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Abolish Copaganda!: An ACAB Analysis of *Sisters* and *The Wicker Man* and the Ramifications of Abolitionist Spectatorship

Anjali Moore

Introduction

This project discusses the ways in which police are portrayed in film, primarily the insidiousness and danger of copaganda and why it needs to be abolished as a means to achieving full police abolition in the United States and globally. I apply an abolitionist framework to two early 1970s horror films: Brian DePalma's 1973 slasher *Sisters* and Robin Hardy's 1973 cult classic *The Wicker Man*. Both of these films exhibit notable anti-police sentiment but demonstrate the limits to which this is communicated and enacted. To understand how anti-police messaging affects spectators and builds communities, I gather salient user reviews from Letterboxd, a popular film database and review site, and dissect them using the methodology of discourse analysis. Films are dynamic and regardless of when they were made, have meaning and impact people's lives. By comparing the 1970s context to today, we can see how much has changed and more importantly, how much has not changed.

Another way of conceptualizing this project is as an investigation of contributions to the ACAB film canon and using an ACAB lens to analyze those cinematic works. ACAB is an abbreviation for "All Cops Are Bastards" which is a slogan that directly critiques the systematically abhorrent nature of the police and in the words of *Independent* journalist Victoria Gagliardo-Silver, expresses how "the

issue isn't 'a few bad apples'; it's a tree that is rotting from the inside out, spreading its poison."¹ The term has been in circulation in song lyrics and social discourses since the 1920s and was likely first converted into an abbreviation in the 1940s particularly among those in the British prison system.² The phrase was further popularized in later movements and musical genres, particularly gaining international usage due to the spread of punk and oi! subcultures in the 1970s. However, ACAB is now an omnipresent term after the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis. The ACAB ideology is centered in this project.

Statement of Purpose

I am compelled to explore this subject because of two primary positions that I occupy. The first is my perspective as a mixed-race person of color who is committed to activist work specifically focused around the abolition of police and prisons and located primarily in the Twin Cities which is the epicenter of this movement since the 2020 Uprising spurred by the murder of George Floyd. My dedication to this work and being present at the protests gives an urgency to studying the topic of copaganda and spreading awareness about it. Before I moved to Minnesota, I was always very active in different types of community organizing and protest work in my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona. In my predominantly non-white public

¹ Poulter, James. "How 'ACAB' Became the Universal Anti-Police Slogan," *Vice*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/akzv48/acab-all-cops-are-bastards-origin-story-protest>.

² Poulter. "How 'ACAB' Became the Universal Anti-Police Slogan."

high school, I helped to organize and participate in anti-ICE walkouts and Know Your Rights forums on campus.

The summer of 2019 was a particularly intense period of anti-police activism in Phoenix and the Phoenix police were named the deadliest police force in that year. These experiences were influential early on in my life in helping to refine my awareness of my own positionality as a light-skinned non-black person of color - I am Sri Lankan and white - who has had the privileges of living a relatively comfortable life and simultaneously participating in these movements even if I was not the primary target of police harassment and other institutional mechanisms of oppression. This is precisely why I see involvement in this work as necessary and not a choice - people who benefit from privileges of whiteness and capitalist supremacy are even more obligated to expending their resources (time, energy, money, labor) so that the burden does not fall on the most vulnerable and most targeted groups.

Later, as a student at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, I became a consistent participant in anti-police protests in the Twin Cities, which has acquired an elevated urgency and relevance after the Uprising. I worked as an intern for the Minneapolis-based abolition collective MPD150 and through simply attending protests week after week, I formed many connections with other activists and the central figures who spearhead the movement, particularly those involved with the organization Families Supporting Families Against Police Violence. Following the summer of 2020, the local police murders of Dolal Idd, Daunte Wright, and Winston Smith have compounded the intensity of this struggle within the Twin Cities specifically and consequently solidified many more communities and interpersonal connections between activists.

In this context of ever-increasing anti-police attitudes, there has also been significant

backlash and a substantial increase in violent and repressive state tactics. I have noticed that one of the most obstinate barriers to achieving the project of abolition has been individuals' stubborn attachment to notions of trust in the authority and maintenance of order that people see in the police. This trust is particularly pronounced in white communities and individuals who are never terrorized by constant police presence, harassment, and surveillance and who have little to no contact with police. Whatever interactions occur between white individuals and police is often considerably more positive than interactions with BIPOC individuals. Therefore, white adherence to police and policing is often established and supported by media representations that explicitly and implicitly cultivate trust in police.

Additionally, my perspective as an avid cinephile and studier of films drives my interest in studying the connections between police portrayals in media, specifically the generic notion of "horror," and their consequent effects on psychological conceptions of police in reality. Deconstructing the fictions that abound through highlighting examples that actually recognize the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that are concretized and deployed by police, allows for a deeper understanding of where anti-police sentiment exists in film texts and the discursive power that they hold. I am interested in how negative portrayals of police can change people's views as well as affirm and motivate abolitionist practices. I assert that film communities and abolitionist communities can be generated and unified through this goal and can be synthesized through the spectatorship and creation of films that contain ACAB ideologies.

This research is essential not only due to the urgency of the anti-police movement in the Twin Cities and worldwide, but also because we are living in an age of unprecedented media dominance and cultural hegemony that is exerted through it.

What is abolition?

“Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.”

Ruth Wilson Gilmore³

The police are fundamentally an institution built to uphold, protect, and preserve the material and ideological functions of white supremacy and it continues to do so. This institution is constantly and fervently reinforced through lived experiences, policy, and media and functions through the unabating efforts of the state to repress marginalized groups and preserve a hierarchical, capitalistic social order. Modes of state repression are perpetuated by police surveillance, arrests, and carceral punishment. Abolition imagines a non-carceral society, a world without police and without policing. It is grounded in concepts of radical care, pleasure activism, and mutual aid. In an abolitionist society and framework, individuals keep each other safe and communities keep themselves. Power is not exerted upon and against people from above, but derived from within communities and individuals. Abolition applies to every aspect of life, promoting healthy relationships, effective communication, and mutual respect. It is invested in cultivating and establishing new ways to support people and provide resources, not just take away things that people are accustomed to. It is generative, not reductive.

In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing the Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, Christina Heatherton interviews Black Lives Matter founder Patrisse Cullors and asks the question,

“What does an abolitionist society look like to you?” Cullors responds,

“An abolitionist society is not based on capital. I don’t think that you can have a capitalist system and also have an abolitionist system. I think an abolitionist society is rooted in the needs of the community first. It’s rooted in providing for and supporting the self-determination of communities. It’s a society that has no borders, literally. It’s a society that’s based on the interdependence and the connection of all living beings. It’s a society that is determined to facilitate a life that is full of honoring and praising those most impacted by oppression. I think an abolitionist society is deeply spiritual.”⁴

Abolitionism is therefore necessarily anticapitalist and grounded in emphasizing the connections between individuals, communities, and different forms of life. Robert Fanuzzi’s definition of the term abolition expands on Cullors’ concepts. He characterizes abolition as open-ended, future-oriented, and directed toward imagining new worlds and not continuing to conform to and perpetuate the racist and repressive world that already exists.⁵ He states that abolition “represents the disruption of US culture and history, not its culmination or potential for redemption; it stands for antiracism but takes the historical structures and modern institutions of racism for its point of departure.”⁶ Although the exact meanings, usages, and implications of the term “abolition” have changed historically, its current incarnation “provides us with new directions, applications, and methods because it points to social change

³ Rachel Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind.,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>.

