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EVERYDAY NIGHTMARES

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THE RHETORIC OF SOCIAL HORROR IN THE *Nightmare on Elm Street* SERIES

The *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie series has enjoyed six successful theatrical releases since 1984, and a seventh installment was released in time for Halloween in 1994. It and other successful horror movie series, such as *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*, are frequently analyzed from Freudian psychological perspectives and characterized as allegories of the psychological dynamic underlying the return of the repressed. Although the return of the repressed, especially repressed sexuality, is clearly the major theme in many stalker movies, this approach does not completely explain movies like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, in which sexual repression is not a major conflict. Instead, the position offered here is that the *Nightmare* series is ultimately centered in a set of ideological tensions, which pit the members of a dominant culture against that of certain subcultures, or "others." The "monster" in these movies is only a foregrounded, tacitly inscribed "other." As will be demonstrated below, however, the *Nightmare* series is an even greater source of backgrounded cultural and social horror, which sets the stage for an ideological rite of passage for the *Elm Street* youth in the film.

Although stalker movies differ in many ways, Vera Dika finds that they share a persistent narrative paradigm that is characterized by several cinematic and dramatic features: camera angles and soundtrack cues, stock characters, an unaware or ineffectual adult community, and a revenge motif (88), often sexual revenge. Ultimately, Dika has isolated certain undeniable features of many stalker films, and the *Nightmare* series shares most of them. However, the conflict between the heroine and the killer—who is always male—is foregrounded in early stalker movies as a feminist rite of passage; this motif is clearly seen in movies such as *When a Stranger Calls*, *He Knows You're Alone*, *The Funhouse*, and the first *Nightmare* movie. By violently overcoming their attackers, the heroines of those slasher movies change the code of traditional women's roles in the genre (women as victims) and actively "devictimize" themselves.

The genre has evolved significantly, though, and Dika's heroine/male-attacker binary does not explain movies like the first *Friday the 13th*, *Happy Birthday to Me*, or *Play Misty for Me*, in which women do the stalking and killing; the later *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies, with mixed-gender victims/heroes/heroines; or *Clown-house*, in which three young boys are terrorized by a male without explicit sexual implications. Thus, the evolution of slasher movies suggests that another, broader set of codes, in addition to the ones Dika identifies, is at work.

Although Dika and others clearly identify the explicitly inscribed politics of gender in the early stalker movies, the variety of attackers and victims found in the genre suggests that there are other implicitly inscribed politics at work as well. Those political codes are best described by M. M. Bakhtin's idea of monoglossic and heteroglossic discourses. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin defines monoglossic discourse as the language of power that arises from "the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" (269). Monoglossic discourse is a culturally inherited, totalizing master narrative with absolute sources of power and truth, like God and country; in other words, it is the ideological language of the dominant culture, or status quo.

On the other hand, heteroglossic discourses work to de-center monoglossic discourse along various social and ideological lines (Bakhtin 315). Heteroglossic discourses "de-center" tradition, function as languages of emerging or revisionary social orders; and have prompted, for example, the civil rights, women's rights, and environmental movements in the United States. Monoglossic and heteroglossic discourses are always present in a culture (consider the persistent cultural "rivalries" that exist in the United States between North and South, East and West, conservatives and liberals, and so on), and the dynamic between them, with its checks and imbalances, constitutes a larger cultural dialogue, creating the rhetorical architecture upon which culture is built.

This rhetorical structure is also evident in all cultural artifacts, including horror movies. The premise that guides this analysis is that the ideological "plot" of the *Nightmare* movies operates on two levels: one concerns "humanity" against a "monster," while the second, more important ideological level, concerns a dominant culture against its "others."

Monoglossic and heteroglossic discourses can be translated into cinematic terms as, respectively, ideologically coherent or incoherent movies (Wood 197). Coherent horror movies are monoglossic and focus on conflicts between conventional cultural binaries: good/evil, humanity/nature, humanity/supernature, and humanity/science. In an ideologically coherent movie, the conflicts are resolved such that humanity and goodness always prevail and restore harmony and coherence to the master narrative. This dynamic requires that an external "other" be destroyed in order to resolve the conflict and achieve a satisfying closure for the audience. The original *Dracula* best typifies a coherent horror movie. Once *Dracula* is destroyed, life returns to normal, and the monoglossic master narrative is preserved.

