

IN VIOLATION OF THE BALANCE: Foreignness and the Post 9/11 Horror Film

By Adam Wadenius | [Jura Gentium Cinema](#). Dossier: Horror Politics, November 2009.

In the moments preceding a critical shootout in Francis Lawrence's *Constantine* (2005), John Constantine, the film's gruff, chain-smoking protagonist, offers an appropriate summation of the attitude towards the foreigner in post-9/11 America. With his holy shotgun in hand, he bursts into a hospital waiting room filled with half-breed demons. "Hi, my name's John," he announces, looking across the room of mostly dark-skinned faces. "You are in violation of the balance. Leave immediately or I will deport you. All of you...go to Hell." He takes aim with his shotgun and opens fire, blasting his way through the demon bodies as his method of sufficiently *deporting* them back to their hellish origins. John's words reflect a common attitude about the foreigner; one that prefers they "go back to where they came from." His actions reflect the consequences for the foreigner if they disobey - a refusal to form relations, violence, rejection, and ultimately annihilation. The horrific events of the September 11th attacks on New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have endowed Americans with a false sense of legitimacy for malicious articulations of anti-foreign sentiment such as this. During the weeks and months after 9/11, hate crimes and assaults against foreigners (specifically Middle Easterners) increased in the United States. In the aftermath of this drastic change in American culture, a sub-genre of the popular horror film emerged - the *post-9/11 horror film* - as a reflection of the fear and anxiety projected upon foreigners by an American population consumed by post-9/11 hysteria. The films of this sub-genre exhibit the traditional codes and conventions of the popular horror film, yet they are distinct from contemporary horror in three key areas: they emphasize arbitrary acts of violence, the

monstrous element is positioned as foreign, and they employ specific imagery evocative of the 9/11 tragedy. Significant examples include, among others, *Constantine*, *The Descent* (2005), *Feast* (2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Slither* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes II* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *The Happening* (2008), and *The Strangers* (2008).

The post-9/11 horror film

A recurring narrative convention of the post-9/11 horror film is the sudden and unprovoked attack carried out by a monstrous other. The incidence of unexpected attacks by monsters and killers in the horror film is certainly not a new innovation, however the post-9/11 horror film offers a subtle variation on this theme. Where traditional horror film killers often kill for a reason, whether it be to release suppressed sexual energy (Michael Myers in *Halloween*, Norman Bates in *Psycho*), achieve a sense of vengeance (Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, The Fisherman in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*), or for sadistic pleasure (Jigsaw in *Saw*, the rich businessmen in *Hostel I & II*), the monsters and killers in post-9/11 horror films attack without reason. These films place an emphasis on senseless acts of brutality by depicting crimes against random victims, committed without a discernable motive. In *The Strangers*, three masked strangers arrive unannounced at a remote vacation home, and proceed to terrorize and torture a young couple staying the night. When the couple is pleading for their lives at the film's conclusion, they ask why they've been targeted for such atrocities, to which one of the murderers coldly responds, "Because you were home." In *The Happening*, an unexplainable element wages an attack on innocent people in New York's Central Park. The event causes a reaction in its victim's brain that renders them irrational, compelling them to commit suicide. A brutal attack on New York also sets

the narrative in motion in *Cloverfield*, when an unidentified monster appears, purposelessly rampaging the city and unleashing a brood of parasitic offspring. The mutant miners in the 2006 remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* stage a swift and senseless attack on a stranded family, viciously raping and murdering three innocent people. The image of an American flag in this scene, fastened to the antenna of the Carter family's SUV, is a critical departure from director Alexandre Aja's adaptation of Wes Craven's 1977 version of the film. As an unsettling final touch to the violent ordeal, one of the miners snatches the miniature flag as he runs into the night, calling attention to the arbitrary act of terror as an assault against unsuspecting Americans, not unlike the events of September 11th.