⁴ Jordan T. Camp, *Policing the Planet : Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, (London: Verso, 2016), 40.

⁵ Robert Fanuzzi, “Abolition.” In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd ed., 1–4. NYU Press, 2014.

⁶ Fanuzzi, “Abolition,” 3.

that has not yet occurred” because “nothing has been adequately or effectively abolished”.⁷ Fanuzzi also notes that “abolition inspired a popular culture, an aesthetics, and a moral philosophy.”⁸ These three aspects of abolitionist culture, as they exist now, are central to my study of films that attempt to repudiate the omnipresent positive portrayals of police, also known as copaganda.

What is copaganda?

Copaganda refers to media portrayals of police that glorify and promote positive sentiment toward police and trust in their authority or legitimacy as an institution. It can be both implicit or explicit, deliberate or unintentional. Media texts can be wholly copagandistic or contain elements of copaganda. For example, some of the most pro-police examples in film would include *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection* and with many more obvious examples in television, like “Brooklyn 99”, “Cops”, “Law and Order”, “Chicago PD”, and even “Paw Patrol,” which is specifically designed for children who are most impressionable to these ideas. These texts serve the ideological function of brainwashing viewers - of all different types - into conforming to hegemonic norms.

In an article about the portrayal of the county sheriff in film, MaCherie M. Placide and Casey LaFrance define cultivation theory, which “suggests that, over time, exposure to television and film images and events can affect the viewer’s perceptions of reality” so that “the viewer may see the world as it is presented on television”.⁹ This concept is the primary reason why copaganda is so successful. Placide and LaFrance explain, “Weitzer and Kurbin (2004),

and Holbert et al. argue that: The media play a substantial role in shaping beliefs and fear of crime that point to a generation of fear, greater support for police authority, and the endorsement of punitive justice and protective measures.”¹⁰ This analysis confirms the extent to which media cultivate trust in police authority and a widely accepted punitive carceral system that abolition aims to demolish. This project draws on this theory as a core framework to understand filmic depictions of police.

To understand how copaganda is produced and functions in American culture, it is crucial to understand what the term “media” refers to. Lisa Nakamura presents a nuanced definition of “media,” describing how media can be “‘addictive’ and socially isolating, as a purveyor of harmful stereotypes and violent images” but also has become instrumental in creating “a sense of identity and practices of social belonging for users.”¹¹ Film, as one form of media, has undoubtedly played all of these roles and this project will explore how both these negative and positive impacts interact with each other. She highlights how “unequal access to media power and the tools of media production results in exclusion of specific populations from the nation on both a symbolic and a very real level. People of color, women, sexual minorities, and other subaltern individuals possess less power within the media system, which has often represented them in stereotyped, limited ways.”¹² These stereotypes are reinforced by pro-cop media and they help to perpetuate police support by showing negative portrayals of minorities rather than the cops themselves. Additionally, Nakamura cites Marshall McLuhan’s theorizations of media becoming extensions of ourselves as “not just as ways to get information and entertainment but also as

⁷ Fanuzzi, “Abolition,” 1.

⁸ Fanuzzi, “Abolition,” 2.

⁹ MaCherie M. Placide and Casey LaFrance, “The County Sheriff in Films: A Portrait of Law Enforcement as a Symbol of Rural America,” *International Journal of Police Science Management* 16, no.2 (2014): 101-112.

¹⁰ MaCherie M. Placide and Casey LaFrance, “The County Sheriff,” 102.

¹¹ Lisa Nakamura, “Media,” In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, (NYU Press, 2014), 165-68.

¹² Lisa Nakamura, “Media,” 167.

having distinctive affective qualities and as extensions of the human body and brain.”¹³ When media invisibilizes or negatively portrays minority groups, they relate to texts in different ways and become integrated into their lives differently.

Therefore, media representations of the police not only work to create and deploy these normative social values which become subsumed into our bodies corporeally and our minds psychologically. They also reflect the social and cultural contexts in which they are made. The police are both consciously and unintentionally legitimized through media cultivation but have also physically and materially played an active and persistent role behind the scenes through funding and participating in the film industry itself. Noah Tsika recounts this history in his book *Screening the Police: Film and Law Enforcement in the United States*. His research exposes how pro-police sentiment is deliberately and deeply embedded in cinema and how cinema is implicated in exerting “blue power.”¹⁴ In his own words, he demonstrates that “state and local police departments are among the ‘concrete and historical sites where power originates,’ and cinema’s conceptual work has long lent them coherence and legitimacy.”¹⁵

The police have been historically present in cinemas and screening houses which shows they have a vested interest in how they are portrayed in film and in maintaining public trust through media messaging. This can be seen in how cops have surveilled theatres and explicitly requested moviegoer assistance under the guise of participating in “the shared responsibility of public safety.”¹⁶ Between 1939 and 1941, the Chicago Police Department “banned at least eight anti-Nazi films” which

openly shows the overt racist ideals of police departments.¹⁷ In response to backlash in situations like this, “pro-police motion pictures were produced at the behest and with the close cooperation of law enforcement agencies” in an effort to “ensure that the police would be ‘increasingly perceived more like impartial scientists and less like political thugs in the employ of private machines.’”¹⁸

Tsika also notes the oft-neglected history of fingerprinting stations that effectively turned moviegoers into biotypes; this practice started in the 1920s and remained popular for at least three decades. Moviegoers’ “fingerprints were often taken ‘for fun’ in many a theater lobby” for decades through deploying these stations as “‘interactive publicity’ for all manner of crime films, as well as for patrons interested in the process or simply bored as they stood in line.”¹⁹ They would sell the idea as “giving the public a chance to establish identification without charge” and this disturbing surveillance practice which underhandedly helps to “swell the files of law enforcement agencies” is still used in places like post offices today.²⁰ This is just one illuminating example that exposes the profound investments police have in moviegoing, what they have at stake if they are portrayed adversely, and how to use film’s ideological and everyday processes to their advantage.

Tsika also explains how “power is routinely described as ‘*increasingly* exercised through mediated representation and symbolic production’; policing is seen as ‘*now* very much visual work,’ given ‘the ascendant position of the image/visual in contemporary culture.’”²¹ This idea of policing as visual work is central to understanding why white viewers are more susceptible to internalize positive views of the police due to media consumption exclusively.

¹³ Lisa Nakamura, “Media,” 166.

¹⁴ Noah Tsika, *Screening the Police : Film and Law Enforcement in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 15.

¹⁵ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 14.

¹⁶ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 3.

¹⁷ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 13.

¹⁸ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 13.

¹⁹ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 6.

²⁰ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 6.

²¹ Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 8-9.

He continues on this theme by outlining the often invisible nature of this visual work of policing. He states that “the persistent appeal of the panoptic framework, which sees policing as a regulatory mechanism prone to concealing itself (including through the cultivation of self-discipline and the black-boxing of particular operations), has allowed scholars to sustain the impression that the police represent, in the words of Emile Gaboriau’s fictional detective Monsieur Lecoq, “that mysterious power whose hand was everywhere, which one could not see or hear, but which heard and saw everything.”²² This concept of panoptic self-concealment and self-policing speaks to how media representations condition spectators to not only police themselves as well as others, but also serves to successfully naturalize and normalize the police as an institution that “must exist” for order to be maintained and preserved.