In contrast, incoherent horror movies are heteroglossic, and offer a different ideological view of the world. While coherent versions of horror depend on humanity being able to control and vanquish external sources of horror, incoherent movies focus on humanity's limited abilities to control the horrors--or worse, on humanity's capacity to create its own horrors that cannot be contained by the coherent master narrative. In fact, many incoherent horror movies code the dominant culture itself as a source of horror. For example, *Freaks* and the *Basket Case* series show the status quo, with its inability to accept the physical mutations of the main characters, as the real monster.

Incoherent horror movies also can be characterized by a lack of definite closure or conflict resolution. Coherent horror movies leave us feeling safe and secure in the knowledge that the monster is destroyed and all is right with the world. Incoherent ones are meant to leave the audience feeling uneasy because the source of the horror is not really gone. This is perhaps one reason why incoherent horror movies are "open-ended to allow for sequels and to tease the audience into expecting a closure it never delivers" (Modleski 160). Despite the obvious economic rationale for movie sequels, the ideological impact of a horror that never really goes away is profound in such movies. As such, incoherent horror movies are subversive because they do not reinforce the dominant themes and values of the culture--rather, they function as a cultural critic by pointing out limitations, hypocrisies, or omissions in the coherent master narrative, thus unveiling the social roots of horror. In this way, incoherent texts bring to bear a "judgement on us and on the moment in history in which we live, . . . in which a vision of the totality of things is no longer possible" (Jameson 47). Ideologically, incoherent movies reinforce the idea that the writing of the master narrative is continuous and ongoing, and never quite complete.

One by-product of the ongoing revision of the master narrative is the complexity of codes for "others" in incoherent horror movies. Robin Wood argues that in contemporary horror "the figure of the other is always contained in the figure of the monster" (75). Although, certainly, a monster may be the most obvious "other" in a movie, it is not always the only one. Traditionally, as a subculture, youth is also ideologically coded as "other" in movies--by their clothing, hair, music, and attitudes, in short, by everything that codes them as not adult. As such, their discourses and identities are, along with those of the monster, something to be repressed by the dominant culture. Thus, there is always an ideological kinship of "otherness" between youth and the monster, which may partially explain the popularity of horror movies among younger audiences--they can identify with the monster because it, too, stands outside and apart from the members of the dominant culture.

The coding of youth in this dynamic then works on two levels. On the one hand, youth, along with whatever monster is in a movie, is coded as "other" from the point of view of the dominant culture. On the other hand, young people are the protagonists who carry the ideological burden of their elders, and who create the heteroglossic element necessary in order to survive the threat of the monster. In that dynamic, young people must not only do violence to the monster, but also to the rhetorical identities traditionally ascribed to them within the dominant culture. From the perspective of the young people, however, members of the dominant culture are also coded as part of the threat. Parents, police, psychiatrists, and other traditional authorities and institutions are coded as "other" from the point of view

of the Elm Street youth in Nightmare. These institutions' lack of responsiveness and resourcefulness makes them as dangerous to the young people as Freddy Kreuger, the "monster."

From this point of view, as Tania Modleski argues, incoherent horror movies like the Nightmare series are "engaged in an assault on all that bourgeois culture cherishes, family, youth, home, church, education, order" (158). As such, the whole value system of traditional, coherent narratives is turned on its head. If young people accept their traditional roles in the dominant culture as obedient children who do not challenge the common sense advice of adults, they die. Instead, the young people in the Nightmare movies must undergo a rite of passage that enables them to take care of themselves in a world that cannot or will not do so. In fact, the movies suggest that youth can survive better than adults, because they employ an epistemology that accepts the impossible as part of their experience. For young people to survive in the Nightmare movies, there must always be a breakdown or de-centering of the monoglossic, common-sense, rationality machine that guides the status quo. In order to achieve this, the young people must resist the codes of the dominant culture in order to survive.

The Elm Street youth resist codes of the dominant culture in two distinct ways. The first method is the most obvious and typical recourse for the young: They simply begin to ignore all directives from the dominant culture's authorities. If their parents tell them to go to sleep, they find ways to stay awake; if the police tell them not to get involved, they get involved anyway. In order for the genre to work, parents and other authority figures are dramatically bound to give bad advice so that more young people will be killed and the plot will keep moving. Likewise, the disobedient behavior of the young people is also to be expected, simply because they are young.

