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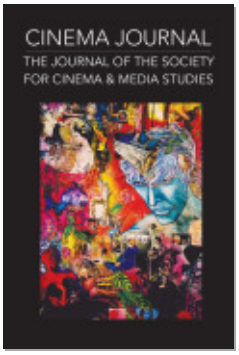

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Abstract: Through its ironic critique of monogamy as a monstrous force, the horror film *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) advances, by way of negative example, a queer ethics of open, responsible sexuality—albeit an ethics constrained by the film's setting in a present-day, neoliberal Detroit increasingly stripped of public services. By examining the film's ambivalent nostalgia for both a generic and an urban past, this article argues that the queer aesthetic of *It Follows* achieves its emotional tenor through imaging Detroit's decrepit (sub)urban spaces as haunted by polyvalent sexualities and socioeconomic inequalities.

> When there is torture, there is pain and wounds, physical agony, and all this distracts the mind from mental suffering, so that one is tormented only by the wounds until the moment of death. But the most terrible agony of all may not be in the wounds themselves but in knowing for certain that within an hour, then within ten minutes, then within a half a minute, now at this very instant—your soul will leave your body and you will no longer be a person, and that this is certain; the worst thing is that it is *certain*.
>
> —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (1869)[1]

The epigraph by Dostoyevsky is the final dialogue uttered in *It Follows* (2014), read aloud by one of the main characters as she recuperates in a hospital bed following a violent ordeal at the end of writer-director David Robert Mitchell's critically acclaimed independent horror film. To be marked for imminent doom is, of course, a common enough occurrence in the horror genre, but Mitchell's film centers on more than the existential dread of one's own inescapable mortality.

1 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Henry and Olga Carlisle (1869; New York: Signet Classic, 2010), e-book.

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It Follows tells the story of Jay Height (Maika Monroe), a nineteen-year-old Detroit suburbanite who acquires a sexually transmitted curse from her boyfriend, Hugh (Jake Weary). After they first have sex, Hugh sedates her with chloroform and ties her up, forcing her to heed his bizarre instructions about the curse: she must "sleep with someone as soon as [she] can" in order to pass it along to another person (and on and on, like a chain letter), lest she be tracked down and killed by a ghostly entity—the titular "It"—that takes various human forms, slowly but perpetually walking toward her location. If It kills her, It will resume following Hugh or whoever else preceded each of them in the sexual chain. It follows only one person at a time, so maintaining a continual line of transmission is necessary for survival. Aided by her younger sister Kelly (Lili Sepe) and friends Yara (Olivia Luccardi) and Paul (Keir Gilchrist), Jay attempts to locate the vanished Hugh while emotionally wrestling with whether and to whom to give the curse for her own protection. After eventually passing the curse to her unbelieving neighbor Greg (Daniel Zovatto) proves to be Greg's undoing once It catches up with him, Paul then volunteers his own body to Jay, perhaps more eager to have sex with his unrequited crush than to help the childhood friend with whom he experienced his first kiss. After a climactic confrontation in which It takes the form of the sisters' absent father, the film ends with Jay and Paul beginning a romantic relationship, unaware that It still follows them.

The monster in *It Follows* may be a supernatural being, but the film's true source of horror is living under a regime of sexual shame wherein our heteronormative culture compels sexual subjects toward monogamy—even at the risk of their overall well-being. Although nearly all critics observed that the film's conceit was a clever reworking of the "have-sex-and-die" cliché commonly associated with the fate of disposable teenage characters in 1970s and 1980s horror films, few critics grasped the film's most subversive implications: the curse would become moot in a society embracing the value of a multiplicity of sexual partners in conjunction with an ethos of open communication and mutual support. In other words, the characters' failings illustrate how the film's logic finds monogamy (serial or otherwise) as promising perpetual danger, whereas one's survival would be far better ensured through what Michael Warner has called an "ethics of queer life."[2]

Moreover, earlier in the film, the Dostoyevsky-reading Yara offers an even more suggestive quote from *The Idiot*: "I think that if one is faced with inevitable destruction—if a house is falling upon you, for instance—one must feel a great longing to sit down, close one's eyes, and wait—come what may." With its allusions to inexorable architectural devastation, this quote resonates with the film's setting in contemporary Detroit and its surrounding environs, evoking an aesthetic of ruination that links the once-prosperous city's spectacular decay to the decrepitude of dangerously outdated sexual norms. Through the film's retro nods to the horror genre of the 1970s and 1980s and its proximity to the photographic aesthetic of "ruin porn," *It Follows* evinces an uncertain nostalgia for Detroit's prebankruptcy past, a period before the rampant privatization of the very sort of social services that would help promote a life-sustaining queer ethics of sexual health. Although the film's overall aesthetic—especially elements

2 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

of mise-en-scène drawn from different decades in a "promiscuous" manner, echoing the strategy for survival to which its protagonist only partly accedes—may appear to suggest a temporally ambiguous milieu, the film's contemporary political relevance came into sharper focus against the backdrop of its nationwide release in 2015: a year that saw monogamy (and its tool of enforcement, sexual shame) reified across sexual lines in the United States.

Contagion, Queer Intimacies, and the Normative Couple. At first glance, *It Follows* would seem an unlikely candidate for a queer reading, since it features neither protagonists nor monsters that might be coded as "queer" in an identity-based sense. Following Harry Benshoff's influential 1997 study *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, most academic discussions of queer horror cinema have tended to explore how the genre's depictions of monstrosity can be read as symbolizing the supposed "threat" of homosexuality, offering both pleasures and misgivings among gay and lesbian viewers.[3] Nor does *It Follows* register any of the overtly homoerotic appeal exhibited in, say, David DeCoteau's beefcake horror films that represent "part of the ongoing hegemonic negotiation of exactly what the phrase 'queer horror film' might actually signify."[4] For understandable reasons of political reclamation, established minoritarian identities like "gay" and "lesbian" remain the dominant points of reference in much of this critical literature. Although the previously cited authors do highlight how queerness can operate in these films in multivalent ways for different audiences, "queer" ultimately tends to operate in these accounts as more of an umbrella term for a variety of same-sex-desiring identities rather than to suggest a fluidity of (nonnormative) desires that would evade or blur the very boundaries of minoritarian identities—or, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it in her famous definition: "[T]he open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."[5]

It is in this latter sense—a polymorphous sense of queerness that may overlap with, but cannot simply be limited to, identities and desires like "gay" or "homosexual"—and consistent with the antiessentialism of much contemporary queer theory, that I claim *It Follows* to be one of the most significant queer films of *any genre* to gain a wide release in recent years. Among the vast field of independently produced features, horror has long been a genre especially amenable to fostering potential crossover hits, as proved by *It Follows*'s breakout success, first on the festival circuit and then in limited release, where its exceptional per-screen receipts inspired its distributor, Radius-TWC, to forgo a third-week video-on-demand launch in favor of a wide release to more than

3 Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997).

4 Harry M. Benshoff, "'Way Too Gay to Be Ignored': The Production and Reception of Queer Horror Cinema in the Twenty-First Century," in *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology*, ed. Caroline Joan S. Picart and John Edgar Browning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 134. Also see Glyn Davis, "A Taste for *Leeches!* DVDs, Audience Configurations, and Generic Hybridity," in *Film and Television after DVD*, ed. James Bennett and Tom Brown (New York: Routledge, 2008), 45–62.

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8, original italics.

1,200 theaters.[6] Indeed, it is precisely because the film was not explicitly promoted or reviewed as a "queer" text—and thus was not relegated to the backwaters of art-house or straight-to-video distribution that so many LGBTQ films are forced to call home—that it has all the more ability to expand our notion of how queerness might operate within a popular genre like horror.

For some viewers, a horror film that depicts sexual partners callously spreading a deadly curse via intercourse might seem deeply sex-phobic—indeed, most of the film's reviewers understood the film's central conceit as tapping into "the fears of anyone who came of age during the AIDS plague years."[7] The threat of AIDS has, of course, long been allegorically linked to popular horror imagery, from crisis-era films like *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), and *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986) to perceptions of the AIDS-era gay man as gothic vampire.[8] Allusions to that most infamously incurable and stigmatizing of sexually transmitted diseases abound in the critical reception of *It Follows*, but the film's queer lesson is less about the avoidance of sex than the management of risk. After all, according to the film's logic, those infected by the curse can survive only by successfully finding new sexual partners, versus remaining abstinent and living out the fatal consequences of their prior sexual history.[9] The film scarcely acknowledges that Jay has any other option but to find new partners, but her hesitance to move beyond a series of monogamous bonds ultimately proves her downfall as well. *It Follows* thus implies that having a sexual life is inevitable and always involves a certain negotiation of risk (emotional or otherwise)—but the film also suggests that the danger truly lies in the social attitudes that make one increasingly objectified and stigmatized as a consequence of one's sexual history.

