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# Thirty-Five Years of Middle-Class Fears: How Two Poltergeists Address Race, Class, and Gender

By Paul Doro

Horror has been a political genre for nearly 100 years. Tod Browning's *Dracula*, released in 1931, grappled with broad cultural anxieties including national identity, class, and sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Horror has the unique ability to confront issues that generate societal anxiety in a manner that obscures them enough to permit audiences a feeling of relief and offer cultural analysis that would be too candid for other genres. As Ryan and Kellner observe, horror allows filmmakers to express fears that the culture is afraid to deal with directly and serves as a vehicle for social critiques too radical for mainstream Hollywood production.<sup>2</sup>

Some filmmakers contend that horror has an obligation to be aggressively political. Larry Fessenden says that you make horror by considering what's happening in society, and in the best horror films, "you can track that they were engaged with the dilemma of the day".<sup>3</sup> When the genre is thriving, such as the late 1960s through the 1970s, engagement with such dilemmas are easy to track. Filmmakers like Tobe Hooper, George Romero, and Wes Craven fearlessly deal with the era's social movements and their films exploit horror's capacity to "expose the issues and concerns of our social world".<sup>4</sup>

1982 saw the release of a horror film that clearly expresses the fears of that time. No film articulates the anxieties of living in the Age of Reagan as much as 1982's *Poltergeist*, produced by Steven Spielberg and directed by Hooper. Kellner argues that the original *Poltergeist* is exceedingly political, and even if its politics tend to skew conservative, it still highlights anxieties about class and social life in the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The same is not true of 2015's *Poltergeist*, produced by Sam Raimi and directed by Gil Kenan. A missed opportunity to comment on the anxieties of life in 2015, the remake eschews any probing of contemporary fears. The original is a stark example of how horror films are able to communicate anxieties of a certain age while the remake is an example of removing nearly everything interesting and provocative from the original.

## The Suburban Dream

The neighborhood itself is an integral character in the original *Poltergeist*. After hearing "The Star-Spangled Banner" play over the opening credits, there are shots of what looks like a typical American suburb. The houses look comfortable without being extravagant and soothing music plays as images of a middle-class neighborhood are shown. Kids ride their bikes and play in the street without any supervision while men drink and watching a football game. There is even an ice cream truck. This is an idyllic suburban paradise, and, more specifically, a white suburban paradise. There isn't a single person of color to be found, even

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among the large group of men gathered for the game. This is not entirely unusual as black characters are almost always absent from films set in the suburbs.<sup>6</sup>

The remake differentiates itself immediately by downplaying the meaningfulness of the neighborhood significantly. From what is shown it appears to be a middle-class neighborhood similar to the one in the original, but there are no shots of kids riding bikes or playing in the street. There isn't a group of friends hanging out and watching a sporting event, and there is no ice cream truck. The remake suggests that the neighborhood is of little consequence with nothing particularly special about it. In the original, when the terror starts, a sense of place has been established which gives added meaning to the events inside the home – something that is lacking in the remake.

While the family's circumstances are different, that does not entirely account for the remake's disinterest in setting up the neighborhood as a desirable place for a family to settle down in. The original *Poltergeist* is about The Freelings, parents Steve (Craig T. Nelson) and Diane (JoBeth Williams) and their three children, Dana (Dominique Dunne), Robbie (Oliver Robins), and Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke). The remake centers on The Bowens, parents Eric (Sam Rockwell) and Amy (Rosemarie DeWitt) and their three children Kendra (Saxon Sharbino), Griffin (Kyle Catlett), and Madison (Kennedi Clements). The Freelings are "your Middle-Class Everyone".<sup>7</sup> Steve is a successful real estate agent working for the company responsible for building the subdivision his family lives in. The older children, Dana and Robbie, are in school while Diane stays home and watches Carol Anne. Their biggest problem is figuring out exactly where the backyard pool should go and how deep it should be.

The Bowens are not as fortunate, though based on how they are depicted in the *Poltergeist* remake no one in their neighborhood would know that. While the Freelings make for a convincing middle-class family, from the very beginning the Bowen's struggles don't ring true. Neither parent is employed and their financial situation is supposed to be precarious. Eric has just lost his job at John Deere's corporate headquarters and Amy intends to write a book. Their real estate agent whispers that the house they want is affordable due to a foreclosure crisis in the area, but the insinuation that the home isn't as attractive as others in the neighborhood doesn't hold up to visual scrutiny. It is clearly a nice, spacious home in a pleasant suburb meaning if the family is drastically downsizing, they must have been living in a mansion. That the Bowens are able to buy a comfortable middle-class home in a nice suburb strains credulity given what is known about their situation. In 2015 the housing crisis wasn't over and millions of Americans were underwater on their mortgage, so there was an opportunity to incorporate those anxieties into the remake.<sup>8</sup>