The second method of resisting codes, however, is more mythical and transformative, more indicative of the inner resourcefulness that the Elm Street youth must draw upon to meet the threat that Freddy Kreuger poses. Instead of asking ineffectual, unbelieving authorities to help them with their problems, the young people devise their own strategies. They use Japanese dream lore (in the first Nightmare on Elm Street), special dream powers they have cultivated (in parts 3, 4, and 5), and even 3-D glasses (in Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare [part 6]) to defeat him.

Therefore, these movies always show a transition, a rite of passage, which transforms subservient young people into independent ideological identities who are capable of resolving their own problems in new ways. In fact, the rite of passage in the Nightmare movies may provide a vicarious sense of empowerment for the young people who watch them because the movies depict teenagers resisting codes and taking control of situations that sources of authority cannot or will not help them with.

Although the method of cultural critique used in my study foregrounds the codes of "other" cultural groups, the discussion below also provides ways of foregrounding and re-seeing the codes of the dominant culture, as well as the rhetorical conflicts between monoglossic and heteroglossic cultural identities. By examining the rhetoric, or dialogue, between dominant cultures and their "others," it is

possible to illuminate some of the social and ideological bases of horror lurking behind the scenes in these movies.

Because the Nightmare series has had successful multiple releases, the coding of members of the dominant culture is varied and, as the series progresses, offers evidence of the ongoing process of revising the master narrative discussed earlier. Within the incoherent horror movie genre, members of the dominant culture are always adults in some position of authority, be they parents, police, teachers, or priests. The conventions of the genre require authority figures to be overbearing and incompetent, which they are for the most part; but in three of the seven Nightmare movies, a more dynamic view of adults can be seen in which they act as collaborators with the young people in resisting traditional codes. The use here of the term dominant culture is not meant to evoke any sort of monolithic, robotic cultural group; instead, it is used to suggest certain discursive tendencies that help its members to form traditional, culturally acceptable identities and a cultural center of gravity, or status quo.

The basic Nightmare on Elm Street story depicts young people terrorized and killed by someone they cannot see, except in their dreams. Thanks to special-effects teams, they die terrifying, horrible deaths. The someone is Freddy Kreuger. A child murderer, Freddy is caught, but escapes justice because a police form is signed in the wrong place. Unhappy with this outcome, a group of parents take matters into their own hands, trap Freddy in the school boiler room, and burn him alive. Thinking Freddy is dead, the parents try to explain their children's deaths and behavior through obvious rational strategies (their children are crazy, on drugs, having bad dreams, or killed by human agents). Their strategies all fail to solve the problem, and, eventually, the teens must find their own ways to deal with Freddy. Throughout the series, one teen or a group of teens usually survives and is able to "defeat" Freddy, but each movie ends with a sign that he is not really gone and will return, providing the lack of definite closure that classifies these movies as incoherent horror.

In the first two installments of the series, members of the dominant culture appear as the stereotypical, ineffectual authorities that Dika discusses. They are white, apparently middle-class adults living in a suburb, but their characters are not distinguished by occupation--except for Lieutenant Thompson, a police officer. The parents seek stock, pat answers to the problem they are facing, because within the bounds of what it means to be coded as an adult, the fantastic explanations their children provide are not coded as possible in a "real" world. In Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge, for example, a boy's father assumes that his son is acting strangely because of drugs: "He's not in trouble. He just needs a good kick in the butt and a methadone clinic."

Because they do not believe what their children are telling them, authority figures in the Nightmare series are coded as sane, rational members of the dominant culture--nonrationality is not tolerated in the master narrative as a valid means of interpreting events or solving problems. Parents, teachers, psychiatrists, and police are all unable to give any credence to the young people's stories, and, as a result, both youth and adults are destroyed. Usually, only a direct confrontation or experience with

Freddy convinces adults that he exists. Even then, they cannot really believe what they have experienced.

A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: Dream Warriors marks a departure from the antagonistic adult/child dynamic in the first two movies and depicts young people and adults working together to defeat Freddy. One noticeable difference is the absence of parents. Only two parents appear briefly, Elaine Parker, the mother of Kristin, the lead teen in the movie, and Lieutenant Thompson, Nancy's father, who reprises his role from the first movie of the series. But neither parent has evolved from the traditional role of domineering, ineffectual adult that is evident in the first two movies of the series.