The scene following Jay's infection in the back of Hugh's car—a moment prominently reproduced in the film's publicity materials and home-video covers—most blatantly emphasizes the unethical dimensions of this dynamic. After Jay wakes from the chloroform to find herself bound in a wheelchair perched on the upper levels of an abandoned factory, Hugh informs her that the supernatural entity will now follow her until she has sex with someone else; to forcibly prove his point, he waits until It—first seen here in the guise of an unidentified nude woman—follows them up into the factory (Figure 1). Mitchell's directorial decision to frame much of this scene through a camera mounted directly on the wheelchair, pointing back at Jay, emphasizes not only her vulnerability (e.g., the frame shaking as Hugh wheels her along the uneven floor) but also the narrative's suddenly sharpened focus on her sexual history. As viewers,

6 Anthony D'Alessandro, "How Radius-TWC Turned Indie Horror Pic *It Follows* into a Cult Sensation," *Deadline.com*, April 3, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/04/it-follows-maika-monroe-horror-box-office-radius-twc-dimension-distribution-plan-1201403588/; and Tim League, "What the Success of *It Follows* Means for Indie Film Distribution," *IndieWire*, April 2, 2015, http://www.indiewire.com/article/what-the-success-of-it-follows-means-for-indie-film-distribution-20150402. The $2 million film eventually accrued more than $14 million at the box office.

7 Chris Kaye, "The Unrelenting Pursuer in Horror Film *It Follows*," *Newsweek*, January 24, 2015, http://www.newsweek.com/2015/02/06/unrelenting-pursuer-horror-film-it-follows-301761.html.

8 For an examination of the latter, see Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324–340.

9 In this regard, *It Follows* markedly breaks from recent US cinema's reinforcement of the George W. Bush–era pro-abstinence movement, as described by Casey Ryan Kelly in *Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

Figure 1. In Detroit's abandoned Packard auto plant, Hugh (Jake Weary) forcibly explains the curse to wheelchair-bound Jay (Maika Monroe) while It approaches them in the form of a nude woman, in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014).

we cannot help but watch her alternately confused and terrified reactions as Hugh explains what little he knows about It—an explanation that he claims is for her own protection but that also amounts to a tremendous betrayal of her trust.

We later learn that Jay was not a virgin when the film began—she says she already slept with Greg back in high school and it "wasn't a big deal"—so acquisition of the curse should not be seen as her character's "punishment" for premarital or non-procreative sex. Indeed, just before Jay arrives home with her newly acquired curse, we see Kelly, Yara, and Paul playing Old Maid on the front porch, the camera slowly zooming in on the Old Maid card; the game's goal of avoiding the mismatched card (personified by a decrepit, asexual spinster) ironically foreshadows the "game" that Jay will soon be forced to play in finding new sexual "matches" to inherit the curse.

Importantly, however, neither Hugh nor the film in general ever specify *which* sexual acts will successfully pass along the curse—thus opening plenty of space for queer speculation. Is heterosexual intromission the only option? Will same-sex partners do the trick? Do oral or anal sex count?[10] What about nongenital forms of sexuality? Just how conventional and vanilla are the expectations of this paranormal entity, anyway? Although these speculations might strike some readers as silly or overly literal (it is never implied that Jay is anything but heterosexual), nevertheless, the film's fantastic conceit involving a causal relationship between sexual choices and supernatural consequences still raises provocative questions about what counts as sex and how, within the film's logic, sexual norms might be denaturalized by supernatural exigencies. Take, for instance, the fact that It can change genders at will—as we see later when the entity, hunting down Greg in the (queerly charged) form of an anonymous young man in long underwear, first breaks into Greg's house and then takes the form of his mother

10 If, according to the film's logic, vaginal intromission is the only viable means of transmitting the curse, we might see this as an ironic inversion of the statistical prevalence of HIV transmission via anal sex (especially, but not exclusively, between homosexual partners). Needless to say, there is never any mention of condom use as a potential barrier against transmission.

to trick him into opening his bedroom door.[11] When Jay finds the mother-disguised It writhing atop Greg in a fatal sexual embrace, the film may blatantly play on the horror of incest taboos, but it also illustrates a supernatural fluidity of identity that shows no apparent concern for upholding those cultural prohibitions.

Although we might think of the HIV seroconversion confession as a sort of analogue to the scene of Jay's captivity by Hugh (think of the urban legend about someone awakening from a one-night stand to find the scrawled message "Welcome to the world of AIDS"), this disturbing depiction of knowledge acquisition as a traumatic and sexualized event also finds analogues in common cinematic depictions of rape. When, for example, Hugh drops the barely conscious Jay in front of her house and speeds away, leaving her to collapse on her front lawn, it is difficult not to narratively read the preceding scene as a sort of "symbolic rape," even if the sexual intercourse occurring before her captivity was consensual, as she subsequently affirms to the police. When Greg soon after expresses doubt about Jay's version of the events ("What did he really do to you?"), his callous question about sexual consent merely emphasizes that, for the viewer, the scene of Jay's captivity is likely to register in the overall narrative trajectory much like rape scenes commonly operate in other films. As potentially stigmatizing events (especially when commonly, if erroneously, associated with entering into "unsafe" situations), both rape and seroconversion seemingly compel protagonists to relate their past sexual histories to other characters, even at the risk of extending their stigma.[12]

A useful point of comparison is Eric England's relentlessly grim body-horror film *Contracted* (2013), in which Samantha (Najarra Townsend), a young lesbian woman, is drugged and date-raped by a man at a party, leaving her infected with a mysterious disease that gradually transforms her into a zombie over the course of several days. In that film, the backseat of a car is again the scene of infection, and the protagonist's past sexual history with both men and women becomes a central plot point—although Samantha's eventual transformation into a rotting, deranged monster who brutally kills two other lesbian acquaintances in a fit of sexual frustration marks a particularly homophobic turn. Moreover, *Contracted*'s marketing tag line, "Not Your Average One Night Stand," equates her (unambiguous) date rape with casual and consensual sex—a confusion made all the more possible by Samantha's repeated refusal throughout the film to identify her violation as rape (out of fears that her current girlfriend will leave her if she confesses she was with a man—apparently regardless of the issue of consent). Whereas *It Follows* and *Contracted* depict the act of sexual transmission in markedly different ways (consensual and nonconsensual, respectively), both films

11 The apparition's later sighting as an unidentified nude man standing atop the roof of Jay's house also plays into a queer reading of the monster's fluid appearance, as does Jay's gender-neutral name (short for "Jamie"). See Carol Clover's discussion of the androgynous names among the horror genre's "Final Girls" in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 40.

12 Yet this parallel also has notable shortcomings: HIV is, after all, a known quantity, and thus perhaps more likely to stigmatize the recipient than Jay's mysterious curse would be, despite seroconversion not being the death sentence it once was (at least in developed nations with readier access to antiviral therapies). Likewise, It is a singular entity affecting only one person at a time, unlike AIDS, which is a disease affecting many people simultaneously.

similarly depict the narrative's inciting scene of transmission as a grave violation while also raising lingering questions about the place of queerness in these narratives.

At the same time, it is difficult to imagine films like *It Follows* or *Contracted* achieving a similarly horrific tenor with men as their central protagonists, given our cultural double standards against active female sexuality. But whereas *Contracted* eventually turns its teenage protagonist into an irredeemable monster destructively spreading contagion at will, *It Follows* far more sympathetically depicts the societal pressures placed upon sexually active women as threatening in their own right.[13] In this sense, the film belongs to a recent strand of horror cinema that, as Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley argue, "foreground[s] troubled (and frequently female) teen protagonists and, implicitly, the films' empathetic focus on their physical, emotional, and psychological suffering." Not merely an updating of the 1970s and 1980s female victim-hero personified by the slasher cycle's oft-cited "final girl," these more recent films deploy melodramatic tropes to heighten the (implicitly teenage) viewer's investment in horror protagonists struggling with interpersonal relationships among the teenage set. Date rape, domestic abuse, and other "potential horrors of heteronormativity" (though not exclusive to heterosexual life) resonate in these films, which also include renderings of female sexuality as a "curse" that young women must negotiate within a patriarchal culture—as in *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000), *Cursed* (Wes Craven, 2005), and *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007).[14]

In *It Follows*, for instance, we first meet Jay while she relaxes in her suburban backyard pool (a setting foreshadowing the location of the film's climax), casually drowning an ant crawling on her arm and calling out several preteen neighborhood boys for spying on her from behind the bushes (Figure 2). This temporary idyll figures Jay as the sexualized object of an attention that first seems innocent but later becomes figured as a pervasively threatening force. Although she easily spots these boys lurking nearby, Jay is soon visually scanning her surroundings for It, whose obsessive pursuit follows from her sexual choices. Here and elsewhere in the film, the camera slowly zooms in toward Jay as she is watched, not only implicating the viewer in the monster's slow-but-continuous approach toward its prospective victims but also reflecting Jay's accompanying need to look closely at her surroundings for the approaching threat. Mitchell's prevalent use of wide-angle lenses creates many deeply focused compositions, helping prevent the zooms from unduly flattening out the image. Several of his most striking shots also feature slow, 360-degree pans, emphasizing the characters' paranoid scanning of their surroundings for safety.

