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Tainted Ground: Screenplay Development with Genre Swinging in Mind

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Tainted Ground: Genre-Swinging and Horror

Screenplay Development

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Section 1: Introduction

This exegesis examines horror story structure in film and television as a framing device for observations and ensuing discussions pertaining to genre mixing. I relate my observations in this exegesis to my accompanying Master of Creative Writing thesis project, a second draft screenplay entitled Tainted Ground. The plot of Tainted Ground follows responsible high school prefect Stacey Wilkins, who pursues a university scholarship. Stacey's grandfather, a seasoned detective, gets brutally murdered after experimenting with strange mushrooms. These 'ghost mushrooms' carry spirits of people who've died in Brucedale, the fictional West Auckland suburb in which the story is set. Stacey regrets her own experimentation when she's haunted by butchered visions of her grandfather, but she's determined to piece together the mystery of his killer.

1.1 Film Genre

The primary genre I identify for Tainted Ground, my feature length screenplay, is horror. Entirely, I would classify my thesis work as a supernatural horror mystery. I owe this distinction to the metaphysical element of ghosts, and the prominence of a murder mystery. I take particular interest in the genre mixing that results from Tainted Ground's mystery plot and its relationship with the horror elements in the story's structure.

The implications of this genre relationship between mystery and horror characterize the development process toward the second draft of *Tainted Ground* as a research experiment. The objective for my screenplay is to serve as a demonstration of genre mixing effects. This is in demonstration of a theory I have extrapolated that considers observable genre mixing effects on story structure. Henceforth this theory will be referred to by my coinage of ‘genre-swinging.’ Most discernable at the turning points throughout a story’s structure, genre-swinging is any instance of compounded dramatic effect generated by genre mixing. Exemplary texts in the horror genre will be examined in later sections of this exegesis to demonstrate cases of genre-swinging. These examples will also provide a relatable context for genre-swinging to inform the research question ‘How does genre-swinging influence the development of a feature-length horror screenplay?’

1.2 Exegesis Structure and Aims

This exegesis is comprised of three sections. The first section, the introduction, provides a synopsis for *Tainted Ground*, introduces the concept of genre-swinging. The overview of the structure and aims of this exegesis concludes this first section.

Section two of this exegesis is the theoretical section. The first subsection to follow in section two pertains to a selective history of the horror genre relevant to genre-swinging. This is followed by a subsection which analyses contemporary horror in film and television.

Section two also covers the story structure of *Tainted Ground*, and explores contemporary screen narrative theory. These findings are discussed in a subsequent section which aims to answer my research question. Section three relates the *Tainted Ground* text to prospective audiences. I explore matters of emotional truth, questions of audience and character, posit research conclusions and finally discuss marketing purposes.

Section 2: Theoretical Section

The question of a story's genre identity can be subjective, and the horror genre in particular has a variety of sub-genres and a malleable sense of what constitutes its definition.

This genre fluidity is further complicated by overlap between genres. Still, I cite several exemplary texts which I interpret to showcase characteristics of the horror genre. Several of these texts also demonstrate genre-swinging in their structure.

Specific key signifiers of the horror genre are numerous, but my examples gravitate toward a narrower collection of themes and elements (James 2013) particular to ghost stories. (Ghosts or spirits, haunting, possession, 'negative energy,' inanimate objects of spiritual vessels, exorcism or otherwise 'moving on' of spirits.) Such examples include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973) *Paranormal Activity* (2009), *Insidious* (2011) and *The Babadook* (2014). Additional examples may not qualify as ghost stories but as horror texts featuring characteristics general to the horror genre at large. (Hantke, 2010) (Prince, 2004) (King, 2006) They are selected for their exhibition of genre-swinging, or structural points of interest. These texts are *The Birds* (1963) and *Carrie* (1976).