Instead of parents, the main members of the dominant culture in Nightmare, Part 3 are psychologists. All of the surviving Elm Street children have been institutionalized in a special mental ward. Because they have been determined "crazy" by their parents, the teens are now placed in the dominant culture institution that has been established to house another group of society's "others;" the insane. The psychologists are coded in terms of their different perspectives on treating the mentally ill. Dr. Elizabeth Sims is a conservative, no-nonsense matron of the ward who goes strictly by the book. Dr. Nell Gordon is a young psychologist who is coded as one who practices popular but ineffective techniques; he speaks to the Elm Street youth in psychobabble: "Let's get our feelings out in the open." Neil judges the people he treats on the basis of strength or weakness, in which the strong confront their fears and survive, and the weak are destroyed by their fears.

Dr. Nancy Thompson, on the other hand, is one of those who survived Freddy's attacks in the first Nightmare. She returns to help the Elm Street youth with a controversial drug called Hypnocil, which prevents people from dreaming. Unlike the previous Nightmare movies, Nancy's presence in Nightmare, Part 3 makes the ideological connection between the dominant culture and the youth subculture possible. Although she is not a parent, Nancy is now an adult and a professional; but because of her controversial techniques, she is coded as "other" within her profession, and her ideas are regarded with suspicion. Also, in spite of the generational difference, Nancy was an Elm Street youth herself, giving her an experiential connection with them. In terms of their similar experiences with Freddy and the knowledge of what it takes to defeat him, Nancy and the young people are on the same ideological page.

Although Neil is coded as conservative at first, Nancy eventually convinces him that the threat of Freddy is real, and Neil agrees to try more radical techniques as well. As a result, Nightmare, Part 3 marks a transitional phase in the series for the coding of certain members of the dominant culture: adults are not all bad, and they can be effective in helping to resolve problems. In fact, instead of a domineering, ineffectual authority figure, Nancy is a positive role model for the young people to whom she can pass on what she has learned. Part 6 of Nightmare offers a similar scenario in which another nontraditional psychologist, known only as Doc, comes to the aid of the Elm Street youth.

Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Child (part 5) marks another transition in the coding of members of the dominant culture by showing sympathetic parents. The lead teen in this Nightmare, Alice, has a father who is a recovering alcoholic. In Nightmare on Elm Street Part 4: The Dream Master he is shown as an abusive father; but in the fifth installment of the series, he is a more concerned parent, even to the point of watching his daughter's graduation from a distance so that he will not embarrass her. Alice becomes pregnant in the movie, and the father of the child is killed by Freddy, leaving her with the prospect of being a single parent. Alice's father supports her decision to keep the child, and does grocery shopping for her, so that she will eat well during her pregnancy. Despite those positive qualities, Alice's father is still coded as "other" by the dominant culture because of his alcoholism, and he is mocked by others at Alice's graduation. As with Nancy in Nightmare, Part 3, or Doc from part 6, adults in the series tend only to be portrayed as sympathetic characters when they, too, have some "otherness" in common with the young people.

There are still primarily negative portrayals of adults in Nightmare, Part 5, mostly in terms of parents who want to control their children's futures and careers. One young man's father brings a football scout to his son's graduation to discuss college athletic plans, and another character's mother wants her daughter to become a model, so she controls everything her daughter eats. However, throughout the Nightmare series, an increasing problematizing of the codes of the dominant culture occurs that makes it difficult to characterize them in general. The Nightmare series provides a multiplicity of codes for members of the dominant culture, and, as such, provides an especially good example of the continuous writing and rewriting of the relationships between a dominant culture and its "others" possible in the genre.

As with the codes of the dominant culture, the youth subculture codes in the first two Nightmare movies initially convey a stereotypical view of white, apparently middle-class teens. They are not distinguished from one another except in terms of gender, but gender is not an issue in terms of who gets killed. The first two Nightmare movies follow Dika's stalker formula, and a lone woman survives to combat Freddy.

In Nightmare, Part 3, a more diverse group of teenagers begins to appear: three white boys, one African American boy, and three white girls. No class distinctions are made, but it can be assumed that they all come from families who can afford to pay for sustained psychiatric treatment. They all possess certain defining identity traits, but despite the scriptwriters' efforts to make the characters individuals, tacitly constructed stereotypes contribute to certain characterizations in this movie: Kincaid is the angry young African American man; Teryn and Jennifer are concerned with their looks and want to be beautiful; Phillip is a rebellious smart-aleck; Will is movement-impaired. At first glance, those traits might be seen as an attempt to make the characters more like individuals, but the stereotyping only serves to reinforce conventional racial, gender, and mobility markers for young people.