The situation the Bowens are in makes the omission of the neighborhood itself all the more puzzling. While it is understandable that Eric is anxious about his employment status, the family derives no pleasure whatsoever from their new home. It is more like a punishment since they have no other choice due to their alleged financial difficulties. However, despite that situation, they still manage to buy a home that is nice by anyone's standards. Whereas a middle-class family's fear of losing their home is a central focus of the original *Poltergeist*, that feeling is muddled at best in the remake since the Bowens demonstrate no enthusiasm

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about their new home or neighborhood. Those things don't mean as much to them as they do to the Freelings.

The *Poltergeist* remake pulls its punches and is afraid to offer political commentary or depict the Bowens as genuinely struggling. While snobby rich people belittle their subdivision (even though it looks like a well-to-do suburban neighborhood) and a credit card is embarrassingly declined at a home goods store, economic turmoil is completely glossed over. A different credit card works so Eric is still able to purchase everything he wants, and later he splurges on expensive electronics for his kids. The Bowens never actually seem like they are in a perilous financial situation and the opportunity to portray a family experiencing serious economic anxiety is brushed aside.

Class anxiety is much more palpable in the original. There is more at stake for the Freelings and a stronger sense of how much their lives have been upended by Carol Anne's disappearance. Steve stops going to work and no one is sleeping while Dana stays at a friend's house and won't come home. The entire home is upended and a room is totally off-limits. There is no indication that anything is wrong on the outside, but their lives have been thrown upside down and the Freelings are a mess (and look it). Since the original *Poltergeist* takes the time to emphasize the importance of the neighborhood, when the home begins to fall apart it isn't difficult to identify with the fear of losing one's home. The film is effective precisely because it manipulates viewers and conveys a relatable fear: an average middle-class family in a house that gives them trouble and is eventually taken away. In the Reagan and Bush years, many people lost their homes and it wasn't unusual for middle- and upper class families to fall into a lower-class status.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Bowens do not feel attached to their home or neighborhood, so the stakes are much lower.

Another facet the remake shies away from is putting a human face on capitalism and greed. In the original, Steve is lauded for being successful at selling homes and his prowess allows Steve and his family to live a comfortable life in a picture-perfect suburb. After Carol Anne is taken, Steve's boss lets slip that much of the neighborhood was built over a graveyard and the headstones were moved but the graves were not. The boss represents a greedy capitalist who puts private property above all else.<sup>10</sup> The family suffers for their desire of a middle-class lifestyle, punished for the sins of a man consumed by greed and wealth.<sup>11</sup>

The remake ignores the human element of greed and capitalism. The Bowens house is also part of a subdivision built over a graveyard, but that information is shared casually at a dinner party and not by anyone associated with the subdivision's construction. Steve berates his boss for the company's actions but nothing like that occurs in the remake and no one is held responsible. Just as the significance of the neighborhood itself is downplayed, so is the greedy capitalism that is directly responsible for the predicament the Bowens are in. The end result is a contemporary horror film that introduces a family in economic distress and, unlike the film it is reimagining, subsequently puts class anxiety at the periphery. You would never be able to watch this film and determine what society's major dilemmas were in 2015.

### **Whose Neighborhood Is It?**

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While there is no longer an absence of black people in Hollywood, they are seen in limited numbers and only in certain films.<sup>12</sup> They are also rarely the lead in a horror film, which is one of the main reasons Peele made *Get Out*, to give black people a hero.<sup>13</sup> Whiteness is pervasive in Hollywood and is especially prevalent in contemporary mainstream cinema.<sup>14</sup> When people of color are in a horror film, they are either the thing that horrifies or victims of the thing that horrifies.<sup>15</sup> That or they are relegated to a minor and mostly insignificant role, as in both *Poltergeist* versions.

The original *Poltergeist* positions white people as insiders and people of color as outsiders, which is often the norm in horror films. People of color often don't figure into horror films with a non-urban setting.<sup>16</sup> All of Steve's friends are white and no person of color is ever portrayed as living in the Freeling's neighborhood. The one person of color with a major speaking role is Ryan (Richard Lawson), who is a member of the team of paranormal investigators. It feels like the filmmakers wanted to give a minor role to a person of color, a token black character. Ryan doesn't get anything to do other than help white characters, which is typical for a person of color in a 1980s horror film.<sup>17</sup> He is a harmless outsider who is only around to help other people get Carol Anne back.

