EXTREME HORROR FICTION AND THE NEOLIBERALISM OF THE
1980'S: SPLATTERPUNK, RADICAL ART,
AND THE KILLING OF THE COLLECTIVE SOCIETY

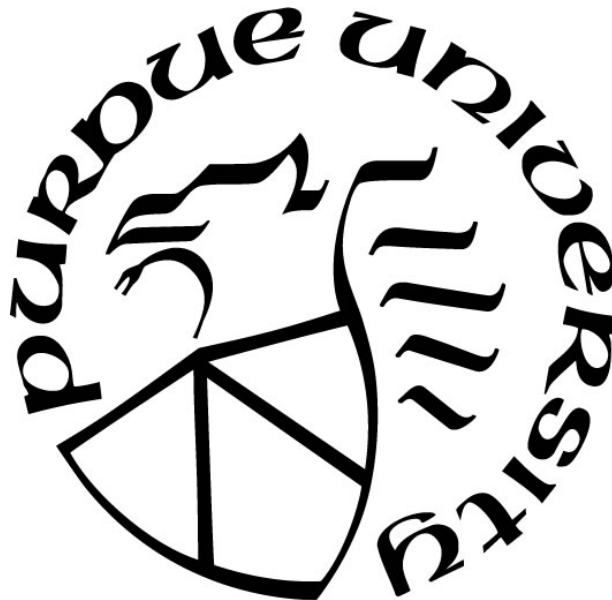by

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ABSTRACT

Splatterpunk was a short-lived, but explosive horror literary movement birthed in the 1980's that utilized graphic depictions of violence in its prose. Drawing parallels to other subversive and radical art movements like Dada and Hardcore Punk, this paper examines through a Marxist lens how Splatterpunk, influenced by the destructive nature of 1980's neoliberalism, reflected the violence, categorized as direct and structural, of its period of creation and used extreme vulgarity as an act of rebellion against traditional horror canon.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On a December 8th, 1987 episode of *Open to Question*, a television program that aired on BBC Scotland where notable figures spent the duration fielding questions from an audience comprised of high school and university aged youths, British author Clive Barker sat down in the guest chair and answered questions and concerns about the violence present in his works. The film adaption of his novella *The Hellbound Heart* had been in theaters for approximately three months, and *Hellraiser*, which he also directed, was causing quite the stir with censors and audiences alike.

Barker skillfully responded to concerns his fictional violence may influence readers by stating his works were grounded in the *fantastique*, and, therefore, were operating on a level of metaphor, detached from real-world context and never glorifying the crimes. He fielded a question from a young woman who wondered if sex, gore, and violence were "essential ingredients" to horror fiction, to which he countered by saying there is a different "strand" of horror fiction that existed at the turn of the 20th century, a quieter strand that never shed blood, a strand he confessed was not his strong suit. The questions droned on with the students echoing conservative and religious criticisms of horror at the time, not far removed from the period's criticisms of heavy metal, or of video games a decade later.

Despite the repetitive nature of the questions and having to consistently defend his stylistic and thematic choices, Barker never lost composure while elaborating on the importance of horror as a look into the subconsciousness and violence as a means of metaphor for the realities of daily life. It wasn't until the final question from the audience, asked by a young man named Steven, that the entire argument against Barker's type of fiction was put succinctly and without the layers of social criticism. Steven asked, "Why is horror fiction the literary form which describes the world most truthfully? What is wrong with love, truth, and beauty?"

Barker explained that his new book had plenty of love, truth, and beauty before pausing—realizing that he wasn't quite answering the question. A contemplative expression appeared on his face as he collected his thoughts. He then told Steven that he was going to answer his question with a story from a recent book signing of his:

> "A guy came, a 15-year-old, came into a bookstore in America with his mom, and he had
> brought the Clive Barker collection, a kind of thing, in paperback, and he had bought a

copy of *The Damnation Game.* And an interviewer was there and said, 'Why do you read this guy? Why have you got a t-shirt on which is written '*There is no delight the equal of dread?*'—which is a line from one of the books—and Clive Barker's name and a bullet hole on the back of his t-shirt. And the guy said, 'I am of the generation of fear. I am afraid of being blown up. I am afraid of AIDS. I am afraid of the streets.' This was in New York so he had reason for that. And it seemed to him, that horror fiction best helped to explain to him the world that he lived in." (BBC Scotland)

The young man in Barker's story was not alone in his thinking. The 1980's were a time of dread, violence, and uncertainty for many—especially those that existed in the margins of society. While each generation has their own set of fears that hung overhead on a daily basis, the era of Barker and his contemporaries was one of shifting anxieties. The Western capitalist model had just begun to come into its own as the neoliberal structure we see today wreaking havoc on the working class, minority populations, and those existing in poverty. Craig Spector, a pioneer in the subgenre of horror that would become known as "Splatterpunk," had this to say in an interview with Crossroad Press regarding his early work in the genre, "Fear is a renewable resource. Last time I looked out the door, the world has not gotten any less scary. In fact, it's gotten more scary. If I woke up tomorrow, and the world wasn't as scary and fucked up a place as it was, I would be happily retired" (Spector). Fears shift and evolve with every passing generation. Splatterpunk, birthed in the mid-1980's, catered to the fears of a society knee-deep in violence, economic uncertainty, and alienation. The extreme depictions in the pages of Splatterpunk works existed to cut through the layers of desensitization that numbed many to the existential and immediate horrors that lurked outside their doors.

Horror as a literary genre has had a long history of serving as a reflection for the fears of its period of creation. Whether it's the clash of ancient fears with burgeoning modernity present in Victorian gothic tales, or fears of unrestrained modernity and technology clashing with an idealized version of American life present in the pulp pages of 1950's science and horror fiction, its ability to react to a changing societal landscape depicted through dread, violence, and the supernatural is the defining characteristic and sharpest tool that horror literature has at its disposal.

The boom of modern horror fiction and the birth of splatterpunk was over a decade in the making. A new breed of horror, unafraid to push boundaries and revel in the grotesque, had

already begun to emerge in the 1970's with works like *The Exorcist* and authors like Stephen King, whose novel *Carrie* was a runaway success and launched the career of arguably one of the most prolific horror writers of the past century. King's novels blurred the lines between pulp and literature and played a prominent role in helping establish horror fiction as a mainstream genre. Books like *Salem's Lot, The Shining*, and *Pet Sematary* primed readers for what was to come next in the evolution of the genre. It was a gradual, organic process that led to the depravity and violence of Splatterpunk. By the mid-1980's, the United States and England were deep in the throes of a cultural and political shift that produced an audience hungry for art that mirrored the chaos and alienation of their lives.

When Clive Barker published his first short story collection in the United Kingdom, 1984's *Books of Blood*, it received, by Barker's own words, "A very English silence. Polite and devastating" (Barker). Barker credits the words of Stephen King, who provided an invaluable blurb for the United States edition of the book, for audiences giving his first collection a chance. The words of King now famously appear on many of Barker's early books and collections, "I have seen the future of horror and his name is Clive Barker."

Books of Blood was erotic, violent, and, thematically, rich with allegories for the depravity of modern urban life, the banality of suburban living, and the resulting alienation from flesh, existence, and fellow man. It helped spark interest in the type of horror that would define the genre of Splatterpunk. Later, John Skipp and Craig Spector's 1986 urban horror novel *The Light at the End* cemented the genre as a true literary movement with its own set of conventions and style. The authors of this era, like Skipp, Spector, and Barker, abandoned subtlety and suggestion; the quiet for the loud. Instead, they reveled in the graphic, the sexual, and the gore-filled. Their tales of modern horror coincided with the shifting economic and social landscapes happening in the United States and Great Britain. While the violence present in Splatterpunk was meant to be a metaphorical and visceral experience, it was often cathartic for readers—such as the 15-year-old at Barker's book signing who was horrified at the realities of neoliberal modernity.

Prior to the 1980's, the United States and Great Britain were operating primarily on what is often referred to as a "Keynesian" economic system. Named after economist John Maynard Keynes and his economic theories put forth in his seminal 1936 work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Mon*ey, Keynesian policies advocated to increase the role that

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government played in employment and private industry. While classical liberalism saw government in a limited role and as a guiding hand for the free markets, Keynesian policies believed the government had to intervene in times of economic crisis by regulating private industry, increasing spending to create employment, and even consolidating major national resource enterprises under State control (Roy and Steger 6). These policies were a response to the economic turmoil present in the early 20th century and served to counter and quell rising global popularity of Marxist thought. Where Marxism believed that a global proletariat revolution was an inevitability due to the eventual failings and unsustainability of capitalism and the free market, Keynesians, while still committed to the idea of the free market, sought to provide just enough reform to prevent revolution by applying band-aids to capitalism in the forms of regulation, State involvement in enterprise, and social safety nets for its citizens (Roy and Steger 5).

In the decades preceding the election of Ronald Reagan, a political movement had been gaining traction, commonly referred to as "The New Right," that pushed back against these Keynesian economic principles and instead advocated for unfettered, unregulated free-market capitalism—or, "neoliberalism." Running under the slogan "Let's Make America Great Again," Ronald Reagan ushered in an era of New Right policies that adhered to the doctrine of neoliberalism, as well as his own brand of trickle-down economics, dubbed "Reaganomics." Across the Atlantic Ocean, just a year prior in 1979, using the slogan, "Labour Isn't Working," referring to the democratic socialist leaning Labour Party, Margaret Thatcher became the first female prime minister of the United Kingdom. Both Thatcher and Reagan's campaign slogans acted as dog whistles to abandon the kinds of economic policies that provided small semblances of security for working and lower class people for policies that emphasized profit for private industry and the wealthy class. The Reagan years saw wealth grow exponentially for those his administration's policies favored, but for many Americans, their alienation grew and they were left in the margins of a society, now more than ever, unabashedly focused on accumulating wealth, rather than ensuring a standard of living for all its citizens.

Reagan and the neoliberals believed that the United States had become a welfare state with too many of its citizens dependent on social services provided by the government. The idea was to cut taxes and reduce funding for welfare services, which led to the rich becoming richer, a stagnant poverty rate, and an extreme increase in inequality as the wealth gap between the lower

and upper classes grew (Plotnick). The Reagan years evidenced a complete indifference to those suffering the most. The homeless rate skyrocketed to nearly 600,000, many of whom were Vietnam veterans or laid off workers who were victims of Reagan's war against unionized labor, as Thatcher and Reagan both made the cutting of social and subsidized housing a priority in the early years of their administrations (Dreier). The doctrine of individual freedom and personal responsibility seemed to only apply to those in the lowest circles of society, and not to the private industries that were allowed to operate unregulated and without conscience.