But does this deep-seated history of police involvement in film mean that every film is a heinous work of copaganda or is tarnished to the core? Films exist as complex texts and even if a film may reinforce cops in some way, that does not mean it is its sole trait or only function and should be judged accordingly. The focus should lie on how we critically assess films with the tenets of abolitionism and antiracism in mind, as well as any other lens that is aimed at addressing and deconstructing any system of oppression.

The Films

***Sisters* (dir. Brian de Palma, 1973)**

Brian de Palma’s *Sisters* tells the story of Dominique and Danielle Breton (Margot Kidder), a cryptic pair of Siamese twins who were separated surgically by Danielle’s menacing ex-husband Emile (William Finley). Dominique is a

beautiful model and actress while Danielle is sickly and demented; her identity is hidden by Dominique until Danielle murders Phillip (Lisle Wilson), a man that Dominique spends the night with after they were both participants on “Peeping Toms”, a Candid Camera-esque game show. We learn that Dominique died on the operating table when they were separated in so that “whenever Danielle is attracted to a man, Dominique takes over, slashes his genitals and then murders him.”²³ Grace Collier (Jennifer Salt) a struggling journalist who is known for writing exposes of police brutality, witnesses the murder through the window of her apartment across the street, and in a desperate attempt to help Phillip calls the police, and is promptly undermined and gaslit by them. Due to the cops’ incompetence, Grace takes it upon herself to uncover the truth about the murder and in doing so, becomes progressively more entangled in the sisters’ sinister history. De Palma takes strong notes from Hitchcock in creating a stylish and multilayered story of female crisis²⁴ that can also be seen as an indictment of the American “criminal justice system.”

Personal Narrative and Film Analysis

I first saw *Sisters* in August of 2020, several months after the Twin Cities Uprising. I recall I chose to watch it because I was looking to watch a 70s film that would be both riveting and aesthetically pleasing. My father selected *Sisters* for that night’s viewing after I voiced those intentions. I wanted to attempt to take my mind off of the upsetting realities of the pandemic and escape the realities of my life at the time. Although the horrors of systemic racism are not something non-white people can simply circumvent, film is known to provide a form of escapism that can assuage psychological stressors and I often turn to

²² Tsika, *Screening the Police*, 9.

²³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine : Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 131.

²⁴ “Sisters (1973),” The Criterion Collection, <https://www.criterion.com/films/377-sisters>.

movies as a way to temporarily forget about my own anxieties. However, I always feel a distinct anxiety about how police will be portrayed going into any viewing experience, and particularly with genres like horror which almost always feature a police presence due to crime-based plots. Even with this at the forefront of my mind, I was pleasantly and unexpectedly surprised by *Sisters*. I was left feeling elated by what seemed to be a shockingly radical presentation of systemic racial issues for both the time period and for De Palma as a director.

Before knowing much about the film, one may at first glance assume it would be just like any other 70s crime slasher conforming to heteronormative and racist film conventions, but *Sisters* offers a refreshing take on the horror genre by not only indicting police brutality and corruption but the entire institution of police itself, while simultaneously operating as an analysis of “the way women are oppressed within patriarchal society.”²⁵

Sisters subverts traditional horror tropes in simultaneously imaginative and limited ways. The film begins with an episode of “Peeping Toms.” Danielle Breton meets Phillip during the show; she is awarded with a cutlery set and he is given tickets to eat at The African Room, an obvious and immediate signifier of the racist tropes that are already being established and critiqued. Danielle accompanies Phillip to the African Room which is the only Black space depicted in the entire film. The scene begins with a hyperbolically slow zoom away from a massive gorilla sculpture. This exaggerated overture marks the self-reflexivity of the film in calling attention to obviously racist stereotypes about Black men. This moment is then corroborated, when Dominique murders Phillip the next morning, which marks a recognition of the common trope of Black characters being the first to die in horror films. He is also tokenized as the only Black character in the film.

De Palma and screenwriter Louisa Rose go out of their way to establish Phillip’s innocence and “goodness” and the “Peeping Toms” episode is a deliberate trick to make the viewer question how Black men are portrayed in media, as you are made to suspect Phillip of wrongdoing at first but then this is wholly reversed by his conspicuously respectful and kind treatment of Danielle. He is completely innocent yet is murdered by Dominique and so you feel for his loss as a viewer. The white woman is the killer rather than a man and more specifically, a Black man, as is the trope in American society. These choices seem to be conscious and self-reflexive techniques designed to critique stereotypical filmic devices in the horror genre.

However, the most striking examples of explicitly ACAB ideology emerge in the sequences that follow Grace Collier’s call to the police. While on the phone, she spends most of her time convincing them of the urgency to even show up. After she says that the victim is a Black man and then her own name, the police already start acting uncooperatively. They know of Grace’s anti-police journalistic reputation and so they immediately begin discrediting and hassling her over the phone. Through De Palma’s skillful use of splitscreens, the viewer is shown different perspectives simultaneously. When Grace initially places the call, the camera pans from her face to the wall behind her where some of her articles are framed. We then see quick cuts of the headlines, with the last and most important being, “Why we call them Pigs.”

When the cops arrive, Grace is desperately trying to make the cops go to Danielle’s apartment but they are more concerned with arguing with her about why she dislikes police and i doing so, allow for Emile and Danielle to have just enough time to hide Phillip’s body and clean up any traces of the murder. She is refreshingly candid in how she addresses them and clearly has a grasp on how

²⁵ Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 131.

the police are institutionally racist and not just occasionally corrupt. These arguments persist throughout the entirety of the splitscreen sequence and investigation of Danielle's apartment. Before entering the room, the cop tells her "you're certainly not a cop," and Grace immediately responds, "and you're not either... if you don't do something about this. Unless, of course, you'd rather go beat up a few students."²⁶ Grace's response reflects the cultural and socio-political context of the time, referencing the explosion of police brutality toward student protestors in the post-60s, early 70s climate. The cop responds, "ever hear of a search warrant, Miss Civil Liberties?" and Grace retorts "well, you haven't got one, and neither do I. You mean you're actually gonna stand here and ask me idiotic questions...like some dumb courtroom drama while a man dies? I saw it. Saw it happen. *Actually saw it happen.*"²⁷

This line is particularly revealing as it addresses another significant theme: the disconnect between how media portrays the "criminal justice system" and how it manifests and functions in real-life situations. In describing "courtroom dramas" as "dumb", her opinion of how America treats crimes and criminals but also the clear disparity between how "crime" is treated in media representations and how it actually exists in reality, is clearly discernible. She has an acute awareness of the often intentionally dishonest nature of fictionalized media and how it affects viewers' minds and cultivates their perceptions of reality as a mode of ideological brainwashing. She also contrasts this with the significance of how she saw it herself, with her own eyes. As an eyewitness, her testimony and lived experience is far more credible than the ridiculously ignorant questions the officers are asking her.

The dialogue follows:

Police Officer: Calm down, calm down. Now, you just go back to your apartment and relax.

Grace: And watch you walk off?