2.1 History of the Horror Genre

I have selected these texts on the basis of their significance as historical markers in the horror genre. Notably, audience perceptions change over time, and I assess these films through the lens of a modern viewer. This is most evident in the example of the oldest text I discuss, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). Widely accepted and studied as an exemplary horror film, *The Birds* provides a case for my theory of genre-swinging. The film's identity as strictly horror is readily challenged when examined through the lens of modern horror

perspectives, (Bishop, 2011) as so much of the narrative is fixated on the romance plot. Forty-eight minutes into the film and the greatest spectacle of horror we see is the protagonist's hair getting pecked by a bird. But we're certain by now that our lead characters, our 'lovebirds,' are meant to be together. That is, if a certain mother-in-law can give her blessing. Of course, the danger of the birds serves to compound the predicament. But they also provide the means by which the romance resolves. Only after persisting through the ordeal of bird hell on earth does the protagonist finally earn the acceptance of her mother-in-law. (Arnold, 2013) I consider this a clear example of genre-swinging, where the story arc builds on both romance and horror for compounded dramatic effect.

Rosemary's Baby (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) follow story arcs with a similar dynamic: The horror has an ebb and flow with the domestic drama. (Arnold, 2013) On a certain level, one could dismiss the horror altogether. The films could be interpreted as stories about mothers who worry for the wellbeing of their afflicted children.

Yet, the presence of the horror genre elements undoubtedly augments the drama.

The child isn't just unwell, it's taken over by an evil demon. A mother triumphs, someone good triumphs, a *good mother* triumphs. (Arnold, 2013)

Carrie (1976) follows the titular character in a harrowing journey to cope with supernatural telekinetic powers, and school life. She longs for acceptance from her peers and her mother. (Arnold, 2013) The opening scene of the film shows her having her first period. The audience sees her bleed between her legs, and her shocked reaction. These visual cues may prime the audience to suppose she's been stabbed, or has some sort of affliction, until her unfamiliarity with the menstrual cycle is explained. It wonderfully utilizes the unknown of what we see for

a fresh viewer, and it is through her perspective that much of the story elements are contextualized as horror. (Alsenberg, 2012) The character's dread toward her period and her supernatural powers help to energize the conflicts with other characters. Her only support comes from a sympathetic gym teacher at school, who has her own conflicts about helping the awkward girl. The teacher not only sympathizes with Carrie but pities her insofar as finding her pathetic.

2.2 Contemporary Horror Genre Expectations

Two films I've chosen to analyse as examples of the horror genre in the public consciousness are *Paranormal Activity* (2009) and *Insidious* (2011). Both films are in the supernatural horror genre, share producers, and were commercial successes. Of the two, *Paranormal Activity* received a greater reception at large and grossed more than double the revenue of *Insidious* with expenditures of only a fraction of the *Insidious* budget. (Internet Movie Database. 2014) Nevertheless, I consider *Insidious* as a better model of a modern horror genre film.

Paranormal Activity may be good, or successful, but not for the 'right' reasons: that is to say the film does not achieve what I consider to be exemplary execution of key elements within the horror genre. It is not sufficient for these elements to merely feature: they should be adequately explored and developed. Taking into account these factors, *Paranormal Activity* presents a paradox. It is a commercially successful horror film which lacks adequate substance.

In *Insidious* I found a film that wasn't necessarily a greater commercial or even critical success than *Paranormal Activity*, but one that would better typify a horror genre film.

Paranormal Activity utilizes common horror elements, but its means of achieving its effectiveness within the genre hinge tremendously on the Found Footage narrative device. The film follows protagonist Katie whose sleep has been disturbed by sleepwalking. Her boyfriend Micah has captured footage of her sleepwalking, and decides to document her experience. This justification for the Found Footage narrative also sets the characters' course into a horror environment, the haunted house, and the dangers of which the audience is given privileged perspective. By the fifteen minute mark, Katie calls over a psychic for a consultation and the film establishes a supposition that Katie may be haunted. The psychic also exposit that the hauntings 'feed off negative energy,' but the film does not adequately expand on this. The reason why Katie may be haunted is unclear. Still, the film has the characters examine online footage of a previous, similar case. The footage is of a grizzly looking, possessed woman, and serves as foreshadowing for the danger the couple will encounter.