Before the Reagan administration, private prisons simply did not exist. With Reagan's "War on Drugs," beginning in 1982, the incarceration rate doubled from the beginning of his first term to the end of his last. Hundreds of thousands were being jailed for profit every single year for non-violent crimes (Drug Policy Alliance). These policies disproportionately targeted communities of color and destroyed countless families and lives, giving birth to the prison industrial complex that continues to devastate Black and Latino communities.

Thatcher and Reagan's fiscal and social policies on issues like HIV, poverty, and labor unions took aim at what Marx would describe as the proletariat, or the working class. When Margaret Thatcher stated in a 1987 interview that "there is no such thing as a society," she exemplified all that is wrong with the capitalist system. The emphasis on profit and accumulation of wealth takes inherent precedence over what is good for all peoples. The idea of an egalitarian society is in total contradiction to the tenets of capitalism; therefore, it is beneficial for neoliberals to stress the importance of the individual over the many, and deny the existence of a society required to support and raise everyone to equal footing and standard of living.

The Marxist critique of this brand of neoliberal capitalism is an ideal lens for viewing the radical literature of the Splatterpunk genre due to its broad definition of violence and its theory of alienation—a common theme in horror. In *Capital,* Marx writes that, "Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx 926). Marx is not just noting that capitalism is a system under which violence thrives, he is asserting that violence is an inherent trait of capitalism (Tyner & Inwood 777). This inherent, and direct, violence is what Splatterpunk authors sought to reflect in their pages.

Violence, in its many definitions, is the connective tissue between Splatterpunk, Marxism, and neoliberalism. As Johanna Oksala, a Professor of Philosophy at Loyola, writes, violence is "an extremely wide-ranging term that covers everything from the use of physical

force that damages bodies to the forms of semantic exclusion involved in issuing a meaningful sentence" (Oksala 4). Violence must be viewed as a spectrum when discussing the harm that capitalism and neoliberal policies cause. The direct and visceral violence present in the pages of Splatterpunk is an extreme representation of the systemic and structural violence that occurs under capitalism. The difference between this direct violence and structural violence, as noted by sociologist Johan Galtung, is:

> "Whereas in the first case these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons or actors, in the second case this is no longer meaningful. There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances" (Galtung 170-171).

It is the inherent inequality, uneven distribution of resources, and hierarchal structure that results in the suffering of many. The violence of capitalism can arise in the form of poverty, preventable diseases, homelessness, and access to essential resources (Tyner & Inwood 778). There is no one wielding an instrument of torture in these scenarios like in horror fiction; the violence is far-reaching and widespread. Splatterpunk took the broad spectrum of violence present in 1980's Western capitalist society and condensed it to a microcosm of blood and guts.

Though splatterpunk defined itself as a genre by leaning heavily into the physical aspect of horror, it still did not shy away from one of the more conventional traits of the horror genre: alienation. Whether discussing the alienation Frankenstein's monster felt from society, the alienation the zombie hordes feel from their once fellow man, or the slasher's mask as a representation of alienation from the self, the various forms of isolation and estrangement have littered the pages of horror fiction and film since their inception.

The Marxist concept of alienations stems from Karl Marx's assertion that, through the capitalist modes of production, workers are stripped away of their individuality and creativity, the very things that Marx believes define the human species, through labor that lacks purpose and the creation of products that the workers themselves cannot purchase. Under capitalism and neoliberal policy, all facets of life become products and are commodified. Essentialities like food, shelter, and health care all are produced for profit and to generate wealth for the upper class. It is this commodification of such basic aspects of human existence that leads to massive amounts of alienation in society's populace. However, modern Marxists theorize that it is not as cut and dry as a worker being alienated from the product they are producing on a factory line.

The Splatterpunk tales of urban horror encapsulated the alienation that existed during the 1980's—and continues today. The movement's use of violence and over-the-top gore reflected the loss of connection to humanity that occurs under dog eat dog capitalism. Without a system that perpetuates detachment, violence cannot thrive. However, the 1980's was a time of rampant, unregulated neoliberalism that sought to build wealth on the backs of the working class and their resulting alienation. The authors of the Splatterpunk movement used depictions of extreme violence and sexuality as a lifeline to readers who felt the alienation under this neoliberal capitalist system. As horror has done throughout the centuries, Splatterpunk was a radical take on the period of its creation.

The works and words of the genre's pioneering authors John Skipp, Craig Spector, and Clive Barker will be examined through a Marxist lens, historical context from the Reagan and Thatcher years, and the modern state of neoliberalism. This thesis will examine how Splatterpunk, a subgenre of horror fiction that specialized in the subversive, violent, and perverse, told stories of urban and suburban decay, alienation, and violence as a reaction to the neoliberal and capitalist landscape of the time.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PATH TO NEOLIBERALISM

The modern, urban landscape has become an example of a displacement and deterioration. In a city like Chicago or New York, gentrification has, year after year, pushed marginalized communities out of the neighborhoods they have called home for decades and into areas where businesses die, grocery stores are nearly non-existent, and crime and violence are a means for survival.

In the downtown areas and business districts of major metropolises, the homeless stand with crudely made cardboard signs and plastic McDonald's cups. People pass without giving a glance, afraid that if they acknowledge, they will have to dig into their wallet for a dollar, or worse, be drawn into conversation. Individuals soldier on to their financial and marketing jobs while, in their minds, the homeless remain nothing more than unsavory urban waste that the city really should take care of already.

This was the scene thirty years ago. This is the scene now. It is the scene for the foreseeable future. It's been a reality for multiple generations, and the shock has worn off. Rarely is the sight of people living on the street, or in neglected, dilapidated neighborhoods, met with horror. Instead, it's met with a shrug of the shoulders and a self-reassurance that these are just facts of life—facts of the capitalist system.

It is under these conditions that the Splatterpunk genre made its mark. By the end of the 1980's, Splatterpunk, to some extent, had already gone mainstream with the 1987 release of *Hellraiser,* a film based on Clive Barker's *The Hellbound Heart*—a man Stephen King had ceremoniously dubbed the "new face of horror." However, hindsight, as they say, is 20/20, and while Splatterpunk spoke to the hedonistic tendencies and coldness of neoliberal culture, it wasn't until the Reagan-era had passed that clarity outlined the severe decay of the societal and economic shift that had taken place.

Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho*, while hailed by academia and mainstream critics as a depraved piece of postmodern fiction, had all the hallmarks of a Splatterpunk novel. The novel takes place in New York City towards the end of the Reagan administration and follows Patrick Bateman, a young investment banker, as he mingles with

Wall Street elites, embarks on stream-of-consciousness rants about consumerism and pop culture, and sadistically murders his peers, the homeless, and sex workers.

The novel utilized violence, often against women, to such horrifying extremes that it drew ire and calls for a boycott from famed feminist activist Gloria Steinem and is still sold shrink-wrapped on bookstore shelves in Australia (Venant par. 7; Sutton par. 2). A second review in *The New York Times* ("In Hindsight, an 'American Psycho' Looks a Lot Like Us"), published 16 years after the publication's first, punishing review, praised Easton's social and economic commentary and walked back many of the initial's criticisms (Garner). The evidence suggests it remains a polarizing book, due in no small part to its Splatterpunk tendencies.

Unlike the 1980's Splatterpunk works, Ellis' novel approached the Reagan Era's excess and greed as a study, rather than as a reaction. In the book's final scene, Bateman, having not paid in any way for his crimes, sits in a bar with his Wall Street friends making banal conversation while clips from President Bush's recent inauguration play in the background. The story ends with both Bateman, and neoliberalism, winning. As Thomas Heise explains in his article "*American Psycho*: Neoliberal Fantasies and the Death of Downtown," this ending cements the narrative as a "fantasy of what a radically free market might look like if all noneconomic obstacles on acquisitive and consumptive desires were abolished, which for all intents and purposes they are, as Bateman's crimes go unnoticed and unpunished" (Heise 157). It's a world where the violence and exploitation wreaked by an unregulated market on society is channeled into a microcosm of individual, horrific acts against humanity through the vessel of Bateman, who serves as a physical embodiment for the unfeeling and profit-motivated entity.

The Reagan-era's neoliberal policies bred a class divide that dehumanized large sects of the urban population, especially the homeless, in the eyes of those who had accumulated wealth. Heise explains this through *American Pyscho* by examining Patrick Bateman's experiences and observations from walking through 1980's New York City:

> "By the Reagan-era, homelessness was reaching epidemic levels. 'The Death of Downtown' is here, proclaims a headline in *American Psycho* (14). 'Beggars and homeless seem to have multiplied . . . and the ranks of the unfortunate, weak, and aged lined the streets everywhere,' Ellis writes (278). 'I'VE LOST MY JOB I AM HUNGRY I HAVE NO MONEY PLEASE HELP,' reads a sign held by a man whom Bateman describes as 'lounging below the Les Misérables poster' (113). For the neoliberal

Bateman, all unemployment precedes from a lack of personal incentive, a desire to 'lounge' rather than work. If the impoverished do work in *American Psycho,* it is as symbolic labor in a leisure economy in which they cannot afford to participate" (Heise 142).

It is an ideology that believes people get what they deserve. A man like Patrick Bateman would fervently defend the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" narrative that has been a talking point of neoliberals for decades. However, many, like Bateman, did not work to accumulate their initial fortunes. Instead, they inherited that wealth or were placed in affluent positions through various forms of nepotism. Still, in the minds of advocates for the system, they are rightful heirs to wealth and security due to their intelligence and natural inclination towards hard work. This mentality conveniently strips away the idea that we are all part of a society and that society is only as strong as its weakest link. Neoliberalism transforms this idea into an individualistic, winner-take-all blood sport where those on top remain on top through policies that explicitly benefit them and exploit those lower on the social and economic hierarchy.

While *American Psycho* illuminated the detachment present in society during the Reagan Era, the issue was far from a uniquely American problem. On the other side of the Atlantic, Britain's first woman prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, was establishing an administration and sweeping policy that aligned closely with the new American normal of neoliberalism. In a 1987 interview with *Woman's Own*, Thatcher gave a now infamous quote: "There is no such thing as society" (Keay 30). Thatcher was speaking to the idea that when there is economic or social suffering, the blame wrongly falls on government, and the obligation to solve it on the shoulders of the State. This was diametric to what Thatcher believed. Society to the Prime Minister was a loose "tapestry of men and women" that were, first and foremost, obligated to take care of their own interests (30). Through that, they would better the lives of those suffering. It is a social model akin to Reagan's trickle-down economics. Under the guise of personal responsibility and individualism, Thatcher's remarks, and her administration's policies, helped to shift the narrative of what a society is and what it should not be.