Police Officer: You'd like that, wouldn't you? That'd make a great story for your next issue. "Police refuse to investigate brutal race murder." Not a chance, lady. You stick with us. And keep your mouth shut.

Grace: I'll do what I consider necessary....This isn't a police state yet.²⁸

The arrogance and ignorance of the cop's order to go back to her apartment and relax exemplifies not only the police's investment in silencing voices that are contrary to them because they feel they know better, but also the blatant disrespect they show toward anyone who does not blatantly support them and in particular, toward women. Police not only act as agents of racism but also as agents who perpetrate the codes of an aggressively patriarchal society. The cops' continuous orders for Grace to "shut up" and essentially go back to where she belongs, which refers to the domestic, feminine-coded space of her apartment, diminishes her intelligence and transparently exposes the cops' refusal to be "talked down to" by a woman. Yet, Grace does not conform to these feminine conventions, but instead continues to resiliently stand her ground and bite back at the officers' insulting remarks.

Grace is certainly treated unfairly but not as reprehensibly as Phillip almost certainly would be, if he had been interacting with the police. Due to her privileged status as a white woman, she has an enhanced ability to accost the cops in the first place, without fearing for her life and immediate safety. Likewise, Danielle/Dominique's murder of Phillip is

²⁶ Brian De Palma, *Sisters*, directed by Brian De Palma (1973; New York City, NY: Pressman-Williams Enterprises, Inc.), film.

²⁷ Brian De Palma, *Sisters*.

²⁸ Brian De Palma, *Sisters*.

essentially unintentional. The fact that Phillip is an innocent Black man killed by a white woman who is not discovered to be the killer until the very end of the story, exemplifies how white people often do not have to face consequences for their actions in the system as it existed then, and now. When a crime involves a white person perpetrating harm on Black and Brown bodies, there is a severe double standard that *Sisters* mirrors through its plot development.

In *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films*, Kier-la Janisse briefly analyzes this sequence and states, “They are hesitant to investigate, partially because Grace has been critical of the police in her newspaper column, but also because the victim was a black man - and as one of the cops crudely remarks, ‘these people are always stabbing each other’ (only one indicator of the film’s peripheral criticism of racial prejudice).”²⁹ Janisse’s use of the word “peripheral” signals how *Sisters* is not necessarily a film designed to do abolitionist visual work but rather just contains this element as one of several themes. For instance, Grace immediately called the cops even though she is known to be in opposition to them which shows the perpetuation of police-based conflict resolution being posited as the only solution to crimes. It is also possible to see this as an acknowledgment that different resources need to be introduced because clearly police intervention had no positive impact on the case.

While in the apartment, Danielle attempts to dissuade Grace from her confident certainty that she killed somebody. She says, “but Miss Collier, many time at night I watch the television show, and uh, I watch the horror film, and it make me full of fear, and - and I jump at every noise.” It is notable that both Grace and Danielle made judgments about how media

representations impact everyday individuals’ perceptions of reality and notions of truth. Grace calls out the stupidity and insensitivity of dramatizing crimes while Danielle focuses on the paranoia and fear that is cultivated through particular forms of spectatorship. The characters’ awareness of this phenomenon confirms the purpose of this project as well as the prominence of the film’s self-reflexivity once again.

The police fail to find any evidence in their search, and so Grace resolves to investigate for herself, using her skills as a journalist which positions her as the detective. The viewer identifies with her and is complicit as a spectator. This exposes how even films with anti-police sentiment often reinforce the police or policing by conditioning the viewer to police in their own lives and communities. This conditioning process is designed to feel normal and is naturalized by its omnipresence in all media forms. By trying to figure out what happened for ourselves (alongside Grace), we perform the spectatorial work of policing and in a way, become cops too.

Later that day, Grace is in a phone booth placing another call but this time the receiving end is the small newspaper she works for. She proclaims, “a white woman kills her Black lover and those racist cops couldn’t care less!”³⁰ This sentence in itself elucidates the essence of *Sisters*’ ACAB sentiment. It shows that Grace also believes that cops are racist and apathetic specifically when the victim is not white. She sees how race is inextricable from this murder. When the newspaper insists they hire a private detective, Grace voices how she wants to investigate for herself and even goes on to say “I know more than those idiot police!” The sexist overtones of this situation, where Grace’s agency and intelligence is continually

²⁹ Kier-la Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women : An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in*

Horror and Exploitation Films, (Godalming, UK: Fab Press, 2012), 35.

³⁰ Brian De Palma, *Sisters*.

undermined by male figures, contributes to the feminist themes encased in the film.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, film theorist Barbara Creed defines the slasher film as “those in which a psychotic killer murders a large number of people, usually with a knife or other instrument of mutilation.... The killer, who is usually - but not necessarily - male, stalks and kills relentlessly.”³¹ She goes on to discuss further how gender is constructed within the slasher sub-genre and says that “according to Royal Brown the slasher film ‘grows out of the severest, most strongly anti-female aspects of a very American brand of the Judaeo-Christian mythology’ in which woman, because of her sexual appetites, is held responsible for man’s fall from innocence. Woman is victimized because she is blamed for the human condition.”³²

In *Sisters*, de Palma reverses this trope and self-reflexively examines the sexism embedded in American society. The slashers are women, rather than men, who kill out of revenge for the psychological personality splits that men inflict. The female castrates the male, as Creed discusses at length in her analysis of the *femme castratrice* construct in relation to *Sisters*, which can be understood in the following terms: “The slasher film deals specifically with castration anxieties, particularly with the male fear of castration. The image of a woman’s cut and bleeding body is a convention of the genre... . Symbolic castration appears to be a part of the ideological project of the slasher film.”³³ Janisse also touches on the *femme castratrice* in the context of *Sisters*, explaining, “She [Danielle] thinks that to get rid of Dominique is the answer, but even the separation surgery - deliberately played out like a grotesque castration (and mirrored in the literal castration of men in the film) - cannot

dispose of the monstrosity that Dominique represents to the seemingly perfect Danielle.”³⁴

This discussion of castration anxiety is transferrable to the pervasive anxieties that stem from those who are afraid to abolish the police because it would mean a sacrifice of their privileges and a supposed loss of safety. Fear of this loss breeds anxiety which holds considerable power in obstructing attempts at resistance, justice, and overthrow of racial capitalism. The discursive prominence of these anxieties has surged as spaces for and attempts to abolish the police have escalated since the Uprising. Therefore, the idea of a “minority” group castrating, or essentially removing the power, whether literally or figuratively, from the bodies that hold it produces a parallel dynamic. Abolitionist goals threaten to symbolically and possibly more literally castrate police by materially and ideologically uprooting their power. The desperate attempts to hold onto existing power structures are motivated by underlying fear of the possibility of losing that power. In the context of *Sisters*, the female slasher/femme castratrice can represent a more abolitionist positionality and the actual manifestation of anti-patriarchal desires.

After Grace is kidnapped by Emile when trying to infiltrate the Loisel Institute on her own, she is hypnotized into forgetting the murder that she witnessed. She is reduced to an infantile and mollified state and is now living in her childhood bedroom with her mother, who earlier in the film criticized Grace’s lack of desire to marry and independent lifestyle choices. Janisse reflects on this dynamic, “Danielle and Grace are instantly paralleled by their relationships with men - both are treated with condescension, and encouraged to submit to traditional behavioural modes of femininity.”³⁵ Both of these qualities are also emblematic of police. In this scene, the same police officers

³¹ Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 124.

³² Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 125.

³³ Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 125.

³⁴ Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women*, 35.

³⁵ Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women*, 35.

who visited Danielle's apartment, come to Grace's room to apologize for not listening to her when the murder first occurred. During this exchange, she is now docile and polite to them because she is no longer herself, but a submissive and co-dependent woman with no convictions of her own. Emile has once again destroyed the "deviant" woman (Grace's incarnation of Dominique) and replaced her with the type of woman a misogynistic society dictates as "normal" (Grace's incarnation of Danielle). The police also personify this same type of destructive and oppressive power. De Palma and Rose are showing that this is how systems function in the United States. This is how institutionalized police power is perpetually maintained.

By the end of the film, everyone's lives have descended into chaos or ended completely and the root cause becomes very evident: systemic racism. Phillip's murder, which is a form of racialized violence, is the event that permanently alters every character's lives for the worse. This serves as an obvious disapproval of the ways in which uniquely American forms of racist and misogynistic oppression produce harm.

**The Wicker Man (dir. Robin Hardy,
1973)**

The Wicker Man tells the story of a conservative Christian policeman Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) who comes from the British mainland to the small, remote Scottish island of Summerisle to investigate the disappearance of a young girl named Rowan Morrison, who the locals promptly claim does not exist. Summerisle is characterized by a Pagan religion that honors the natural world and features a reverential relationship to the land, sex and fertility, and the belief that when you die your soul is reincarnated. Howie has no tolerance or respect for their religion and cultural practices which are inconceivable and barbaric in his worldview and consequently treats

everyone he encounters with disgust, contempt, and blunt hostility. By the end of the film, Summerisle comes alive to celebrate the Mayday holiday, complete with animal costumes based on their native folklore and a parade to the sea. Howie disguises himself in the ceremonies in an attempt to find Rowan but when he does, it is revealed that the people of the island have been planning all along to burn him in a giant wooden man as a ritual human sacrifice to renew the harvest and restore the land's fertility. The blazing immolation of Howie's embodiment of modern Western, capitalist, and colonialist evils, appropriately housed in the body of a policeman, is a triumphant condemnation of everything police stand for and suggests a hopeful promise of an abolitionist future.

Personal Narrative + Film Analysis

I first watched *The Wicker Man* in the midst of the Derek Chauvin trial in April 2021. My friend had recommended *The Wicker Man* to me years earlier and similar to my experience with *Sisters*, I was once again in the mood to watch something from the 1970s that I could be immersed into, purely for the purpose of distracting me from current events. Watching the trial all day long, day after day, was incredibly emotionally draining and I felt compelled to try to escape the crushing and inescapable reality of it by watching a film. I was simultaneously attending the protests for Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center and those happening at the Government Center in Minneapolis for the trial and so it is important to note how the fact of living in the Twin Cities enhanced and intensified the experience of the trial in visceral ways that are difficult to articulate in words alone.

Just a few minutes into the movie, I immediately felt anxious seeing that the protagonist was a cop and I asked myself if I could even continue to watch. I persisted as I immediately noticed that Sergeant Howie was

progressively being portrayed in an unquestionably negative and unappealing light. After watching, I experienced a sense of euphoria and distinct validation as I had truly never seen a more anti-police movie. It felt like I had fortuitously stumbled upon an overwhelmingly rewarding moment of solidarity that provided me with comfort and reassurance. This feeling was repeated as I read other viewers' similar feelings toward the film and felt like I belonged to this very specific spectatorship community that not only appreciated cinematic obscurities but held abolitionist values. This was exactly what I needed during a period of time where I felt singularly discouraged and despondent about the hopelessness of the capitalist system and what I perceived as a decreased level of involvement in protest work in the Twin Cities.

The film begins with a note that states: "The Producer would like to thank The Lord Summerisle and the people of his island off the west coast of Scotland for this privileged insight into their religious practices and for their generous cooperation in the making of this film"³⁶ which immediately situates the filmmakers' perspective in favor of the people who live on the island and their cultural customs which are continuously disrespected by Sergeant Howie.

When he first arrives at Summerisle he is shown in a long shot far away in the water ordering the men on the shore to send him a dinghy which they coyly refuse to do, which is the first sign that Howie will not be met with effortless compliance like he expects. His arrogance is quickly established as Howie orders, "Now, that makes it a police matter, private property or not!"³⁷ When he gets to land and meets with the men they are shown in medium shot with Howie on the left and the crowd of men on the right with a clear divide between them. When the photo of Rowan is

passed around among the men, the filming shifts to handheld camerawork following each face in close-up until the framing is completely reversed back to a medium shot but now Howie and the men have reversed positions. This visual reversal symbolically represents and foreshadows the inversion of traditional power dynamics that is progressively intensified throughout the film.

Later, when Howie goes to the classroom, he starts by watching from a tiny window shown behind the schoolteacher, Miss Rose (Diane Cilento), who is speaking to the class about the veneration of the phallic symbol in preparation for their impending Mayday celebration. This shot visually establishes Howie as an outsider looking in, a figure who does not belong in that space and is very far away from their ways of thinking about the world. Nevertheless, he enters the room with disarming confidence that exemplifies how cops not only intrude into spaces where they do not belong but also feel entitled to be anywhere they please with no respect for the nature of the space itself and the people within it. He is viscerally disturbed by Miss Rose's candid lecture about male genitalia which, as a virgin himself, he deems as being too inappropriate to be taught to young schoolgirls.

He interjects, "Miss, you can be quite sure that I will report this to the proper authorities. Everywhere I go on this island, it seems to me I find degeneracy. And there is brawling in bars, there is indecency in public places, and there is corruption of the young. And now I see it all stems from here. It stems from the filth taught here in this very schoolroom." She responds, "I was unaware that the police had any authority in matters of education." Ignoring her pointed response, he begins to address the class himself, completely undermining Miss Rose's authority and immediately stating "Now, I am a police officer"

³⁶ Robin Hardy, *The Wicker Man*, directed by Robin Hardy. (1973; Scotland, UK: British Lion Films), film.

³⁷ Hardy, *The Wicker Man*.

and proceeding to rudely erase the day's lessons from the chalkboard without even asking permission. Clearly, he has no concept of the power structures and authority figures that are respected on the island and can only understand his own supremacist notions about police being the arbiters of all authority and order. Miss Rose, by contrast, is well aware of her role as an educator and how the police have no place in interfering in that space or making judgments about what should or should not be taught.

Howie's presumptuous attack not only exhibits his ego and superiority problem but manifests as an expression of patriarchal misogyny. He is making a clear delineation between education and the "degeneracy" he sees the island characterized by. Classrooms are typically coded as feminine spaces as women are stereotypically assigned to jobs that involve caregiving and working with children. Therefore, in this context, he feels empowered to interrupt and publicly humiliate the actual authority figure in the room and since she is a woman, he automatically believes he knows better than her and can tell her what to do. As the film progresses, we see how Howie is threatened by strong female characters and feminine energy and it is expressed through his overly defensive, sexist behaviors which are in line with the authority complexes that also typify cops.