On the other hand, there are a few people of color with tiny roles in the original *Poltergeist* who are depicted as being more sinister than Ryan. They are workers on a construction crew building the new backyard pool, outsiders who only work for the Freelings and do not live in the area. As Kellner puts it, these men are "dark-skinned ethnic types, somewhat uncouth and vaguely threatening".<sup>18</sup> They are only in a few scenes early on, but they are portrayed as a danger to the family and the home, people that frighten white families living in the suburbs. In one instance the danger is sexual as two of them stare inappropriately at Dana, a teenager. In the other moment of potential danger one of them tries to steal coffee and food from the kitchen counter by reaching through a window. Diane admonishes him and makes it clear that he has no place inside the home. The workers never actually set foot in the house. Goodness then is represented by the white middle-class family, while otherness is represented by people of color. This plays on the fear that a racial invasion will destroy the suburban middle-class utopia.<sup>19</sup>

In the remake nothing much has changed. The Bowens are not building a pool so there are no men working in their backyard. Their neighborhood is just as white as the Freelings though and not a single person of color is shown as living in their subdivision. When the Bowens attend a dinner party with several other couples, everyone is white. As Means Coleman explains, exclusion is the most common form of racial stereotyping.<sup>20</sup> People of color do not live in the suburban neighborhoods of *Poltergeist* and its remake, and whiteness remains the norm in the suburbs.

The one person of color with a speaking role in the remake is Sophie (Susan Heyward). Like Ryan, Sophie is part of the team of paranormal investigators attempting to help the family get their daughter back. She is an outsider who only enters the neighborhood to support the Bowens. Like Ryan, Sophie exists only to help the white family and isn't given much else to do. Ryan and Sophie are token minority characters, or what Sharon Willis calls a "guest

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figure”. They are people of color who have clearly pursued white goals (education and hard work) and attained professional status and are around to “facilitate representations of an inclusive model of assimilation”.<sup>21</sup> Their presence on a team of university researchers is supposed to achieve just the opposite of what it does, which is call attention to the fact that people of color only enter the suburbs to help a white middle-class family (and, in the case of the original, antagonize it). They are outsiders who are excluded from the American dream.

### **Do You Need My Help?**

Initially it seems like Diane will be a stereotypical female character. It’s 1982, and dad goes to work while mom stays home with the kids. Dad watches football and drinks with his buddies while mom comforts a distraught child and tucks the kids into bed. Eventually dad will probably save the day. That is not how things play out, and Diane is not a damsel in distress waiting to be helped by a man. Diane takes center stage along with two other women: Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight) and Tangina (Zelda Rubinstein). The former leads the team of paranormal investigators while the latter is the spiritualist who figures out how to reach Carol Anne in the spirit world. The trio of women do not rely on men to bring Carol Anne home safely.

While Steve and Diane are on the same page and quickly seek help rather than deny what is going on in their home, it is women who control the discourse and events.<sup>22</sup> Dr. Lesh is accompanied by two male techs but she is clearly in charge and leads the investigation into Carol Anne’s disappearance. The techs are there only to set up equipment and support Dr. Lesh. Later she secures the help of Tangina, a spiritualist who has a lot of answers and explains exactly what is going on with Carol Anne. As the three women take the lead in the rescue operation, “the adult males – Steve and Dr. Lesh’s two techs – are shunted aside”.<sup>23</sup>

Steve, in fact, spends most of his time standing around watching, something women are typically asked to do in films while the male hero saves the day. He is a marginal figure, all but helpless as he looks on from the sidelines.<sup>24</sup> When the final rescue commences Diane is the one who embarks on a dangerous journey to the spirit world, finds Carol Anne, and brings her back home safely. Steve, meanwhile, passively watches her and the other women confront the supernatural.<sup>25</sup> The women have more power than the men and take charge when it comes to identifying the problem and resolving it. Steve isn’t hapless so much as he is content to hover in the background and cede authority to those with more knowledge and capability.

