



FIGURE 1. Bill Gunn, *Ganja & Hess* (1973). Frame grab.

The Ontology of Open Mouths

The Scream and the Swallowing

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In his studies of the grotesque and carnivalesque, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the mouth as “the most important of all human features for the grotesque.” As he puts it, “the grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features . . . only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.”¹ Indeed, the mouth agape is a many-faced thing. Not only among the horror genre’s most prevalent motifs in cinema, its symbology is also noteworthy in literature, other modes of visual art, mythology, and folklore. Contained within its many significations—a spectrum that runs from terror to wonder to song—are the grand preoccupations of the human and nonhuman condition alike: the human revealed again as animal.

This is, however, a pathologized notion within Western ideology. Julia Kristeva defined abjection as that which “disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, systems, rules,” a perspective that almost unilaterally informs all contemporary approaches to horror and the Gothic.² As such, critical perspectives often regard terror to be conjured from fears of trespass, but if we are to read Western culture according to “the monsters they engender,” what becomes evident is a distinct preoccupation with anxieties around consumption.³ As Kristeva writes, abjection “beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”⁴ What I’ve termed the Swallowing therefore refers to the occasion in horror where the abject (which is to say, the monster) appears as a form of devouring Other.

In its most literal sense, the Swallowing appears in eco-horror like *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963),



FIGURE 2. Jon Turteltaub, *The Meg* (2018). Frame grab.

Frogs (George McCowan, 1972), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), *Piranha* (Joe Dante, 1978), *The Fog* (John Carpenter, 1980), *Bats* (Louis Morneau, 1999), *Lake Placid* (Steve Miner, 1999), *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005), and *The Meg* (Jon Turteltaub, 2018; fig. 2), which all see elements of the natural world threaten humanity's perceived sovereignty in the form of some devouring menace. It's also seen in many of our most popular cultural monsters—vampires, werewolves, zombies, cannibals, succubi—to whom the human body is meat for their monstrous appetites.

Psychic consumption takes the form of demon possession, all manner of *Body Snatchers*-type narratives, characters who become “unhinged,” and, of course, the threat of brainwashing and cults. Even haunted house movies, home and alien invasion plots, viral outbreaks that shatter society—these themes that perhaps most overtly reflect an essential

fear of trespass—reveal how it's not solely the gesture of trespass that we fear but what we believe trespass to inherently indicate: consumption and dissolution. Abjection, thus, is essentialized in the swallowing mouth—not just a hole, but a *black hole*.⁵

If we understand the Swallowing as an umbrella term for these varied occurrences of devouring monsters while also accepting that monsters necessarily reflect the anxieties of the culture that creates them, then what does the Swallowing reveal to us about the construction of Black monstrosity and where we locate and weaponize fear in our culture? Further, how might this monstrousness be reimagined as a vehicle for catharsis and reclamation?

If someone were to ask me why 1992's *Candyman* (Bernard Rose) is not a Black horror film (apart from the traditional reason, which is that it was written and made by white people), I'd need only reference figure 3.



FIGURE 3. Bernard Rose, *Candyman* (1992). Frame grab.

Though the film's namesake, Candyman is explicitly not its emotional core. It's Helen, the white anthropology student studying the urban legend, who is the subject and center of this movie, just as she's the center of this shot. The composition is meant to illustrate how consumed Helen becomes by the Candyman legend. When she arrives at Cabrini-Green, the housing project he haunts, and crawls through the cabinet that doubles as Candyman's mouth, she trespasses the borders drawn along lines of race and class to enter the lair (read: stomach) of the Black monster, embodied not just as Candyman, the ghost, but Cabrini-Green itself. The film's not-so-subtle sub-

text stokes a specific and pathological preoccupation with Black men's perceived desire (read: hunger) for white women (read: a forbidden delicacy). In the film (and in this image), Black male desire represents the occasion of the Swallowing, an echo of earlier coded and not so coded renderings of Black men as monstrous Others, demonstrated in *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), *Ingagi* (William Campbell, 1930), and *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). And not just Black male desire, but Cabrini-Green as a city-state-sanctioned (and neglected) Black space. As Candyman's mouth teems



FIGURE 4. Rusty Cundieff, *Tales from the Hood 2* (2018). Frame grab.

with swarms of killer bees, so too does Cabrini-Green teem with monsters both real and imagined.