To those like Thatcher and Reagan, a society was not an entity to protect or ensure an acceptable standard of living. It was not a system that protected humanity for the sheer sake of protecting humanity. Instead, it was a collection of individuals working towards their own interests, rather than the collective interest; an "every man for himself" scenario where the

betterment of the collective relied on a class being allowed to accumulate so much wealth that enough would, theoretically, drip down to satiate those on the bottom.

Without the narrative of individualism and personal responsibility, it was a hard sell. Neoliberals had to systemically dissemble the idea that a society existed to ensure limited hierarchies and inequality. David Harvey, noted Marxist scholar, elaborated on Thatcher's rhetoric surrounding society:

> "All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values. The ideological assault along these lines that flowed from Thatcher's rhetoric was relentless. 'Economics are the method,' she said, 'but the object is to change the soul'" (Harvey 23).

In the neoliberal quest to promote individualism as a method to open and unleash the markets without regulation, dismantling the notion of collectivism, social obligation, and government assistance had to be demonized. As Thatcher notes in Harvey's quote, the economic policies of neoliberalism were just one component that worked towards the endgame of completely shifting the paradigm of what a society should be. The goal would be to institute and normalize a system that worked for the few, while leaving a life of violence and struggle for the many.

Neoliberalism and unchecked capitalism have not always been the accepted economic model for Western governments like the United States and Britain. At the turn of the 20th century, rapid industrialization, economic inequality, and poor working conditions led to an increase in Marxist and socialist thought—bolstered by the 1929 start of the Great Depression. Brought on by a crashing stock market and poor regulatory policies, the Depression was a wake-up call for many Americans to how capitalism had little safeguard in place to protect them from its predatory and exploitative behavior.

Dating back all the way to the end of the 19th century, socialism existed as an undercurrent to mainstream American politics. Parties like the Socialist Party of the United States of America, the Socialist Labor Party, and the Progressive Party all occupied a void left by the dominant parties for worker advocacy and an egalitarian social and economic agenda. The socialist parties were a smorgasbord of leftist ideology that saw supporters holding "moderate to radical views" and included "Marxists, Christians, pro-Zion and anti-Zion Jewish reformers, pacifists, populists, anarchists" in their ranks (Phelps & Lehman par. 3). Internal conflict over

reform versus revolution, the splintering of factions, and inconsistent electoral performance led to a stagnation of their growth.

When the Great Depression nearly destroyed the American economic system, a resurgence of socialist thought emerged. In the 1932 presidential race, the Socialist Party's candidate, Norman Thomas, received a substantial 896,000 votes. However, continued ideological infighting caused the party to splinter into groups who thought they could enact more meaningful change by joining the Democratic party, and those who joined the Communist Party of the United States because they felt that the Socialist Party's agenda had compromised its radical roots (par. 4-5). Regardless of the divide, socialist thought in the United States, specifically with the Communist party, continued a steady incline because the Great Depression and, later, World War II. Fraser M. Ottanelli, in his book *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, elaborates:

> "During the years of the Depression and World War II, the increase in Communist strength broadened influence, relative acceptance, and their ability to make significant contributions to the labor and social struggles of the time, were direct consequences of their search for policies, language, and organizational forms which reflected the country's circumstances, culture, and singular political system as Communists understood and articulated them" (Ottenelli 213).

American communists had a unique perspective from which they sold their ideology to the American public. The Great Depression, American imperialism, and the rise of fascism in Europe allowed them to speak directly to the fears present in the left-leaning American voter— and it worried the capitalist establishment.

The reasons why a viable socialist party never took power in the United States are many. Political scientists like Theodore J. Lowi believe it is partially because the United States was cut from the cloth of Europe and did not undergo the same trajectory towards democracy that countries who spent years under direct monarchy and feudalism had to endure. In his article, *"Why is There No Socialism in the United States?"* Lowi argues that it is this absence of feudalism in the country's history that prevented socialism from ever gaining significant traction:

> "The thesis is roughly that Americans were 'born free,' that Americans never had a feudal system, an aristocracy, or repressive state apparatus. Consequently, no rigid and

explicit class structure developed, there was no right-wing ideology sustaining an upper

class, and there was no revolutionary experience or organized left opposition" (Lowi 35).

There is some fault with Lowi's hypothesis. Capitalism, while not feudalism, comes with its own built-in hierarchies and class structure, and with the Great Depression, a majority of Americans saw that they were on the low-end. Because of this, a compromise almost certainly had to occur to quell any serious threat of socialist or communist power. A band-aid would need to be applied to the entire system.

It was clear to capitalist thinkers that the current system was not sustainable without a series of measures that would protect the system under economic crisis and keep the masses from losing faith in the capitalist model and abandoning it for a socialist one. In his article "The End of Rational Capitalism," John Bellamy Foster explains that it was a British economist named John Mallard Keynes who gave birth to an economic theory that potentially saved capitalism from being tossed in the trash bin of history alongside Western feudalism and monarchy.

Foster notes that towards the end of, and in response to, the Great Depression, Keynes wrote arguably his most influential work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, and "for the first time in the establishment economic literature, serious consideration was given to the nature of structural economic crisis under capitalism and what the state might do about it" (Foster 2). It was Keynes that introduced the idea to temper and regulate free trade, ensure that the national economy was as self-sufficient as the markets would allow, and supply workers with safety nets and resources for a certain standard of living. Foster goes on to write, "In general, Keynesianism is thought to have pointed toward social democracy and the welfare state as manifestations of capitalist rationality" (2). It was this model that was adopted by Roosevelt's New Deal—an immensely popular initiative that proved to be quite the effective band-aid that capitalism needed to survive.

The system held strong for the decades following WWII—until a new ideology emerged that sought to awaken the unchecked monster within capitalism. In "The New Right, Fundamentalism, and Nationalism in Postmodern America: A Marriage of Heat and Passion," Anton K. Jacobs presents the notion that the capitalist system in America is an inherently right-leaning system and, when given enough time, the band-aids will always peel off to reveal the grotesque open wound underneath. Jacob explains:

"From the early years of the 1930s to the 1970s the political right, like the religious right, remained largely in the shadows. They fumed against New Deal legislation in the 1930s. Then they protested America's Cold War policy of containing communism as a compromise. They railed against court-imposed school desegregation, civil rights legislation, and the extensive government involvement in welfare programs as well as extensions of social security measures" (Jacobs 361-362).

It wasn't until the 1960's and 1970's that this so-called "New Right" began to organize and become a prominent political force in American politics. They built their new base up slowly, but strategically, by establishing organizations and think-tanks, as well as sending out monstrous quantities of direct mail—a new method of influence that was the brainchild of a leading conservative in the New right, Richard Viguerie (362). Their decades long campaign to take over the Republican party and implement their ideology culminated in the 1980 nomination of Ronald Reagan for the office of the President of the United States.

The Reagan presidency was a near-complete rejection of Keynesian economic policy. In the past, moderate Republican presidents accepted New Deal economic policy as the band-aid it was; the patch to keep the boat from sinking. Reagan was not a moderate. As David Jacobs and Lindsey Meyers note:

"Unlike prior Republican presidents, Reagan was devoted to neoliberal principles. He was convinced governments should make every effort to avoid interfering with labor markets. Reagan opposed collective bargaining and political attempts to protect less prosperous families from destructive labor market fluctuations" (Jacobs & Meyers 754).

It was this spurning of the bare minimum by the New Right and Reagan that brought immeasurable amounts of pain, violence, and alienation to the working and lower class.

James Tyner and Joshua Inwood's work, "Violence as fetish: Geography, Marxism, and Dialectics," as well as Susan Opotow's work on structural violence, provide insight onto the types of violence that characterized the Reagan Era. In their article, Tyner and Inwood detail two main categories of violence that occur under the capitalist system: direct violence and structural violence. Direct violence, as Tyner and Inwood explain, "is said to occur when there is an identifiable actor who commits an act of violence" (Tyner & Inwood 778). Structural violence, on the other hand, as Opotow notes:

"occurs as inequalities structured into a society so that some have access to social

resources that foster individual and community well-being – high quality education and

health care, social status, wealth, comfortable and adequate housing, and efficient civic

services – while others do not" (Opotow 151).

Marx and Engels were acutely aware of the inherent role that violence, direct and structural,

played in the accumulation of wealth under capitalism, as Engels writes in *The Condition of the

Working Class in England*:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results,

we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would

be fatal, we call the deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in

such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is

quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives

thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot

live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until

that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of

victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as

surely as the deed of a single individual; dis-guised, malicious murder, murder against

which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the

murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more

one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains" (Engels 127).

Marx and Engels, who provided, arguably, history's most valid criticisms of capitalism, foresaw

the direct and structural violence that would occur as capitalism continued to grow. To them,

systemic murder, like the kind caused by diseases of poverty, was still murder.

The 1980's, under these definitions, were a vulgar display of violence. There had always

been some degree of structural violence like homelessness present in the United States, but the

1970's and 1980's saw a sharp increase in the amount of people sleeping on the street. The

Reagan administration did nothing to curb homelessness or address the root causes. Instead, they

sought to frame the problem as an individual issue, that these were people who didn't adequately

pull up their bootstraps. In an interview with *Good Morning America*, shortly after his 1984 re-

election, Reagan seems to shift the blame, saying that the "people who are sleeping on the grates

… the homeless … are homeless, you might say, by choice" (Roberts). In "Creating a Science of

Homelessness During the Reagan Era," Marian Moser Jones deconstructs Reagan's distortion of the issue as an individual one by examining the policies put forth by the neoliberal administration. Moser asserts that there was:

> "ample evidence to link New York City's homeless problem to a lack of affordable housing (interview with Hayes). In the late 1970s, the city had sought to attract back higher-income residents, who had been fleeing to the suburbs since the late 1940s, and thus eventually rebuild a residential tax base depleted by this flight. It did so by creating short-term tax incentives that encouraged owners of cheap rooming houses and SRO hotels to renovate and convert them into condominiums and rental apartments for middle- and upper-income New Yorkers" (Moser 149).