In a later scene, Jay is startled as one of the same neighborhood boys, spying from outside on her roof, bounces a rubber ball off the bathroom window where she stands scantily clad, fearfully staring at her nether regions—the apparent site of the curse's sexual transmission. Although the actual cause of the shockingly loud noise, which Jay (and we) might immediately ascribe to a surprise attack by the monster, turns

13 On common tropes of female monsters as contagious entities, see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

14 Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, "Teenage Traumata: Youth, Affective Politics, and the Contemporary American Horror Film," in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 87, 88.

Figure 2. Jay spots two neighborhood boys spying on her in a backyard swimming pool, prefiguring her later sexual stigmatization and corresponding need to scan her surroundings for the approaching monster, in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014).

out to be a comparatively banal instance of pre-adolescent voyeurism, the film repeatedly implies that what once may have seemed innocently sexual can quickly take on sinister overtones when one lives under the stigma of contagion and sexual shame. Indeed, the use of static, long point-of-view shots during those few moments when the cursed stop long enough to scan their surroundings serve as a sort of refracted optics for their own shame: much as their sexual histories mark them as subject to social and self-surveillance, they must now survive by surveilling their once-safe environment for risks in turn.

Likewise, in another scene, not coincidentally occurring just before the monster's intrusion, Paul and Jay reminisce about finding and laughing over some discarded porn magazines back when they were children—another instance of juvenile curiosity about sex initially serving as less of a disturbing primal scene than an innocent pursuit. But this memory is later echoed in the present when Paul and Jay find, in an abandoned Detroit house where Hugh has been squatting, a stash of old porn magazines bookmarked by a photo featuring Hugh and an unnamed teenage girl posing in their high school hallway. Here, the "shameful" domain of pornography literally envelops this once-wholesome image of Hugh and a past girlfriend, visually suggesting the tainted nature of his own sexual choices. Moreover, the discovered photo proves the vital clue that Jay and company will use to finally locate "Hugh" under his real name, Jeff, who is living with his mother in a well-to-do suburban home, where he explains how he contracted the curse during a one-night stand with an unknown woman from a bar. Like Jay, it seems that Hugh/Jeff was just as instrumentally used and discarded by the curse's previous owner out of calculated self-interest. He may have tried to warn Jay (again, out of self-interest, hoping that It would not kill her and revert to following him), but as long as the chain of deception continues on a one-to-one basis, the curse's transmission cannot help but seem deeply abusive instead of ethically sound.

Jay herself guiltily understands this when she seeks out new sexual partners once Greg's death causes the curse to revert to her. Instead of endangering another friend, she takes her mother's car to a nearby lake and gives herself to three random young men on an offshore boat. Although the film elides what actually transpires on the boat (and, again, it is unclear what kinds of sexual behavior will successfully transmit the curse), Jay is clearly upset by the experience—whether by the shame of her sexual submission or the knowledge of having just doomed them. We never learn whether she attempted to inform these men about the curse—and it does not seem likely that she attempted to submit them to the traumatizing experience of forced instruction

that she herself underwent at Hugh/Jeff's hands.[15] If the nonconsensual nature of her former boyfriend's actions cannot be reconciled with sexually ethical practices, then neither can Jay's attempt to move beyond the fatal chain of serial monogamy through this potential gangbang scenario if she is unable or unwilling to impart the seriousness of her sexual transmission to them. In any case, this unsettling effort merely proves a means of buying time, and It is soon back on Jay's trail. If there is a sure death sentence in *It Follows*, it resides at the intersection of monogamy and ignorance.

If abstinence is an unrealistic answer (as the film suggests), then the crucial problem here would require a twofold solution: more openness in sexual relations, in order to disperse the curse as efficiently as possible, and the need for properly educating and caring for those afflicted. This is not, then, so much a model of purely *casual* sexual relations as one of *mutual investment* in sexual well-being. According to the film's logic, those previously infected with the curse can still see It following the new recipients, so it logically follows that the more people previously infected, the more who will be able to monitor the approaching threat (Figure 3). Although the curse might technically continue to follow a linear chain of transmission, open and rapidly shifting sexual interconnections would produce a more rhizomatic dispersal of risk—more akin to herd immunity to a communicable disease than solipsistic punishment for one's own sexual choices. Unlike the punishment of sexually active characters in so many horror films, the secret to ensuring one's safety in the world of *It Follows* would not reside in no sex but in more sex.

Figure 3. Hugh/Jeff (center) fearfully keeps watch for approaching threats while explaining to Jay and her friends how he acquired the curse, in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014). If all these people were previously infected via multiplicitous sexual relations, they could all see It and thus participate in the monitoring of shared risk for mutual benefit.

And here I can finally return to the matter of queer ethics and the horrors that monogamy can produce. In his 1999 book *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner argues that a queer ethics insists on forms of intimacy and care that are not limited to normative constructs like the nuclear family or the monogamous couple, instead embracing a far more multiplicitous range of erotic connections among partners, friends, and even strangers—all united in a community in which "one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex."[16] And yet even though these fluid sexual relations were promoted as a consequence of queer people's historical exclusion from

15 Hugh/Jeff informs Jay that it "should be easy" for a beautiful young woman like her to pass along the curse, but one wonders whether the film's central conceit registers as that much more terrifying for those of us, shall we say, less photogenic viewers?

16 Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 35.

heteronormative institutions such as marriage, Warner finds contemporary gay and lesbian identity politics championing same-sex marriage as an assimilationist strategy that embraces dominant standards of monogamy. As he explains, one of queer culture's "greatest contributions to modern life is the discovery that you can have both: intimacy and casualness; long-term commitment and sex with strangers; romantic love and perverse pleasure. . . . Straight culture has already learned much from queers, and it shouldn't stop now. In particular, it needs to learn a new standard of dignity, and it won't do this as long as gay people think that their 'acceptance' needs to be won on the terms of straight culture's politics of shame."[17]

Although Warner incorrectly predicted that same-sex marriage would not likely come to pass in the United States, he nevertheless foresaw that, regardless of its eventual legality, the campaign for same-sex marriage would itself do "more harm" to the crucial insights of queer culture "than marriage could ever be worth."[18] Indeed, much as the origins and motivation of It in *It Follows* are never explained to viewers, monogamy circulates as Western society's unmarked norm, even to the point that "safe" forms of queerness can be appropriated beneath its auspices in support of mainstream gay and lesbian culture's "new homonormativity" (which Lisa Duggan describes as a conservative assimilationist politics built on neoliberal standards of individual responsibility, privatization, and domestic normalization).[19] Ironically enough, the year of *It Follows*'s wide release saw two high-profile testaments to monogamy's entrenched status: the US Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage in June 2015 and the August 2015 dump of hacked data from an estimated thirty-seven million user accounts on the pro-infidelity social-networking website Ashley Madison (slogan: "Life is short. Have an affair."). Whereas the former was widely celebrated by social liberals as a long-awaited milestone in sexual equality, widespread Schadenfreude at the latter event merely proved monogamy's centrality in promoting an endemic culture of sexual shame.[20]

Hence, it is not difficult to see how an anti-monogamous queer ethics would help dispel the monstrous threat in *It Follows*. In his much-cited 2004 book *No Future*, Lee Edelman argues that queerness should be defined not by an essentialist notion of same-sex-desiring identity but as an indeterminate, identity-defying quality marking a perpetual challenge to the dominant ideology of reproductive futurism. The titular threats in *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), for example, do not symbolize homosexuality per se, but because the culturally denigrated figure of the queer is supposedly antithetical to the socially valorized figure of the Child and the normative family, "homosexuality inflects how [the birds] figure the radical refusal of meaning"

17 Ibid., 73, 74.

18 Ibid., 91.

19 Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 175–194.

