

Linn Lönroth:

Hoodie Horror: The New Monster in Contemporary British Horror Film

RESUMÉ

Denne artikel undersøger en voksende genre i moderne britisk horror film: "hoodie horror". Ved at se nærmere på hvordan arbejderklassens ungdom portrætteres i disse film, og hvordan publikum har opfattet disse repræsentationer, argumenterer jeg for, at "hoodie horror" er en konservativ og problematisk filmgenre som øger den sociale dæmonisering og stigmatisering af den britiske arbejderklasse. Med hjælp fra sociologiske teorier fremsætter jeg det synspunkt, at denne form for dæmonisering er et grundlæggende fænomen i neoliberal kapitalisme, fordi den fritager staten fra sit sociale ansvar med at løse komplekse sociale problemer ved i stedet at overføre skylden på dæmoniserede individer.

ABSTRACT

This article examines an emerging subgenre in contemporary British horror film: the 'hoodie horror'. By looking at how working class youths are portrayed in these films, as well as how the audience has made sense of these portrayals, I argue that hoodie horror is a conservative and problematic film genre that reinforces social abjection and stigmatisation of the British working class. Drawing on sociological theories, I advance the idea that this kind of demonisation is a cornerstone of neoliberal capitalism because it eradicates complex social problems by transferring the blame onto abject individuals, thereby freeing the state from its responsibilities.

EMNEORD:

Hoodie horror, social abjektion, stigmatisering, dæmonisering, neoliberalisme

KEYWORDS:

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Introduction

In a letter published in *Sight & Sound*'s 2013 October issue, an upset reader expressed his dislike for the somewhat dubious politics of Irish director Ciarán Foy's latest horror film *Citadel* (2013). In the previous issue, *Citadel* was positively reviewed by critic Trevor Johnson, whom the reader argues 'seems strangely to excuse a creative philosophy that crystallises some of the most repellent currents in British consciousness' (Tait 2013, 111). Set in a particularly bleak and deprived-looking area somewhere in Glasgow, *Citadel* tells the story of Thomas, who witnesses the brutal murder of his wife by a bunch of monstrous and demon-like hooded youths from the local council estate. When finding that his daughter has been kidnapped, Thomas heads to the estate to seek revenge and ultimately blow up the entire building (killing every last one of the hooded youths) in order to get his daughter back. The reader continues:

In the wake of the London riots, when we face widespread problems about how disadvantaged young people are depicted, a film that presents 'Them' as flesh-eating zombies, to be feared and dispatched second-amendment style, is intensely problematic. *Citadel* and its opportunistic mining of base popular fears deserve to be condemned outright (*Ibid.*).

The author of this letter is far from alone in his critique of what has recently come to be described as an emerging subgenre in British horror film – the 'hoodie horror'. Typically set against the backdrop of Britain's low-income housing estates, these films locate their horror in a milieu associated with the 'new British "underclass"', as film scholar Johnny Walker puts it (2012, 438) and almost invariably follow a peaceful middle-class couple or family as they are ruthlessly attacked and terrorised by a group of deprived hooded youths. Besides *Citadel*, films like *Eden Lake* (James Watkins 2008), *Cherry Tree Lane* (Paul Andrew Williams 2010), *Harry Brown* (Daniel Barber 2009), *F* (a.k.a. *The Expelled*, Johannes Roberts 2010), *Community* (Jason Ford 2012), *The Disappeared* (Johnny Kevorkian 2008), and *Heartless* (Philip Ridley 2009) are often mentioned in these discussions and can be seen as forming a part of this new subgenre. Although set in Romania, *Its (Them)*, David Moreau and Xavier Palud 2006) is also worth mentioning as a predecessor to British hoodie horror as it deals with similar issues of class violence.

What is particularly striking about these films is their portrayal of working class youths as revolting, violent, and sometimes even demonic monsters (as in *Citadel* and *Heartless*), posing a great threat to British bourgeois life. As the *Sight & Sound* letter suggests, many of the hoodie horrors were soon criticised for reinforcing negative stereotyping of already-marginalised groups in society, particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 England riots as those participating were likewise demonised in tabloid media. Yet in exploiting this largely media-invoked fear of a 'Broken Britain' and the supposed slow moral decay of Britain's 'lower classes', other parts of the audience accepted these films as realistic representations of a naturally savage and uncontrollable 'feral underclass'. Regardless of whether the figure of the hoodie is politically questionable or simply realistic (or perhaps even a parody of a warped media view), it seems that British horror film has made itself a new monster with roots in the right-wing media's portrayal of the 'dangerous' classes.