The couple call in a demonologist for consultation, who immediately leaves. He simply states that the evil presence in the house is exceptionally strong, and doesn't want to be involved. In a documentary, it's sensationalistic when a specialist backs away from approaching the subject matter. But in a horror story, it is something of a missed opportunity. Characters seem to come and go in this film. We never see the demonologist, or the psychic before him again. Katie's condition progresses, and typical horror elements are shown: ominous sights and sounds. Interspersed with these are more video log reflections by the characters. The characters do try to resolve their situation, but the plot itself is spread quite thin and not much 'happens.' The film's climax, where a possessed Katie kills her boyfriend, happens off-screen, and the film ends with a dedication to the boyfriend and the soon to be deceased Katie. Many of the film's scenes are devoted to character dialogue surrounding information just recently divulged. The film appears to try use this realism for suspense, but that suspense

is contingent on whether the audience accepts the scenes as documentary video logs.

Typically, the horror genre compensates for any failing suspension of disbelief with its stylistic choices, whereby viewer interest may be maintained in the spectacle of the horror elements. In *Paranormal Activity*, much of the spectacle is in the realism itself, which means failure to properly suspend audience disbelief may more likely result in viewer disinterest. In contrast, *Insidious* typifies modern conventions surrounding supernatural horror, and balances these in the context of domestic drama.

Renai's son Dalton, shown sleeping in the opening, wanders into the creepy attic to play. He suffers a fall and becomes comatose the next day. The fear of a child injuring their head is played for domestic drama throughout the early part of the film. It is later explained the child unknowingly performed astral projection.

With the child back after an omitted three months in hospital, supernatural events occur. Thirty minutes into the film there is a notable scene where the mother finds blood on the boy's sheets. Immediately, we may suspect the child is bleeding somehow, which builds much more on the parents' and audience's fear. But then the mother unravels the sheet and we see the blood makes up the form of a hand print. I consider this scene an effective execution of genre-swinging between domestic drama and horror.

A more recent example of domestic drama and horror overlap is *The Babadook* (2014). The film has received critical acclaim for its effective use of suspense and creative art direction. The film is not without its detractors, one of whom is Tylar Sage, a contributor to the Bright Lights film journal website. He presents a provocatively titled article 'The Return of Repression: How Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* Undoes Itself.' (Sage, 2015) Sage's review actually begins by giving the film similar praise you'd come to expect from other reviews. '*The Babadook* is simply the newest entry in what might broadly be called the

“Domestic Space Invaded by Evil” film that has come to dominate much of the contemporary horror genre.’ I’m inclined to agree with most of the positive feedback the film receives. I’m also inclined to agree with Sage’s position that the film meets an anti-climax, albeit with less conviction. ‘Here we have the film’s deepest betrayal of not only the horror genre but life itself.’ The crux of Sage’s argument is the film’s demystifying of the Babadook spirit into an allegory for grief. The monster is really a motif for the deceased father of the family.

‘An allegorical film of this sort may or may not, according to your taste, automatically be “bad.” In this case, I think it’s not only bad, it’s troubling, and ultimately malignant.’ Sage explains ‘It’s troubling because of its relationship with, and understanding of, the genre of the horror film.’ He explains this is because ‘a good horror film ought to exacerbate our fears, rather than allaying them.’ The Babadook ends on a relatively happy note with respect to the rest of the film.

I consider The Babadook to demonstrate effective genre-swinging in its earlier half. The film weaves in and out of the horror frequently during its suspense scenes to great effect, and during many of these suspense scenes the threat of horror is intensified by the vulnerability of domestic drama. However, the value of mixing domestic drama and horror genre becomes dampened in the climax by its allegory. Effectively, the Babadook abandons its horror and retrospectively can be seen by critical horror fans (Tamborini and Weaver, 1996) to be a domestic drama film posing as horror.

The Babadook begins as domestic drama, and ends as domestic drama.

2.3 Influence of Genre Examples on Tainted Ground

The example films discussed in the earlier subsections provided me with an increased awareness of horror genre expectations, especially in terms of horror story structure.