In the post-9/11 horror film, particular attention is paid to accentuate the foreign, or outside nature of the threat to normality. The giant monster in *Cloverfield* presumably appears from another planet before it rampages New York, though from which, it is never explicitly stated. It is certainly not of any earthly origin, and neither are the alien worms in *Slither*, on a mission to take over the earth by transforming its population into mindless zombies. After falling from outer space, the worms attack the residents of a small South Carolina town by entering the victim's body through the mouth, and imbedding itself into the brain stem. The orphaned miners in *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Hills Have Eyes II* are positioned as a violent, outside threat to any human traveler that passes through their secluded camp. Similarly, the six women trapped in a labyrinth of caves in *The Descent* must contend with a monstrous clan that kills and devours human flesh, as do the creatures in *Feast*, who terrorize their human prey by eating them alive, or by vomiting up an acidic ooze that decomposes the victim's flesh so that they can eat them dead. In each of the four previous examples the monsters are human-like in their appearance¹, yet they exhibit

features that are also clearly inhuman; an ambiguity that evokes the fascinating repulsion of what Julia Kristeva calls *the abject*². The dispassionate killers in *The Strangers* differ from their alien counterparts in that they are human monstrosities, yet their intrusion into the couple's vacation home is likewise represented as an unwelcome, foreign assault. The foreigner is commonly positioned as a monstrous outside force in post-9/11 horror films, and its presence poses a threat to the sanctity of the American family, home, or homeland.

Perhaps the most distinct characteristic of the post-9/11 horror film is the staging of the *mise-en-scène* to resemble specific images from the events of September 11th. *Cloverfield* most vividly re-imagines the tragedy of the attacks with its grainy, hand-held video footage of pulverized buildings, and thick grey clouds of concrete dust looming over city streets. The collapse of the World Trade Center is called to mind in an early scene, when a skyscraper implodes in a terrifyingly similar fashion. An image of the Time Warner Center, with one of its two towers leaning onto the other, similarly recalls the destruction of the Twin Towers. So, too, does a scene that depicts the Statue of Liberty's severed head crashing through a downtown avenue – a prominent New York City landmark destroyed by a foreign invader. The destruction of the World Trade Center is similarly evoked in *The Happening* by an image of two nuclear power plant silos standing side by side, each emitting a thick smoke from their crowns in an uncanny likeness of the smoking towers. When it's discovered that the mysterious event in the film is altering human brain chemistry to provoke suicide, its effects are illustrated by a group of construction workers jumping from the roof of a building. The scattering of bodies falling from the rooftop bears an uncanny resemblance to the image of helpless office workers jumping from the Twin Towers in the moments just prior to their collapse. In addition to these chilling evocations of 9/11 imagery, the film explicitly plays

upon the fear of terrorism when government officials first describe the event to be an act of chemical warfare. The U.S. Military invasion of Afghanistan, and the hunt for chief 9/11 conspirator Osama Bin Laden are alluded to in the 2007 update of *The Hills Have Eyes II*. An early scene in the film depicts a simulated military operation in Kandahar, where an Afghan civilian reveals herself to be a suicide bomber, rendering the exercise unsuccessful for a unit of American soldiers. As the film progresses, the soldiers come under attack by the mutant miners, who live in caves, and employ guerrilla warfare tactics to ambush and kill various members of the unit. These scenes recall the numerous military engagements that took place in the Tora Bora Mountains (the supposed hiding place of Bin Laden) during the war in Afghanistan, positioning the miners as a violent, foreign element that dwells in caves. In the post-9/11 horror film, threats to the safety of Americans are made strikingly apparent with vivid 9/11 imagery, calling to mind the horrific events of September 11th, and the violent conflict that ensued.