People were not sleeping on the streets because they were too lazy to find housing. They were sleeping on the streets because the complete commodification of shelter made it so there was no affordable housing for those on the low tier of society. Coupled with their prioritization of the rich, the Reagan administration unabashedly allocated funds away from the poor and working class. The administration took an axe, rather than a scalpel, to the national budget to help pay for their large tax cuts for the wealthy. The budget was cut by nearly $44 billion almost exclusively from two areas: income security and education, training, employment, and social services. These cuts disproportionately affected the poor and "near poor," which affected the black community to a larger degree since "a higher proportion of blacks are poor than white" (Danziger & Haymen 14). Large sections of the working and lower classes felt the brunt of the structural violence that Reagan's neoliberal policies brought. Safety nets were torn away, public resources became scarce, and the blame was placed solely on their heads, rather than on the unchecked capitalism that had become the law of the land.

The war on the working class continued throughout the 1980's and took many forms. The crack epidemic became a national crisis that ruined and took countless lives from mainly communities of color. Because crack was so cheap and easy to produce, those that lost their jobs or couldn't find employment in marginalized communities turned to selling and distribution. Rather than treat the systemic issues of drug abuse and addiction, the Reagan administration openly declared a "War on Drugs." In a radio address to the nation where the term was first used, Reagan boasted:

"drug-related arrests are up over 40 percent, the amount of marijuana seized is up about 80 percent, and the amount of cocaine seized has more than doubled. The important thing is we're hurting the traffickers. It's true that when we close off one place they can move somewhere else. But one thing is different now: We're going to be waiting for them. To paraphrase Joe Louis, they can run but they can't hide" (Reagan par. 11).

Reagan had an enemy, and they were defenseless.

As Kenneth B. Nunn writes in "Crime and the Pool of Surplus Criminality: or Why the 'War on Drugs' Was a 'War on Blacks,'" "the rhetoric of war also shaped the impact of those methods, for a war requires not only military strategies, but an enemy as well," and continues by explaining that by "Viewing the drug problem through a war model implies that the perceived drug problem can be attacked through aggressive law enforcement measures designed to seek out and destroy contraband and interrupt distribution networks" (Nunn par. 3). In what was an obvious trend, the Reagan administration allowed the violence to continue rather that address any of the causes. They vilified those doing drugs and created a narrative of binaries: good vs. bad, poor vs. middle class, and white vs. black. Those who suffered most under the War on Drugs were sacrificial lambs to sustain a system that had been deemed unsustainable decades prior: Black, Hispanic, and poor communities.

The results of the War on Drugs were dystopian and inhumane. Incarcerated populations grew from approximately 400,000 in 1982 to a staggering 850,000 in 1992, a mere ten years later after it began. As Nunn details, "During that same period, the total number of African American arrests for drug abuse violations skyrocketed from 112,748 to 452,574, an increase of over 300 %" (par. 14). The wealthy and business class capitalized off the devastation by privatizing incarceration and creating the first for-profit prison in 1983 (Pauly par. 2). This was a targeted assault on communities of color and an illegitimate solution to a manufactured, and treatable, crisis. In his book *Private Prisons in America: A Critical Race Perspective*, Michael A. Hallett notes that "private prisons are best understood not as the product of increasing crime rates, but instead as the latest chapter in a large historical pattern of oppressive and legal discrimination aimed primarily at African American men" (Hallett 9). However, it wasn't just Black men who suffered at the hands of the drug war, other marginalized communities were left behind and sacrificed in the name of neoliberalism and social conservatism.

The HIV/AIDS crisis that exploded from intravenous use of both crack cocaine and heroin was near-apocalyptic for the gay community. Reagan and his administration did their absolute best to not even make mention of the crisis and swept it under the rug for years as thousands suffered. According to Associate Commissioner for Policy and Planning William Hubbard, "AIDS activists concluded that the agency was sitting on lifesaving AIDS drugs and refusing to let patients have them, sort of a ban by the social conservatives" (Richert par. 6). Reagan willingly let thousands die as a pandering to the religious right and refusal to address the drug problem as a medical emergency. This, however, didn't stop the President from committing supreme hypocrisy when he helped notorious conservative lawyer Roy Cohn secure groundbreaking AIDS treatment when he discreetly contracted the disease. As Mary Alice Miller wrote for *Vanity Fair,* "Ronald Reagan, who, despite his refusal to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic, actually helped Roy Cohn get admitted to the National Institute of Health for an experimental AIDS treatment" (Miller par. 19). The rich helped the rich, and the powerful helped the powerful. Reagan's blind-eye towards the AIDS epidemic was only blind when it affected the gay and Black communities, not for his corrupt, capitalist cronies.

Reagan's rejection of Keynesian values stripped what little humanity capitalism had left. So many were left to fend for themselves as the system actively worked against them to turn greater profit. The narrative of individualism, just as Thatcher wished, shifted the paradigm in America to demonize those who lived on the streets, did drugs, went to prison, were people of color, or homosexual. The 1980's were a time of structural and direct violence and manufactured enemies and scapegoats. The upper and upper-middle class transformed into a collective Patrick Bateman as they walked down the street disgusted at the vagrants and poor that lined it. The societal system of support had been dismantled. The society was no more.

It was under these conditions that radical art flourished. Splatterpunk and its musical contemporary, Hardcore Punk, reflected the direct and structural violence back to a repulsed mainstream. The dream of an egalitarian society had been crushed underneath the boot of those who scolded others for not pulling their straps up enough. Punk became increasingly visceral and abandoned what melody it had, while horror, on the literary end, abandoned subtlety in exchange for blunt force trauma and gallons and gallons of blood.

CHAPTER THREE: DADA AND THE TWO PUNKS

John Skipp, co-author of *The Light at the End* and splatterpunk pioneer, has continually used his work to reflect the violence present in the urban and suburban arenas through the dark, grotesque, and unapologetically obscene. This practice is a calculated measure, not simply an exercise in gross-out one-upmanship. Traditional, subdued, suggestive horror was not an appropriate avenue for the young, disillusioned, and alienated bunch that made up the short-lived literary movement that continues to influence both literature and film: Splatterpunk. As Skipp reflected in a 2009 interview with *Shock Totem*:

> "When you're scared, you need something to scratch that itch…we culturally need something to scratch that collective itch. To try and make sense of what's going on, put it in context and make your fear manageable again…there is a lot of escapist shit, but also that really deep-seated gimme-something-that-can-get-to-this-hard-to-reach place and scratch it for me. To me, that's the horror writer's job. I think to the extent that we respond to that, you get some really valuable writing" (Skipp par. 74).

That itch, that gnawing feeling of dread, was the uncertainty of the 1980's; the decade of birth for Splatterpunk. Reagan, his administration's neoliberal policies, social conservativism, and urban alienation pushed the fledgling Splatterpunk authors to explore new routes of shock and terror as the world outside their pages felt horrific in its own right. Skipp, along with his then writing partner, Craig Spector, and the man that Stephen King would eventually declare "the future of horror," Clive Barker, scratched that itch until only bone and frayed nerve endings remained. The violence in their pages was a reaction to the direct and structural violence in society, and they felt it their duty to not sugarcoat the destruction. Skipp notes in the *Shock Totem* interview, "Bottom line is, shit's always fucked up, even in times of relative peace. Dark times demand tough measures, and as Hunter S. Thompson said, 'When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro,'" (par. 75). The authors of splatterpunk were eager to step up to the plate and give rise to a flash in the pan movement that had lasting implications on the horror genre.

Radical art, whether music, conceptual, film, or literature, had historically been a vessel for the anger and fear present in the society of its inception—but also for rebellion against the canon that came prior. Author Paul M. Sammon, who compiled what is considered the be the

definitive splatterpunk anthology, *Splatterpunks: Extreme Horror*, described the movements ethos as such, "Like surrealism before it, splatterpunk was a specific revolt against an artistic establishment -- in our case, the traditional, meekly suggestive horror story" (Tucker par. 3). This rebellion against art itself was not new. In fact, it took cues from an early 20th century movement also born out of the violence and alienation present in the modernity: Dadaism.

Dada, like Splatterpunk, exploded onto the scene, caused confusion, sneers, and visceral reaction, then dissipated in less than a decade. With an accepted life span that ranged from 1916 to 1923, Dada did not linger or overstay its welcome. Its name, as outwardly absurd as the art that bore it, was a nonsense term that meant "'yes, yes' in Rumanian, 'rocking horse' and 'hobby horse' in French" and was "a sign of foolish naiveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage" in German (Trachtman par. 5). The name was random by design. Tristan Tzara, a Romanian poet who claimed to coin the term and wrote a manifesto of the movement's ethos, supposedly inserted a knife arbitrarily into a dictionary and landed on the word "dada." In his manifesto, he described Dada as "the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE" (Short 163). It was a reflection of the pain, the absurdities, the violence, and the hypocrisies that were rampant during the tumultuous first quarter of the 20th century.

The turn of the century was a time for revolution, radical ideas, expanded industrialization, and total war to a degree that the world had yet to witness. To a small sect of artists, traditional art had become stale and failed to address the shifting political, social, and economic landscape. The world was in constant flux and conflict; there needed to be a movement that matched its volatility.

It was the anarchists and nihilists who championed this new form of artistry that was created to "attack the very concept of art itself" (Trachtman par. 2). Whether that was writer Hugo Ball's poem comprised of exclusively gibberish ("gadji beri bimba / glandridi lauli lonni cadori....") to critique the inane, nationalistic rhetoric that surrounded World War I; or Hannah Höch's collages that incorporated sewing patterns, cut-up photographs taken from fashion magazines and images of a German military and industrial society in ruins; or Francis Picabia simply creating an inkblot, placing it on display, and labeling it "Immaculate Conception;" it was art created to disrupt, provoke, and spit in the face of canon and tradition (Short p. 163; Trachtman par. 4-20). It was also art as reaction to chaos.

The advent of World War I saw conflict and carnage on a level that had previously not been thought possible. Dada artists didn't seek to make sense of destruction or find beauty in the resilience of the human spirit through it all, no, Dadaists sought to reflect the sheer absurdity and disorder of war. Leah Dickman, a curator at the National Gallery of Art, describes the inception of Dada during the mass slaughter and confusion of World War I, "For many intellectuals, World War I produced a collapse of confidence in the rhetoric—if not the principles—of the culture of rationality that had prevailed in Europe since the Enlightenment" (Trachtman par. 8). Rationality had failed. There was nothing rational about the global violence of World War I. Dadaists utilized the ludicrous and nonsensical to make art that reflected the illogical nature of the world that they now lived. Traditional art had fallen in line and had become a tool of those who propagandized or sought to romanticize the war effort. The institutions of art had failed to provide any sort of resistance or valid critique of the world in flames. Robert Short in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* states that it is "difficult to imagine Dada happening without the First World War," and explains:

> "Dada was bound to turn on the institutions of art and literature themselves because both had to be acknowledged as products, reflections, and even supporters of the dominant culture that had unleashed the war and were thus criminally implicated. But rather than being overtly political, like say, a Lenin or a Romain Rolland who shared their Swiss refuge, Dada's revolt was primarily moral and expressed itself in the cultural sphere of the 'symbolic.' In a spirit of generalized skepticism and aggressive iconoclasm, the Dadas set about dismantling aesthetic conventions and debunking the received canons of reason, taste, hierarchy, and social discipline. In their place, they cultivated chance, the arbitrary, the unconscious, the primitive, the cosmic, and the anarchically vitalist – just about anything and everything indeed that was anathema to the mentality of right-thinking people and warmongers" (Short 164).

