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Writhing Dark Muscle

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Abstract

This thesis consists of practice-led research in the form of a full-length script for a feature film; plus, an 5975-word essay (exegesis). A summary of the script is as follows:

After a near-death experience, Kaden, a troubled gay man with fears of starting a family, seeks out his estranged father in hopes of gaining closure for the trauma of his past. With his partner and sister, he soon finds himself in the middle of the harsh Fiordland wilderness, where his father – David, reigns supreme as the leader of a religious cult. Yet, David's control is not the true threat of this place, and it isn't long before Kaden runs afoul of a supernatural darkness poisoning the land – and the minds of those who live there.

The script is framed by an Exegesis which is a 5975-word essay on the subject of:

- a) the horror genre – of which this film belongs
- b) the development process from synopsis to second draft.

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Nick Jones

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except that which appears in the citations and acknowledgements. Nor does it contain material which to a substantial extent I have submitted for the qualification for any other degree of another university or other institute of higher learning.

Signature of the candidate:

Intellectual Property Rights Statement

All content within the screenplay *Writhing Dark Muscle* alongside the corresponding exegesis is my own intellectual property unless otherwise specified.

Writhing Dark Muscle

An Exegesis

By Nick Jones

Introduction

This exegesis functions as a deep dive into the world of horror and its many faces. In particular, the faces that I as a writer, have been influenced by in the development of my script. Carroll (2003) attempts to establish a definition for the horror story as being the appearance of or focus on monsters. He writes: "...that monsters are a mark of horror is a useful insight..." before establishing that:

"...what appears to demarcate the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as myths, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order." (Carroll, 2003)

Carroll explains that characters in a horror story react to monsters through fear, yes, but not only that. The threat of fear is "compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust."

Monsters in horror stories are often described as:

"...impure and unclean. They are putrid or mouldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous, but they also make one's skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust." (Carroll, 2003)

In his career as a horror writer, Stephen King has attempted to unpack horror in a different way. Writing on social media in 2014, King explains that there are three types of fear found within the genre. The first being "The Gross-Out: The sight of a severed head tumbling down a flight of stairs, it's when the lights go out and something green and slimy splatters against your arm." The second being:

"The Horror: the unnatural, spiders the size of bears, the dead waking up and walking around, it's when the lights go out and something with claws grabs you by the arm. And the last and worse one: Terror, when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute. It's when the lights go

out and you feel something behind you, you hear it, you feel its breath against your ear, but when you turn around, there's nothing there..." (King, 2014)

But if horror stories cause such negative emotions, then why do so many of us enjoy them? Birkvad suggests firstly that: "Horror films entertain us." But it is his second and third points that are more pertinent to this exegesis. He states that through the genre of horror, "formerly religious explanations of evil are... ..given a diagnosis. One subjects the evil actions to scientific or psychotherapeutic explanatory models." (Birkvad, 2017) Birkvad argues that "Evil is reserved for this genre of popular culture (the horror story) because we no longer believe in the compelling explanatory models that the local priest once gave us." Finally, he suggests horror is a form of "anthropological and therapeutic utility." It teaches us to deal with our fears and anxieties in a safe space. "We see it in the way teenage boys occasionally use horror films as part of a kind of manhood test where it's about keeping one's composure as much as possible." (Birkvad, 2017) The horror story therefore becomes a way to push against our own boundaries of fear and taboo without those fears or taboos truly occurring. We eat popcorn, crack jokes, cover our faces and crawl up the back of the couch if things get too scary. "In psychology we call this activation of a feeling "emotional regulation." By watching horror films one can have a sense of control over both the situation, and the viewing experience, and over the feeling of fear." (Birkzad, 2017)

My History

To really understand the nature of what I have written in *Writhing Dark Muscle*, it's helpful to know about my own backstory in horror, religion, sexuality and spiritual thought. *Writhing Dark Muscle* is in many ways, my attempt to analyse the strangeness of my upbringing in evangelical Pentecostalism.

My family, in many ways, are small-town folk. Although we are presently spread out across the largest cities in New Zealand, I grew up in small towns like Blenheim and Nelson, in which conservative values and religious belief were still very much the norm in the 1990s. My parents are to this day conservative Pentecostal Christians. They say grace before meals, read their Bibles, go to Church and speak in tongues.