This monster takes the form of a hooded teenager from the very bottom of British welfare society.

From a film historical perspective, the American backwoods genre could in many ways be seen as a predecessor to hoodie horror (and to some extent the home invasion film, on which, for example, *Cherry Tree Lane* draws). These genres often base their plots around similar scenarios in which white, middle-class people either venture out into rural America where life is depicted as backwards and primitive and in which savage and uncivilised inbred creatures thrive (e.g. *Deliverance* (1972), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977)) or, as in some branches of the home invasion genre, where the peaceful middle classes find their quiet domestic sphere invaded by these feral groups (*The Last House on the Left* (1972), *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), *The Strangers* (2008)). Some films also inverse this class violence by twisting the genre and letting the rich classes hunt down the poor rather than the other way around, in a kind of reversed hoodie horror scenario in films like *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), *The People Under the Stairs* (1992), *Hard Target* (1993), and more recently *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010) and *The Purge* (2013).

As far as hoodie horror is concerned, however, this article argues that these films are charged with far more conservative and problematic undercurrents and that their portrayals of working class youths are ill informed and help reinforce a process of demonisation and stigmatisation of those least well off in capitalist Britain. This, it will be suggested, follows a more general trend in neoliberal societies whereby certain social groups are stripped of their human qualities and made into what sociologist Imogen Tyler calls ‘national abjects’ (2013). It is also what Slavoj Žižek describes as the inherent violence of capitalism and its automatic creation of ‘dispensable individuals’, who are endlessly slandered and made to cover up for a reality of unequal distribution and exploitation of capital (2009). In this sense, the hoodie stereotype is by no means a new phenomenon but is merely a cinematic reconfiguration of a much older construction of a national abject or ‘evil other’, as sociologist Mark Featherstone puts it (2013), in capitalist societies.

Fiction or Realism? How the Viewers Responded

I feel the film had a powerful message, which revealed itself more and more to me as I slowly recovered from the trauma – a truth so vital that it almost justifies the vicious vehicle that conveys it. The film is actually a parable of the moral decay of England – a parable of prophetic importance in view of the major breakdown of law and order that the world witnessed in the English riots of 2011, when the streets of London looked like they’d been fire-bombed, and people the country over feared for their safety (Woolflydog 2012).

This IMDb user review of Johannes Robert's *F* nicely captures the ways in which many of the hoodie horrors have been perceived by its audience. Although horror is a genre grounded in aesthetic excess, many people have nevertheless responded to these films as if they provide realistic accounts of contemporary Britain. It is not difficult to find



Fig. 1 Faceless hoodie in *F* (a.k.a. *The Expelled*), Johannes Roberts.

commentators and critics alike who interpret these fictional stories as direct parables or mediations on British society, particularly with regards to social class and the notion of a dangerous underclass. *F* takes place in a north London school that is under siege by a bunch of faceless and bloodthirsty hoodies, who climb the walls like wild monkeys and brutally kill everyone

in their way. "It's a grim picture," admits the IMDb user, who nevertheless goes on to argue that "it's a scream worth hearing" (2012) in relation to the real social concerns in Britain. However, this slightly paranoid portrayal of today's youth has also been taken with a sense of irony by other parts of its audience. "I understand that horror films are based on what people are afraid of," another user argues, "but this film is so unapologetically terrified of the youth of today that I can't help but wonder if anyone involved in writing it has ever actually spoken to a teenager, or if they just base all of their knowledge on what The Daily Mail tells them" (Shweeble 2012).

The hoodie horror that has been most widely discussed for its supposed social commentary and reference to class is *Eden Lake*. The film follows Jenny and Steve, a well-to-do, middle-class couple who go for a weekend break in the countryside. Despite obvious warning signs, such as billboards announcing that the area is to be redeveloped into a gated community, mothers with heavy accents slapping their children in the local pub, and the couple's own satnav literally telling them to "turn around at your first opportunity," Steve and Jenny drive straight into a horrific nightmare. Not long after arriving, they are terrorised by a group of murderous teenagers with a Rottweiler.

"The film bites deep into a growing social problem in Britain," film scholars Marc Blake and Sara Bailey write in their book *Writing the Horror Movie*: "The *Daily Mail* culture of a fatherless underclass on benefits with no morals, responsibility or fear of reprisal. A pack of youth with a sense of entitlement to 'respect' and instant gratification may be a narrow view, but it became all too real in the England-wide riots in the summer of 2011" (2013, 143). This comment makes a connection between the feral teenagers in *Eden Lake* who stab Steve to death and try to burn the couple at the stake whilst recording it on their smartphone, and the youth taking part in the 2011 England riots. While admitting that associating violence and immorality with the British 'underclass' seems narrow minded,

the authors nevertheless justifies this very association when they deem the film realistic and “all too real.”