20 The film's resonance with neoliberalism extended outside the United States as well. As one early reader of this article told me, a graffitist wrote "The Conservative Party" after the tag line "It Doesn't Think. It Doesn't Feel. It Doesn't Give Up." on many *It Follows* posters in Brighton, England.

that their unexplained but horrific presence connotes.[21] If the Child is a symbolic figure representing the continuance of the (heterosexual) human species and mobilized to repress various forms of non-procreative desire (e.g., conservatives' clichéd lament "Think of the children!"), then "whatever voids the promissory note, the guarantee, of futurity, precluding the hope of redeeming it, or of its redeeming us, must be tarred, and in this case, feathered, by the brush that will always color it queer in a culture that places on queerness the negativizing burden of sexuality."[22] But rather than resisting the reactionary stereotype that queers supposedly promote a culture of death through hedonistic, non-procreative sex, Edelman suggests that the "ethical burden" of queerness must be to embrace this existential refusal of future-oriented meaning, maximizing the live-for-today jouissance of ego-destroying sexual pleasure over the empty promises of future progress.[23] Like Hitchcock's birds, then, *It Follows* presents a monstrous, free-floating threat whose lack of clear identity, eschewal of rational explanation, and perpetual death drive mark its own sense of queerness. But much like Edelman's reversal of homophobic edicts, the most ethical response would be for Jay to effectively beat the It monster at its own game, using her sexuality in far more multiplicitous ways than are permissible by the linearity of socio-sexual relations required of both monogamy and reproductive futurism. Her repeated attempts to save herself by passing on the curse may ironically recall reproductive futurism's use of procreation as a fantasized defense against mortality, but so do the eventual deaths of her former partners testify to its inefficacy as a viable solution. Following Warner, if straight culture continues to have much to learn from queer culture, then these lessons would include eschewing the monogamous couple as a culturally ideal form, along with the various forms of sexual shame that police its boundaries—which, in the film, encourage the curse to be deceptively passed to unsuspecting victims while also inhibiting the afflicted from disseminating the curse in an informed way that would ultimately prove more efficacious to everyone involved.

Heteronormative understandings of sexual shame as an isolating, stigmatizing affect bear heavily on Jay and her friends, but queer theorists have also described shame as a contagious affect that queers the boundaries between self and other, because one can easily feel another person's shame and thereby become part of "collectivities of the shamed."[24] As David Caron explains, shame is normatively expected to motivate "internalized self-policing," since "it feels hyperindividuating. Yet this extreme singularity also enables the collective," creating ethical bonds when memories of one's own past or present shame are shared with others.[25] In Sally Munt's discussion of shame as a queer "structure of feeling" that is "intrinsically relational, correlative, and

21 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 149.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 47–48.

24 Douglas Crimp, "Mario Montez, for Shame," in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 72.

25 David Caron, "Shame on Me, or the Naked Truth about Me and Marlene Dietrich," in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 126, 127.

associative," forming a contagious web of attachments and disattachments between people, she suggests:

> Perhaps we can imagine an aesthetics or technology of the self that reinscripts [*sic*] the bio-power of bodies, that builds ethical futures out of shame, that perceives shame as a sort of muscle, an energy that can make things happen. Foucault claimed that there are no relations of power without a multiplication of resistances, and thus, to stay with the muscle analogy, sometimes a muscle must be "ripped" in order to extend; perhaps shame must be intensely endured in order that individuation, and hence new thoughts and feelings, can occur.[26]

Although the stigmatizing effect of Jay's sexual history gradually implicates her friends in potential danger from It once they begin interceding (sexually or otherwise) on her behalf, if the curse were more openly shared through "promiscuous" contact, including temporary intimacies with strangers, then it would cease to circulate as a marker of individual stigma and instead become subject to the more collective responsibilities necessitated by shared risk. These queerer forms of shame (though, as Eve Sedgwick suggests, not directly contingent on same-sex desire) might then take precedence, implicating each node of this rhizomatic sexual community, as "not distinct 'toxic' parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; [but] . . . instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed."[27]

Here, especially, the film's resonance with AIDS anxieties gains greater relevance. At the time *It Follows* appeared on screens, media attention began addressing the slow-growing popularity of preexposure prophylaxis (PrEP) drugs, such as Truvada, that prevent HIV viral transmission altogether, thus reopening possibilities for queer sexual life that once seemed foreclosed by the threat of AIDS and the push toward same-sex marriage.[28] In Tim Dean's brilliantly provocative 2009 book *Unlimited Intimacy*, he argues that condomless "bareback" sex has arisen as both a subcultural practice and a wellspring of erotic fantasy among male-desiring men seeking radically queer alternatives to homonormative drives toward assimilationism and conformity. Whereas a mainstream gay-identity politics promotes the right to marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, the bareback subculture uses real or imagined HIV transmission to "breed" emergent forms of kinship that, by eroticizing a once-fatal disease, fall afoul of gay culture's newfound political correctness. As Dean notes,

26 Sally R. Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 220–221.

27 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 59–60.

28 For instance, see Christopher Glazek, "Why Is No One on the First Treatment to Prevent HIV?," *New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/why-is-no-one-on-the-first-treatment-to-prevent-h-i-v; Tim Murphy, "Sex without Fear," *New York*, July 13, 2014, http://nymag.com/news/features/truvada-hiv-2014-7/; Evan J. Peterson, "The Case for PrEP, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love HIV-Positive Guys," *Stranger*, November 12, 2014, http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/the-case-for-prep-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-hiv-positive-guys/Content?oid=20991643; and Ariana Eunjung Cha, "In New Study, 100 Percent of Participants Taking HIV Prevention Pill Truvada Remained Infection-Free," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2015/09/04/in-new-study-hiv-prevention-pill-truvada-is-startlingly-100-percent-effective/.

one of the unforeseen ironies of the AIDS crisis was how the threat of transmission inadvertently paved the way for widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage, precisely by encouraging male-desiring men to stay "safe" by restricting sexual fluid exchange within the bounds of monogamy.[29]

Made feasible by the post-1990s spread of protease inhibitors (which minimize HIV replication in the infected body), the rise of barebacking represents a queer ethics based around not only the shared risk of infection but also the openness to alterity once more commonly associated with "risky" behaviors like cruising.[30] Even if Dean tends to paint San Francisco's distinct barebacking subculture as full of tattooed, muscular, ultramasculine "power bottoms" embracing an ethos of self-sacrifice, we might note that recent advances like PrEP drugs help mitigate the sheer extent of the risk assumed by barebackers.[31] Nevertheless, these preventative medications also help open an ethics of queer life to far more than a subset of urban queer men—thus proving another important instance where queer culture could educate straight culture. Still, when many PrEP users are currently stigmatized as "Truvada whores" (regardless of whether they actually engage in promiscuity), it serves as a reminder that, much as birth-control pills were once denigrated as an unlimited "license to fuck" for straight women, it will not be easy to overcome the various forms of sexual shame that promote monogamy as a socially acceptable norm.[32]

Overall, then, *It Follows* appeared at a historical moment when a hetero-cum-homonormative model of monogamy was upheld as law of the land in its extension to gay and lesbian couples while a countervailing trend saw the (partial) overcoming of longtime anxieties about the most infamously fatal of sex-borne diseases, opening fresh possibilities for sexual autonomy through multiplicitous intimacies. The film may not have been deliberately intended as a sociopolitical commentary on such shifts—indeed, David Robert Mitchell left the monster's motives and weaknesses nightmarishly unexplained and open to interpretation—but the place of queerness as a sort of structuring absence within the text, an unnamed but perpetually haunting presence, still speaks to the film's centrality within an emergent "structure of feeling" informed by queerness's lingering status as an indeterminate quality that, despite recent political shifts, cannot be fully incorporated into normative socialization.[33]

29 Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 84–92.

30 Ibid., 204–207, 210–211.

31 Ibid., 52–56. In a more recent essay revisiting *Unlimited Intimacy* in light of Truvada's popularization, Dean questions whether barebacking on PrEP still counts as barebacking if the fantasy of viral transmission is rendered moot. More important, though, he criticizes how this purported sexual "freedom . . . depends on biomedical technologies and their unprecedented potential for monitoring the interior of our bodies" while extracting high profits from gay men. See Dean, "Mediated Intimacies: Raw Sex, Truvada, and the Biopolitics of Chemoprophylaxis," *Sexualities* 18, nos. 1–2 (2015): 241.

32 See David Duran, "Truvada Whores?," *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-duran/truvada-whores_b_2113588.html; Jim Burress, "'Truvada Whore' Stigma Endures among Doctors and LGBTs," *Advocate*, August 11, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/health/2014/08/11/truvada-whore-stigma-endures-among-doctors-and-lgbts; and Aaron Braun, "'Truvada Whores' and the Class Divide," *Pacific Standard*, August 17, 2015, http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/truvada-whores-and-the-aids-class-divide.