The teens in Nightmare, Part 3 become much more individualized in their dreams. Each character has a unique dream power that is used to combat Freddy, except Phillip and Jennifer, who die before they learn about dream powers. In dreams, Kristin is able to perform a kind of acrobatic kung fu; Joey has a

powerful wall-crashing voice; Kincaid possesses superhuman strength; Teryn becomes "bad and beautiful," dressed in leather and carrying switchblades; and Will becomes The Wizardmaster, Prince of the Elves. Not all of the powers are equal, however, and Teryn and Will are killed. Their powers enable more than one youth to survive at the end of the movie, and Kristin, Kincaid, and Joey all live to see *Nightmare, Part 4*. The third installment marks a departure from the conventional slasher movie paradigm and subverts the dominant gender representations in the genre: adults and youth are stalked, and adults and youth survive the stalking. There is an emphasis on group strength in *Nightmare, Part 3* and part 6, especially the combined strength of men and women, teens and adults, against a common enemy.

Overall, the coding of youth in these movies goes through two stages. In the early movies (parts 1 and 2), youth is coded as a generic subculture in which one or two female teens have the wherewithal to survive Freddy's attacks. In the later movies (parts 3, 4, 5, and 6), youth become more individual and resourceful, allowing a greater and more diverse number of them to survive at the movie's end. Like the codes of the dominant culture, the codes of the subculture are also diverse and contain multiple identity positions along lines of race, class, and gender. One consistent code appearing in all of the movies, however, is that young people, and, with some exceptions, adults, must resist traditional identities and authorities in the ways described above in order to survive.

The most obvious "other" in the *Nightmare* movies, of course, is Freddy Kreuger, and he is a subculture unto himself. Freddy is like a terrorist--he is not really interested in entering the cultural dialogue discussed above; he just wants someone to pay attention to him. His only agenda is chaos and destruction, an agenda that can be found at either extreme of the monoglossic/heteroglossic spectrum. As such, ideologically, Freddy is an example of America's political unconscious violently unleashed upon itself, manifesting everything that is unspeakable and repressed in the master narrative (perversion, child abuse and murder, vigilanteism, the breakdown of rationality, order, and the family, among others), but still always present in the collective unconscious of the dominant culture. In other words, Freddy's goal is to dismantle the master narrative, reminding the members of the dominant and the youth subculture that there is no safety from him in either ideology. But because of the extremity of his position, Freddy, as a threat to both dominant cultures and subcultures, collapses ideological differences between the two groups and pits them both against a common threat. This dynamic is most pronounced in parts 3 and 6 of *Nightmare*, where subculture and dominant culture combat Freddy together.

The codes that distinguish Freddy Kreuger as "other" are based on a mixture of implied supernatural elements and conventions of urban legends and folklore. For example, Freddy is marked by an unusual birth. His mother was a nun working in an insane asylum who is accidentally locked in with the patients and repeatedly raped by them. The result is the birth of Freddy, "the bastard son of 100 maniacs." Freddy is thus coded outside the dominant culture as a bastard and as "an abomination to God and man." He also is coded as a child molester who has killed hundreds of children. In terms of physical features, Freddy is coded as "other" than both the dominant culture and the youth subculture because he is horribly burned and wears a bladed glove.

Even within the genre, Freddy is also coded as "other" among famous stalkers such as Jason Voorhees of Friday the 13th and Michael Myers of Halloween. Both Jason and Michael are coded as silent automatons who stalk their prey silently from behind masks, almost like robots. They show no emotions: no pleasure, no pain--they are simple killing machines, more like props than characters. In contrast, Freddy has a very outspoken personality, and a penchant for bad one-liners. Also unlike Jason and Michael, who kill for some type of sexual revenge, Freddy wants revenge against the parents who killed him. Finally, Freddy takes great pleasure in killing, and is much more inventive than his counterparts, transforming himself and his victims at will. In a twisted way, Freddy's character "humanizes" the stalker by making him less mechanical and almost likable, under different circumstances.

Ironically, however, Freddy wants what he has destroyed throughout all the movies in the series: a child. In part 5, he fights Alice for ownership of her baby. If he can get possession of the baby, he will have affected three generations of Elm Street residents, and with a child of his own, Freddy will have achieved a kind of perversion of the nuclear family that will allow him to continue killing more young people and pass on the tradition.