The director James Watkins argues in equally confused and contradictory ways when claiming that *Eden Lake* “isn’t an attack on a particular social group” yet adding, “but if you had a bunch of public school kids in blazers, it just wouldn’t be scary” (Watkins in Graham 2009).¹ As in *Citadel*, where the violent kids are unambiguously associated with a poor working class living in social housing, the youths in *Eden Lake* are likewise unambiguously portrayed as ‘lower class’ citizens by adopting well-known stereotypes of bad-mannered and poorly socialised working-class ‘chavs’² wearing branded tracksuits, trainers, and hoodies. Their accents are distinctively different from the boarding school English of the middle-class couple they terrorise (who drove from their home in London to Eden Lake in a Range Rover with a built-in satnav, wear Ray-Ban sunglasses, and go scuba diving). The kids themselves get around on BMX bikes (while their parents drive white vans), own an aggressive Rottweiler, and play loud music on their boombox. We find similar working-class stereotypes in the other films mentioned: In *Heartless* and *Harry Brown*, the youths also hide their faces behind hoodies and spend their time causing trouble in dark alleyways and underpasses in their deprived communities. *Cherry Tree Lane* portrays the violent young offenders as money greedy, illiterate, and foul-mouthed rapists with an attention span so poor that they cannot even be bothered to find the button to change the channel on the TV remote, and *Community* sees its hooded monsters as living in a council estate so excluded from the rest of society that they have started communicating through howling.

Whether or not we can justify Watkins’ argument that his film is *not* an attack on any specific social group, it seems safe to suggest that the hoodie horror genre makes use of ready-made stereotypes of the working class in order to enhance its genre-specific effects. This is something that its audience was fast to point out both by ways of praising and condemning it. Realistic or not, violence and crime are almost invariably associated with the working classes in these films.

Journalist Libby Brooks continues this discussion when writing in *The Guardian* that *Eden Lake* leaves her with a bitter aftertaste because it suggests that:

what we fear today is not the supernatural or the alien, but children – specifically working-class children – and their boozy indiscriminately shagging, incompetent parents. And the reason for that lingering aftertaste is that it’s true [...] *Eden Lake* frightens because feral youth (or knife

¹ It is curious that Watkins has not considered any films where upper-class people, as opposed to a poor working class, go about terrorising and murdering people (e.g. *Clockwork Orange*, *If...*, *Funny Games*, *The Purge*, etc.)

² The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘chav’ as ‘In the UK, a young lower-class person typified by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of (real or imitation) designer clothes’. I will discuss this further later on.

crime, however you want to identify it) exist as much as truism as a trope (2008).

As Brooks suggests, *Eden Lake* does not simply end with Steve's murder but goes so far as to propose that Jenny is killed (and possibly raped) by the kids' parents, thereby allowing critics like Brooks to associate the dangers of British society not only with certain troublesome youths but with a whole class of problem families, whose immoral and 'incompetent' behaviour is passed down the generations through uncontrollable reproduction (or 'shagging', as Brooks puts it).

Some of the commenters on this article agreed that the 'broken' families of Britain were to blame for the real-life violence they saw reflected in the hoodie horrors. One reader expressed his concern about the "ultra-violent, almost subhuman, underclass that currently infests this country" (*Ibid.*) and suggested that *Eden Lake* should be taken as realism. Similarly, one blogger argued that

Eden Lake is the closest thing I've found to a satisfactory 'explanation' for our 'inexplicable' summer of unrest. It satisfies because it lays bare our innate distrust of our children. It satisfies because it provokes indignation and fury; because it gives the audience its 'feral rats!' moment, because it appeals to the latent vigilante in all of us, who 'won't stand for it' and desires an eye for an eye (Tutorphil 2011).

The Daily Mail critic Chris Tookey praised *Eden Lake* as a "thought-provoking" film that said "what other films have been too scared or politically correct to mention" in its accurate portrayal of parents who had "lost their moral compass and any feelings of responsibility towards their children" (2008). Perhaps the most outrageous response to the supposed realism of *Eden Lake*, however, came from an IMDb user who went to great lengths to express his/her anger at the societal collapse portrayed in the film:

"With *Eden Lake*, I've been shown the terrifying truth about one of the biggest evils currently plaguing the UK (I'll give you a clue: it likes to wear Burberry and has lousy taste in music!)"