33 On the political valences of structures of feeling, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

Moreover, despite the horrific deaths resulting from Jay's efforts to pass on the curse, the film itself closes on a darkly ironic note that undercuts the apparent restoration of monogamy—heterosexual or otherwise. Although Jay initially rebuffs Paul's offer to receive the curse, suspecting a mere excuse to consummate his longtime crush on her, her trust is established when Paul foments a plan to lure It to a deserted Detroit pool and electrocute It with disused household appliances. Despite the plan proving a disastrous failure when It (having taken the form of Jay and Kelly's absent father) refuses to enter the pool and Yara is wounded in the climactic tumult, the monster is temporarily dispelled with a well-placed bullet.[34] Thereafter falling back on another previously failed solution, Jay finally consents to have sex with Paul and transfer the curse to him—having apparently failed to learn that even serial monogamy will not dismantle the linear chain of transmission. In the postcoital moment, Paul asks if she feels any different, and she shakes her head no. "Do you?" she responds, as Paul sits in silent disappointment. While neither of them "feels any different" from transferring the curse to Paul, this pregnant line also suggests that the simmering sexual tension between them has had little emotional payoff through its anticlimactic consummation. We next see Paul driving past several prostitutes on a lonely street corner, mentally debating whether to pass along the curse to them—two women who, because of their stigmatized status as sex workers, are presumably disposable (much like the men on the boat were previously), or would at least succeed in passing the curse along to an unsuspecting john.

The film closes, however, with a shot of Jay and Paul walking silently hand in hand down their quiet suburban streets, unaware that It is still approaching in the distance behind them (Figure 4). This open ending implies that Paul, portrayed throughout as a somewhat nerdy and hopeless romantic, could not go through with infidelity to Jay—even for purely instrumental reasons that would potentially save them both from impending danger. Jay and Paul's future relationship is likely as flimsy as Paul's failed plan to trap It in the pool, so not only does the pathos of their earlier postcoital exchange cast doubt on this naively "romantic" (though deeply ironic) final image, but the "cruel optimism" of monogamy has also implicitly sentenced the seemingly happy couple to

Figure 4. The "happy" monogamous couple as image of ruination: Jay and Paul (Keir Gilchrist) walk down their suburban streets, unaware that It still follows them in the distance because Paul did not pass along the curse to the prostitutes, in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014).

34 Although Hugh/Jeff had earlier warned her that It might take the form of loved ones just to hurt her, it is never made clear why It specifically takes the form of Jay's father at this moment. One might speculate that Jay and Kelly's father is absent because he had an extramarital affair, potentially with someone else infected with the curse (it is never made clear whether he is living or deceased). Another common theory among film critics and fans has their father banished for past sexual abuse of his daughters—hence Jay's refusal to tell Kelly about what form she sees It take here—but the truth of his role is ultimately left ambiguous.

death.[35] It is, then, an image of monogamous, romantic love in ruination: a human-made edifice that still stands, but whose external visage betrays its fundamentally crumbling character, evincing a sort of melancholy beauty in its decay.

Moreover, the sense of pathos we might experience at the film's ending is a cumulative effect of the film's larger use of setting: an evocative synthesis of its actual filming location (present-day Detroit and its suburbs) and its use of retro signifiers to evoke both an urban and film-historical past that have each been subject to ambivalent forms of nostalgia. If these uses of setting merely served as proverbial window-dressing, they would not merit extended discussion, but they instead prove instrumental in lending the film an emotional and political weight that it might not otherwise possess, thereby enhancing its potential as a text that can be read as critiquing neoliberal economics and the traditional sexual mores subtending neoliberal privatization.

Ruin Porn and the Haunted Spaces of Detroit. Aside from the film's obvious twist on the common convention that horny teenagers are the first to die in a 1970s or 1980s horror film, *It Follows* is rife with allusions to that period of genre history—albeit less in the hipster-geeky style of intertextual winks (à la the Quentin Tarantino formula of retro pastiche) than on a more subtle level of nostalgic ambience. In the film's first moments, for instance, a shapely teenage girl wearing a diaphanous camisole and high heels runs away from the as-yet-unseen entity, her attire and unlikely footwear slyly recalling the horror genre's history of scantily-clad female victims. Other scenes, though, are more obvious citations of specific films: when Jay flees her community college class after seeing It, in the form of an elderly woman in a hospital gown, walking toward her outside the window, the film recalls similar monster sightings during classroom scenes in both *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and especially *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984). Other *Nightmare*-inspired scenes come when Jay, disturbed by the encounter with the old woman, invites her friends to sleep over and stay up all night to keep watch, and when, once she has transferred the curse to Greg, she stays awake watching his house from her bedroom window, warning him too late of the approaching threat. Jay and Kelly's mother is an alcoholic, much like Nancy's mother in *Nightmare*, helping account for the conspicuous absence of concerned parents throughout much of the film. Composer Rich Vreeland's (a.k.a. Disasterpeace) analog synthesizer score adds to the overall retro vibe, at times recalling Air's electronic score for the 1970s-set *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999)—another film about teenage girls and seemingly peaceful Michigan suburbs haunted by loss. And one of the film's alternate theatrical posters even features a hand-illustrated design (a terrified young woman looking in a rearview mirror) reminiscent of so many early VHS box covers and 1980s horror paperback novels (Figure 5).

Whereas many self-reflexive takes on the horror genre, such as the *Scream* series (Wes Craven, 1996–2011), *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012), and *The Final Girls* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2015), lean toward meta-humor in depicting their teenage protagonists as little more than stock character types to be played with, *It Follows* has more in common with independent films like *Welcome to*

35 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Figure 5. The retro-styled alternate poster for *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014) recalls the hand-drawn quality of 1980s VHS box art, complementing the film's promiscuous mix of temporal signifiers.

the Dollhouse (Todd Solondz, 1996), *The Virgin Suicides*, *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *L.I.E.* (Michael Cuesta, 2001), *Bully* (Larry Clark, 2001), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), and *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004)—all films that Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley identify as "contemporary cinematic depictions of young American adults . . . specifically filtered through the horrors of the late-capitalist gothic imaginary."[36] I would also link *It Follows* to what one critic dubs "mumblegore," a recent strand of independent genre cinema that combines horror tropes with the so-called mumblecore movement's low-budget naturalism, emphasis on young white characters' interpersonal travails, and rotating pool of creative personnel both before and behind the camera.[37] Although David Robert Mitchell is not typically associated with this creative circle, the cycle's films—including *The Signal* (David Bruckner, Jacob Gentry, and Dan Bush, 2007), *Home Sick* (Adam Wingard, 2007), *Baghead* (Jay and Mark Duplass, 2008), *The House of the Devil* (Ti West, 2009), *A Horrible Way to Die* (Adam Wingard, 2010), *Silver Bullets* (Joe Swanberg, 2011), *The Innkeepers* (Ti West, 2011), *You're Next* (Adam Wingard, 2011), *V/H/S* (Adam Wingard et al., 2012), *Entrance* (Dallas Richard Hallam and Patrick Horvath, 2012), and *24 Exposures* (Joe Swanberg, 2014)—similarly feature, to varying degrees, dramatizations of young people's quotidian lives as filtered through the filmmakers' fond childhood memories of watching horror movies on VHS tapes.

Indeed, with its more somber focus on the emotional tribulations of teenage sexuality (including not only Jay's predicament but also Paul's jealousy over Jay initially passing him over for Greg), *It Follows* occupies a liminal territory between the horror genre and the sort of indie coming-of-age drama exemplified by Mitchell's previous Detroit-set feature, *The Myth of the American Sleepover* (2011). *It Follows* thus achieves much of its affective weight by grounding the recognizably realistic emotions of its contemporary teen characters within a generic framework that subtly colludes with many critics' "gloomy nostalgia" for 1970s horror as a more artistically and politically engaged period in genre history than the present moment might seem to be.[38] Paradoxically,

36 Craig and Fradley, "Teenage Traumata," 78.

37 Amy Nicholson, "Mumblegore: Meet the Smart Young Misfits Who Are Revolutionizing Indie Horror Movies," *LA Weekly*, October 28, 2013, http://features.laweekly.com/mumblegore/.

38 Craig and Fradley, "Teenage Traumata," 80.

then, the film's nostalgic nods toward a bygone past help affectively charge the emotional realism of its present-day characters by situating these recognizably realistic teenage protagonists within a diegesis suffused with other forms of (temporal) longing and angst borne of nostalgia, combined with the pathos of recognizing that, much like the film's falsely "happy" ending, the past was never as ideal as our various nostalgias might want to imagine.