Dada aimed to dismantle art in nearly every sense of the word. The art world had become predictable, stale, and inept at challenging the status quo. While pulling from aspects of German Expressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism, Dadaists created work that still feels fresh today and has had far-reaching influence on modern art throughout the century. Like Splatterpunk, it accomplished this through poor taste, shock, and vulgarity, but Dada's influence would first be felt in the latter portion of the horror subgenre's name: Punk.

Its anti-art sentiment, sheer abrasiveness, and affinity for cut and paste collage style are the obvious links between Punk and Dada, but their deeper connection lies in their radical nature. While Dada was arguably most a reaction to World War I and traditional art canon, Punk was a reaction to the growing social conservatism and decay of urban environments during the 1970's.

The 1960's was a decade of social upheaval and cultural revolution, and the rock n' roll reflected that. Unlike the jukebox hits and crooners of the 1950's, the rock songs of the 1960's were vehicles for political commentary and an anti-war movement. It didn't last. The Beatles broke up in 1969, disco became the pop of the land, and rock stars began wearing elaborate costumes and lighting pyrotechnics in the massive arenas they were playing. By the late 70's, even the Rolling Stones were recording disco songs. Superficiality reigned supreme. Like Dada rebelled against traditional art canon, Punk rebelled against the rock music of the 1970's.

In *American Hardcore,* Steve Blush's history of the Hardcore Punk movement of the 1980's, he details the process of the original Punk's birth:

"In 1976 arose a Second British Invasion, headed by the Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Damned — influenced, ironically, by relatively unsuccessful American artists like The Velvet Underground, The Stooges and New York Dolls. This new, radical music was called Punk. It tossed the dominant Rock culture into the garbage can. The only rule was to break the rules. Rough and tough and sarcastic, Punk provided some of the most influential Rock of all time. Of course, it soon ran out of steam, becoming pretentious and boring like its predecessors" (Blush 14).

However, Punk, just as quickly as it had risen as a force of rebellion and snark, quickly became co-opted, commodified, and dulled. Its subversive fashion of safety pins, spiked, colored hair, and leather jackets became mainstream, and the music itself became more and more melodic and accessible. Punk had evolved into New Wave and soon, like disco, became the pop of the land:

"A watered-down version of Punk — marketed as 'New Wave' — got cranked out by major labels trying to soften the image for mainstream consumption. Clean production, keyboards, angular haircuts, wrap-around shades and skinny ties defined the moment. Perhaps the industry's diversion of 'anti-social' Punk into the more palatable New Wave bin delivered a more appealing product to the consumer" (Blush 14).

Capitalism had gotten its claws into the meat of what made Punk an exciting movement and tore until only the skeleton remained. Mass-produced and generic, Punk had quickly become a caricature and evolved into a toothless, mohawked shell of its original self—but it wasn't done evolving. In the spirit of Dada, and as a contemporary of Splatterpunk, a subgenre would emerge that sought carry the torch of the original spirit of Punk to a much more aggressive degree.

Just as Dada took elements from Cubism and Surrealism, Hardcore Punk took elements of Punk to create something entirely new and vicious. *(GI)* the 1979 debut and sole album by The Germs, widely considered to be the first Hardcore Punk record, was sonically and lyrically more visceral than any Punk record that preceded it. In a retrospective review for Pitchfork, reviewer Madison Bloom reflects:

> "Bolles' drumming style was fast and savage, doubling the BPMs of anything the Sex Pistols or Television had released. Meanwhile, Crash's vocals were far removed from X's harmonies and Joey Ramone's chewed-up bubblegum. Crash didn't sing: he growled. On *(GI)* centerpiece "Manimal," he assumes the pelt of a rabid feline: 'I came into this world like a puzzled panther/Waiting to be caged… I was never quite tamed,' he snarls" (Bloom par. 10).

The record established musical and lyrical conventions that would define the genre—but The Germs were not just the musical template for Hardcore Punk, they also helped to define the characteristics that would encapsulate the fanbase, bands, and nihilistic ethos of the movement. Dez Cadena, the third vocalist of Black Flag, muses:

> "I never felt the spirit in any Punk band the way I felt when I saw The Germs. People have tried to emulate it and some have done a pretty good job. What I liked was that everything was a negative but when you put it all together it somehow made a positive. A lot of times they were too fucked-up, a lot of times they didn't play well, a lot of times there was hardly any vocals because the vocalist was too high, or the bass player was out of tune, but somehow they embodied Punk. I saw their singer, even though he was insecure and had to get high before he played, was a genius. An eccentric, bizarre drug addict" (Blush 16).

There was a violence inherent in the music itself and, often, the people who made it. The music was fast and pummeling. The lyrics dealt with the isolation, depression, and alienation brought

on by a shifting culture that sought to live millions in the margins. Young men and women went to the shows and moshed, a form of slam-dancing that originated with Hardcore Punk, and unleashed their angst. Hardcore was a true, unfiltered movement created by and comprised of wayward, frustrated youth.

Splatterpunk and Hardcore shared a disdain for the state of society in the 1980's. They both saw greed run rampant, entire populations oppressed and exploited, and sought community through the extreme. Hardcore "was a political and social movement" that used "hard-edged music" in its goal to build "a better world" by "tearing down the status quo," with its main enemy being Ronald Regan (9). As Blush notes, Reagan was "an enemy of the arts, minorities, women, gays, liberals, the homeless, the working man, the inner city, et cetera" (22). He was a universally hated figure within the movement and his administration's policies were a driving force behind much of the imagery used and lyrical content written.

Figure 1. Winston Smith. Bedtime for Democracy. 1983.

Figure 2. Winston Smith. Big Money. 1982.

Winston Smith, an artist responsible for some of the iconic imagery of early Hardcore, and visually influenced by the collage art of Dada, recognized the impact that Reagan had on the subversive art movement, "Art changed radically from 1981 to 1986 —when Reagan was in his prime. People who were asleep up until then suddenly had their eyes opened. The attitude was, 'Go down fighting if we had to lose, but don't let them get away with it'" (22). It was radical art with a clear enemy: the Reagan administration, its neoliberal policies, and the social conservatism it used to garner support. Reagan proved to be the catalyst that Punk needed in order to be relevant and a threat once more.

Bands like Reagan Youth, who tied the Reagan administration with Nazi imagery, were just one of many Hardcore groups that used shocking lyrics and graphics to portray political sentiment. Their singer, Dave Insurgent, for many, provided a voice to the youth experiencing the "pain, anguish, and alienation" during the Reagan years (202). Their lyrics encapsulated a generation that saw compassion, critical thinking, and societal empathy be washed away by neoliberalism. A prime example being their eponymous song "Reagan Youth:"

"We are the sons of Reagan heil

We are the godforsaken heil

The right is our religion

We all watch television

Drugs have fried our brainwashed minds

We are the sons of Reagan heil

We are the unawakened heil

We want another war

Forward to El Salvador

We're gonna kill some communists" (Rubinstein)

The lyrics focused on mass media, U.S. intervention, and the drug crisis facing the youth, all while equating Reagan to the monstrosity of Adolf Hitler. Reagan Youth were typical of the Hardcore ethos—unabashed in its critique of the United States, reveling in the extreme, and giving voice to alienated young people.

In the end, the story of Reagan Youth played out like a Splatterpunk novel. Dave Insurgent, while never quite rising to the immortal ranks of Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat, Danzig of The Misfits, or Henry Rollins of Black Flag, cemented his place in Punk history before it all went downhill. He was beaten into a coma by his heroin dealers in 1990. A few years later, in 1993, the police discovered the "decomposing body of his prostitute girlfriend Tiffany Bresciani in the back of the Mazda pickup of serial killer Joel Rifkin (who killed 17 streetwalkers, two of them NYHC scenesters)" and he took his own life just a few weeks later (202).

The origins of Splatterpunk are intertwined with the histories of both Dada and Hardcore Punk. The genres sought to offend through vulgarity, critique through absurdity, rebel against canon, and react to shifting social and political landscapes. Splatterpunk took violence, that was once relegated to the subtle and stylistic in traditional horror, and brought it to the forefront. The dread and anticipation were replaced with explicit descriptions of gore and painful passages of excruciating death. It is no coincidence that it arose nearly simultaneously with Hardcore Punk and borrowed its surname—as both were a reaction to the Reagan Era and influenced by Dada's fearless, unrestrained approach to concept.

When Stephen King released *Carrie* in 1974, it ushered in a new era of horror fiction. The writing was fresh, the structure was unorthodox, and the violence was more prominent than

the traditional horror canon of the past—which often left details to the imagination and relied on building a sense of dread and fear of the unknown.

King was the Punk Rock to the subtle, quiet horror of the past. It was in your face, explicit, and wasn't afraid to push the envelope, but King still relied heavily on characterization and subtlety, pulling away from the violence just before it became too much for the reader to bare. Like Punk Rock, King influenced a group of artists who would take what he had built to its organic next step—unfiltered and without subtlety. Splatterpunk was the Hardcore. It was urban, often lacked the depth and characterization of King's novels like Hardcore lacked the melody of Punk Rock and New Wave, and was more concerned with creating an impact and a reaction than a gnawing sense of dread and slow-building fear.

The origin of the term is widely accepted as being attributed to author David Schow, while the movement was already underway, in 1986 at the Twelfth World Fantasy Convention in Rhode Island. Schow described his coining of the term as such:

> "I made up the term to describe hyper intensive horror -- the Clive Barker 'there are no limits' variety -- [back] when it mattered. If Stephen King is comparable to McDonald's, then splatterpunk -- in its day -- was akin to certain varieties of gnarly mushroom, the kind that could open new doors of perception, or, in noncompatible metabolisms, just make you puke" (McCammon par. 2).