That's right: I'm talking about Chavs! If, like me, you find that yob culture makes your blood boil, then you too will be absolutely seething by the end of this excellent film, which cleverly taps into the viewer's fury, fear and frustration with loutish teenagers who are free to terrorise the innocent because the law lacks the power to punish them.

In *Eden Lake*, Director James Watkins presents a harrowing fictional account of one such incident in which a couple are subjected to unbelievable pain and humiliation by a gang of nasty young thugs. The sickening atrocities perpetrated by Watkins' lawless delinquents are terrifyingly real (reports on similar real-life events can all-too-often be

found in today's tabloids) and serve only too well to highlight just how far our society has sunk in recent years (Ba_Harrisson 2011).

In this sense, part of the audience not only recognises that these films associate violence and criminal behaviour with an 'underclass' of people existing outside of 'normal' British society but also accepts these representations as realistic.

The frustration and anger triggered by the hoodie horrors also notably resemble the outrage provoked earlier this year when Channel 4's new and much debated sensationalist 'shockumentary' series *Benefits Street* aired on TV (2014). The show follows the everyday lives of people living on James Turner Street in Birmingham, a street supposedly occupied by a high percentage of benefit claimants. The first episode was seen by 4.3 million viewers, resulted in over 1000 complaints by the end of the week, and was soon accused of 'poverty porn' tendencies and negative stereotyping of benefit claimants (Plunkett 2014). Simultaneously, however, the show also caused a twitter storm as people expressed their anger and disgust not at the sensationalism of the show but rather at the people portrayed in it. "These people on 'Benefits Street' actually need [to be] put down" (@ScottMackenzie_ 2014), one user tweeted, while others repeatedly hashtagged words like 'scum' and 'filth', suggesting that people on benefits were "lowlife scum" (@garryturner4 2014) and "primitive apes" (@matt_beale123 2014), who deserved to be "eaten alive by pigs" (@ConnorScotter 2014) and "dragged out into the street and shot in the head" (@BigDaveScott 2014). The stigmatisation that was already present in the show itself was thus further reinforced by these vicious responses (as was the case with the hoodie horrors), in which it was proposed that individuals on benefits should be executed.

As for the hoodie horror films, however, other parts of the audience were more ambivalent and critical of the stereotypes being offered, judging the films to be hysterical portrayals of a tabloid media-depicted reality in which civilization is under constant threat of moral decay. One blogger commented on what he saw as the "unpleasant freak-show element" and "leering voyeurism" of Jason Ford's film *Community* (Hatfull 2013). *Harry Brown* director Daniel Barber himself admitted that "there's not a great deal of interest in these real people in most of the hoodie-horror genre [...] baddies are more effective if they're 'withheld' – getting to know them means empathizing with them and losing out fear" (Barber in Graham 2009). Even the right-wing tabloid paper *The Sun* criticised *Eden Lake* for its "nasty suggestion that all working-class people are thugs" (*The Sun* in Jones 2011, 131).

Citadel is perhaps the best example of a film that has been rather harshly criticised for its portrayal of the hoodies as actual inbred mutants or demonic creatures that feed on human fear and the green moss that grows on the estate. In particular, the ending of the film, in which the hooded children are burnt to death through the bombing of the estate, has been discussed on account of its modest proposal that mass murder is a valid solution to social deprivation. "*Citadel* says of the so called 'Broken Britain'," critic Drew Talor writes, "just blow it up and start over, lower class children be damned" (2012).

Whatever one may think of hoodie horror, it is apparent that many people have made a clear connection between the fictional stories told on screen and real life in contemporary Britain, particularly in relation to the 2011 riots and the media hysteria following these events. As Walker argues, “the hybrid nature of these films has proven problematic in the public sphere, where the lines between cinema and reality have become increasingly blurred” (2012, 448). The stereotype of the violent, working-class teenager was clearly well known in Britain long before the hoodie horror films were made, but they have nevertheless even further reinforced its position in popular culture.

Social Abjection

In Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* from 1976, Travis Bickle studies the people wandering the streets of New York at night: “whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal,” he ponders, “someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” Though perhaps far from hoodie horror, Travis’ monologue works as a good way into understanding the idea of a whole group of people considered useless in society – the “parasitical drains” or “national abjects,” as Imogen Tyler puts it, people “‘laid to waste’ by neoliberal economic, political and social policies” (2013, 8). Seeing as hoodie horror films are consistently taken to be realistic portrayals of a feral underclass plaguing the UK, perhaps the hoodie can be seen as 21st Century Britain’s scum of the streets or as a modern-day creation of an abject societal villain whose death we root for and subsequently celebrate in the films discussed above.