Pentecostalism is a difficult religion to define. Though it is denominationally distinctive from Catholicism and other orthodox systems of Christianity, it is within itself multid denominational, containing vast differences in theological belief and practice across the globe. Pentecostalism's precursor was the American Holiness Movement which grew as an "evangelical preoccupation since the rediscovery (and redefinition) of John Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification during the period of early 19th-century revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening." (Robins, 2010 p.1-11) This doctrine was of great interest to evangelical Christians after the Civil War, as it combined intense emotional experience with strong and sober ethics, inspiring a new movement of christian perfectionism amongst believers of multiple denominations.

"As the 19th century progressed, fascination with the person and work of the Holy Spirit flourished in American Protestantism, liberal and conservative alike. That fascination worked with particular effect on non-Wesleyan advocates of Christian perfection whose Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, or Anglican affiliations linked them to mid-century "Reformed" Holiness figures like Finney and Mahan. Though often influenced by Methodists, they spoke less of entire sanctification than of what Boardman had called "the higher Christian life," and since the time of Mahan, they had equated this experience with the "Baptism with the Holy Ghost" that had empowered the disciples on the Day of Pentecost." (Robins, 2010 p.1-11)

This focus on "the higher Christian life" resulted in a new branch of the Holiness Movement that chose to see entire sanctification as less of an eradication of sinful nature and more as a filling of oneself with power from the Holy Ghost to do acts of service for the church.

The Holiness Movement also professed a belief in what is called dispensational premillennialism. Something that is still held by many Pentecostal churches today. This position came from a preoccupation with prophetic doctrines and scriptures to gain esoteric knowledge about the future. It taught that “history fell into seven “dispensations” – historical economies or orders – each governed by its own distinctive covenant between God and humanity.” (Robins, 2010 p.1-11) According to this belief, we are currently living at the end of the sixth dispensation, also known as “the Dispensation of Grace” or the “Church Age.” This age began with the resurrection of Christ and concludes with the rapture, in which he secretly steals away his saints to heaven before seven years of violence and suffering known as the Tribulation.

“The seventh and final dispensation of history would commence with Christ’s final appearing, when, with his army of resurrected saints, he would conquer the forces of Satan and reign during a thousand-year era of peace known as the Millennium. The curtain would then fall on the old secular stage, all would stand before the Final Judgement, the earth would be purged with fire, old things would pass away, a new heaven and a new earth would appear, and the saints would enjoy fellowship with God into the far reaches of eternity.” (Robins, 2010 p.1-11)

This theological belief was incredibly important because it created an environment of intense urgency and expectancy as well as an openness to new “revelations” and a deep desire for the supernatural, resulting in the classic Pentecostal trope of faith healing.

“In addition to sanctification and the Second Coming, post-Civil War Holiness placed increasing stress on New Testament signs and wonders. The most important of these was faith healing. Faith healing and other supernatural features of Holiness resonated with the mood of late-Victorian romanticism, which had a fascination for intense experience and the extraordinary.” (Robins, 2010 p.1-11)

It was this fascination, combined with an increasing expectations around personal health and well-being during this time that caused the Holiness Movement to see faith healing not as a once-in-a-blue-moon miracle, but a fundamental element of full salvation.

In the 1880s and onwards, the Holiness Movement fell victim to internal political tensions. Believers from poorer backgrounds began to gravitate towards increasingly intense expressions of Holiness as a rejection of the movement's early leadership which "had come from men and women of privilege" who's societal standing had created a sense of elitism. They believed that many of the movement's leaders had "grown lukewarm. Their religion was decent, sober, orderly, and orthodox." (Robins, 2010 p.1-11) Those who felt this way began to leave their churches in search of a denomination they could agree with. This was often met with relief from their more conservative leaders who felt these believers were too radical, and who disagreed theologically with their ideas around that radicality.

These "radical" Christians subsequently gathered together and rejected "patterns of deference and polite civilities that sustained privilege and social hierarchy." Instead, they poked fun at and mocked "aristocratic churches," wealthy believers and anything resembling the mainstream orthodoxy of their time. In their opinion, wealthy believers attending popular churches were attending "a rich man's tomb" where a "dead Christ is embalmed in the spices of worldly respectability." (Robins, 2010 p.1-11)

Their absolute distaste for classist Christianity then resulted in a focus on religious ecstasy.