It is, in this sense, particularly notable that the film's temporal signifiers gain more political relevance in regard to economic class and, by extension, the dramatic class disparities that have bedeviled Detroit and so many other postindustrial cities in the American Rust Belt. One of the most common critical observations about *It Follows* is the film's apparently promiscuous use of temporal signifiers, including (among others): a 1980s-style synth score, 1970s-era cars and kitchen appliances, clothes bearing 1980s touches, 1950s "creature features" like *Killers from Space* (W. Lee Wilder, 1954) broadcast on rabbit-eared television sets, and a palm-size e-reader that does not actually exist (but is, as one critic evocatively puts it, "shaped like a pack of birth-control pills").[39] As Mitchell explains, "There's a lot of things from the '70s and '80s, I think a lot of people feel like it's a period piece to that point, and it probably leans in that direction, but there are enough things from many different time periods to where you can't quite put your finger on when it's taking place. And that's the intention, it's like a dream or a nightmare."[40] And yet, regardless of how critics and viewers may think the film gently blurs together multiple time periods, the appearance of these seemingly outdated temporal signifiers is actually far more reflective of class disparities—albeit class disparities that also resonate with sexual disparities.

Following Elizabeth Freeman, we can connect the film's temporal indeterminacy to its overall queer structure of feeling, as "in its dominant forms, class enables its bearers what looks like 'natural' control over their body and its effects, or the diachronic means of sexual and social reproduction. In turn, failures or refusals to inhabit middle- and upper-class habitus appear as, precisely, asynchrony, or time out of joint. And as denizens of times out of joint, queers *are* a subjugated class."[41] As though embarrassingly fixated on the past, the film's queering of temporalities thus echoes its overall tenor of sexual shame, because shame's mnemonic affect ("to remember shame is to experience it anew") creates "queer community [as] a community of spatial discrepancy and asynchronicity, where past and present are concurrent and in which we enjoy the pleasures of the collective and relive our original isolation at the same time."[42] Despite *It Follows*'s human characters being figured as heterosexual,

39 Leslie Jamison, "It's Not Done," *Slate*, April 21, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/it_follows_and_the_transgressive_pleasure_of_the_horror_movie.single.html.

40 Mitchell, interviewed in Meredith Woerner, "How *It Follows* Uses Dread and Beauty to Create the Perfect Monster Movie," *io9.com*, March 10, 2015, http://io9.com/how-it-follows-uses-dread-and-beauty-to-create-the-perf-1690601352.

41 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 19, original italics. Freeman, for example, cites "T.S. Eliot's sexually frustrated J. Alfred Prufrock declaring himself to be 'Lazarus, come from the dead!'" as a queer literary character bound by multiple temporalities (7). This same line features prominently in *It Follows*, recited in the college classroom while Jay watches It approach in the guise of the elderly woman.

42 Caron, "Shame on Me," 128, 129.

then, their difficulties asserting "natural" control over their bodies and their bodies' effects affectively open onto the broader histories of sexual and economic loss that have found particular purchase in Detroit.

Although Jay and Kelly Height live in the suburbs (in the Oakland County municipality of Sterling Heights, to be precise) just outside Detroit's city limits, their home illustrates the fact that many suburb dwellers are not necessarily middle class—or at least as uniformly middle class as dominant cinematic depictions of the American suburbs tend to imply. If American movies generally tend to paint such a homogeneously classed image of the suburbs, it is little surprise that so many viewers (mis)read *It Follows*'s temporal signifiers as more of a stylistic idiosyncrasy than a barely exaggerated version of what many real-world homes of working-class suburban families actually look like. Step into many such homes and one is likely to find furniture or appliances that have not been updated since the 1970s, secondhand clothes and electronics purchased from garage sales and thrift stores, and all manner of outdated commodities commingling with a more limited number of newer models. The past persists out of economic necessity, not out of hipster affectation (Figures 6–7).

Figures 6 and 7. The retro mise-en-scène in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014) may seem a product of hipster stylization on the filmmakers' part but actually corresponds to the dated, secondhand décor found in many working-class suburban homes.

This contrast is made clear when we compare the resolutely working-class interior of the Height home with the typically bourgeois home of Greg's family just across the street: the latter's furniture, fixtures, and appliances all look modern and up-to-date, and when It breaks into both homes during the film, only Greg's house has a burglar alarm. While observing the flashing lights and commotion as the police interview Jay about her captivity by Hugh, one of Greg's family members even looks across the street and remarks, "Those people are such a mess." The class divide between the two homes, separated by a mere strip of pavement, could scarcely be more apparent in this disgusted judgment. Moreover, when Jay tells the police that she hasn't actually been inside Hugh/Jeff's supposed house (his squatter pad, rented under a false name) because he was allegedly ashamed of where he lived, it is not hard to see her respect for his hesitation as tacit acknowledgment of their shared economic underclass status.

In one of *It Follows*'s several moments of postcoital poignancy, Jay—lazing in the back of Hugh/Jeff's car, unaware that she has just received the curse—absent-mindedly

tells him about one of her younger teenage fantasies. She explains that she had wanted to simply drive away with her lover—not to any specific destination but simply in search of a sense of freedom—but "now that we're old enough, where the hell do we go?" This line, uttered just before Jay is sedated with chloroform and tied up by her deceptive boyfriend, could just as easily apply to her later relationship with Paul—a monogamous bond that, given the continued threat from It, is also not likely to go anywhere. The ability to get away is, of course, crucial to the film's plot—as is the centrality of cars as both a mode of transport and a symbol of Detroit's former glory. Greg owns his own car to take Jay and her friends to his family's hunting cabin on the lake, but Jay must either escape her supernatural pursuer on a bicycle or by borrowing her mother's car. Aside from car ownership as a class privilege, consider that the cursed might hypothetically hop a cross-country or international flight to buy him- or herself plenty of respite from It—but the fact that this option is never mentioned implicitly acknowledges its economic impossibility. Perpetual travel and multiple residences would render the threat of It largely moot, but this class luxury clearly does not exist for working-class denizens like Jay.

It is also notable that Jay acquires the curse during sex in the back of Hugh/Jeff's 1975 Plymouth Gran Fury—a formerly Detroit-made car—and that the trauma of her forced captivity and first sighting of It was filmed in the ruins of Detroit's Packard automotive plant, thus visually cementing the link between the horrific and Detroit's urban decay. Cinematographer Mike Gioulakis notes that Mitchell had initially planned to shoot this scene at a completely different building, but the filmmakers were quickly forced to change locations because of an active murder investigation occurring at the originally slated filming site.[43] Detroit's high violent-crime rate may have impinged on the film's production, but by turning to what is one of the city's most commonly photographed locations for the creation of so-called ruin porn, the film actually ends up indexing the economic causes underlying so much of the city's rampant crime.

The recent neologism "ruin porn" refers to the primarily photographic discourse produced by tourists, urban explorers, and artists whose images find beauty in the decay of deindustrialized cities like Detroit.[44] Unlike the far longer and less controversial practice of aestheticizing ancient or preindustrial ruins, ruin porn gains its allegedly "pornographic" tenor by encouraging sublime pleasure in viewing these decrepit, depopulated spaces and thereby glossing over the temporally proximate human lives ruined by the decline of urban industry. Aside from the blatantly simplistic and moralistically predetermined connotations of the term "porn" in this context, ruin porn also tends to present an oversimplified visual rhetoric that focuses less on the root causes of industrial decay (the removal of manufacturing bases by corporate and state

43 Gioulakis, interviewed in Matt Mulcahey, "'We Didn't Have to Add Too Much Creepiness': *It Follows* DP Mike Gioulakis," *Filmmaker Magazine*, March 31, 2015, http://filmmakermagazine.com/93629-we-didnt-have-to-add-too-much-creepiness-it-follows-dp-mike-gioulakis/#.VfXB1nt8gQ0.