Insidious begins with a suspense scene with the boy wandering the family attic. In *Tainted Ground* I begin with a chase in a swamp of ghost mushrooms. Grandpa Wilkins pursues a pair of robbers for his case. The robbers escape the old detective but run into Lastgasp and meet their deaths.

From *Carrie*, I draw some inspiration from the relationship between Carrie and her gym teacher for the relationship dynamic between Stacey and Miss Briar. The student places trust in the teacher, while the teacher feels pity or a sense of obligation toward the student.

I've been conscious in trying to retain the horror focus of *Tainted Ground* throughout, which I discuss further in this exegesis with respect to the story's structure. I aimed to maintain a threat of horror as the story ends. This includes a horror epilogue scene, where the ghost mushrooms are seen to grow at the school, observed by the ominous Megan. *Tainted Ground* should be clear of the same problem *The Babadook*'s ending presents for certain horror fans. *Tainted Ground* begins as horror, and ends as horror.

2.4 Genre Perspective of Tainted Ground

The advancement I wish for *Tainted Ground* to contribute to the horror genre is that of genre-mixing. I'd like to encourage more films which might explore the design space of a feature-length story. I would hope for *Tainted Ground* to be indicative of my passion for the writing craft, and serve as meaningful entertainment.

One of my aims with *Tainted Ground* was to make sure the plot could be interesting whether or not an audience suspended their disbelief for the horror or lost interest in the mystery.

(Williamson, 2006) I also wrote *Tainted Ground* to try and please myself by meeting the challenge of arranging a mixed-genre work where each genre had contingencies on the plot (Hantke, 2010) (Prince, 2004).

2.5 Structural Analysis of Tainted Ground

The engine of *Tainted Ground*'s story is in the mystery plot. A killer named Lastgasp murders people who discover its identity to be Miss Briar, Stacey's dean and gym teacher. Stacey gets involved after her grandfather, having made the discovery, is killed in a confrontation with Lastgasp.

It is here the horror elements energize the story engine. Stacey doesn't just want to find the killer for justice, but she's haunted by her grandfather's mutilated ghost. This haunting compounds Stacey's trauma and interferes with the normality of her academic pursuits.

The major leads on the mysterious Lastgasp require ghost mushroom use. Brucedale police won't use the mushrooms themselves, and the only hard evidence they have suggests the murders are the result of infighting amongst mushroom addicts. This enables the Zero Tolerance campaign, which deters people from using ghost mushrooms. Stacey herself has conflict with mushroom use – to resolve the mystery, the horror must be engaged with.

This results in dramatic tension between Stacey and the characters with whom she interacts.

Stacey discovers her brother Vince gets involved with mushroom use, influenced by the grandfather's example. Stacey dreads she may lose another family member, but she's also frustrated by Vince's opposed stance on ghost mushroom use. She gets closer to her dean

Miss Briar, who supports Stacey's academic pursuit than anyone else. Though Stacey resists ghost mushroom use, her mounting suspicions and research on the strange Dr. Albert Fisk promise closure on her grandfather's death. Stacey's pursuit of Albert Fisk meets a twist when Fisk shows up as the new biochemistry teacher at Stacey's school. Effectively, her prime suspect now hides in plain sight, and Stacey must navigate carefully with respect to the potential threat.

Stacey's relationship with Vince and friends Nadine, Megan, Aster and Clyde also develop. They support Stacey's Zero Tolerance work as friends, and are sympathetic to her trauma caused by her grandfather's death and her persistent visions of him.

Still, Stacey's friends continue to support ghost mushroom use, and help to develop Stacey's tolerance for the taboo. Stacey employs what she learns from Vince and her friends to piece together the mystery. The growing antagonism between Miss Briar and Stacey's friends foreshadows the turning point where Miss Briar is confirmed to be Lastgasp. From Stacey's perspective, Albert Fisk and Miss Briar provide major dramatic tension here. Albert Fisk presents potential danger to Stacey and her friends, while Miss Briar resents Stacey's friends as some form of bad influence on Stacey.