"The saints called it "shouting" and proudly defended it. The ecstatic frenzy of holy possession composed a rich kinetic symbolism that demarcated social and religious boundaries with keen efficiency, but it repaid its practitioners with much more than boundary maintenance. Visible evidence of God's validating presence for the community, palpable assurance for the disquieted soul, a dense catechism on the nature of the divine-human relationship for all – this was the kind of bedrock spiritual evidence that turned "I think so" into "I *know* so religion." (Robins, 2010 p.1-11)

Understanding these key elements – the higher christian life, dispensational premillennialism, faith healing, prophetic knowledge and religious ecstasy (aka "shouting") is

crucial to understanding modern day Pentecostal religion (which formed around them), and the environment I was brought up in. Furthermore, my parents got “saved” in the 1980s as teenagers and that comes with a whole lot of peculiar baggage.

Something very bizarre happened both in Pentecostal Christianity and secular society between the years of 1980 and 1995 – the “Satanic Panic” phenomenon. It began with the release of the best-selling “biography” *Michelle Remembers* by Lawrence Pazder which detailed the alleged abuse of Michelle Smith at the hands of a satanic cult. According to recovered memories of Smith, between the years of 1954 and 1955, when she was only five years old, she was forced to take part in satanic rituals that involved torture, being locked in cages, sexual assault, witnessing several murders and being rubbed with the blood and body parts of various murdered babies and adults (Smith & Pazder, 1983).

After recovering these memories, Smith and her husband became quite famous. Smith’s husband, Pazder became the foremost expert on SRA (Satanic Ritual Abuse) and consulted with both church authorities and secular media outlets. (20/20, 1985)

The book was subsequently refuted, but it became the basis for the Satanic Panic phenomenon in the coming years. The popularity of the book has been directly tied to the McMartin preschool sex abuse trial which began in 1987 and lasted until 1990 before all charges were dropped with no convictions obtained. Allegations made against the preschool included bizarre accusations such as seeing witches fly, underground tunnels, car-wash orgies, children being flushed down toilets and a game called “naked movie star.” (Reinhold, 1990)

Similar cases occurred throughout the 1980s in Kern county in which several day-care centres were accused of satanic ritual abuse, with up to sixty children testifying as victims. At least thirty-six day-care staff were convicted, most spending time in prison. Of those thirty-

six convictions, thirty-four were overturned on appeal, with the last two accused dying in prison, unable to clear their names. (Nguyen, 2016)

At the same time as these scandals, the tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons came under fire from Pentecostal Christianity as being a recruitment tool to bring children to satanism. In 1985, Patricia Pulling and Thomas Radecki created the organization B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons) after Patricia's son Irving committed suicide, allegedly due to playing the game. B.A.D.D. gained some traction in both Pentecostal and secular communities, and Pulling's book *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children For Satan* is a classic of the Satanic Panic era. To highlight the ludicrous nature of hers and Radecki's accusations around the game, in her book, Pulling gives Police a questionnaire to ask suspected "child cultists" in ascertaining their level of engagement with the dark arts. One question is particularly ridiculous, in which she encourages Police Officers to ask: "Has he read the Necronomicon or is he familiar with it?" (Stackpole, 1990) The Necronomicon being a fictional grimoire created by HP Lovecraft in the 1930s and not a real-world grimoire at all.

The 1980s were an interesting time to "find Jesus." With all the Satanic Panic court cases going on, interviews with "ex-cult members" on Opera (Winfrey, 2011), and Tracts about D&D being evil, the global Pentecostal community was understandably terrified that the Devil was making some sort of grand move to bring about an apocalypse. As a result, converts, like my parents became more conservative, terrified that demons existed behind every tree.

It was into this environment that I was born and raised. I was forbidden from watching certain movies and cartoons. Dungeons and Dragons was considered occultism. The stories of HP Lovecraft were out-of-bounds, Christian horror-novels that encouraged Satanic

Panic (such as Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*) filled our family bookshelves, and to top it all off, I started to realize at an early age that I was gay.