But what of Helen's consumption? Candyman does not come unless he is called, after all. Helen's relationship to Cabrini-Green is one of tourism and extraction. She arrives like a truffle pig, hunting for the delectable morsels of information that will earn her the scholarly renown she hungers for. She is disrespectful and arrogant toward Cabrini's residents, and in her rush to disavow Candyman's existence while feeding herself on "the faith of [his] congregation," she beckons him to her. Reoriented to privilege a Black perspective, Helen is also a manifestation of the Swallowing: a consumer of Black production, a gentrifier of Black space and storytelling.

Meanwhile, Rusty Cundieff's *Tales from the Hood*



FIGURE 5. Coon Chicken Inn, Lake City, Seattle, Washington. Coon Chicken Inn Records and Graham Family Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

2 (2018) features a similarly composed shot in the first tale, "Good Golly," to drastically different effect (fig. 4). Cundieff has confirmed that the doorway entering the Museum of Negrosity references the infamous Coon Chicken Inn restaurants, the implication being that as the two girls at the center of the tale—Audrey (Alexandria DeBerry), who is white, and Zoe (Jasmine Akakpo), who's Black—pass through the mouth of this caricature, they've left behind the world that pretends to be "color-blind" and have entered a space where the evidence of racism and white supremacy is unignorable (fig. 5).

Collected in this museum are relics of anti-Black Americana; its mission is to refuse the sugar-coated, whitewashed overhaul of this country's history. Certain dynamics are already evident between the two girls,

HELEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO CABRINI-GREEN IS ONE OF TOURISM AND EXTRACTION

and the imbalance of influence and power is exacerbated when Audrey is thrilled to discover a doll of the golliwog character who, to her, represents a beloved relic from childhood. Like Helen, she is arrogant and entitled, and in this entitlement, she insists on being able to purchase the doll, refusing to recognize its existence as a cursed object. In this case Blackness is still equated with a devouring force, something that, if acknowledged, would fundamentally necessitate a reconsideration of the ways we relate to one another and the world. Here the Swallowing is represented as that all-consuming shift in perspective, threatening only to those whose goal is revision and suppression.

The Scream represents the other occasion of open mouths most prevalent in horror. To scream is a physiological response to terror, yes, but it's also something born of laughter, grief, ecstasy, or rage, all of which ultimately represent catharsis. The disturbance and collapse of these expressive, emotional boundaries is the lifeblood of any great horror climax. Consider the closing crescendo of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974): the cacophony of Leatherface's chainsaw and Sally's sustained screams

from the back of the pickup truck—the moment her screams of terror melt into screams of jubilation. But I wonder about the unnamed Black trucker portrayed by Ed Guinn, who first stops to help Sally and is left to flee on foot when she claws her way into the back of the pickup that carries her off into the sunrise. We never learn what becomes of him, the story of his terror, if he escapes.

While we may consider the Scream a sonic experience, it's a visual and imagined experience as well, and the image most relied upon within non-sonic mediums to address or project suffering, anguish, and fear to a given form. Indeed, Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* represents a key example. Another would be Frederick Douglass's description of his Aunt Hester's screams as recalled in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and again in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, analysis of which accounts for the introductions to Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, Fred Moten's *In the Break*, and Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies*.