After this scene, Howie continues to encounter various characters on the island including a breastfeeding mother in the cemetery, a female registrar (Ingrid Pitt), and Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee) himself. When he speaks to the registrar, the first thing she asks him is, incisively, "do you have authority?"³⁸ and Howie cannot comprehend that he does not have unrestricted automatic permission. He is required to receive it from Lord Summerisle first. His physical appearance and attire also communicate this overt

ignorance on Howie's part. He wears his police uniform, which is stiff, black, and immaculate, everywhere he goes which signifies how he conspicuously does not fit in in this environment, where everyone wears much looser and freer clothes. His uniform also visually indicates his obsession with his own power and how he desperately clings to his identity as a police officer.

He visits Lord Summerisle who recounts the history of the island's conversion to a Pagan lifestyle and religion and Howie balks at the notion, insulting him at every turn. Lord Summerisle retorts that he is "a heathen, conceivably, but not, I hope, an unenlightened one." And Howie retaliates, "Lord Summerisle, I am interested in one thing: *the law*. I must remind you, Sir, that despite everything you said, you are the subject of a *Christian* country." The scene ends with Lord Summerisle sarcastically biting back, "What a great pleasure, meeting a Christian copper!"³⁹ Throughout all of these sequences, the camera deliberately frames Howie as beneath Lord Summerisle, with Howie shown as further away or from a high camera angle and Lord Summerisle shown as larger, more confident, and higher up through the use of low camera angles. These techniques subtly indicate who holds power and who does not within this narrative, contributing to the thematic subversion of police authority.

Later, as the Mayday celebration is beginning to get underway, Howie speaks to Rowan's mother May Morrison for a third time and their exchange is particularly relevant to this discussion. Howie aggressively disparages her fitness as a mother and she calmly yet caustically responds "Sergeant, if I were you, I would go back to the mainland. Stop interfering in things that are no concern of yours." He continues to become angrier and more threatening to which May answers assuredly, "you'll simply never understand the true nature

³⁸ Hardy, *The Wicker Man*.

³⁹ Hardy, *The Wicker Man*.

of sacrifice.”⁴⁰ May had been one of the characters who was most polite and friendly to Howie up until this point. Her assertions are striking in their frankness and lack of accommodation for Howie’s unacceptable behavior.

The film climactically ends with the disclosure that the Summerislanders had intentionally lured Howie to the island and trapped him within the “wicker man” which is triumphantly set aflame at sunset. This sequence is drawn out over many shots and lasts nearly fifteen minutes, emphasizing the victorious conviction of this final resolution, the beauty and intensity of the flames, and the rejoicing of the Summerislanders. Some people view this ending as inconceivably terrifying and unacceptable, but they are likely not approaching the film from an already anti-police viewpoint, that this project is attempting to instill in all moviegoers.

In *The Quest for the Wicker Man: History, Folklore, and Pagan Perspectives*, Anthony J. Harper writes a chapter entitled, “*The Wicker Man* - Cult Film or Anti-Cult Film? Parallels and paradoxes in the representation of Paganism, Christianity, and the law.”⁴¹ He perceives the ending’s sacrifice as the deciding factor that justifies the film’s classification as a horror film. However, I assert that the true horror of the film is the police terror embodied in Howie and not the fact of how he is burned alive onscreen. Throughout the film, Howie insolently characterizes the people of Summerisle as barbaric, savage degenerates. What is ironic, is it is actually his behaviors and everything he stands for that is truly monstrous and inhuman and the people of the island are well aware of this.

Touching on the idea of “the law,” Harper claims that “Even in democratic states [the law]

may suggest repression of alternative life-styles, a point that is relevant here. Basically the system of law and its enforcement ought to guarantee the continuance of civilised values, which are contradicted by such things as human sacrifice. In that sense the final scene seems logical. Human sacrifice means the death of the law.”⁴² Although I agree that the sacrifice is equivalent to “the death of the law,” I consider this to be a positive and encouraging symbolic message rather than a negative one. The law is a racist and colonial construct built to protect the state, white supremacy, and the most wealthy and powerful. It is something that we should celebrate the death of, if we believe in abolitionist principles. This death entails a form of rebirth: it means creating a new world from the ashes, that values all life and is committed to reducing harm and violence against individuals and communities who are most vulnerable. In truth, this new world cannot be created without the death of the old world.

Harper is also correct in saying that the law represses alternative lifestyles but he makes a staggering mistake in characterizing law enforcement as upholding “civilized values” when it does just the opposite by criminalizing people of color and the poor and treating them as sub-human subjects of the state rather than living, breathing human beings. Harper also argues that neither protagonist, Sergeant Howie nor Lord Summerisle, are empathetic characters and that there is a lack of a hero in the film. I would agree that there is a lack of one discrete hero yet I do not feel that Lord Summerisle is un-heroic. He represents the antithesis of the police and that must be empathized with significantly more than Howie, as well as regarded in a more “heroic” light.

In *Beyond Hammer : British Horror Cinema since 1970*, James Rose echoes this

⁴⁰ Hardy, *The Wicker Man*.

⁴¹ Benjamin Franks, *The Quest for the Wicker Man : History, Folklore and Pagan Perspectives*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2006), 98.

⁴² Franks, *Quest for the Wicker Man*, 107.

perception of the Summerislanders being unsympathetic and a menacing, villainous presence which I contend is categorically untrue. First, he explains the police procedural format which is the primary horror convention featured in *The Wicker Man* as follows: “the policeman arrives at the scene of a suspected crime and begins his investigations, meeting resistance from the locals which suggests some sort of foul play or group responsibility for the crime.”⁴³ This construct allows for the development of opposition to police in general and is enacted because Howie does ultimately solve the crime, but the viewer’s expectations are subverted by the surprise ending. However, in both Rose and Harper’s theorizations of the film, they fail to acknowledge the racist, and white supremacist implications of police and the law which only serves to belie their corresponding lack of abolitionist consciousness.

In “Anthropological Investigations: An innocent exploration of *The Wicker Man* culture,” Donald V.L. Macleod discusses how film can be understood as an ethnographic film that reveals the horrors of Western society. He asserts that Sergeant Howie is “understood as the personification of the more limiting and negative aspects of western cultural values, these being narrowmindedness, intolerance, violence and bigotry.”⁴⁴ I agree with this statement but would go further in saying that Howie represents the deeply entrenched systems undergirding these aspects, by which I refer to racism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. The film is itself a renunciation of these global oppressions. Macleod also elaborates on the historic relevance of the film’s depiction of Pagan symbols and rituals and in discussing Howie’s ultimate immolation he states, “but surely there was good reason to sacrifice him in the minds of the islanders (let us not be ethnocentric). His death would ensure

the next harvest and moreover, Howie’s loss of life is only temporary, as he will be reincarnated.”⁴⁵ This is a useful point as it further contextualizes the sacrifice and shows another justification for the Summerislanders’ actions. Harper reiterates this idea, explaining that “Howie’s immolation occurs well within the bounds of the narrative’s internal logic.”⁴⁶

I assert the film is deliberately constructed as an anti-capitalist and anti-police story that serves as an allegory for colonial and imperialist violence against Indigenous peoples. Howie’s sacrifice not only ensures next year’s harvest, it serves as a form of cleansing the society of a distinguishable evil and emphasizes the catharsis generated through this removal. In other words, it is a physical and visual production of abolition. It is a dismantlement of the system in the most visceral sense. His sacrifice allows for the possibility of a new future and a more ideal and equitable society that values indigenous knowledge systems and sacred cultural practices. It imagines a police-free and non-carceral future.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: Letterboxd

Reviews

For both films, I have scoured Letterboxd reviews, a popular film database and review site for cinephiles and moviegoers, looking specifically for people’s reactions to the portrayals of police and policing in both films. The results are indicative of the power of spectatorship. The silences that exist surrounding how people interact with the police presence in these films is also extremely telling of the lack of abolitionist-driven spectatorship as well as an indicator of a primarily white audience. However, comments that directly address police portrayals, often in a disapproving way, also speak volumes about

⁴³ James Rose, *Beyond Hammer : British Horror Cinema since 1970*, (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2009), 26.