Constantine, foreignness, post-9/11 ideology

Constantine is the post-9/11 horror film *par excellence*. Its primary antagonist, Mammon, plots a surprise attack against the human realm of existence. Its monsters are foreign demons that cross the border of Hell to create chaos on earth, and the film displays an abundance of anti-foreign sentiment and 9/11 imagery. Beyond the core characteristics of post-9/11 horror, *Constantine* illustrates Julia Kristeva's articulation of *foreignness*; a concept she develops in her essay, "Strangers to Ourselves." The film reflects an ideology that is pointedly anti-foreigner, and more specifically, anti-Mexican immigrant. The Mexican body

is positioned as a foreign contaminant that invades America - an abject presence that must be eradicated, or as the film puts it, "deported" back to its hellish origins.

In "Strangers to Ourselves," Kristeva uses Sigmund Freud's reading of *the uncanny* as her starting point towards an exploration of the internal experiences of the stranger within Western tradition. Freud associates the uncanny with that class of the frightening which "arouses dread and horror" (1919, 219). The uncanny is something "familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it if only through the process of repression" (ibid, 241). He goes on to discuss how *the other* is constructed through this process of repression, and that when repressed emotional affects and ideas return, they assert themselves in the individual's consciousness as something uncanny, "in all their primitive terror and glory" (Smith, 27). Kristeva's reading of foreignness concentrates on the experiences of a subject who is characterized as more than an other - the foreigner is an exile, alien, or immigrant (Moruzzi, 137). The difference of otherness - a different age, ethnicity, sex, or religious background than the dominant group - does not "endow one with the attributes of foreignness" (Kristeva, 1982, 96). The foreigner is marked as an other because of these characteristics that exclude him from the dominant group, *and* he is specifically foreign in that he is not a citizen of the country in which he resides. In *Constantine*, Mexico and the Mexican immigrant are constructed as a repressed evil that emanate from an abhorrent, foreign region.

The opening scene in the film establishes the Mexican immigrant as foreign, otherworldly, and above all dangerous. A slow fade-in reveals the image of a burned-down church, over which a screen title appears, situating the action in Mexico. A stone skeleton is all that remains of the old building, and an opaque smoke rises from several small fires that

are still burning amidst piles of dirt and debris. The black haze that washes over the dry, desert wilderness in the background evokes an uneasy sense of heat, choking the mise-en-scene, which draws a parallel between the barren Mexico countryside, and the smoldering landscape of Hell that is represented later in the film. Inside the church, two Mexican men are scavenging among the ruins. One of them, Manuel, unexpectedly falls through a hole in one of the broken floorboards. Peering into the darkness, he reaches in and pulls out a rolled-up Nazi flag with a knife-shaped object wrapped inside. His body trembles upon grasping the object, and an uncanny sensation overwhelms him. Gripped by an uncontrollable force, he attempts to cross a nearby road on his way into the desert, when a speeding car suddenly drives through and smashes into him at top speed. Instead of running him into the ground, the car is immediately stopped in its tracks - the mass of metal that was once an automobile now wrapped around his body as if he were a tree trunk imbedded solidly into the pavement. The camera closes in on his torso, sprawled across the hood of the vehicle, and then to his hand, which still clutches the strange object. A foreign symbol materializes on his wrist, mysteriously burned into his skin by an unknown force. He springs up from the wreckage, his lifeless body reanimated, and runs off unharmed into the desert. The knife-like object that Manuel has come upon is the Spear of Destiny - the weapon used to kill Jesus Christ when he was crucified - which is believed to hold a quantity of the Lord's blood on its tip. As a result of his discovery, Manuel becomes the possessed agent of Mammon, son of the Devil, who is using him as a dangerous instrument to carry out a plan to assume a demonic kingdom on earth. Because Mexico is the place where the spear is discovered, it is positioned as the origin of evil - the place from which

both Mexican immigrants and demons originate. It is a breeding ground for a foreign element that looks to invade the American homeland, and displace its inhabitants.