The screenplay's point of view remains largely fixated on Stacey's perspective, with little privileged perspective given to the audience. I've done this to help contextualize character roles before the mystery becomes resolved, and focus audience perspective on character intentions with respect to Stacey. Albert Fisk, Stacey's prime suspect, ultimately innocent of the crime, is a ghost mushroom enthusiast, and serves as a diametric counterpart to Stacey. He embraces the ghost mushrooms, and his real agenda is against the Zero Tolerance campaign itself. In the second act turning point, Stacey identifies Miss Briar as Lastgasp. This serves as Stacey's lowest point, because it destroys what was until then her most stable and secure relationship. The revelation is given additional weight by the dramatic tension

inherent in the story up until this point when reflected upon. Miss Briar's endorsement of the Zero Tolerance anti-mushroom campaign would help prevent people from meeting the ghost of her dead sister, and learning of her crimes. This backstory provides additional tension as Miss Briar has genuine appreciation for Stacey. An audience may feel conflicted as to what extent Miss Briar had manipulated, betrayed, protected or cared for Stacey.

Several of Stacey's key decisions are made in reaction to what secrets she learns. She holds onto the mushrooms she catches Vince using, and uses them later in the story to see Miss Briar's dead sister when she realizes the little ghost girl is the final lead to finding out who killed her grandfather. This happens after Miss Briar confides to Stacey in a flashback that she had murdered her sister. At this point in the story, the connection between the little ghost girl, Miss Briar, Lastgasp, and Stacey's grandfather is foreshadowed but not clarified.

Of course, the audience may figure out the mystery ahead of Stacey, but it is not long after these elements are evaluated together in the story that Stacey makes the conclusion herself. Miss Briar's confession to Stacey is analogous to an admission to the murder of Stacey's grandfather. Stacey's attention to Albert Fisk nears its apex when there's trouble at camp with poisonous mushrooms. Stacey's fear for Vince and apprehension toward Albert Fisk escalates. When Vince applies knowledge received from Albert Fisk to save a life, Stacey begins to doubt Albert Fisk's culpability.

The final act deals with how Stacey navigates her relationship with her grandfather's killer. The key tension lies in how Stacey and Miss Briar read each other's intentions. Miss Briar trusts Stacey can adopt her own extreme, indifferent sense of moving on. Stacey by this point refuses to ignore her grief, turns against Miss Briar, and works with Vince and Albert to face

the ghost of her grandfather again to get hard evidence on Miss Briar.

Stacey finally takes Miss Briar down using the javelin skills she'd taught her. There's an irony here. The mentor figure she thought was a danger to Vince, Albert Fisk, is overshadowed by the revelation that the real danger is Stacey's own mentor figure.

I created the motif of the ghost mushrooms as a plot device to facilitate the presence of ghosts in the plot. Ghosts in the world of *Tainted Ground*'s story result from persons being murdered or suffering distressing accidents. The place of death becomes tainted with negative energy. The ghost mushrooms seen only in Brucedale, and nondescript foreign lands presumably known by Albert Fisk, grow on this negative energy. The mushrooms in turn are vessels for the ghosts whose negative energy taint the ground. Consumers of the mushrooms become haunted temporarily, depending on the concentration of mushroom ingestion. A considerable danger is that ghosts, which may be encountered with the mushrooms, are emotionally unstable, particularly if they have suffered traumatic deaths.

2.6 Contemporary Theories of Screen Narrative and their Relation to the Structure of *Tainted Ground*.

In devising and developing my screenplay, I've taken into account screen narrative theory discussed by Linda Aronson. Primarily, I've aligned my own screenplay structure to the modified 'Smiley/Thompson Nine-Point Structure' that Aronson introduces in 'The 21st Century Screenplay.' (2010) Aronson adds a tenth point, that of the antagonist, 'to suggest the necessary protagonist / antagonist conflict.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 57) I diversify the idea of antagonists by bringing in two characters that are in turns seen as antagonists – Albert Fisk and Miss Briar.