⁴⁴ Franks, *Quest for the Wicker Man*, 70.

⁴⁵ Franks, *Quest for the Wicker Man*, 78.

⁴⁶ Franks, *Quest for the Wicker Man*, 103.

values people carry with them to a movie and how the viewing experience can definitively change one's views.

SISTERS

The most popular top review of *Sisters* is as follows:

September 20, 2020 by BRAT 4 stars (487 likes)

“unexpected but welcome addition to ACAB canon — cogent narrative choice for the cops to refuse to help the plucky gal reporter because she wrote articles denouncing police brutality. horror films often fall into the trap of relying on police to save the main characters’ lives, so it’s refreshing to see that subverted in a realistic and meaningful way. also love how she explicitly called them out for not caring about the case because the violent perpetrator was a white woman and the victim was a Black man — demonstrates screenwriter Louisa Rose’s understanding of the insidious history of systemic racism, which i think is imperative for anyone writing any piece of media featuring cop characters. easily my fav non-Carrie De Palma! (watched after reading about it in chapter 2 of *House of Psychotic Women* by Kier-la Janisse, a book i highly recommend for fans of horror/exploitation films!)”⁴⁷

The fact that this reviewer’s first takeaway was that this movie unexpectedly ascribes to abolitionist ideology speaks to the ideological messaging of the film. I also appreciate the recognition of the ACAB canon which is the larger topic that this project is aiming to contribute to. The review deconstructs the police’s racial bias in very clear terms and emphasizes the more nuanced

subversions of conventional stereotypes. Additionally, this reviewer clearly has a consciousness about how police are portrayed in films and the concept of “copaganda,” exhibited by their comment that it is “imperative for anyone writing any piece of media featuring cop characters” to have an understanding of systemic racism. They also speak in glowing terms not only about the film’s writing and messaging but connect it to the subversion of generic horror conventions, which aligns with my thesis. This is precisely what is meant by abolitionist spectatorship. The fact that this is the most popular review of *Sisters* with 487 likes is a testament to the alignment of shared values through spectatorship and how interest in police portrayals in film have augmented in a post-Uprising society. The Letterboxd members who liked this review resonated with the reviewer’s assertions and belong to this particular community, whether it is “real” or imagined. This breeds a sense of solidarity felt between people who are against the police but also appreciate cinema which is a powerful feeling.

Interestingly, some of the comments on this particular review reject the reviewer’s support of ACAB sentiment, with one user remarking in a strangely passive aggressive tone, “ACAB isn’t something people should be supporting honestly, but a decent review I guess.” Another user said, “unironically using ACAB lmao” but was sharply rebutted by another commenter who responds, “white guy named jacob smith butthurt about acab. suddenly the world became paralyzed with shock.” Others also express agreement with the anti-police stance, commenting “ACAB Canon 😏 I’m stealing this.” The manner in which this dialogue is generated through an online forum demonstrates the ability for films to create discursive communities along lines of antiracist thought specifically. It also shows how there is

⁴⁷ BRAT (@bratpitt), “unexpected but welcome addition to ACAB canon,” Letterboxd review, September 20, 2020, “<https://letterboxd.com/bratpitt/film/sisters/>.”

still a huge obstacle to overcome in universally turning the tide of public opinion in support of abolition.

October 29, 2021 by Matt 4 stars

“ ... in these two early films of his i've really loved the not-so-subtle political messaging, something i wasn't really expecting, but this is so blatantly and irrefutably an anti-cop movie (obviously). and it rules...”⁴⁸

This recent review underscores the straightforwardness and potency of the anti-cop message as a primary takeaway from the film. Similar to the previous reviewer, they show how it was unexpected for a contemporary viewer going into this movie and then express full approval and a sense of satisfaction. Another review is as follows:

December 28, 2020 by Angelica Jade Bastien 4 stars

“this film is going to haunt me for a minute. found this one mad disturbing especially the ending which offers no true resolution for the death of the black man, which sets off the major arc of the story and sees its lead irrevocably (?) altered by the incidents and people she's faced.

love the split screens and shadow play. i also love how brian de palma's camera moves through danielle's apartment. but of course what drew me to the film is the way that ideas of the feminine grotesque and (racial) libidinal capital play out. even though i had an idea of where the film was going, but i found myself surprised in terms of narrative and visual grammar (like the black and white sequences).

i enjoyed jennifer salt as journalist grace collier who is aching to write meaty worthwhile work on “the apathy of the

police”. her issues with the racism of the police causes her to butt heads with the detective who gets assigned to the case: she saw a black man killed by danielle (margot kidder) through her window and what's to see justice occur.”⁴⁹

It is notable that this reviewer puts the phrase “apathy of the police” in quotes as it belies a sardonic tone toward this phrase, which lacks specificity about policing existing as an inherently racist phenomenon, rather than simply “apathy.” They also highlight how *Sisters* forgets about Phillip's significance and identity as a Black man midway through the film, which is another aspect that shows how even films that profess anti-police sentiment often do not go far enough and consequently end up reinforcing police. However, this reviewer also acknowledges how this act of racist violence irreversibly transformed Grace's life and mental wellbeing, reducing her to an infantile state by the film's conclusion. Another review that highlights the ACAB themes once again considers De Palma's seemingly prescient take on both cops and feminism:

October 30, 2021 by thegade91 4 stars

“Really decades ahead of its time in portraying cops as useless, lazy, racist slugs who have no interest in doing their jobs, as well as a Proto-feminist take on gaslighting and other ways men go out of their way to disbelieve and belittle women.

Directing masterclass utilizing different perspectives, split screen, film within film, culminating in a psychosexual body horror mindfreak.

Most valuable utility player Charles Durning as the PI who waaaaay

⁴⁸ Matt, “i'm really excited to be going through de palma's films,” Letterboxd review, October 29, 2021, <https://letterboxd.com/maccrash/>.

⁴⁹ Angelica Jade Bastien (@angelicajade), “this film is going to haunt me for a minute,” Letterboxd review, December 28, 2020, <https://letterboxd.com/angelicajade/>.

overcomplicates his search. Very funny final shot.”⁵⁰

This reviewer unapologetically denounces police and the more clandestine ways in which men are misogynistic toward women, in particular mentioning gaslighting which DePalma emphasizes thematically throughout the film and its tandem depictions of both men and police. They also connect De Palma’s filmmaking techniques to the development of the film’s content. Considered together, all four of these reviews illustrate the types of anti-police discourse that can be sparked from just one film, suggesting the potential ability of film to be used as a medium for uniting activist communities.