John's sole purpose in the *Constantine* is to prohibit illegal demons from entering or disrupting the human plane of existence; to *deport* them if they overstep their boundaries. As a child, he discovers that he has the gift to see things that are not human; some are angels and some are demons. This eventually drives him to (unsuccessfully) attempt suicide, which is looked upon by God as a sin that will damn him to Hell upon his demise. For the entirety of the film, when an angel, demon, or half-breed disrupts the balance on earth in some way, John takes it upon himself to track them down and banish them back to their plane of existence. His mission is a penance of sorts; a means of making his way back into God's good graces so that he might one day earn a place in Heaven. Kristeva writes that when one is faced with the foreigner, it gives rise to a horror that must be dealt in one of two ways: assimilation, or ejection (ibid, 96). Holding true to the popular convention of the horror film, the demons and immigrants in *Constantine* receive the typical punishment reserved for the other/foreigner; they are annihilated. In a scene following Manuel's discovery in the abandoned church, John exorcises a soldier demon from a young girl's body by transposing it into a mirror, destroying it by hurling it out of a three-story window onto the hood of a taxicab below. He dispatches of Balthazar by first weakening the half-breed's exterior with holy water, and then beating him into submission with a blessed pair of brass knuckles. He survives an angry mob of scavenger demons by setting them ablaze with holy fire, outmaneuvers a bug demon in a busy L.A. intersection, outwits Mammon by informing Lucifer of his devious plan to take over the earth, and deports an array of demons and possessed immigrants in the shootout at the hospital. Used frequently in the film, the word

“deport” is of special significance, as it places a connotation of foreignness on the demons. The word itself is commonly recognized to mean a legal proceeding, through which immigration officials seek to remove a foreign national from a country for violating a particular aspect of the law. In the film it means, “to destroy the demon and send it back to Hell,” where it will suffer eternal damnation. The systematic annihilation of demons and Mexican immigrants in the film, coupled with the specific terminology used to describe their eradication, functions to align the demon with the Mexican immigrant as foreigners to the homeland, who must be disposed of to restore normalcy. The eradication of the demon/immigrant in the film can also be read as a greater signifier of the dominant ideology in America during the months and years after 9/11, during which initial suspicion and persecution directed at Arab and Muslim communities were quickly redirected onto the Mexican population, with heavy attention focused on the U.S.-Mexican border as a site of insecurity⁴.

The foreigner as abject

As an exile in an unfamiliar land, the foreign body represents a threatening element, at once fascinating and repulsive; a condition Kristeva calls the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, she provides an analysis of the conditions that make personal and social identity possible, positing abjection as a phase in the construction of subjectivity that concatenates a separation from the mother. This separation takes place in the semiotic space of the mother/child symbiosis, prior to the subject’s entry into the symbolic. The abject induces a simultaneous fear and fascination, the dissolution of boundaries, and a return to the

maternal space of the semiotic (ibid 1982, p. 2). Kristeva incorporates her analysis of the abject into her discussion of the foreigner:

“Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy’” (1991, 187).

The subject is haunted by the looming threat of the experience of abjection, which is posed by the foreigner as one who is “both desired and feared” (Moruzzi, 144). For Freud, a confrontation with the other evokes the uncanny. For Kristeva, a confrontation with the foreigner gives rise to abjection.

In *Constantine*, immigrants and demons are constructed as foreign invaders, and positioned as figures of abjection. The immigrant body is frequently the site of demonic possession in the film (the little girl, Manuel, the deportees in the hospital), pointing to the fragility of their bodily boundaries. They are abject in that their bodies have been violated by demons, whose destructive capabilities are made visible as they attempt to claw their way from beneath the victim’s skin into the human realm. Manuel’s possession is the most prominent illustration. Immediately after finding the Spear of Destiny, he heads toward the U.S./Mexican border, leaping over a fence that separates the two nations. He becomes an exile in a foreign land, and a polluting element to his new space, signaled by the effect of his body on the herd of cattle that fall sick and die as he passes through them. Kristeva writes that the abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, 4). Manuel is abject because the boundaries of his body have been blurred by the presence of the demon inside of him, and because he refuses to respect the physical boundary separating his home nation from that of another.