As far as the figure of the antagonist is concerned, the two antagonists of *Tainted Ground* both fit the description advanced by Aronson as a 'mentor figure', 'with a wisdom born of pain.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 80) Miss Briar's pain, revealed through her drunken stupor, creates in her an emotional catharsis which for the audience is an insight into her disturbed character. Albert Fisk, on the other hand, does not disclose to the audience any trace of pain. His mentor role is emphasised as the 'fascinating, enigmatic outsider,' (Aronson, L. 2010, p. 80) whose secrets Stacey attempts to unveil.

Listed below is the Aronson's modified Smiley/Thompson Nine-Point Structure and the corresponding points in *Tainted Ground*'s story listed beside. (Aronson, 2010, pp. 57-58)

Normality	Stacey Wilkins fulfils her role as school prefect.
Protagonist	Stacey Wilkins
Disturbance	Grandpa Wilkins leaves home (Later killed)
Plan	Stacey wants to maintain status quo, look out for herself, family and friends.
Antagonist	Ostensibly Albert Fisk, and later Miss Briar
First-Act Turning Point	Stacey experiments with mushrooms, haunted by grandfather
Second Act Complications	Stacey's suspect Albert Fisk shows up at school.
Second Act Turning Point	Stacey discovers her grandfather's killer is none other than Miss Briar.
Third Act	Stacey tries to escape Miss Briar's wrath.
Climax	Stacey exacts justice on Miss Briar

In devising the plot of *Tainted Ground*, I was also influenced by Joseph Campbell's concept of the circular journey cited by Aronson, a journey 'starting and ending at home with a trip to a special world in the middle.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 28)

Stacey's journey starts and ends 'at home' – in the troubled Brucedale community.

Stacey's trajectory in the story of *Tainted Ground* also encompasses a trip to a special world.

It is the world of the ghost mushrooms with the secrets and mysteries they hold.

In order to decode the secrets and unveil the mysteries, Stacey's character advances along her arc with significant turning points. Aronson regards turning points in stories as 'always moments of great emotion for the character and thus the audience.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 45)

In *Tainted Ground*, key turning points have their emotional impact charged by the genre-swinging effect. In the second act turning point, Stacey learns Miss Briar is Lastgasp. The resolution of this mystery produces a twist which shakes Stacey's character all the more for the horrific implications. These implications stem from the underlying acts of horror (Lastgasp's generating of Slit-Throat Ghosts). These horror elements are planted in the story's setup. The protagonist, normality, disturbance and problem that results from the disturbance provides the setup. (Aronson, 2010, p. 68)

The murder of Grandpa Wilkins is the story's disturbance, 'a problem that the course of the film will answer,' (Aronson, L, 2010, p. 68) which is the basis for the film's mystery plot.

Aaronson also discusses the concept of an action line and a relationship line. She constructs this from an analysis of conventional main plot / sub plot dynamics. (Aronson, 2010, pp. 58-59) In the third act, the showdown between Stacey and Miss Briar carries into it the tension that has been built up throughout their relationship line, exasperated by the action line into physical confrontation. 'In the climax of the action line they will normally encounter the climax of the relationship line, which will be the moment of truth for their relationship, the point to which the whole film has been leading them, emotionally.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 75)

2.7 Story Structure and Research Aims

The objective for my screenplay is to serve as a demonstration of genre mixing effects.

We may take the case of *Tainted Ground*'s development as an experiment to answer the question of 'How does genre-swinging affect the development of a feature-length horror screenplay?' Aronson's modified Smiley/Thompson structure 'remains an extremely useful structural method, particularly at the start of the development process, but also later, when it can be used as a diagnostic checklist.' (Aronson, 2010, p. 55) Similarly, I consider genre-swinging viable as a diagnostic tool. The result of genre-swinging's influence on story development, as I assess, is a useful means of discerning impact of genre-mixing on a story's turning points.

For the genre mix of horror and mystery in *Tainted Ground*, consideration of genre-swinging has helped me to examine the potential structural interplay between genres during dramatic turning points. I would be intrigued to learn what implications genre-swinging consideration may have for mixes of other, more disparate genres like science fiction and romance.