Overall, Freddy is most like a comic book superhero--aggressive, resourceful, unbeatable--he gets what he wants. Freddy says, "I am eternal," and he can become anything he wants: a bathroom, a puppet, a showerhead, a motorcycle, a diving board, a huge snake, a cartoon character, and so on. His identity is one of absolute power. The element of uncontrollable power is an additional incoherent trait of this particular branch of the stalker movie genre. Stalkers like Freddy, Jason, and Michael cannot be stopped. They may be beaten, burned, and blown up, but they are never destroyed. This is perhaps the most disturbing element of incoherent horror movies and is related to the lack of definite closure in the genre. While coherent horror movies can have a cathartic effect once the monster is destroyed, incoherent horror movies do not meet those same expectations, and leave audiences with a nihilistic view of humanity without control over its future. Perhaps only the next sequel can save us!

To summarize, the coding of cultural identities in the Nightmare movies falls into three main categories: (1) members of the dominant culture; (2) members of a youth subculture; and (3) the subculture of the monster. The dynamic among the groups creates a variety of cultural conflicts, but no single one "characterizes" the Nightmare series, or the incoherent horror genre. I discuss each of the predominant conflicts separately, below.

The greatest number of tensions occur in the Nightmare series because of the dominant culture's coding of parent and child in a family. The traditional family structure of authoritative parents and subordinate children is a microcosm of the power structures evident in all institutions of the dominant culture. However, in the Nightmare series, the family, "rather than serving bourgeois patriarchy as a place of refuge from the social upheavals of the past two decades . . . has become the site of them" (Sobchack 178). Alcoholism, neglect, abuse, and sexual molestation are all woven into the family tapestry of the Nightmare movies, such that most of the parents become "monsters" along with Freddy. From this

perspective, the movies can be seen as a comment on the inability of the coherent dominant culture to protect its young from its own excesses and limitations.

Another family-centered conflict that occurs in the Nightmare movies, either explicitly or implicitly, is that over the ownership or control of children. In all of the movies in the series, young people struggle to create identities that will allow them to survive, but also still seem like "good kids" to their parents. Teens must "sneak around" late at night in order to help one another stay awake. The dilemma presented to youth in the Nightmare movies is that they must disobey traditional codes of parent/child authority if they are to survive.

In Nightmare, Part 5, the conflict over ownership of children is more explicit. There is a three-way struggle for possession of Alice's child between Freddy, the father Dan's parents, and Alice. In keeping with the master narrative's coding of patriarchal lineage, Dan's parents want to claim the child so that the traditional paternal links between parents, children and grandchildren will remain unbroken. In contrast, Alice wants to keep her child because it belongs to her body, even though this decision threatens her own survival and that of her friends.

A final, family-centered conflict involves the issue of defining what a family is. The master narrative of dominant culture supports a view of the family that is composed of a father, a mother, and children. However, in the Nightmare movies, as in contemporary culture, the splintered or single-parent family is becoming increasingly the norm. In parts 3, 4, 5, and 6 of Nightmare, several of the young people belong to families of divorce. Although many conservative groups argue that society's problems can be solved by resurrecting traditional family values, they often overlook the point that in order to accomplish this goal, one needs a traditional family--a social unit that is no longer an exclusive reality.

Other conflicts are present in the Nightmare movies, such as conflicts between young people and police (police believe that one of the young people is committing the murders); between young people and work (young people must not only work, but also find time to be young people); and between young people and religion (none of the Elm Street youth uses prayer or invokes God as a means of fighting Freddy, and sprinkling his bones with holy water does not help him to rest in peace). And, of course, there is the obvious, tacit conflict between young people and Freddy. All of those conflicts share a dynamic in which a group of dominant-culture authorities embrace the rhetoric of rationality as a means of problem solving, and the myth of individual development in capitalistic culture, which codes youth as incomplete members of the culture, incapable of being responsible for themselves. It must be noted, however, that the adults who are responsible for the young people are also, with few exceptions, incapable of helping them.