In much the same way that Manuel succeeds in traversing the border between Mexico and the United States, the demons that populate the film have crossed over from Hell. Mammon and his demon forces (scavenger, soldier, and bug demons) are on a mission to invade the human world. As Papa Midnite recounts, the original superpowers of the spirit world dictate that angels are required to stay in Heaven, and demons are required to stay in Hell. A violation of these rules will upset the balance of good and evil, resulting in a conflict between all parties on the two planes of existence. The demons in *Constantine* eschew the established boundary that separates Hell from earth, and are positioned as abject because they fail to respect the balance. In addition to this violation of territorial borders, the demon body is abject because of the physical breakdown it endures. During the shootout in the hospital, John and his apprentice Chas manipulate the overhead sprinkler system so that it will produce a downpour of holy water when activated. "Half-breeds are most vulnerable when their skin is breached by holy water," Chas says, and the water eats into the half-breeds' skin, rendering their bodies susceptible to John's gunfire. Kristeva describes the skin as a fragile container, whose function is to preserve a border between the inside and outside, in order to maintain a clean and proper body (1982, 53). When the skin is breached, the essential fluids of the body show up in order to compensate for the collapse of this border - blood, excrement, and vomit. The demon body in the film explodes with blood and pus when it is shot or breached with holy water, calling to attention its abject breakdown. In *Constantine*, the Mexican immigrant and the demon become synonymous with one another, as they are both deeply, and perpetually bound by abjection. Mexican immigrants travel across borders, and acquiesce to the advances of demonic possessors. Demons traverse the planes of Hell and earth, and their bodily boundaries are rendered indistinct when subjected

to holy water. By violating these boundaries of body and space, they point to the instability of the borders of Mexico and America, Hell and earth, human and inhuman. They are positioned as abject, foreign pollutants to the American body/home(land), and they must be annihilated.

Accepting/rejecting the foreigner within

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva declares that “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder (1991, 1).” Confronting the foreigner results in a loss of boundaries, and the realization of foreignness in an other, leads to the recognition of foreignness in one’s self. Throughout the film both John and Angela come face to face with the foreigner, in his multiple representations, and it is through an enhanced gift of vision - which they acquire through an experience of momentary death and entry into Hell - that the film is able to visually articulate the experience of the abject that arises during an encounter with the foreigner, and the recognition of one’s own foreignness that results. John’s first experience of crossing over comes during his attempted suicide. “Officially, I was dead for two minutes” he says. “When I came back, I knew all the things I could see were real.” Kristeva writes that unlike *signifiers* of death - the flat encephalograph, for example - the corpse is the “utmost of abjection” in that it *shows* death; what the subject “permanently thrust(s) aside in order to live” (ibid, 3,4). When faced with visions of foreignness - angels and demons that have traversed the bounds of Heaven and Hell - John realizes his own foreignness, and is thrust into the realm of abjection, represented by his metaphysical passage into Hell, and by his physically dead body. Ultimately, his confrontation with the

foreigner is a confrontation with his own self. Under the threat of dissolution, John chooses to reject the foreigner (and in turn, his own foreignness), by attempting to take his own life. "When we flee from or struggle against the foreigner," Kristeva writes, "we are fighting our unconscious - that 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper'" (1992, 192). His two minutes in Hell visually articulates his experience of abjection, and also functions to enhance his gift of sight. After being brought back from the dead, he represses the abject by using the power of his gift as a means toward annihilating the foreigner. This choice articulates the "struggle" of which Kristeva writes. John's self-appointed mission is revealed to be less about upholding the balance between the human and spirit worlds, and more a selfish attempt at atoning for his sins - a struggle to repress the foreignness that he now refuses to recognize within himself. The struggle to repress the quality he most despises in himself is similar to the mentality of many Americans in the wake of 9/11, who seek to repress that which they are most afraid of; the foreigner.