2.8 Successes and Difficulties of Research Aims

My initial motivation was to create a story around interrelation between ghosts and crimes.

In early development of *Tainted Ground*, the screenplay was intended as a supernatural horror crime series pilot.

One of the primary complications was the lack of a compelling relationship line that could be sustained over twenty or more episodes. Research into addressing this problem showed one solution was to have the key relationship be a romance, but after an attempt in drafting it felt like a mix of too many genres in the story and the focus became skewed. The slant on crime pushed the story to include a gritty underground of petty theft and drug use. It proved

difficult to sustain interest in the world's normality, where Stacey was a construction manager in her late 20's. There were too many ideas, and not enough emotion.

Once I conceived the ghost mushrooms, the concept of a killer who took advantage of obscurantism soon followed. If the ghost mushrooms would let people see ghosts and learn of crimes, then it could be compelling to have a killer be a part of an anti-drug campaign against the mushrooms. This focus refined the story's structure to befit a feature-length film and the pursuit of a series pilot was abandoned. Development would sharpen the focus on this plot and help charge it emotionally. After *Tainted Ground*'s first draft, then named 'Boundary' the gritty crime became a 'cleaner' mystery. I felt for the purpose of my story that an identity as crime genre would be more loaded and complicated than mystery.

The story's normality was also appropriated to be set around Stacey's life as a high school student. This change in age and occupation meant the adjustment of the story for a horror film teen demographic.

Without a major romance, wild criminal underground of hard drugs, and the busy life of a construction manager, the genre mixing and thus genre-swinging, became simpler and more observable.

Section 3: Discussion and Conclusion

This final section will discuss *Tainted Ground* as a text to be interpreted by audiences. The following subsections discuss possible interpretations of dramatic metaphors from *Tainted Ground*, emotional resonance of the text with audiences, and questions of the project's purpose.

3.1 Emotional Truth

Tainted Ground's mystery plot poses the dramatic metaphor that one must confront one's fears to ascertain their strength. Part of this confrontation of fears, includes a willingness to keep an open mind toward what is considered taboo. The murder mystery isn't just a puzzle to be solved, but a test of courage.

On a socio-political level, the story can serve as a metaphor for political manipulation.

The Zero Tolerance name of the campaign was inspired by an ACT party campaign slogan I remembered from 2011, 'Zero Tolerance for Crime' While I make no explicit political view, I'd always found the slogan's wording to be amusingly deterministic. It implied to me maximum penalties for even minor offenses.

An interpersonal emotional truth is Stacey's negotiation of principles with other characters.

Stacey wants her university scholarship, but must contend with social and familial obligations. The first scene I present Stacey in shows her attempting to concentrate on her javelin practice, only to be interrupted by Vince. The end is ironic, as Stacey defeats Miss Briar using the very skills she'd been taught.

The ghost mushrooms are a dramatic metaphor for one's past turning up. Mushrooms are resilient and spread far. The flaw shared by Miss Briar and Stacey is a form of denial of the past, Miss Briar from guilt and Stacey from trauma. The story finds resolution after Stacey overcomes her fear and can face her grandfather's ghost.

3.2 Audience and Character

I tried to make Stacey a sympathetic character, while she's very stiff she still has the determination to achieve. I feel a character such as Stacey could be inspiring to a teenage

audience, because she's not perfect (Arnold, 2013) but still virtuous. Her determination in addition to her flaws provide a strong platform from which her character arc can spring from. Stacey has a sense of commitment to her friends and she's a seeker for justice, qualities I feel would inspire a teenage audience.

Stacey and her brother are protective of each other. They try to understand what the other's going through, despite their differences. Stacey's relationship with Vince reflects her character arc. Vince functions as a moral compass for Stacey, and the audience may indicate through Vince when Stacey veers toward intolerance.

Despite her appearance of righteousness, Stacey deep down has a warm personality and a genuine desire to help others improve themselves. She gets carried away sometimes in the interest of this and the audience can relate. I tried to communicate a hidden warmth in an otherwise righteous, rigid individual who is happy to conform to societal rules because she realizes the need conformity in order to achieve her goals. Her anxiety around.