Despite now having a name, the movement wasn't a solidified group of artists consciously making art in accordance with a generally agreed upon ethos like Hardcore or Dada. Instead, it was more akin to a collective unconscious, present in a small group of writers, to write stories that shocked and appalled in ways literature had never done before. They didn't fear being dismissed as smut or literary trash, which is the reason the Punk suffix applied so well—they just didn't care. Schow goes on to explain:

> "I was recently cornered at a book signing by a person who wanted to know the whole holistic history and timeline of splatterpunk. I was asked, "when did you write your first splatterpunk story?" and I can't answer that for the same reason Monet probably could not pinpoint exactly when he "did" his first Impressionist painting. I'm not comparing myself to Monet, but I would like to remind everyone that the reason the Impressionists are so called is the result of a bad review of their first show, written by a now-forgotten art critic who attempted to spin a derisive joke on the title of Monet's painting, "Impression:

Sunrise." When the Pre-Raphaelites came along and named themselves, they did so to outfox, with humor, those critics who might label them. Splatterpunk, similarly, is more an era than a school of thought or writing" (Schow).

The writers of Splatterpunk did not see themselves as part of an organized movement. They reluctantly embraced the term as a means to defy and mock their own critics—and criticism was aplenty. Robert Bloch, author of *Psycho,* criticized the genre by saying, "There is a distinction to be made between that which inspires terror and that which inspires nausea," while horror editor Ellen Datlow spoke of her perceived faults within the movement, "One of the apparent misconceptions of the splatterpunk writers is that describing the infliction of pain or the throes of death makes their stories realistic. All it does, actually, is demonstrate that they've been seeing too many movies" (Bail 26; Corstorphine and Kremmel 366). Ellen Datlow's observations are right on the nose—though meant criticism. Splatterpunk *is* more cinematic than its traditional predecessors and contemporaries. Authors saw no shame it utilizing their love of slasher and exploitation movies of the late-1970's and 1980's. Low-brow was never a concern, which cemented their brand of horror as a horror for the people. Splatterpunk made little room for literary word-play or stylistic choices, instead, the writing was more visual and aimed at eliciting a visceral reaction akin to the experience of watching a campy, violent horror movie. This was art meant for the alienated, frustrated, and, to be frank, those frightened at how society looked outside their bedroom window—not the academic or high-brows.

John Skipp and Craig Spector, the writing duo responsible for the seminal Splatterpunk novel *The Light at the End*, were no strangers to playing with the idea of class, low-brow art, and a crumbling society that placed self-interest over the greater good in their work. According to the pair, the distinction between low-brow and high-art was "simply a matter of breeding and income bracket" (Corstorphine and Kremmel 366). High art was a club you had to either buy your way into or be born into—a notion all the Punk movements rebelled against. Their stories worked within that ethos, and they lived it in their real lives. The two worked as street messengers in New York City to pay the bills and brainstormed their story about a "punk vampire in the subways" in a "roach-infested apartment" in the Bowery on the southern end of Manhattan (Skipp par. 16). The pair were not literary savants who wanted to create the next essential piece of horror canon; they wanted to survive, and writing was their means of survival. It was their escape from the messenger life and run-down apartments.

The Light at the End reflected the dead-end feeling of dead-end jobs, the fruitlessness of academia and art, and the violence that seemed to be lurking around each corner in New York City during the 1980's—as Lawrence Person, writing for the now-defunct *Nova Express* fanzine in 1988, explains:

> "Underlying everything, is the concept of New York City as Hell. Needless to say, most of us had come to this conclusion a long time ago, and the only people you will meet these days who won't agree that New York is Hell have either never visited there or have lived there all their life so they don't know any better" (Person par. 6).

The book detailed the Hell of urban living for the working class. The subway, the mode of transportation for the masses, being under attack highlighted the danger in even the most basic and banal functions of the day-to-day for working people. Skipp and Spector were products of the 1980's, products of the Reagan era, and products of a society that turned a blind eye after its indoctrination into putting the individual above society and the collective, and their work reflected that.

Of course, *The Light at the End* is also extremely violent. Scenes of decapitation during intercourse and disembowelment litter its pages, but not without justification. Reflecting in a 2013 interview, Skipp explains his own Splatterpunk ethos, in characteristically less-than-subtle terms:

> "People seized on the splat, but forgot the punk. Which is to say, the subversive element. The part that challenges society with shocking ideas, as opposed to just rubbing its face in the nearest open wound, then raping its ass till jizz squirts out its eyeballs as it drowns in the bowels of the previous victim. I don't wanna sound like a prudish, doddering granny here, clutching her pearls as her blue hair bursts into flames. But I just gotta say: I think a lot of people missed the fucking point entirely. It's not just about how horrible you can make things. It's about what it means. Why it matters. And what it says about us as a species" (Skipp, Talking Horror with John Skipp & Shane McKenzie par. 5)

The novel itself is a commentary on how we as a society tend to not band together to protect each other or our own interests. Instead, we buy into the dog-eat-dog, bootstrap mentality that is passed down from neoliberals and social conservatives. Skipp and Spector were working class authors writing a working-class book using vampires and excess violence to critique urban life under Reagan and neoliberal policy. As the group of vampire hunters comprised of messengers,

students, and outcasts band together to stop an existential menace facing their city, it is clear what the threat of *The Light at the End* actually is: a city transformed, once and for all, into unfeeling, self-involved, excess-hungry monsters that have no problem oppressing those who are most vulnerable in order to satiate their hunger for power.

What King did for suburbia in *Carrie*—taking the ordinary and remaking it into the horrific—Skipp and Spector did for New York City in *The Light at the End*. While a seminal novel that led to the pair collaborating a handful more times before disbanding, perhaps the most successful author to emerge, and transcend, the Splatterpunk movement was Clive Barker—a British writer who cut his teeth in theatre before shifting to writing horror with his acclaimed first collection *Books of Blood.* If Skipp and Spector were the Splatterpunk movement's calloused hands and aching gut, Barker was its contemplative and chaotic mind. His stories were often more heady, existential, and dreamlike. Still, like Skipp and Spector, Barker focused many of his efforts on the decaying moral fabric of society—and not what the Reagan social conservatives considered decay.

Barker's violence is sexual, his creatures are surreal, and his stories more literary than his Splatterpunk contemporaries. His work tackled the existential perils of capitalism and neoliberalism. In a 1992 interview, Barker mused:

> "We love life, but I don't think we love it quite as much as we think we do. I think there are large parts of our spirit that yearn to be out of life—and that doesn't mean into death. Out of being, the business of being, the business of feeding, the business of shitting—tiresome business" (Holland).

Under capitalism and neoliberal modernity, life is reduced to productivity and profit. Barker saw this life as drudgery and used the ethos of Splatterpunk to critique it. He sought to reinject the "fantastique" back into life—to take the reader on a ride through Hell and back, to show how absurd and bleak society had become.

Whether "The Midnight Meat Train," or "In the Hills, the Cities," both from his collection *Books of Blood*, Barker broke from the norm of his Splatterpunk peers and created works of the surreal that used violence like pixie dust, sprinkled only to provide a horrific sense of awe, rather than flat-out disgust. Barker, like his contemporaries, did not have an explicit political agenda. While their stories criticized society's excess and systemic violence present in neoliberal policies, it is difficult to assign a specific ideology to them. "The Midnight Meat

Train" is a clear critique of the oligarchical class and the oppression of the working class, but "In the Hills, the Cities" can be read as a critique of communism and the horrors that occur when society shifts too far from the individual and into the collective. Explored deeper in the following chapter, these stories demonstrate why Barker seemed to rise above his Splatterpunk brethren. They were introspective, ambiguous works that dissected modernity and alienation with a scalpel, rather than a chainsaw. Blood and guts still aplenty, Barker's early works were the closest Splatterpunk moved towards the "literary" while still maintaining its subversive ethos.

The work of Clive Barker was a different sort of radical art than that produced by his Splatterpunk peers. His stories were a reaction to the amplification of structural and existential problems—the chore of existence, oligarchical power, the balance between individuality and collectivism—during the 1980's, while authors like Skipp and Spector spoke to the direct violence that was happening on the streets in urban cities and were more blunt in their efforts.

Regardless of distinctions, like Dada before it and Hardcore Punk concurrently, Splatterpunk was radical. In the spirit of Dada, it sought to rebel against the canon which came before through vulgar and extreme measures. In the case of its musical twin, Splatterpunk and Hardcore were rejections and reflections of Reagan Era neoliberalism and social conservatism. They sought to distill the most violent aspects of their predecessors to create art that was offensive and inaccessible to those who could not relate, but wholly entertaining, pretense-free, and oddly uplifting to those who felt alienated by the social and political landscape of the 1980's.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF SKIPP, SPECTOR, AND BARKER

Horror, as a genre, is rarely a critical darling or particularly lauded in the halls of academia. Exceptions exist—*Frankenstein* and *Dracula* have their places cemented in the literary canon—but blood, guts, and dread as devices have traditionally fallen towards the low-brow end up the critical spectrum. When Splatterpunk emerged in the 1980's, the movement's brand of vampires, demons, and writhing abominations from the depths of oblivion were written off as tasteless pulp. In a *New York Times* article published in 1991 titled "The Splatterpunk Trend, and Welcome to it," writer Ken Tucker explains:

> "One reason splatterpunk exists is that it is horror fiction's natural response to what is going on around the edges of pop culture these days: not only bloody exploitation films but also the hyped-up world of rock-music videos and the new raunchiness of many comic books (the often all too aptly named 'graphic novel') aimed at adults" (Tucker par. 14).

It is true that Splatterpunk novels have cinematic qualities to them. Their violence worked in synchronicity with the violence of slasher movies, exploitation films, and heavy metal videos of the 1980's—but Splatterpunk, like all literature, was limited only by imagination and language, not the constraints of practical effects or budgets. Like many of the slasher movies of the 1980's, Tucker notes that Splatterpunk authors claim their movement was created as a reaction to "the vicious conservatism of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher," but that "supporters also argue that most splatterpunk fiction does not share the salient trait of so many contemporary horror films – misogyny," instead offering equal opportunity for maiming and murder (par. 20).

Aside from its obvious kinship with slasher movies and their rebellion against social conservatism, Splatterpunk had a subtle vendetta against liberalism and the capitalist system. Louis J. Kern, writing for the *Journal of American Culture,* in his article "American `Grand Guignol': Splatterpunk gore, Sadean morality and Socially Redemptive Violence," observes that Splatterpunk is also a "liberal nightmare," and that its "style and literary techniques wryly turn the opinion-molding apparatus of incessantly appetitive consumer marketing and the packaging of political candidates in a sham democratic process of the walking dead on their heads" (Kern p. 55). Splatterpunk was indiscriminate and bi-partisan in its criticisms. The movements only

parameter seemed to be that if something was perceived as harmful to society as a whole, preyed upon the innocent, or acted in pure self-interest, then it was worthy of being vilified in a novel or short story.