Angela's experience of the abject differs from John's, in that she ultimately chooses to accept her gift. At the beginning of the film, Angela is in a state of denial with regards to her ability to see demons. She has repressed this special vision from an early age, and it isn't until she and John find a clue in her sister's hospital room that she becomes ready to face her innermost fears by accepting it. To do so she must be submerged in water, "the universal conduit," John says, that "lubricates the transition from one plane to another." She must come to the edge of death so that she may cross over and experience Hell. For Angela, this experience is intrauterine. As she lays back into the bathtub, the water blurs her senses. Muted vibrations echo in the soundscape, and in tandem with the enclosed space of the tub, the atmosphere is akin to the mother's womb. She is drawn back to the place of "old and

long familiar,” as Freud says, what Kristeva calls the semiotic; the “place where meaning collapses,” and the boundary that separates the self and the mother becomes blurred (1982, 2). Time stops, and she crosses over into Hell. When she reemerges from the other side, it is though she is reborn; fully in tune with the gift that she has repressed since childhood. “I’ve always known,” she says repeatedly. “I’ve always known that I could see.” What she now sees, the visions of abjection that have been made clear to her via her experience of the foreigner in Hell, is that which had been repressed in her unconscious. Like John, Angela’s encounter with the abject, which results from her confrontation with the foreigner, reveals her as a foreigner. Unlike John, however, by accepting the foreignness within, she becomes open to the experiences of the foreigner. One such consequence for this is that she becomes susceptible to possession, and during the climax of the film, Mammon takes control of her body, while Gabriel stands poised to “give birth” to the demon child by cutting open her stomach with the Spear of Destiny. As John Lechte notes in his analysis of Kristeva’s oeuvre, “being a foreigner involves a separation from one’s (motherly) origins” (Lechte, 81). Mammon’s resurrection echoes Angela’s rebirth, positioning them both as foreign. They are also figures of abjection in that Mammon has crossed the border that separates Hell and Earth, and Angela’s body has been violated by the presence of an evil demon. Her status as foreign, abject, elucidates the primary difference between her acceptance, and John’s rejection of the foreigner. “The foreigner is in me,” Kristeva writes, “hence we are all foreigners” (1991, 192). Knowing that one is a foreigner to one’s self is that quality which enables us to live with, and accept the foreigner.

An American nightmare

Post-9/11 society is suspicious about, hostile towards, and fearful of the foreigner. In his essay, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," Robin Wood contends that the true subject of the horror genre is "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (1979, 10). The post-9/11 horror film is a sub-genre that articulates the attitudes and anxieties of an American population who, unable and unwilling to accept themselves as foreign, seek to repress the foreigner, in all of its many representations. Such is the case for John in *Constantine*, and though he rejects the horrifying, abject depiction of the foreigner in the film, Angela's acceptance of her foreignness illustrates Kristeva's notion that we are all indeed, strangers to ourselves. "The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises," Kristeva declares, "and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities" (1991, 192). *Constantine* ultimately lays bare the notion that identifying the foreigner in one's self can empower the subject to accept that we are all foreigners, and thus, we can foster a sense of solidarity in one another as foreign.

Endnotes

¹ It should be noted that *The Hills Have Eyes II* is to be looked upon as an update more so than a remake, and unlike *The Hills Have Eyes*, the film bears no similarities to its original version.

² In the case of *The Hills Have Eyes*, the miners were at one time human, but have been transformed into mutant creatures by extensive nuclear testing.

³ A point I will elaborate on in further detail, later in this essay.

⁴ Additional concerns about national security also led to the passage of the Patriot Act, specific legislation against unauthorized immigrants, and the reorganization of government agencies to form the Department of Homeland Security, which can be viewed as increased efforts by the dominant population to attempt to keep the foreigner out of America.

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