Growing up in a Pentecostal family, where God and the devil were very real had a huge effect on my internal life philosophy. My childhood was marked by being afraid of a lot, while simultaneously being drawn to darker subjects like horror. I also constantly felt I was somehow broken because of my sexuality. I wondered if I was a victim of SRA, if perhaps I had hidden memories of sexual abuse that had turned me gay. As a result, I actively pursued conversion therapy in my late teens, before spending most of my early twenties working in church ministry to try and earn enough favour from God so that I might be "cured." My craving for supernatural intervention became so strong, that I found myself in the wildest fringe areas of Pentecostalism. I attended revival meetings where the sick were prayed for and people spoke in tongues. I participated in huge "communion festivals" where people claimed to be "drunk in the holy ghost." I even saw, on more than one occasion, people praying for dead bodies to be brought back to life. But by far, the most influential thing on me and my writing that I saw was a constant pattern of sick people being prayed for, then healed, only to, a few days/weeks/months/years later, have that same sickness come back – and in some cases, take their lives. It was almost as if they were being tricked – as if god was playing a kind of divine prank on them.

Queer Sensibilities In Horror

Arguably a key trait of both queer fiction and Cosmic Horror is that of the *outsider archetype*. This archetype is obvious to see in queer fiction as queer people are real-world outsiders to heteronormative society. But in the history of horror, it is somewhat more complex. The essay *Outsiders and Aliens: The Use of Isolation in Lovecraft's Fiction* gives a good starting definition:

“In “The Tomb” we meet a character-type that appears in much of Lovecraft’s early fiction: the person who is by nature an outsider. Whether presented as a dreamer or a madman, he is generally so withdrawn that it is no easier for the reader to distinguish the point where the internal landscape of the character’s imagination gives way to the external landscape of the “real” world than it is for the character himself.” (Dziemianowicz, 2011)

While this archetype of the outsider was important in developing my protagonist, it was also important in terms of how I developed the location in my script.

“Usually the characters in weird fiction (a sub-sub-genre of Lovecraftian horror) have either entered into a place unfamiliar to most of us or have received such hints of the unusual that they become obsessed with the weird. Whether It exists or not, they have fallen into dialogue with It; they may pull back from the abyss, they may decide to unsee what they saw, but still they saw it.” (VanderMeer, 2012)

Building off VanderMeer’s thoughts, the essay *Developing Weirdness Through Cartographic Destabilization in Jeff VanderMeer’s Annihilation* states:

“More often than not the effect is one in which the reader must orient themselves against those weird spaces as they attempt to navigate their way through the tale, in effect attempting to map the weird. However, the weird seems to always reject this attempt at finding a sense of place during the reading. Characters are continuously presented with new monstrosities and their sense of reality is consistently challenged. Rarely do these characters find their own sense of place within the weird, but if they do, they come across as changed or uncanny. This all comes together to only further destabilize a reader’s cognitive map of the literature.” (Hugel, 2015)

In *Writhing Dark Muscle*, I make use of this “cartographic destabilization” and sense of being an “outsider” through setting the film in Fiordland, New Zealand – a sparsely populated, vast, hard terrain, outside of normal society. It was important to create a space that truly conveyed the strangeness of being in an environment that is both foreign and at the same time familiar. The first draft of the script played off this idea even more, as most of that version took place on the journey to the compound rather than in it. With the first draft, I took the approach of using the bigness of the environment to represent an oppressive monster, as well

as creating more blatant displays of cartographic destabilization via landmarks in the story-world shifting compass directions on the characters.

In the second draft, I dropped much of this as the need to get the characters into conflict with their father and the cult became much more dramatically interesting to me. The second draft also brought about another major change to the narrative of my script. Originally, Kelsey was my protagonist. Only in the second draft as my setting shifted from journey to destination, did the protagonist shift from Kelsey to Kaden. This is because Kaden's homosexuality, and the pain he feels towards his father's abandonment is far too strong dramatically to ignore. He became the character with the most to lose in an environment of supernatural and religious horror – his partner and sister, his father's acceptance, his rationality, and possibly, even his eternal soul.

“The horror film's representation of the ‘Other’ has long been understood to be a symbolic representation of social ills, anxieties and unease. Non-normative sexuality (bisexuality and homosexuality) is often chief among these concerns...much of its representation has been symbolic or implicit (in horror films), whereby homosexuality must be teased out of its place in the shadows via queer interpretation.” (Elliot-Smith, 2016)

I have always felt it to be somewhat problematic that the “Queer” and the “Other” are depicted in horror as being synonymous in some way with “the monster.” Coming from a gay perspective raised in a heteronormative Christian environment, I may have once felt like “the monster,” but now, I recognize that the monster was really the social and spiritual construct I was raised within. Because of this realization, I wanted to diverge a bit with my film. Instead of focusing on the monsters as representations of societal fears about homosexuality, I focused on using the monsters to represent *homosexual* fears about society – particularly the Christian religion that I grew up with.