In contrast, the youth and a few adults reject the traditional authorities' norms of reality, family, work, law, religion, and psychology, and instead initiate their own rite of passage into a reality that will allow them to survive. But the Nightmare movies involve a rite of passage into a world that is totally alien to the adults as well as to many of the teens in these movies, the world of the irrational. This rite is the most

pronounced incoherent feature in the Nightmare series. The movies deconstruct a rationally oriented master narrative and put in its place an irrationally oriented, de-centered narrative that subverts the rationality and power of traditional cultural authorities.

At the same time, the young people's rite of passage is incoherent and almost contradictory. For example, while the Nightmare youth adopt a radical recoding of their identities against the problem of Freddy, their identities do not undergo a similar radical recoding in relation to their parents or other members of the dominant culture who created the problem for them in the first place. The recoding of identities enables the young people to survive long enough to become adults, but once the threat of Freddy is gone, everything returns to "normal," and the young people, now adults, are smoothly recoded back into the mainstream of the dominant culture. While young people can use dream lore to take Freddy's power away, they cannot use the same tech-toque to take the master narrative's power away.

Given the primarily negative portrayal of the dominant culture in the Nightmare movies, perhaps the greatest horror and irony for the young people in them is the realization that their rite of passage has transported them into the world of the adults--the very group they have struggled to resist. Some of the former Elm Street "youth," such as Alice in Nightmare, Part 5, now have children of their own to raise, and will need to make the same kinds of difficult, uncomfortable decisions that their own parents did when raising them, as well as face their own limitations.

A final incoherent feature of the rite of passage in the Nightmare movies is that the young people are only doing what their parents have done, taking matters into their own hands when the traditional authorities do not provide an adequate solution to a problem, and killing Freddy themselves. The ability to violently take matters into one's own hands is an inheritance of the master narrative. True, it is not an officially sanctioned inheritance (the master narrative instructs members of a culture to respect and obey the law). Yet the vigilante inheritance of American culture exists not only in movies such as Taxi Driver and Death Wish and its sequels, but in real-life cases such as that of Bernard Goetz. Although Goetz was sentenced in court, he is still a hero to many New Yorkers and other Americans. The fact that Goetz could be coded as a hero and a criminal may illustrate "the absent center of mass culture" (Collins 111) both in film and in everyday life.

To conclude, the Nightmare movies ultimately succeed in revising the master narrative to an extent because they are ideologically incoherent. Audiences have come to expect and crave the lack of definite closure and the unstoppable horror provided in this genre. When Wes Craven tried to translate the incoherent story into a coherent one in New Nightmare--by making Freddy representative of the ultimate evil (that is, the Judeo-Christian Devil)--the result was both a commercial and artistic failure. Although I have argued that there is room for rewriting the relationship between codes of the dominant culture and the youth subculture in these movies, the radical recoding of an incoherent horror into a coherent one, which Craven attempted, does not work: the genres do not mix effectively.

It can be argued that the lack of closure in the Nightmare movies does "not resolve the dilemmas faced by a contemporary patriarchy under assault" (Sobchack 187). As long as Freddy can return, the viewers know that the conflict has not really been resolved. The lack of resolution operates on at least two levels. On one level, the conflict between Freddy and the Elm Street youth has not been resolved. On another level, the conflicts that separate young people from adults and from each other also have not been resolved. As such, the Nightmare movies are ultimately subversive, incoherent horrors that expose the limitations and closeted skeletons of the dominant culture in order to revise and improve it. The multiplicity of codes that the Nightmare series offers for members of the dominant culture and the youth subculture indicates that the incoherent horror genre is able to evolve and continue rewriting the codes of the genre's master narrative.

Ultimately, the function of incoherent horror movies like the Nightmare series is to continually challenge the codes and authority of the monoglossic master narrative. Even the master narrative cannot save parents and their children from Freddy, just as it cannot save parents or children in the world of today from the ravages of divorce; gang violence; drugs; AIDS; unemployment; racial, gender, and class prejudice; teen pregnancy; rape; car bombs; or the other everyday nightmares that face young adults and their families. Perhaps from this perspective, the Nightmare movies can be seen as a commentary on the difficulties and horrors inherent in achieving the passage, not only into adulthood, but into ideological awareness as well--and on the continued challenge of maintaining that awareness.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Freddy Krueger, the "monster" of the Nightmare series, is a subculture unto himself.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Youth in the Nightmare movies cannot depend on adults for their survival--only on themselves.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Freddy just wants someone to pay attention to him.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The Elm Street youth struggle to create new identities to survive, as well as be "good kids" for their parents.

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