44 For published examples of ruin porn specific to Detroit, see Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010); Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Bologna: Damiani/Akron Museum, 2010); Dan Austin, *Lost Detroit: Stories behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruins* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2010); and Julia Reyes Taubman, *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* (Detroit: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011).

interests) than the aftereffects of a seemingly inevitable decline. To its detractors, ruin porn thus evacuates urban sites of historical context, freezing them in a postapocalyptic mortification that serves for little more than aesthetic contemplation by viewers who don't actually have to live there.[45]

In her recent study of Detroit as the quintessential site of ruin porn, Dora Apel summarizes this aesthetic's cumulative function as a politically conservative one:

> The images participate, wittingly or not, in constructing the dominant narrative of Detroit as a story about an eternal romantic struggle between culture and nature, or a natural downward spiral of historical progress. The romantic narrative is precisely, perversely, what yields the pleasure of the deindustrial sublime, containing and controlling the anxiety of decline provoked by the images through the safety and distance of representation. This mental mastery of the terrifying is the nature of the ruin imaginary. . . . Detroit ruin imagery thus performs a doubly reassuring function, suggesting either that the city is to blame for its own conditions or that this state of affairs is historically inevitable and no one is to blame. Either way, the dominant forces of capital as the real agents of decline become naturalized and the threat of fiscal austerities for many other towns and cities [is] hidden from view.[46]

Although most of the film transpires in Detroit's northern suburbs, *It Follows* does trade in some of these images: from the aforementioned scene at the Packard plant to the wide-angle shots of the deserted city streets that Greg's car glides down and to the abandoned house where Hugh/Jeff has hung old bottles and cans over the windows, a makeshift It alarm that could just as easily warn of the city's many homeless individuals and serial arsonists.[47]

As the friends drive past abandoned houses while trekking across the city limits to the public pool to do battle with the monster, Yara off-handedly remarks, "[W]hen I was a little girl, my parents wouldn't allow me to go south of 8 Mile [Road, the city's northern border]. And I didn't even know what that meant until I got a little older and I started realizing that's where the city started and the suburbs ended. And I used to think about how shitty and weird that was." "My mom said the same thing," Jay replies—but a whole history is implied in this simple exchange.

Historians Thomas Sugrue and Kevin Boyle observe that Detroit's deindustrialization began following World War II, with major industries slashing jobs (especially the

45 Sarah Arnold, "Urban Decay Photography and Film: Fetishism and the Apocalyptic Imagination," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 2 (2015): 326–339. Arnold, for example, compares ruin porn to Victorian death photography, as both involve capturing mournful images of subjects too late to be saved but incapable of telling their own stories.

46 Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 93, 100.

47 The horror film *Don't Breathe* (Fede Álvarez, 2016), also starring Daniel Zovatto, similarly depicts Detroit's depopulated urban neighborhoods as a potential war zone where impoverished residents prey upon each other in an attempt to escape to friendlier climes. In that film, however, three teens attempt to rob a blind Gulf War veteran, only to find themselves trapped in his heavily fortified house where he has been artificially inseminating captive women to bear a replacement daughter for his biological daughter (killed in a traffic accident). Like *It Follows*, then, Detroit's lack of economic productivity is again figured as a setting for monstrous forms of nonconsensual reproduction.

forms of unskilled labor once held by African Americans, now performed through automation) or moving those jobs northward to the more affluent white suburbs. As white flight continued, the effects of racism in employment and housing kept most African Americans from following those jobs to the suburbs, eventually creating what remains one of the most racially segregated cities in America.[48] According to a recent estimate, "[w]hile Detroit is almost 83 percent black, the neighboring white working-class suburbs are less than 2 percent black," with rates of unemployment and violent crime disproportionately higher in the increasingly depopulated city than surrounding areas.[49] With little cooperation existing between Detroit's black political leadership and the white suburbs, the city's decline has been more commonly blamed on its majority black population than the relocation of white-run industries over the late twentieth century.

Although the film is not dominated by images of ruin porn, those that do appear are tempered by a certain awareness of how "shitty and weird" (to put it mildly) dominant attitudes continue to be toward Detroit's disenfranchised racial underclass. When Jay, for example, peers out the window of Hugh/Jeff's abandoned house and sees a young black man walking around outside, she recoils with fear that It has once again found her—but this brief shot also contains a tinge of racial anxiety, given the historically black city's notoriety among its white neighbors. Black faces are only fleetingly seen throughout the film, a result not only of so much time being spent in Sterling Heights but also perhaps of a reluctance on Mitchell's part to visually associate urban decay with blackness and thereby echo the racism that has long attributed Detroit's downfall to its black residents. After all, the film may visually associate Detroit's decay with the horrific, by repeatedly depicting the "Heights" (Jay and Kelly's surname) facing threats when they journey into the city and back, but the suburbs prove no safer from It.

Much of the debate over ruin porn concerns who has the right to produce it: exploitative outsiders with little or no understanding of Detroit's history versus local insiders capturing images of their city out of respect for its plight. Moreover, Detroit locals often take umbrage that ruin porn widely publicizes and exaggerates the city's problems, broadcasting a sense of helplessness and obscuring more optimistic signs of urban renewal. Small wonder, then, that a neighbor suspiciously eyes Jay and her friends as they enter the abandoned house; as much as the neighbor might be on the lookout for criminality, she could also mistake the teenagers for young ruin tourists in search of eerie locations (not unlike the filmmakers themselves). Sociologist George Steinmetz suggests that "the largest group of non-locals participating in the representation of Detroit's ruins consists of white suburbanites who left the city or whose parents and grandparents fled a generation or two ago"—an adequate description of *It Follows* creator David Robert Mitchell.[50] While ruin porn might, on some level, conjure nostalgia for a bygone Fordist era of economic prosperity and urban stability,

48 Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Kevin Boyle, "The Ruins of Detroit: Exploring the Urban Crisis in the Motor City," *Michigan Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (2001): 109–127.

49 Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins*, 45.

50 George Steinmetz, "Harrowed Landscapes: White Ruingazers in Namibia and Detroit and the Cultivation of Memory," *Visual Studies* 23, no. 3 (2008): 217.

Steinmetz sees this nostalgia as especially mutable because "most suburbanites have transferred their deeper investments, both psychic and economic, to the suburbs and beyond."[51] As one critic (and former Detroiter) astutely observed, "It doesn't strike me as coincidence that Mitchell, who grew up in suburban Oakland County, has his white heroine catch the curse in Detroit (while having sex in the parking lot of an abandoned factory), and that when the decay follows her to the suburbs, she flees further north with her friends, repeating a pattern started by her parents and grandparents."[52]

In this respect, the nostalgic aesthetic of *It Follows*—its mixture of temporal signifiers that locate the film in both the past and the present—may have more to do with idealizing a suburban past than an urban one. Yet the fact that those temporal signifiers also index present-day economic disparities within even the northern suburbs raises the specter of neoliberalism's broader divestment of capital from workers to corporate owners, of which Detroit's deindustrialization is only the most visible part. Furthermore, Apel argues that the insider-versus-outsider discourse about ruin porn is fundamentally flawed, because it is not possible to accurately discern a photographer's artistic intent when any image can foster multiple interpretations, from touristic exploitation to local appreciation.[53] We might, for example, compare the Detroit of *It Follows* with Jim Jarmusch's recent genre hybrid *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), in which a depopulated Motown serves as a temporary haven for a trio of globe-trotting, hipster vampires. These horror-inspired characters have more in common with the "creative class" of predominantly young, white artists and entrepreneurs who, drawn by promises of cheap rent and images of romantic ruination, have settled in downtown Detroit over the past decade, creating "two different cities within Detroit, one a tiny thriving gentrified area of millennials and the other the devastated neighborhoods in most of the rest of Detroit, in a microcosm of the chasm of inequality nationwide."[54]

Detroit's rise and fall paralleled that of Fordism, the capitalist industrial system of standardized mass production and consumption that characterized much of twentieth-century America—before the post-1960s rise of neoliberalism's deregulated, globalized capitalism (buttressed by state support), widespread austerity measures, and privatization of public services drastically undercut the potential prosperity of working- and middle-class citizens. As such, it makes sense that many people drawn to latter-day Detroit's industrial ruins "experience the neoliberal, hyper-competitive present as intensely challenging and long for the days of Fordist working-class solidarity and cross-class coalitions of economic interest."[55] As Apel observes, neoliberalism's effects on everyday life have hit Detroit especially hard in the wake of the city's Chapter 9 bankruptcy proceedings in June 2013, from the privatization of basic services (e.g., water, electricity, garbage disposal, mass transit) to the divesture of municipal assets

51 Ibid., 218.

52 Mark Binelli, "How *It Follows* Uses Detroit to Explore the Horror of Urban Decay," *Slate*, April 1, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/04/01/it_follows_how_the_new_movie_uses_detroit_to_explore_the_horror_of_urban.html.

53 Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins*, 23–24, 91–92.