In his article on hoodie horror, Mark Featherstone argues that the figure of the hoodie can be better understood by tracing the idea of a monstrous and excluded ‘other’ in social thought. Although this figure has been reconceptualised over the years, Featherstone suggests that the notion of the ‘evil other’ in contemporary Britain, now taking the form of a hooded teenager, has changed little since the time of Marx (2013). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Hegel theorise this ‘other’ in the notion of the ‘lumpenproletariat’ and describe those who fall into this category as “the ‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society” (Marx and Engels 1848/2002, 231). Not too dissimilar from Travis Bickle’s thoughts on people roaming the streets of New York, Marx and Hegel likewise depict these lower classes as the scum of the earth, the “indefinite, disintegrated mass” of people pushed to the very margins of the proletariat (Marx 1852/2012). Vagabonds, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, beggars, brothel keepers, as Marx partly identifies them, these people produce nothing and are therefore never fully integrated into the productive system (*Ibid.*). Referred to only in negative terms through a language of revulsion and abjection, they are the excluded excess of the capitalist system rather than a class of their own (Featherstone 2013, 183-184).

As we saw earlier, the audience is fast to judge cinematic hoodies as a real life underclass in words not so unlike Marx’s description of the lumpenproletariat. Some viewers even perceive films like *F* and *Eden Lake* as direct parables of British society and the degeneration that they claim is taking place. Others relate the figure of the hoodie to that of the ‘chav’, which is another example of an ‘evil other’ bearing close resemblance to

the hoodie.³ This stereotype coincided with the council estates beginning to be imagined as ‘abject border zones’ or ‘antisocial spaces’, Tyler argues, in which this dysfunctional underclass was supposedly breeding (2013, 160). “[T]he moral panic about the council estates unleashed pervasive forms of irrational stigmatization [...] a revolting class discourse that was inscribed upon the bodies of those who lived in the abject zones” (*Ibid.*, 162). This stigmatisation is well illustrated in this *Daily Mail* article by Gina Davidson:

And we will know them by their dress... and trail of fag ends, sparkling white trainers, baggy tracksuit trousers, branded sports top, gold-hooped earrings, ‘sovvy’ rings and the ubiquitous Burberry baseball cap. Throw them together, along with a pack of Regal, and you have the uniform of what is being described as the UK’s new underclass – the chav. [...] They are the sullen youths in hooded tops and spanking-new trainers who loiter listlessly on street corners and shopping malls, displaying an apparent lack of education and an all too obvious taste for fighting; the slack-jawed girls with enough gold or gold-plated jewellery to put H Samuel out of business. They are the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers (Davidson in Tyler 2013, 263).

Many hoodie horror films, such as *Eden Lake*, evidently make use of this pejorative stereotype when clothing their monsters in trainers and branded tracksuits with hooded tops and letting them “loiter listlessly on street corners” (or by lakes ironically named Eden yet pointedly portrayed as postlapsarian). In *Community*, we also find the chav-like “dole-scrounger” that Davidson describes, as the parents of the hooded monsters turn out to be unemployed and drug-addicted cannibals feasting not only off taxpayers’ money in terms of welfare benefits but also literally off their human flesh when the middle class protagonists visit their estate to make a documentary about their depraved ways of life. Just as Marx “lumps together all liminal, displaced, criminal and disenfranchised people into a singular revolting political foe,” as Tyler argues (2013, 185), we still create abject groups cut off from society’s mainstream and continuously demonise them through monstrous configurations.

Tyler also suggests that this kind of stigmatisation is essential to the “politics of disgust” practiced by neoliberal states today, in which certain “wasted humans” or “abject populations” are repeatedly created. Because the neoliberal state constitutes itself through a process of inclusion and exclusion, Tyler argues, disposable groups of people are automatically created as some individuals inevitably fall outside of the definition of symbolic state membership (2013, 4-10, 19-47). As mentioned earlier, this is what Žižek calls the automatic creation of “dispensable individuals” in capitalist societies (2009, 12), that is, people who do not count and are not integrated into to the productive system but

³ ‘ASBO’ (Anti Social Behaviour Order) is another example of a derogatory label (albeit also a civil order) given to groups of youths who are seen to fit into similar pejorative stereotypes as ‘chavs’ and ‘hoodies’.

rather exist on the borders of the state proper. The unemployed, benefit claimants, illegal immigrants, and asylum seekers are examples of such ‘wasted’ groups of people seen to constitute a parasitical drain on the economic system (Tyler 2013, 7-10). To justify such exclusionary forces and uphold its sovereign power, the state systematically makes these people into ‘national abjects’ through perpetual stigmatisation and demonisation. This neoliberal politics therefore operates in ways that ultimately legitimatise inequalities and injustices because people on the margins of society are effectively dehumanised (*Ibid.*, 8). “Social abjection describes the violent exclusionary forces of sovereign power,” Tyler writes, “those forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the disposable dregs and refuse of social life” (*Ibid.*, 140).