Michael is afraid of the promiscuous gay stereotype, which is expressed in not only his desire to start a family, but also in his specific shutting down of Kaden's more flamboyant aspects both publicly and in private on pages 4, 22 43 and 44.

Conversely, Kaden is afraid of both the vanilla straight family stereotype and becoming like his father (the archetypal straight, white, conservative preacher), through his discomfort with settling down, sharing his feelings with his spouse, and of course, having children.

The setup of the story itself is also designed to play with these fears – the audience, identifying with two gay characters are placed alongside them in an environment of radical Christianity. They are surrounded by straight men and women whom believe with a degree of fanaticism that homosexuality is a sin and one of the worst kind – some possibly even believe it should be punishable by death.

This sandbox of Christian fundamentalism is an exaggerated version of what I, as a gay man, had to live inside for most of my life so far. And with the advent of supernatural occurrences inside the compound, the characters are forced to reevaluate their positioning in the world. Signs and wonders lend credibility to the theological beliefs of religious people, and as act three of the film begins, Kaden stutters terrified: “What if he’s right, Michael? What if we are sick? What if we are hated by god?”

Body Horror

One of the major horror subgenres incorporated in *Writhing Dark Muscle* is that of Body Horror. Finding its roots in films like Cronenberg's *The Fly*, Gordon's *Re-Animator* and Carpenter's *The Thing*, body horror is a genre that attempts to make the body a focal point of terror. This, “Body Gothic” - a term used to group body horror together with splatterpunk, torture porn and surgical horror within the context of gothic tradition, is a

“...fictional representation of the body exceeding itself or falling apart, either opening up or being altered past the point where it would be recognised by normative understandings of human corporeality.” (Reyes, 2014, p.11)

During the development process of my film, I have made use of elements specific to this genre in ways that best served me and the story I was telling. Beginning with the first signifying scene that *Writhing Dark Muscle* is a horror film, on page 11 we see Kaden lying in a hospital bed after a traumatic car accident. He is set upon by a vision of whom will eventually be revealed to be his father. This vision plays off his fears around parenthood through the use of a foetus-like monster that forces, Kaden’s body to “open up” and ingest it, implying within this scene, and the one that follows it, a kind of mutation may have taken place within Kaden’s body.

However, the climax of the film (page 83), contains perhaps the most potent version of body horror within it. As Kaden and his father attempt to escape the cosmic being that has been toying with them throughout the entire film, Kaden witnesses his father torn apart as he evolves into a mass of writhing black muscle.

The film’s title, which is largely symbolic, represents the anger of rejection that Kaden feels from his father, but also, on a deeper level the fear that how he feels, who he loves, or what he is deep inside his “heart”, is somehow corrupted by sin. The horror of him ingesting the foetus-monster represents Kaden’s fear that the very act of settling down and having a child within the context of a “spiritually abnormal” gay relationship, is somehow a confirmation or acceptance of the darkness he sees within himself.

In his book, Reyes suggests that in body horror, the horrifying nature of a physical body changing is first glorified for its othering of the victim, before being feared and reviled for the loss of humanity that comes with it. The genre flourishes via its ability to blur the

boundaries between spectacle and empathy. Body horror can also deal with strange areas such as the space between life and death, as we see with the film *Re-Animator*, which allows a unique focus on the helplessness of being a consciousness trapped within the confines of a corporeal body, and having a terrible yearning to escape it for something more. The genre explores these strange spaces, reimagining them through the reconstruction of flesh as an attempt to transcend them. (Reyes, 2014, p.73) *Writhing Dark Muscle* follows this tradition by exploring the strange space of mystical experience and the longing of believers to access an esoteric realm of spiritual ecstasy. David's eventual transformation into a writhing dark muscle himself, is the result of his constant pursuit. He is lifted by a kind of divinity that ultimately destroys him because of his own inability to transcend. In his final moments, he may realize the error of his ways with the line "My son..." but as the Bible he follows teaches, "You will eat the fruits of your labour." (Psalm 128:2 NIV)

Cosmic Horror and Religious Horror

In Stephen King's 2014 Lovecraftian inspired novel *Revival* a character named Astrid is dying of lung cancer when she is visited by Jamie, the protagonist, her ex-lover. During this encounter, a pivotal line is uttered. A line that conveys in a sense, the entire theme of the novel, and a line that eventually would go on to inspire me in the earliest stages of developing *Writhing Dark Muscle* as a film.