54 Ibid., 34.

55 Steinmetz, "Harrowed Landscapes," 232.

and workers' pensions, to the further erosion of collective bargaining rights for labor unions. But in this regard, Detroit exemplifies, and serves as a warning of, the broader socioeconomic inequalities that have become endemic under neoliberalism—hence the iconic role acquired by its much-documented postindustrial ruins.[56]

And here we can finally conjoin the political relevance of *It Follows*'s haunted urban spaces to its possibilities for a queer ethics. As I suggested earlier, the film's monstrous threat would be assuaged by a turn away from monogamy and toward far more multiplicitous sexual contacts, engendering a community that does not disavow sexual shame and instead embraces shared risk through an ethical dynamic of open communication and collective responsibility. In his discussion of queer life in Times Square's once-numerous adult movie theaters, Samuel Delany describes such open sexual contact (as actualized in cruising spaces for public sex) as welcoming alterity and risk, which paradoxically makes urban life safer by fostering productive (if unpredictable) cross-racial and cross-class connections with strangers.[57] Likewise, Tim Dean updates and extends this argument to bareback sex's embrace of seroconversion risk as exemplifying a more ethical means of fostering community than the fear-based avoidance of social others.[58]

The connotations of ruin porn in *It Follows*'s Detroit setting become more notable (and even literalized) in this regard, as it was precisely the ruination of old urban centers that opened their economically impoverished spaces to reclamation by queer patrons forming covert communities organized around public sex. As Tim Edensor theorizes, postindustrial ruins become liberating spaces for all manner of licit or illicit play, "serv[ing] as erotic realms where sex can take place beyond prying eyes, but by virtue of their proximity to settled urbanity, these endeavors may also be charged with the frisson of forbidden practice" (Figure 8).[59] In this sense, it is not difficult to see how postindustrial ruins' "spooky absent presence of the past, the ghosts that swarm through spaces of dereliction, producing the not quite comprehensible" could take on queer potentialities.[60] While *It Follows* depicts Detroit's abandoned Packard plant as a horrific site through the scene of Jay's disturbingly nonconsensual bondage, we might also imagine the city's many ruins as potential contact zones for the very sorts of open, consensual sexual contact that would help disperse the curse's threat. Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo note, for example, that the cruising grounds featured in urban-set gay porn films depict how "pornography seems to have invaded all of the

56 Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins*, 28–29, 33–34, 100.

57 Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

58 Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 187–194.

59 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 25. Edensor's refusal to identify the specific ruins he discusses has, however, been sharply criticized by other scholars. For example, High and Lewis: "In universalizing his gaze, Edensor strips these former industrial sites of their history and their geography just as surely as the departing companies, entrepreneurs, and trophy hunters stripped the sites of their assets." Steven C. High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 60. For a more cinematic example of this tendency in ruin porn, see the recent documentary *Homo sapiens* (Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2016). In my estimation, any optimistic consideration of postindustrial ruins as sites of anarchistic possibility must be counterbalanced by a more circumspect understanding of the specific urban history (including the catastrophic impact upon local workers) behind each site.

60 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, 145.

Figure 8. The monster's first appearance in *It Follows* (Radius-TWC, 2014), in the form of a nude woman in the abandoned Packard plant, indexes both a ruin-porn aesthetic and the potential for such postindustrial spaces to be used for the very sorts of open, polyvalent sex practices that would help diffuse the monster's threat.

'useless' and abandoned spaces of postmodern urban capitalism not yet ready to be made residential or legitimately commercial. In retrospect, we can see this uneven development as having been governed by a large-scale reorganization of capitalism toward dispersed, transnational modes of production and consumption."[61]

Yet it is also this ethical sense of community that has been endangered by neoliberalism's widespread privatization of social services—including sexual health services—in places like postbankruptcy Detroit, where HIV infection rates have reached "crisis" levels.[62] Take, for instance, my earlier allusion to PrEP drugs like Truvada, which currently cost about $1,500 per month and, because they are more often associated with license for promiscuous sexual opportunities than with basic sexual rights, are not covered by many insurance plans. Aaron Braun notes that, whereas an earlier generation of queer activists like ACT UP demanded more democratic access to early anti-AIDS drugs like AZT, many of those older activists, including Larry Kramer and Michael Weinstein, now oppose PrEP drugs for encouraging non-monogamous sex, thus allowing access to PrEP drugs to remain a distinct class privilege while also stigmatizing users as non-homonormative. Consequently, "working-class and low-income people, predominantly people of color, are excluded from a crucial sector of the pharmaceutical industry that directly serves to LGBTQ folk. Meanwhile, public figures resort to sexual moralizing that seeks to

61 Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, "The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-Male Moving-Image Pornography," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 162. The documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s* (Joseph Lovett, 2005) also stresses the importance of depopulated urban spaces as reclaimable for gay cruising.

62 See Todd Heywood, "HIV in Detroit: Officials, Activists Agree It's a Crisis," American Independent Institute, March 19, 2012, http://www.americanindependent.com/214111/hiv-in-detroit-officials-activists-agree-its-a-crisis; and Michigan Department of Community Health, "Annual HIV Surveillance Report: City of Detroit," Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, July 2014, http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch/Detroit_July_2014_full_report_465194_7.pdf.

dismiss new drugs and thus the needs of those most affected."[63] Sarah Schulman notes that such symptoms of the "gentrification of gay politics" have accompanied the more familiar gentrification of urban spaces: much as the campaign for same-sex marriage accelerated with the homonormative displacement of risk by monogamy, the post-1970s gentrification of urban neighborhoods was facilitated by the dramatic rise in housing vacancies created by the AIDS epidemic's high death rate.[64] Even as a resident of Detroit's predominantly white, northern suburbs, Jay's working-class status in *It Follows* thus resonates with larger questions about the exclusionary transformation of urban environments and the related restriction of access to certain sexual health services. PrEP drugs may currently be marketed primarily to gay men, but with more democratic means of access, their wider implications for sexual freedom clearly extend beyond subcultural and class boundaries.

As austerity measures shift the purview of basic services from the public good to corporate control (and often higher prices in the process), it has become more common for sexual shame and civic shame to go hand in hand. Medical anthropologist Mark Padilla, for example, finds young Detroiters hoping to distance themselves from the "spatial stigma" associated with living in the city, even as many have also been forced by economic necessity into the stigmatizing realm of sex work (recall the prostitutes at the end of *It Follows*). Because neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility instead of public interest, Detroit's most vulnerable citizens (not its outsourced corporations) shoulder the blame for the city's postindustrial decline, which compounds the sexual stigma assigned to citizens' sexually and gender-nonconforming bodies.[65] Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that *It Follows* nostalgically looks to the past for inspiration, even as its promiscuous pastiche of different periods contaminates any simple notion that the past was a wholly idyllic time. Viewed through a queer lens, its overall aesthetic of ruination mourns the lost collectivities of pre-AIDS queer subcultures and working-class solidarities alike—social bonds that once served as a bulwark against different varieties of shared vulnerability. Although, for example, we might see the film's 1970s-era temporal signifiers as invoking a pre-AIDS period when cruising, swinging, and other forms of non-monogamous sex carried different, less fatal understandings of risk, that decade also saw the dramatic acceleration of Detroit's deindustrialization: "Detroit lost 19 percent of its jobs between 1969 and 1973; by 1975 the unemployment rate had climbed to a catastrophic 18 percent. . . . By 1982 Detroit had half as many manufacturing jobs as it had in 1963; half of those jobs were gone by 1992. Put another way, Detroit lost 5 percent of its jobs every year between 1972 and 1992, a rate of deindustrialization dramatically higher than that of the 1950s."[66] Through its use of anachronism, *It Follows* therefore looks back to a period on the cusp of neoliberalism's post-1960s triumph, even as the immediately recognizable ruins of present-day Detroit

63 Braun, "'Truvada Whores' and the Class Divide."

64 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 27–28, 37, 115–116.

65 Mark Padilla, "Spatial Stigma, Sexuality, and Neoliberal Decline in Detroit, Michigan," *S&F Online* 11, nos. 1–2 (2012–2013), http://sfonline.barnard.edu/gender-justice-and-neoliberal-transformations/spatial-stigma-sexuality-and-neoliberal-decline-in-detroit-michigan/.

66 Boyle, "Ruins of Detroit," 120–121.

belie any simplistic idealization of the past. By depicting its characters traversing the raced and classed borders between the northern suburbs and the decayed metropolis, *It Follows* traces an urban history whose widely circulated images of latter-day ruination cast ironic light on the film's characterization of monogamy itself as a monstrous edifice, threatening to fatally collapse at any moment upon the film's doomed lovers. But if these characters' unfortunate fates inadvertently offer us lessons in survival, as horror films so often do, those lessons are to be found in the polymorphous expressions of queer sexual community that, in a homonormative political climate, have been seemingly consigned to a more naïve, preassimilationist past, yet invariably persist as reminders that the neoliberal present demands transformation. ✻

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