Hartman's approach is unique for its refusal to reproduce the text detailing the scene of astounding brutality to which Douglass first bears witness and then forces us, his readers, to bear witness too in turn. Hartman's argument, which both Moten and Sharpe reproduce and build upon, roots itself in the belief that instead of "inciting indignation, too often [such accounts of white violence against Black people] immerse us to pain by virtue of their familiarity."⁶ It is the same argument that critiques the propagation and spectacle of Black death shared across social media—the same argument that critiques the horror genre at large for its



FIGURE 6.
Wes Craven,
Scream 2
(1997). Frame
grab.

capacity to naturalize Black suffering while treating said suffering as entertainment. It's for precisely this reason that Zalika U. Ibaorimi further affirms Hartman's point, calling it "imperative to consider Hartman's decision to not recount the violences of Aunt Hester, while also introducing her trauma."⁷

The original *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) is an overwhelmingly white film, featuring not a single visibly Black character anywhere in Woodsboro, the upper-middle-class suburb where the movie is set. It's the precise type of homogenization that tells an unwitting story about white flight, fear of the Black menace—the Ghostface costume being an anonymizing black cloak—and the distinctly eugenicist nature of suburbia as a social project. For this reason, one must question *Scream 2*'s (Wes Craven, 1997) ham-fisted racial commentary, the decided focus of the sequel's opening sequence. Clear similarities exist between the Ghostface mask itself and Munch's anguished subject, a trick mirror that effectively builds tension

at the *Stab* movie premiere, where Maureen (Jada Pinkett-Smith) is visibly uncomfortable with the sheer proliferation of masked figures running amok, a very specific anxiety evoked by the character's inability to relax. And with good reason. After murdering Phil (Omar Epps), Ghostface joins Maureen in the theater and stabs her in the stomach just as Heather Graham is simultaneously stabbed onscreen, their screams mirroring and sounding around each other. Bleeding and desperate, Maureen stumbles through the audience, onto the stage, and looks out at the sea of white-faced masks, all of them the face of her killer, as the movie is projected over her body.

Of this scene, Ibaorimi writes, "as she screams from the pain, fear, and utter disgust of how invisible and visible she is to the white audience, she dies."⁸ And at that very moment of collapse, Ghostface's gaping mouth encases her—her demise having literally become the show (fig. 6).

Enormous pathos is granted to this scene, sug-

REPRODUCING VIOLENCE DOES NOT PROVIDE CATHARSIS FROM VIOLENCE

gested by its very length and melodramatic treatment. It's clear the audience is meant to be sad to see these characters die. Nevertheless, Maureen's death is sensationalized in a way that negates any real catharsis for its reproduction of the violence of the banal. As Sharpe states: "We know that the repetition of such horror does not make the violence of everyday black subjection undeniable because, presented in its most spectacular form, [violence] does not confirm or confer humanity on the suffering black body, but all too often contributes to what Jesse Jackson calls. . . 'an amazing tolerance for black pain. . . [a] great tolerance for black suffering and black marginalization.'"⁹ When Sidney (Neve Campbell) and Dewey (David Arquette) later discuss their murders, Sidney asks, "Three hundred people watched? Nobody did anything?" Sheepishly, Dewey responds, "They thought it was a publicity stunt."

Revealed in Hartman's, Sharpe's, Moten's, and Ibaorimi's analyses and their application to the film is the understanding that there has never been a lack of visibility for Black people's, and more specifically Black women's, suffering (as Douglass and other ab-

olitionist authors exemplified in the nineteenth century). What has and continues to persist is a lack of care. Reproducing violence does not provide catharsis from violence. It simply naturalizes it within the broader public imagination.

To contrast, we can look to Bill Gunn's 1973 experimental film *Ganja & Hess*. Though there are several occasions of the open mouth worthy of close examination in this film, which uses vampirism (hunger) as a vehicle to explore several anxieties of Black life, I'd like to examine two specific shots—one representing the Swallowing, the other the Scream.

Captured in this shot (fig. 7) is what the poet Carl Phillips had "been told / was the zone of tragedy—transition [but] was / not that . . . was like / when the body surrenders to risk, that moment / when an unwillingness to refuse can seem // no different from an inability to."¹⁰ In the film, a disembodied choir sings "You've Got to Learn to Let It Go," and Ganja becomes something new.