"I stopped. For seven months, I stopped. If the baby had lived, I might have stopped for good. Something...' She drew a deep wheezing breath. '**Something tricks us. That's what I believe.**'" (King, 2014, p.293 – emphasis added)

This one little line is incredibly important in the novel *Revival*, which deals with concepts of Christian faith healing and life-after-death. Through this line, Astrid seems to be saying that while she does believe in a "god" that perhaps he is not a good one. This of

course, echoes my own sentiment from earlier when suggesting that god himself might be a trickster.

It was this novel that began my personal fascination with the cosmic horror genre, and the works of H.P. Lovecraft. The idea of cosmic pessimism, or *cosmicism* holds incredible weight and terror for someone with my background. Cosmicism is described as “The literary philosophy developed by the American writer H.P. Lovecraft, stating that there is no recognizable divine presence, such as god, in the Universe, and that humans are particularly insignificant in the large scheme of intergalactic existence.” (Trung, 2016) In this literary philosophy, “The universe transcends human imagination and is unimaginably huge. When human beings... face this near-infinite macro... [they] ...feel extreme fear, and... ...are on the verge of madness because of their smallness and absolute powerlessness.” (Hong Kong News, 2019)

Cosmic Horror is therefore an exploration of being trapped within a universe where destiny does not exist, there are no “real gods,” and when we die, we become nothing.

With *Writhing Dark Muscle*, I wanted to create my own brand of cosmic horror. One that took the weirdness and almost cult-like nature of the fringe areas of Pentecostalism and turned them into vehicles of cosmic dread. I wanted to explore further the idea which Stephen King suggested in his novel *Revival* – that of being tricked by something masquerading as god, because it is that exact fear which haunts me.

Religious horror is not a new thing. From Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, to Friedkin’s *The Exorcist*, the mythology of Catholicism and Christianity has been plumbed for centuries. Horror as a modern genre also finds its roots in religion – primarily the Inquisition of 1235 (Masters, 2013) when accusations of witchcraft and heresy were first traded around amongst Christians.

Writhing Dark Muscle diverges from these traditional religious horror approaches by dealing with not a Catholic mythology, but the mythology of Evangelical Pentecostalism. Primarily, a bizarre religious campaign within a series of churches often called “The Glory Movement” – in fact, one of the original titles for *Writhing Dark Muscle* was *The Glory*.

The Glory Movement is a brand of theology and religious practice that has its origins in a 1994 Christian Revival known as *The Toronto Blessing*. The Toronto Blessing was a:

“supposed outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the people of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship Church. On January 20th, 1994, a Pentecostal pastor named Randy Clark spoke at the church and gave his testimony of how he would get “drunk” in the Spirit and laugh uncontrollably. In response to this testimony, the congregation erupted in pandemonium with people laughing, growling, dancing, shaking, barking like dogs, and even being stuck in positions of paralysis. These experiences were attributed to the Holy Spirit entering people’s bodies. The pastor of the church, John Arnott, referred to it as a big Holy Spirit party.” (Got Questions, 2019)

The “manifestations” of this revival did not stop when the event finished either, rather, Christians took them back to their individual churches across the world, and the “blessing” continued to grow.

In 2008, Lakeland Florida, a similar revival occurred known as *The Lakeland Revival*, led by evangelist Todd Bentley, a Canadian-born ex-convict with multiple counts of sexual assault on his record before his conversion to Christianity. “The focus of Bentley’s revivals...(was) primarily on the manifestation of sign gifts, claiming an ability to generate oil from his palms and to produce gold dust from his pores...” (Got Questions, 2019)

From out of these two revivals, the Glory movement was established. The movement focuses on “signs and wonders” as well as supernatural experience to back up its claims about God.