In this sense, the purpose of the abject and evil ‘other’ is quite simply to do the “dirty work of neoliberal governmentality,” as Tyler puts it (2013, 9), by covering up for, in Featherstone’s words, “the reality of a horrific social system that has no time for anybody outside of the elite” (2013, 181). By scapegoating individuals on the margins of society, furthermore, public consent is won to demolish democratic infrastructure aimed at reducing inequality, and decisions to deconstruct the welfare system and deregulate markets (moves that benefit the wealthiest part of the population) are legitimised.⁴ This is particularly so during times of economic hardship, such as the ongoing worldwide economic recession, because social anxieties triggered by such austere times are often “channeled towards those groups within the population [...] who are imagined to be a political drain and threat to scarce national resources,” as Tyler argues (2013, 9). As mentioned above, some viewers of *Benefits Street* claimed it was better to kill the tenants on James Turner Street rather than keep them on benefits. Another recent example of such social abjection can be seen in the Conservative Party’s anti-EU campaigns and xenophobic hostility towards immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria, who were believed to be on the cusp of mass immigrating to Britain and draining its welfare system as soon as their countries gained EU membership.

It is also in this context that we can begin to understand the function of the hoodie. Just like the stereotype of the ‘lazy dole scrounger’ or ‘bogus asylum seeker’, the figure of the hoodie functions as a container for the horrors of capitalism (Featherstone 2013, 191) or a scapegoat and easily identified and vilified bogeyman responsible for all social problems.

‘Broken Britain’ and the Culturalisation of Inequalities

When speaking before the House of Commons following the 2011 August riots, Prime Minister David Cameron made clear what he believed the events were really about. “This is not about poverty,” he argued, “it’s about culture. A culture that glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority, and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibilities” (Cameron in BBC 2011). By avoiding a more in-depth analysis of the riots or exploring the possibility that they were the outcome of more complex social

⁴ E.g. the present government’s tax incentives for the super-rich, benefit cuts, introduction of bedroom tax, privatisation of the NHS (National Health Service), etc.

problems, Cameron deferred the government's responsibility to tackle any such problems by transposing the blame onto what he saw as an anti-social culture of this largely working-class population.

The context of the England riots, and in particular the widespread anger and disgust they provoked, is interesting in relation to hoodie horror because it illustrates how the understanding of the 'evil other', both as manifested in the films discussed and in Cameron's politics, is distinctively different from how Marx's former concept. Although there are many similarities between Marx's idea of the lumpenproletariat, later notions of the 'underclass', and contemporary reconfigurations like the 'chav' and 'hoodie', the cause of such social exclusion seems to be imagined differently today. For Marx, the lumpenproletariat was a group of people who had been marginalised because of the violent exploitative forces of capitalism. Social exclusion was thus seen as an outcome of systemic inequalities and injustices - issues that had to be addressed by the state. In the UK today, however, social exclusion is instead often seen as the consequence of cultural deficiency or even individual behaviour, and poverty is therefore an effect of people's bad attitudes and failure to make the right choices in life (Featherstone 2013, 186-188; Marks 1991, 454). Imogen Tyler calls this a "*culturalization* of poverty and disadvantage" (2013, 162) in which the poor are seen to be culturally different from the rich, thereby bringing poverty upon themselves through bad patterns of behaviour (*Ibid.*; Marks 1991, 448-453).

The politics of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and in particular its construct of 'Broken Britain' are good examples of such culturalisation of inequalities. David Cameron first used the term 'Broken Britain' in 2008 when speaking about how to "repair our broken society" and argued that "social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make" (Cameron in Tyler 2013, 176). Poverty, social exclusion, and criminality, then, were seen as societal issues caused by personal failings, such as bad parenting, antisocial behaviour, laziness, or a lack of aspiration, and the solution was simply to change the attitudes of the poor (Tyler 2013, 161-176; Jones 2011, viii-xiii). This cultural account of the 'other' also finds resonance in Cameron's speech to the Commons cited above, as he suggested that the England riots had nothing to do with politics but instead with a degenerate culture that glorified violence.