The direct and structural violence of the 1980's was a prominent driving force behind the radical nature of Splatterpunk. It was the Reaganites, with their neoliberal policies that punished the working class, and their social conservatism that demonized the marginalized, that seemed to be reflected most in the pages of Splatterpunk texts. The urban dystopia, a common trope in Splatterpunk, was oft the stage where the worst violence occurred and became a character in itself. *The Light at the End* by John Skipp and Craig Spector is a prime example of urban horror being used to critique the direct violence that is present in a neoliberal society due to a range of degenerative policies, while "The Midnight Meat Train," authored by Clive Barker, speaks to the systemic and structural violence that ravages urban environments from the top down.

However, as noted in a previous chapter, Splatterpunk does not adhere to a specific, set political ideology. For example, despite all the genre's criticisms of capitalism, Clive Barker's "In the Hills, the Cities" reads as both a simultaneous love letter and criticism of collectivism and communism. Splatterpunk does, however, seem to oppose the sentiment behind neoliberals like Margaret Thatcher when she spoke of there being no such thing as a society and the individual above all else. This idea of society as an interwoven, natural construct of people cooperating and looking out for each other is a recurring theme in many Splatterpunk texts. For an example of an urban, street-level critique of the societal failings of the 1980's, there is *The Light at the End*.

"NIHILISM, PUNK, AND THE DEATH OF THE FUTURE" read Josalyn's thesis title in an early chapter of *The Light at the End*. It may as well have been the title of the novel. Rudy, a punk, narcissistic and hedonistic in life—and worse so in death—is transformed into a vampire by an ancient evil roaming New York City's subway system and does battle against a ragtag group of working-class people that includes messengers, subway technicians, retail employees, and students in a fight for the soul of the city.

The New York City portrayed in *The Light at the End* is a dystopic nightmare. Much like its real-life 1980's counterpart, violent crime was rampant, hard drugs flooded the streets, homelessness was abundant, and the working class were just scraping by. Skipp and Spector's decision to focus on a messenger service and its employees was, likely, a personal choice due to

the fact that they were both messengers during the writing process. The decision also highlights the working-class struggle that is an undercurrent throughout the book, as one of the would-be vampire hunters highlights early in the novel when discussing the financial struggles of the messenger business:

> "'It's just the economy,' Allan went on. 'If you want to know how the country's doing, just check out how many runs are going out. We're one of the best economic indicators there is'" (Skipp and Spector 42).

The use of working-class messengers was a conscious move to illustrate how dire the situation had become in the city. They serve as a microcosm for the economic struggle that was taking place in New York City during the 1980's. To play off the working-class heroes, there is the often-clueless punk vampire, that encapsulates the petty bourgeoise.

> Marxist theory describes the petit-bourgeoise as follows:
>
> "Below the principal owners of the most powerful economic entities— the national and multinational corporations, in our era— is a group of small business owners, merchants, managers, consultants, intellectuals, and professionals who identify and share many interests with the bourgeoisie. Marx labeled this group the petty bourgeoisie or petite-bourgeoisie. Though the group's relations to the means of production (and wealth) may be tenuous, those populating this group nonetheless tend to share values with the bourgeois class. The petty bourgeois world view is essentially that of the very wealthy and powerful" (Zigedy par. 11).

Rudy, the drug-addicted, punk vampire that terrorizes that book's protagonists, becomes a member of the petty bourgeoise upon his transformation. The only true bourgeoise character in the entire novel is the vampire that bit Rudy:

> "On the other side of the Atlantic, in a small Parisian sidewalk cafe, a creature of extreme longevity and evil sipped quietly at a snifter of expensive brandy and contentedly beamed at the world. Life had been wonderfully good to it, for well over 800 years. Life had succored it in style. Life had sated it, again and again, with beauty and bounty to spare" (240).

Skipp and Spector construct this master vampire to be a portrait of wealth and elitism. A vampire whose parasitic nature aligns closely with the Marxist notion of the parasitic bourgeoise, which satiates itself and accumulates wealth off the labor of the working class. Rudy, on the other hand,

longed for notoriety and respect before transformation, and god-like worship after he was bitten. However, there is very much a master, slave dynamic between Rudy and the nameless, ancient master vampire, made abundantly clear in explicit terms when the master forcibly sodomizes Rudy in a dreamlike state. Still, like the petty bourgeoise, Rudy wants what the master has. In a drug induced haze, he day dreams of sitting at a long banquet table with an undead Ed Koch and Casper Weinberger. Rudy becomes a class traitor once he is given supernatural powers and aligns himself with the bourgeoise vampire. All the wills and whims of the oppressor class are now his, despite never having an actual chance of becoming a true member of the bourgeoise.

To provide further contrast to Rudy and his bourgeoise aspirations, the novel introduces Joseph, one of the book's protagonists, who works as a driver for the messenger service, cares for a mother who was left bedridden after a mugging, and wants nothing more than to leave New York City and all its horrors behind. While Rudy sought to escape his lower class standing by embracing the vampiric bourgeoise, Joseph, instead, aims to crush it out moral obligation. Day in and day out, Joseph witnesses crime and decay while an entire citizenry stands idly by and complacent. Joseph helps to lead the group of working-class vampire hunters because he believes in society, and the parasitic, bourgeoise vampires, who act only out of self-interest and malice, are a threat to the peace that Joseph seeks for himself and his working-class brethren. Joseph hates the modernity and coldness of New York City, which often feels like a character itself that provides conflict for Joseph and the other hunters at every turn.

The novel expands the character of Reagan Era New York City by showcasing the atrocities that helped characterize it. Portions of the violence present in *The Light at the End* focus on one of the most vulnerable populations during the Reagan administration: the homeless. The homeless, and dwellers of the subway tunnels, play small roles throughout the novel, serving as victims and devices to move the plot forward. It is their role as victims that reflect their marginalization under the neoliberal policies of the 1980's. They are portrayed as pathetic creatures, tethered to their alcohol while urinating on themselves, cannon fodder, and unrecorded casualties by police at the end of the novel. The homeless, just as in Reagan Era New York City, were collateral damage to a system that placed them so low on the hierarchical tiers of capitalist society, that when they died, it was barely noticed.

The city, as described by Skipp and Spector, is a pure hellhole. When walking through Madison Square Park, one of the protagonists, Ian, muses, "'the only people who ever come here

anymore are junkies, whores, bums, and dealers'" (230). The park, like the city, had been overrun by crime and people pushed to the margins doing what is necessary to survive. As he makes his way through the park, Ian notices that the park's benches have been renovated with catchy, inspirational slogans. This enrages him further:

> "'…the work of some stupid civic group, spending thousands of tax dollars on some idiotic renovation that they think is really clever because, gosh, they'll make us think about how lucky we all are to be rich Manhattanites with this kind of money to throw around in ludicrous fucking displays'" (231).

The superficial renovation is indicative of neoliberalism. The roots of the problem are never addressed. Instead, a band-aid is applied to quell public outrage, which allows the continued exploitation that caused the problem in the first place. This neoliberal inability and inaction are leading motivations for many of the hunters. They see that their city and the working class has been neglected and those in power can't, and won't, help them. When the vampire strikes and threatens to transform the population into the parasitic bourgeoisie, they deem it their societal duty to stop it and save themselves and others from further exploitation and oppression.

Skipp and Spector used the transportation of the working class, the subway, as a vehicle for terror, but ultimately, a vehicle for victory as well. Joseph holds Rudy against a pole in a subway car as daylight floods in on its way out of Manhattan and into Coney Island; the petty bourgeoise vampire is defeated by an everyday tool of the proletariat. After Joseph's victory over the Rudy, the story ends with a checklist of some of the worst examples of direct violence during the Reagan Era and on a cynical note.:

> "Then the weeks turned into months, and the public imagination with inevitably diverted. New robberies, rapes, and murders. Wars and rumors of wars. Rising interest rates. Dwindling attention spans. One disaster after another, all trotted out in front of the collective eye like ducks in a shooting gallery, given their fifteen seconds in the light, then banished to the oblivion on the other side" (380).

The citizens of had become too alienated from their fellow man, and too desensitized to the violence, to let the vampire attacks serve as any sort of real catalyst for change. *The Light at the End* was a snap shot of Reagan's New York City—violent, frustrated, and alienated. Still, the story contains shreds of optimism: the working class can defeat the common enemy when it stands together and works as one.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, due to its urban horror nature, *The Light at the End* is not the only Splatterpunk story to take place in New York City's subway system. "The Midnight Meat Train" by Clive Barker, from his 1984 short story collection *Books of Blood*, also tells a tale of murder underground.

In "The Midnight Meat Train," Barker tackles what it takes to survive the alienation of a modern, capitalist city and the often-disgusting underbelly of its bureaucracy. The story follows a tepid office worker, Leon Kaufman, as he lives and works in New York City. He is simultaneously in awe and disgusted by the city in all its vastness, modernity, and depravity. One night, Leon falls asleep on an overnight subway car only to awaken it to find it full of dead bodies that have been neatly dismembered like livestock—seemingly curated by a mysterious "butcher" named Mahogany who admits to serving a higher purpose than himself. Leon escapes that night, but decides to go back on that same train the next night in order to satisfy his curiosity. This time, Mahogany notices Leon and a brief struggle ensues, resulting in Mahogany's death. As the train comes to a stop, decrepit, hairless, frail and decaying creatures enter the car—prepared to feast upon the flesh. One creature soon sees Leon and the dead Mahogany and realizes what has transpired. It explains to Leon that they are "the City fathers, and mothers, and daughters and sons. The builders, the law-makers. We made this city" (Barker 19). It is revealed that these creatures secretly control the city and have the power elite above ground do their bidding. Mahogany was made to work for them in order to provide food—human flesh. While Leon is completely shaken and paralyzed with fear from this series of revelations, the creatures decide he will succeed Mahogany as the butcher and kill for their survival.