On page 33, the communion festival scene is very reminiscent of the Toronto and Lakeland revivals, and is drawn from the historical concept of Agapæ Feasts in church history. Burns explains:

“During the days of the Early Church, the believers would all gather together to share what was known as an agape feast, or “love feast.” Those who could afford to bring food brought it to the feast and shared it with other believers.” (Burns, 2012)

The agape feasts of the early church eventually went out of fashion because of how debaucherous they became. Schaff wrote that:

“The early disappearance of the Christian agapæ may probably be attributed to the terrible abuse of the word here referred to, by the licentious Carpocratians. The genuine agapæ were of apostolic origin (2 Pet. ii. 13; Jude 12), but were often abused by hypocrites, even under the apostolic eye.” (Schaff, 2005)

The Glory movement in recent years re-adopted the Agapæ feasts in the form of communion festivals which can be viewed in all its strangeness on YouTube. (Royzoner & YouTube, 2011)

On page 54, I show Michael being touched by the presence of a supernatural being through gold dust appearing all over his body – a common sign and wonder in the glory movement (Juarez, 2016). The scene is intercut with another more traditional horror experience that Kaden is going through to provide contrast and context to the “sign” Michael is experiencing.

Lastly, throughout the script, David preaches to his congregation several times, distorting theological understandings and bible verses that are preached on and sometime distorted by various figureheads in the Glory Movement today. In the pivotal scene on page 61 which results in David calling down fire from heaven to terrify his son, the cult-leader preaches a message in which he states: “This place is sacred earth. Here, somehow, the everlasting doors will be opened, if we please the Lord, he will use us to establish the realm

of glory, to manifest it in reality!” These lines reference a biblical scripture: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.” (Psalm 24:9) which refers to believers being conduits for the presence of God.

David preaches it in a much more literal way, one which is preached similarly by real-world evangelist Ian Clayton, a South-African born New Zealander who speaks within the context of the Glory movement. Other favourite topics of his are interdimensional gateways, dinosaur people, demonic sex offenders and doppelgängers clones.

Conclusion

Through the development of the second draft of *Writhing Dark Muscle*, I have grown as a writer and allowed my script to transition from being solely a genre film to something that places focus on the inter-personal drama between my characters which was only slightly touched on in the original.

I began this script out of a desire to write my first horror story, filled with monsters and darkness. Paying close attention to the defining features of horror outlined in my introduction, I believe I managed to do just that – my monsters inspire that fear which is mixed with revulsion and disgust, I make use of the gross-out, of the horror, and most importantly of the terror, which is felt as a kind of creeping, claustrophobic dread throughout the script.

Using my knowledge of evangelical Pentecostalism and my own history of being raised in the aftermath of the 1980s “Satanic Panic,” I have created a believable religious group and cult-leader in the Riverside Compound and their leader David Watson.

I have also created a new space for queer horror fans in the development of LGBTQ themes, fears and questions presented by the characters of Kaden and Michael. Traditionally,

a horror film with queer motives places focus on the monster as being representative for queerness, but I had a different goal in mind. My monsters were representations of things that I as a gay man, fear about the predominantly straight, hetero-normative Christian society I grew up in.

Lastly, incorporating my understanding of certain horror genres, I have both paid respect to, and displayed an awareness of the rich lineage of films that have come before me. Using Body Horror as a representation of our desire to transcend our physical frame, I have shown abstract ideas that would otherwise be difficult to convey, and through the coupling of it with cosmic and religious horror, I've instilled the script with a sense of both spiritual and existential fear.

In fact, expanding upon these genres briefly, I want to point out that cosmic horror has traditionally been hard to film. This is not just because the genre is a literary one. Cosmic horror tries to explore the fundamental truth that this reality we find ourselves in, cannot be breached. It suggests that if there is no god, heaven or hell, then spiritual transcendence is impossible. Eternity cannot be sought out in any way other than our bones returning to dust. These are ideas that are incredibly difficult to depict on film, which is why pairing it with Body Horror is an important strategic move.

Body horror, like cosmic horror, deals with issues of transcendence. In body horror, characters yearn to be freed from their tiny, personal prisons – their physical flesh itself. Yet, no mutation, no “opening up” of the body can ever truly result in becoming something more, or something higher than what they already are. The experiment is doomed from the beginning. They are trapped in their own corporeal forms, with no hope of release, just like we all are trapped within our own shells, which in turn are housed forever inside this universe.

Body horror therefore becomes a filmic representation of cosmic horror in that both genres cry out desperately to evolve, to transcend, yet ultimately, it is a hopeless cry, because in truth, we are meaningless – tiny ants crawling across the surface of an uncaring planet, beneath a carnivorous sky.

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