To depoliticise social inequalities in this manner (by making it a cultural and behavioural issue) is very effective because it excuses the capitalist system of its flaws by transferring blame onto specific individuals (Featherstone 2013, 193). If social exclusion is incessantly portrayed as being caused by individuals with an immoral set of values, the government is freed from responsibility to tackle such issues and can thereby legitimately spend taxpayer's money in ways that suit the rich and powerful instead. Rather than addressing social problems directly and working to prevent them, the point of this politics is quite the opposite as it seeks to stigmatise and demonise the actual *outcome* of such problems (i.e. poverty, social exclusion, social unrest, revolt, etc.). As Owen Jones argues:

Demonization serves a useful purpose in a divided society like our own because it promotes the idea that inequality is rational: it is simply an expression of differing talent and ability. Those at the bottom are supposedly there because they are stupid, lazy or otherwise morally questionable. Demonization is the ideological backbone of an unequal society (2011, xxi- xiii).

This is also where popular culture such as cinema plays a part because it may reflect and thereby reinforce the notion that social problems are caused by the deprived culture of abject individuals. This makes for a simple explanation to complex social problems and can be found in the hoodie horror films (and, as mentioned above, more recently in TV shows like *Benefits Street*). The hoodies in *Eden Lake*, for instance, are very much portrayed as if emerging from a 'Broken Britain' where the family as an institution has collapsed, and the children simply learn their savage behaviour from their parents, who, it is suggested, murder and possibly rape the woman who their children fail to kill. *Cherry Tree Lane* and *Harry Brown* likewise portray the young hoodies as restless truants with an affinity for violence and craving for instant gratification. In the former, the degenerate young burglars complain bitterly about the foreign language art film DVDs of the couple whose house they have broken into and almost lose their temper when they find nothing but bottles of red wine when searching the house for lager. There were few attempts to theorise or politicise the England riots in their immediate aftermath: The riots were instead deemed *apolitical* and their violence senseless and mindless. Cameron judged them to be "criminality, pure and simple," and Nick Clegg called the unrest "needless, opportunist theft and violence, nothing more, nothing less" (Cameron and Clegg in Sparrow 2011). Similarly, the violence in the hoodie horrors is portrayed as *apolitical*.⁵ "It's not Northern Ireland," a man in *Harry Brown* argues concerning the hoodies causing trouble in the local estate. "No, it's not," his friend agrees, "Those people were fighting for something; for a cause. To them out there, this is just entertainment."

This culturalisation of inequalities is sometimes taken to extremes when it is suggested that certain groups of people are not just *culturally* different from the rest of society but *biologically* different and hence beyond rescue.⁶ Seen from this perspective, poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion become hereditary problems that must be somehow 'cured' through punitive government legislation. Cameron's description of the England riots as a "criminal *disease* that has infected streets and estates across our country" (BBC 2011) is an example of such a biological account of the 'other'. The Prime Minister was far from alone in his callous condemnation of the social unrest however. MP Iain Duncan Smith described the rioters as a dysfunctional and "menacing underclass [...]"

⁵ Many people also failed to acknowledge that the police shooting and killing of unarmed Mark Duggan was what initially sparked the riots in Tottenham.

⁶ This kind of cultural determinism reached an extreme with social Darwinism or the eugenicist thinking about the underclass in the 1930s, when poverty was seen as hereditary rather than economical or political issues (Tyler 2013, 188-193).

governed by a perverse set of values” (*Ibid.*), justice secretary Kenneth Clarke argued that “our feral underclass is too big, has been growing, and needs to be diminished” (*Ibid.*), and journalist Richard Littlejohn described the rioters as a “wolfpack of inner-city waifs and strays” that had to be clubbed “like baby seals” (Littlejohn 2011). While the media did its share of demonisation, the public was equally fast to demonstrate a hatred through social media, describing the rioters as scum, thugs, feral rats, wolves, and by countless other dehumanising names (Connolly 2011). Extreme remedies were soon called for, such as having water cannons shipped in from Northern Ireland, bringing in armed forces, and cutting the welfare benefits of the rioters’ families (Tyler 2013, 179-187). In the aftermath of the unrest, volunteers gathered on the streets of London to wash away the filth in a symbolic kind of street cleansing not so unlike that which took place after the 2005 Paris riots when Nicolas Sarkozy promised to clean the ‘racaille’ (scally, townie, chav) from the banlieues with a ‘karcher’ (a high-pressure cleaning system (*Ibid.*, 38)), a promise frighteningly reminiscent of Travis Bickle’s words.