These creatures are not so thinly veiled depictions of the actual elites, members of the bourgeoise, and one-percenters who run the country. Barker writes a character like Mahogany, the butcher, to be, upon a first reading, the villain—but it seems that he is just another victim of the system that has employed him. In a capitalist society, crime is often committed with rational reasons in mind. In his book, *Crime and Capitalism*, David Greenberg recalls a story about how President Bush, Reagan's Vice President, had a conversation with a teenager at a homeless shelter regarding wages. The teen stated:

> "'I'm not working $125 for a whole week. At McDonald's? Flippin' hamburgers? One hundred dollars a week? That ain't no money. I can make that in fifteen minutes selling

drugs.'" When the President's wife, Barbara, informed him that he could go to jail or wind up dead, the teen replied, "'I don't care'" (Greenberg 66).

Members of society like that teen, Mahogany, and later Leon, don't necessarily have a choice in the crimes they commit. The system has alienated them and left them alone with low, or no, wages, a life or death choice, and a detachment from the privilege of making exclusively moral decisions. The system that they have unwillingly been brought into leaves few options. These crimes are committed out of necessity and out of survival.

The root causes of such dilemmas stem from the inherent inner-workings of a capitalist system. The hellish, sycophantic system of the creatures in "The Midnight Meat Train" mirrors our own to less surreal degrees. The people on top need the people on the bottom to toil and work their hands to the bone—often in less than desirable jobs and conditions—for very little pay so that the people on top can retain the bulk of the profits. The alternative, as Greenberg explains, is that people at the bottom are:

> "Forced to piece together a living income from whatever sources are available—lawful employment, theft, drug sales, prostitution—they have little incentive to invest in strategies (such as education) to improve their "human capital" that may not pay off until years later (if ever)" (65).

Becoming "the butcher" and serving the subterranean creatures is Barker's way of allegorizing the struggle of the people who live under this corrupt system. While being the butcher is undesirable, just like being a thief or a heroin dealer, it is a means for survival because the system leaves people little choice. Whether a petty criminal or a fictional butcher of humans, to commit the crime is to perpetuate the system in one way or another—and to not commit the crime is to live a life of constant struggle and potential death. As in the end of Barker's story, people are often left with no choice when faced with the harsh, disgusting realities of a capitalist society.

Barker, like most Splatterpunk authors, did not explicitly commit to a singular political ideology in his works. While "The Midnight Mean Train" was no doubt a criticism of capitalism and oligarchy, in the same *Books of Blood* collection is "In the Hills, the Cities," an ambiguous story about the awe-inspiring, yet sometimes horrific, feats of collectivism and communism. Barker seemed to want to strike a balance with his stories by not committing to political doctrine

and only exploring the forces that hold society back, or the ones that can propel it into greater harmony.

The story begins with Mick and Judd, a gay couple vacationing and driving through rural Yugoslavia. Unbeknownst to them, two cities, Popolac and Podujevo, are undergoing a once-a-decade ritual: all the citizens of each city build enormous, communal giants out of their individual bodies. They contort, stack, and intertwine to form limbs, muscles, eyes, and teeth out of their own flesh to do ceremonial battle with the other city's communal creature. Once the creatures are formed and the ritual is set to begin, Podujevo's giant begins to fail. The city had experienced "a bad decade for crops" which "produced bodies less well-nourished, spines less supple, wills less resolute" than prior contests (Barker 185). A few weak links cause a chain reaction and the body collapses, leading to tens of thousands of dead and dying bodies scattered on the countryside. The Popolac giant witnesses the travesty, goes mad, and wanders off into the hills.

Mark and Judd hear this sound and discover a landscape full of bodies, twisted and broken, among an endless pool of blood. They discover a local man attempting to steal their car, who crashes it shortly after. Before dying, the man tells them the story of the two cities that came to fight. Confused, Mick and Judd press for more information, the old man continues, "'They fought as giants. They made a body out of their bodies, do you understand? The frame, the muscles, the bone, the eyes, nose, teeth, all made of men and women'" (199). Now without a car, Mick and Judd take shelter at an elderly couple's house they encounter while roaming the countryside. Soon they hear the footsteps of the Podujevo giant and all in the house become delirious with fear. The giant steps on the house, killing Judd and sparing Mick to marvel at its enormity and engineering. Mick decides to join the giant and climbs up its massive leg to become part of the communal creature.

The story can be read almost as a response to "The Midnight Meat Train," a story firm in its horrific depiction of capitalism and the ruling class, and as both partial praise and criticism of the collectivist ideology of communism. The old man, Vaslav, Mick and Judd encounter refers to the communal creature as "'the body of the state'" and the "'shape of our lives'" (200). The two giants serve as metaphorical embodiments of the collectivist state, and the idea of the collective versus the individual is prevalent throughout.

On the one end, Barker takes great effort to detail what an amazing spectacle and feat the two cities accomplish. Vaslav explains the engineering and collective will it took to create such giants:

> "'It took many centuries of practice: every ten years making the figure larger and larger. One always ambitious to be larger than the other. Ropes to tie them all together, flawlessly. Sinews…ligaments…There was food in its belly…there were pipes from the loins, to take away the waste. The best sighted sat in the eye-sockets, the best-voiced in the mouth and throat. You wouldn't believe the engineering of it'" (199).

The giant, as a metaphor for collectivist society, provided purpose and was a source of great pride for every individual in the cities. The emphasis on the individual is placed below the emphasis on the collective good, just as in a communist society. Through a strong collective society that provides for all, the individual will thrive. Unlike in a capitalist, neoliberal society, where an individual's success and stability in life is based on an innumerable number of variables—often systemic such as class, gender, and race. In the collective giant, all seem eager to fulfill their roles:

> "Such wide smiles when an auxiliary heard his or her name and number called and was taken out of line to join the limb that was already taken shape. On every side, miracles of organization. Everyone with a job to do and a place to go. There was no shouting or pushing: indeed, voices were scarcely raised above an eager whisper" (179).

Every man and woman have a place and role in the building of the giant. Their job becomes a matter of greater purpose. In a capitalist society, the work is coerced, not voluntary. Marx explains the plight of the worker under capitalist production:

> "…does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. . . . His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague" (Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 30).

The work occurs because the worker is required to work in order to earn money and survive. In an ideal, collectivist society, the worker labors out of a sense of social commitment and duty. The giant they are constructing may seem horrible and monstrous to outside perspectives, but to

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those in the cities, they are monuments of pride and testaments to the collective will of a society that works together towards a common goal.

However, the story is not a complete acceptance of collectivist ideology. Barker did not spare the reader an alternate view of communism. The story begins with Judd, much to the annoyance of Mick, discussing the politics of the region, "Soviet expansionism," and how the "Communists had exploited that peasant vote" (Barker 172). The violence of communism, specifically the Soviet model, is shown in full view when the first cracks appear in the collective giant. With the population of Podujevo weakened due to a poor crop haul the previous year, their slightly frailer bodies cause a collapse in the giant and tens of thousands of deaths. This could perhaps be a reference to the 1932-1933 famine in the Soviet Union that killed approximately five million people and occurred due to a variety of circumstances, but which many authorities on the subject attribute to the forced collectivism that was implemented during Stalin's Five-Year Plan (Applebaum par. 1). The collectivist policies weakened the populace, just as it perhaps weakened the giant, but like the Soviet Union, and the Popolac giant, collectivism eventually marched on undeterred.

Still, the horrors of the collapse of the first giant are not spared in the slightest in order to emphasize how horrific situations can become when, as seen in the Soviet Union, collectivism takes a tragic turn. Barker writes the violence of the collapse of the communal giant in graphic, Splatterpunk detail and his signature prose that elevated him among his contemporaries:

> "The masterpiece that the good citizens of Podujevo had constructed of their own flesh and blood tottered and then—a dynamited skyscraper, it began to fall.
>
> The broken flank spewed citizens like a slashed artery spitting blood. Then, with a graceful sloth that made the agonies of the citizens all the more horrible, it bowed towards the earth, all its limbs dissembling as it fell.
>
> The huge head, that had brushed the clouds so recently, was flung back on its thick neck. Ten thousand mouths poke a single scream for its vast mouth, a wordless, infinitely pitiable appeal to the sky. A howl of loss, a howl of anticipation, a howl of puzzlement. How, that scream demanded, could the day of days end like this, in a welter of falling bodies?" (Barker 188)

The carnage of the aftermath, which Mick witnessed, should have left him in concrete certainty that he would never want to be a part of such a monstrous, deadly creature. Still, by the end of

the story, Mick is eager join and decides that even if it kills him, he was lucky to have "known this terrible majesty for a brief moment" (208). Upon giving himself to the giant, Barker writes that "Love and life and sanity were gone, gone like the memory of his name or his sex, or his ambition. It all meant nothing. Nothing at all" (209-210). Mick completely surrendered himself over to Popolac in order to feel part of this monstrous, societal accomplishment, even if that meant losing his indivual identity.

Perhaps the answer lies in the last, isolated paragraph of the story that detailed Judd's decaying body long after Mick had left the scene:

> "After a day, birds came, foxes came, flies, butterflies, wasps came. Judd moved, Judd shifted, Judd gave birth. In his belly maggots warmed themselves, in a vixen's den the good flesh of his thigh was fought over. After that, it was quick. The bones yellowing, the bones crumbling: soon, an empty space which he had once filled with breath and onions.
>
> Darkness, light, darkness, light. He interrupted neither with his name" (210).

Barker illustrates here that the individual is always part of something greater than himself, even in death. Judd's decomposing body served and contributed to the natural order until the very end. It didn't matter who he was in life; all that mattered was that he became a part of the collective once more. It was with this realization, and the sense of awe that came from gazing upon Popolac, that moved Mick to join the passing giant. A society based on cooperation and collectivism, even in death, is the natural order of all things.

Though Barker left his political views ambiguous, capitalism is portrayed as an unnatural order in "The Midnight Meat Train" and "In the Hills, the Cities." It is this idea of society that becomes a reoccurring theme in Barker's works, and also in the works of other Splatterpunk authors—like John Skipp and Craig Spector's *The Light at the End*.

The 1980's saw capitalism at its most heightened and unregulated. The Reagan administration and its neoliberal policies caused a paradigm shift that placed the individual over the society and, as a result, many were left marginalized, oppressed, and exploited in the pursuit of profit and power. Splatterpunk authors reacted in their works with violence, vulgarity, and the surreal, all while rebelling against the traditional canon of subtle, quiet horror. Despite the blood and gore, "The Midnight Meat Train," "In the Hills, the Cities," and *The Light at the End* all contain the redemptive quality of ordinary men and women confronting the unimaginable and unspeakable for the good of society. The stories were rejections of the neoliberal policies that left

people alienated and hurting, but, through the violence, they offered a glimmer of hope that society can be so much more than a populace of individuals only looking after their own interests.

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