In "Shadow Without Object," Katrin Hanusch describes a hole as "the absence of a boundary between two spaces touching each other . . . through which we expect things to come or to pass." It represents "the hidden," which she posits "both threatens and allures."¹¹ Such is the quality supportive of Bakhtin's claim that the mouth is "the most important of all human features for the grotesque" primarily because he considers "the grotesque body . . . a body in the act of becoming."¹² In this moment, Ganja's open mouth is a portal: the very moment of transformation. The moment (see figs. 8–10) is also transitory but in a



FIGURE 7. Bill Gunn, *Ganja & Hess* (1973). Frame grab.

different sense—the simultaneous mortification and catharsis of self-realization.

When Ganja is blood-sick in the aftermath of her new becoming, Hess brings a man, “a guest,” to dinner, essentially to *be* dinner. And as is typically the case with vampire narratives, biological hunger is overlaid with sexual desire. Gunn takes care to slowly build tension, eroticizing the scene by languishing at the edges of these tensions—primal hunger, sexual hunger, hunger for the self, desire as an act of cannibalism—until they can be released through the vehicle of Ganja’s scream: the moment in which she is confronted with and steps into her new self.

Prior to their wedding and her transformation, Ganja recounts a “very decisive” day in her childhood: the moment she declared her own self “valuable” and embraced the “disease” projected onto her Black femininity and in particular, her sexuality. She reveals how on this day she vowed to “take whatever steps had to be taken. But always take care of Ganja.” Her transformation into an immortal represents one fulfillment of this promise; her embrace of immortality—along with all its condemned gratifications—another. The realization of this transit overwhelms and shatters Ganja, and indeed, neither she, nor Hess, nor their love is the same on this



FIGURES 8–10. Bill Gunn, *Ganja & Hess* (1973). Frame grabs.

scream's other side; that shift of gravity is a type of swallowing.

In "Unspeakable Acts Tempt Violently" from her lyric essay *The Black Catatonic Scream*, Harmony Holiday describes how "for the African diaspora, the scream has been an emancipatory preoccupation," that "the presence of catatonia among Black people" derives from the collective haunting "surrounding the events that have shaped the diaspora."¹³ It was not Aunt Hester's screams that were the source of horror in Douglass's narrative but the fact that they could not elicit care; that Black horror has been and continues to be white entertainment; that speaking something out of memory into existence can be a dangerous form of conjure. Holiday writes, "There are countless details and nuances that we do not scream about, sing about, moan about, chant about, or discuss at all. And this is not tantamount to having forgotten or overlooked them. Instead, these silences are signs of a trauma so deeply wedged in and wedged to our identities that we freeze in the adrenaline of it and live at its mercy, speak or don't speak at its behest."¹⁴ The catharsis of Ganja's screams is in her refusal of this act of repression. She "take[s] care of Ganja" by casting aside the corrupt, prescriptive moralities of Christian white supremacist patriarchy, a lexicon predicated on the suppression of her subjection that can only ever regard her as object, as monster. She embraces those parts of herself considered most monstrous—her beauty, her desire, her intelligence, resourcefulness, poise, style—and the heathenry it suggests to certain sensibilities. Through this

embrace—this self-confrontation—she devours herself and the world.

And what follows this devouring? The answer to the question, What's on the other side of the hole? Always *possibility*. Always *the future*. ■

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Notes

- 1 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- 2 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
- 3 Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 3.
- 4 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
- 5 In this essay I maintain a capitalization of *b/Blackness* to distinguish different kinds of subject matter—black holes and Black mouths—so to clearly mark the awareness of the negative associations prescribed to *b/Blackness*.
- 6 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3, cited in Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 2.
- 7 Ibaorimi, “Revisiting Aunt Hester’s Scream.”
- 8 Ibaorimi, “Revisiting Aunt Hester’s Scream.”
- 9 Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 2.
- 10 Phillips, “continuous until we stop,” in *Double Shadow*, 11.
- 11 Hanusch, “Shadow Without Object,” 44.
- 12 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- 13 Holiday, “Black Catatonic Scream.”
- 14 Holiday, “Black Catatonic Scream.”

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