THE WICKER MAN

User reviews for *The Wicker Man* demonstrate similar discursive patterns and potential for abolitionist solidarity. The top review that mentions police (which is the 7th most popular review) is as follows:

September 30, 2020 by laird 5 stars (350 likes)

“ACABBQ”⁵¹

Although short and to the point, these six letters represent a portmanteau of two abbreviations “ACAB” and “BBQ,” which is a humorous but potent summary of the film’s final police killing. The 9th most popular review echoes *Sisters* reviewer Angelica Jade Bastien’s contention that this film made a lasting impression:

October 19, 2020 by Jamelle Bouie 5 stars (306 likes)

“Hey look, it’s one of those movies I’ll be thinking about for the rest of my life!

There’s obviously a ton to praise about the script, the direction and the gorgeous daylight cinematography, to say nothing of Edward Woodward’s remarkable performance as Sergeant Howie. But what strikes me is the richness of this text.

On the level of theme, you can “read” *THE WICKER MAN* as a film about the conflict between paganism and Christian religion, of the Christian struggle to retain faith in a secular society. You can read it as a film about danger of groupthink, or a dramatization of the violence that underpins even the most idyllic societies. You can read it as a cautionary tale about the fascistic impulses within romanticism, and you can read it as a film about the conflict between capitalist modernity — embodied in the Police Officer, who represents the state’s capacity for violence and its demand for conformity and order — and pre-capitalist modes of living. You can also read it, on a somewhat similar level, as representing the conflict between a Weberian legal authority versus a traditional-charismatic authority, the latter represented by Christopher Lee’s Lord Summerisle. It even works, in its final scenes, as a commentary on the present moment in American politics.

However you approach it, the film provides a tremendous amount of fodder for any number of readings or understandings, making it endlessly

⁵⁰ thegade91 (@thegade91), “Really decades ahead of its time,” Letterboxd review, October 31, 2021, <https://letterboxd.com/thegade91/film/sisters/>.

⁵¹ laird (@pobrecito), “ACABBQ,” Letterboxd review, September 30, 2020, <https://letterboxd.com/pobrecito/film/the-wicker-man/1/>.

watchable in a way I'm not sure I've encountered before."⁵²

This reviewer stresses the "richness" of the film which is also why I felt so struck by *The Wicker Man* and compelled to center it in this project. They outline a multitude of different themes explored in the film but the most germane of those listed is "the conflict between capitalist modernity — embodied in the Police Officer, who represents the state's capacity for violence and its demand for conformity and order — and pre-capitalist modes of living" and how the ending specifically comments on the current state of American politics, which refers to the Uprising and its enduring reverberations nationally and globally. Sergeant Howie certainly embodies state violence, conformity, order, and capitalist values which clash with the lifestyles and beliefs of the Summerislanders, but he also forcefully personifies patriarchy and misogyny through the corporeal body of the police officer. However, the film's distinct anti-capitalist bent is another line of thought that can bind spectators in the form of imagined communities and serve as the basis for anti-capitalist community organizing.

October 15, 2020 by Kyle Dunne 3.5 stars

"i mean he was a cop so i don't feel bad"⁵³

This reviewer echoes the same anti-police sentiment but expands on the aforementioned perception of *The Wicker Man* as being perceived as unsympathetic to the Summerislanders rather than Howie. The idea of "feeling bad" implies that possible accepted responses to the film are characterized by sympathizing with Howie. They acknowledge that the true villain and horror element is not the

human sacrifice and Pagan religious practices, but the evils incarnated in Howie. Another review accentuates how Sergeant Howie embodies these depravities and perceives Summerisle as a debased and immoral land:

October 17, 2020 by Willow Maclay

"...The cop is literally like, 'we have laws! what is this pagan barbarity!', and Christopher Lee tells the dude that he likes to season his food, and the cop cannot fucking deal with such depravity."⁵⁴

This reviewer converts the themes of the film into readily accessible and humorous language that emphasizes the conflict between Paganism and Christianity that is also central to the plot.

CONCLUSIONS: Abolitionist Spectatorship and the Future of Abolitionist Films

Lisa Nakamura cites Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Communities* theorization of media as bringing a nation "into being by creating a readership that came to view or imagined itself as sharing a common identity. Media, in this account, do more than convey information or even ideology. They create communities."⁵⁵ Rather than through readership, film and the discourse surrounding it, creates these literal and imagined communities for its viewers through spectatorship, both onscreen and off. The ideological alignment in tandem with a film's aesthetics and other components creates the

⁵² Jamelle Bouie (@jbouie), "Hey look," Letterboxd review, October 19, 2020, <https://letterboxd.com/jbouie/film/the-wicker-man/>.

⁵³ Kyle Dunne (@kyledunne), "i mean he was a cop," Letterboxd review, October 15, 2020. <https://letterboxd.com/kyledunne/film/the-wicker-man/>.

⁵⁴ Willow Maclay (@catelyn), "Wicker Man kicks a ton of ass," Letterboxd review, October 17, 2020, <https://letterboxd.com/catelyn/film/the-wicker-man/>.

⁵⁵ Lisa Nakamura, "Media," 166.

foundation for spectatorship communities to be built upon. But when these filmic messages are resistant to mainstream doctrines and align with abolitionist values, what is the result?

Abolitionist spectators are borne out of this question and its ensuing process. To be an abolitionist spectator, you must intentionally disrupt the visual work of policing. You must approach the world of cinema and individual viewing experiences with not only the knowledge of how extensively white supremacist structures dominate American and global systems but also with the desire to eradicate them, and likely personal experience in those attempts. These shared experiences create bonds through viewership - choosing which films to see, one's first reactions to a viewing, and later reflections on the text and oneself - and in turn, can catalyze community organizing. Individuals may identify others based on shared reactions and this potent sense of solidarity is essential for unifying resistance movements.

Both *Sisters* and *The Wicker Man* have the potential to spur these communities of abolitionist spectatorship and have already done so, in significant albeit limited ways. Both films strongly critique police, but also play a role in reinforcing the institution even if it is an unintentional effect. They both show how white supremacy, bound up in patriarchal evils, are contained within police bodies who are also straight, white men conforming to normative and repressive conventions. Both films also construct women as representing a defiance of and revulsion to these conventions, as active threats to the power embodied in the police in explicit ways. In *The Wicker Man*, Lord Summerisle dresses as a woman during the final Mayday ceremony which literally, symbolically, and visually demonstrates this rejection of gendered norms and roles that is one aspect of the Summerislanders' Pagan religion. In comparison, in *Sisters*, both Grace and Dominique represent "deviant women" who are dangerous to men, refuse to conform to

patriarchal norms or submit to police, and in doing so personify concepts of sacrifice. Sacrifice is utilized more explicitly in *The Wicker Man* as it is used to purge Western evils rather than illustrate the impacts of misogyny. In other words, sacrifice destroys in *Sisters*, but creates in *The Wicker Man*.

So what comes next? We have to push this process further and use these discourses as grounding for creating truly abolitionist films and media, which would mean aligning aesthetics, form, and content. With the increased normalization of the phrase "ACAB," I hope for the actuation of a world that embodies this attitude and uses film to do so. Perhaps, the discursive proliferation of anti-police sentiment signifies the proliferation of abolitionist spectatorship and with it, the fulfillment of dreams that envision an end to police and an end to policing.

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