Despite the passage of three decades, Amy is a regressive character. The *Poltergeist* remake clings to outdated notions of gender roles and responsibilities, relegating Amy to the sidelines and diminishing Dr. Powell (Jane Adams) by subjecting her to lecherous comments from Carrigan (Jared Harris), who replaces Tangina as the character with knowledge of the spirit world and its desires. Women are not nearly as powerful as they are in the original, and whereas the men were given little to do during the rescue operation, in the remake Amy and Dr. Powell take a back seat. It is the inverse of how Clover describes the men in the original, as sitting in darkness in the sides and corners of the room.<sup>26</sup>

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Yet another example of a frustrating trend in Hollywood films, DeWitt's Amy is a thankless, one-dimensional wife role whose identity is completely defined by being a wife and mother.<sup>27</sup> She is given nothing remotely interesting to do and exists only in relation to Eric. While he has scenes apart from her, like when he shops at a home improvement store, Amy is rarely if ever separate from Eric. She doesn't exist outside of the home and her value is determined by her relationship with her husband.<sup>28</sup> Just as bad is the fact that Eric controls whether or not Amy works outside the home and balks when she expresses the desire to get a job.

While the original *Poltergeist* features Diane, Dr. Lesh, and Tangina leading the preparation and execution of Carol Anne's rescue, the women in the remake are pushed to the side. Instead of Amy going into the spirit world to rescue her daughter as Diane does, it is Griffin who saves Madison. Amy isn't an active character and stands off to the side of Eric as the rescue takes place. Also, Dr. Powell is a more passive character than Dr. Lesh as Carrigan takes over the rescue operation. The two used to be married and Dr. Powell is subjected to demeaning jokes from a boorish Carrigan, who is introduced as an arrogant jerk but is eventually redeemed by heroic behavior that is performed by women in the original.

### 1982 vs. 2015

As Kellner makes clear, the original *Poltergeist* is a flawed film. It contains ideological contradictions as it celebrates middle-class institutions and values while characters search for salvation from spiritualism.<sup>29</sup> It suggests that nothing beats living in the suburbs with your spouse and children, but look elsewhere when the going gets tough. Muir describes the film as a prime example of having your cake while eating it too. On the one hand, the Freelings are living the American dream and a Yuppie lifestyle is shown to be a good one. On the other hand, there's a price to be paid for this idyllic life, which the family finds out the hard way.<sup>30</sup> The film's family values are undeniably conservative, and the Freelings are absolved of all wrongdoing as Steve's boss and company are entirely at fault. That said, Kellner praises it for at least attempting to showcase "the fears, hopes, and fantasies of the new affluent suburban middle class".<sup>31</sup>

The same cannot be said of the remake. It goes out of its way to be apolitical and has nothing to say about middle-class anxieties. Even worse is the way it sidelines women and features a male protagonist who prevents his wife from working. It eliminates elements that make the original interesting and fails to comment on societal or cultural concerns or life in contemporary America. It drops the politics and runs more than 15 minutes shorter than its inspiration, leaving viewers with the feeling that its only aim is to provide a few rote scares as quickly as possible before sending them on their way.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, (Westport:

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Praeger, 2005), 22.

[2](#) Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 169.

[3](#) Christopher Vander Kaay and Kathleen Fernandez-Vander Kaay, *The Anatomy of Fear: Conversations with Cult Horror and Science-Fiction Filmmakers* (Bedford: NorLightsPress, 2014), 36.

[4](#) Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), xix.

[5](#) Douglas Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, ed. David E. James and Rick Berg, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 220.

[6](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 6.

[7](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 221.

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[8](#) Alana Semuels, “For Some Americans, the Housing Crisis Isn’t Over,” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2015, accessed May 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/11/foreclosures-negative-equity/413473/>.

[9](#) Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-modern*, (Routledge, 1994), 131.

[10](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 227.

[11](#) Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s*, 13.

[12](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, xi.

[13](#) Butler, “Jordan Peele Made a Woke Horror Film.”

[14](#) Daniel Bernardi, “Introduction: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,” in *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), xv.

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[15](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 8.

[16](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 146.

[17](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 150.

[18](#) Kellner, "Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush," 227.

[19](#) Kellner, "Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush," 227-228.

[20](#) Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 167.

[21](#) Dale Hudson, "Vampires of Color and the Performances of Multicultural Whiteness," *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 148.

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[22](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 231.

[23](#) Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 74.

[24](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 231.

[25](#) Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 86.

[26](#) Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 74.

[27](#) Olivia Truffaut-Wong, “The Wife Role in Sully is the Latest Example of One of Hollywood’s Most Frustrating Trends,” *Bustle*, September 16, 2016, accessed March 22, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/182989-the-wife-role-in-sully-is-the-latest-example-of-one-of-hollywoods-most-frustrating-trends>.

[28](#) Brent Lang, “Study Finds Fewer Lead Roles for Women in Hollywood,” *Variety*, February 9, 2015, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/women-lead-roles-in-movies-study-hunger-games-gone-girl-1201429016/>.

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[29](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 230.

[30](#) Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s*, 12.

[31](#) Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” 230.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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