She's from a modest background with parents who are not ambitious or inspiring, and Stacey instinctively realizes, with prompts from Miss, Briar that education is important for her personal growth.

3.3 Relationship between audience, character, and research aims

The intended relationship between an audience and my protagonist Stacey is conflicted intimacy. I invite audiences to speculate on how they would behave in Stacey's position at key points in the film. I feel that despite my indication of Stacey as a very rational person, certain choices she makes may be disagreeable or less predictable to an audience. She'd like to think before she acts, but sometimes is provoked to take drastic actions. With respect to my research aims, I gave consideration to genre-swinging in the evaluation of Stacey's perceivable intention within a scene. The way the horror and mystery contexts might frame

Stacey's character for an audience has tremendous bearing on her complexity of being and by extension, an audience's opinion of her.

3.4 Marketing and Purpose

Were I to present this finished second draft screenplay for *Tainted Ground* to potential investors, the most evocative elements I would emphasize are first the ghost mushrooms, second the role of the Lastgasp killer and its gas mask motif, and third the protagonist's adventure in the mystery. These three elements are perhaps the most visually compelling as expressed in my screenplay.

I feel *Tainted Ground* contains a good balance of warmth and abrasiveness that would register well with a teenage New Zealand horror audience. I didn't censor myself when writing the film's dialogue, and feel that should communicate an intention of honest expression, characteristic of my West Auckland base. In *Tainted Ground* I feel New Zealand teens will find a relatable sort of comfortable vulgarity. This is an element I would mention later in any given pitch, especially for a mainstream release. Above all, my desire in *Tainted Ground* is to offer a text that can serve as engaging entertainment. 'Don't look for perfection. Just tell your story.' (Field, 2006, p.16)

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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 where explicitly defined in acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of learning.

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Abstract

The research in my exegesis is framed around screenplay structure, horror genre trends, and genre-mixing. I wanted to create a screenplay grounded in the horror genre which benefited structurally from mixing with a supporting genre. I experienced difficulties in realizing key relationships while my screenplay was still intended as a horror crime series pilot. I feel the screenplay's development toward a horror mystery feature film helped meet my expectations in the end.

The genre discussion is integral to the approach. Especially since there are multiple genres that combine in the present screenplay. This genre mixing is discussed to support the concept of '**genre-swinging**.' This is a term I coined after reflecting on the incidences observable in films where the preponderant genre is strengthened by ancillary. The specific occurrences I identify is that the film's focus shifts between the genres for dramatic effect. In these conditions, the main genre is at times overseen by the intricacies brought about by the supporting genres that may attract wider audiences and compound the structural impact on the drama.

In my exegesis, I posit the research question of 'How does genre-swinging influence the development of a feature-length horror screenplay?' I follow this question by looking at theoretical aspects of feature films and television series that respond to my inquiry. I discuss the theoretical aspects in relation to the practical achievements discernable in the development process. Thus, I am able to explore in depth the ways in which genres do mix and the effects achieved. I attempt to interpret the benefits that mixing the horror genre in particular derives from this **genre-swinging**.

I continue to discuss my screenplay against the characteristics that I envisaged for genre-swinging, comparing and contrasting with the materials I researched. Going through the stages of actually producing a work that may demonstrate the characteristics of genre-swinging, I became more alert to the technique that characterizes iconic films of the horror genre.

I conclude that horror is a malleable genre which acquires the desired effect in a compensatory quality. As horror cannot have the desired impact on audiences neglecting its key features, (fear, themes of death, the unknown, the mysterious and the unexplained.) it can be compensated by other genres. Audiences that do not appreciate the horror elements presented in a story may still accept the impact of the supporting genre(s). Here, genre-swinging allows horror to gather emotional significance for plot points and mood/tone it may otherwise lack. Alternatively, the emotional significance developed by the supporting genre may be compounded if the horror elements elicit audience response. Lastly, emotional significance of either genre may be supplemented by specific elements which may not be achieved without **genre-swinging**.