The demonisation of the rioters by way of reducing them to a disease and describing them as savage animals and human filth to be washed off the streets with heavy machinery are examples of such a biological understanding of social exclusion. “It is because the underclass are imagined as a *race* and not a class that poverty and disadvantage can be conceived as not economic or even properly political issues, but as a *hereditary condition, a disease*,” Tyler writes (2013, 188). “The implication is always that it is not deprivation and inequality which needs to be ‘reduced’, but the poor themselves” (*Ibid.*, 193). This conviction is reinforced also in hoodie horror films like *Citadel*, *Heartless*, and *F*, where groups of individual teenagers are reduced to ascribed totemic items of clothing – to faceless, savage, and subhuman ‘gangs of hoodies’ whose monstrosity appears to be biological and cannot be defeated by anything but complete annihilation to the point of extinction. This is taken to the extreme in *Citadel*, where the ultimate solution is to bomb the entire council estate and murder the already-ghettoised demonic children. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, director Ciarán Foy argues that this violent scene has been misinterpreted because the hoodies were never meant to be perceived as children at all but rather as *actual monsters*. “In Amsterdam somebody asked me if it was right to just ‘burn these kids’ [...] If they are inbred feral mutants, then yes! Yes!” (Foy in Clarke 2013). Yet when Foy places his ‘feral mutants’ in such a precise social context (a poor suburb of a city renowned for being rough in British culture) and clothes them in tracksuits and hoodies, he inevitably ties them to a specific social group. Instead of creating anonymous monsters, *Citadel* portrays the hoodies in ways that reinforce the idea that there exists an underclass of genetically savage people that society needs to wipe out.

Alternative Readings of Hoodie Horror

Although my approach to hoodie horror has been invariably critical, due to the fact that I have chosen to trace what I believe to be politically conservative and problematic undercurrents running through the genre, there is certainly room for questioning this position. For instance, it might be interesting to discuss these films in terms of ironic distance and comic detachment, to explore whether their use of working-class

stereotypes and configurations of the evil ‘other’ are exaggerated to such an extent (as in *Citadel* and *Heartless*, where the hoodies are literal demons) that the stereotypes are rendered laughable and hence invalid. Seen in this light, *Citadel* may well be commenting on the ridiculousness of the *Daily Mail* hysteria and demonisation of working class youths rather than simply reinforcing such stigmatisation (which is what I have argued). Dark comedy can be a very effective means of undermining stereotypes by way of exaggeration and has been done effectively in contemporary British comedy. However, judging from the audience response to the hoodie horrors, it seems that, if any such comic detachment was implied, the audience did not pick up on it. Neither did I find any such ironic distance in its use of stereotypes. Had the films aimed for such an effect, moreover, it seems likely that they would have lost out on horror in favour of comedy. Most of the films that I have mentioned, however, work very effectively as horror films and have few, if any, comic elements that destabilise the scary atmosphere.

The hoodie horror films are nevertheless valuable from a critical perspective because of their hyperbolic nature, as Mark Featherstone suggests, because they provide us with a good starting point for understanding how social stigmatisation operates in contemporary popular culture (2013, 190). By shifting our attention from the horrors of the actual monsters in these films, we can begin to understand the forces that created these abject figures in the first place and for what reasons. The obsessive focus on monstrous ‘others’ in neoliberal societies hides the fact that these individuals have been demonised in order to cover up a much more monstrous, but less visible and identifiable, social system. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, discusses how the idea of this purely evil violence committed by ‘evil individuals’ (hoodies, chavs, rioters) automatically ignores important factors that may have generated this violence in the first place. He even goes so far as to suggest that such ‘subjective violence’ is, in fact, inevitable and should be understood as nothing less than the bourgeoisie getting back the message they sent out themselves “in its inverted true form” (2009, 9), through systematic exploitation and stigmatisation. Rather than condemning all such subjective violence, it thus seems more productive to theorise and politicise it (2009, 8-10; 23-31). As a result, perhaps the couple in *Eden Lake* who arrogantly smiled and rolled their eyes at the ‘uncivilised’ behaviour of the working class when visiting the local pub simply had it coming. And maybe the England riots were merely a response to decades of perpetual social exclusion and disenfranchisement. As the French philosopher Alain Badiou put it after the social unrest in the Parisian banlieues in 2005, maybe we just “get the riots we deserve” (Badiou in Tyler 2013, 41).

Although tracing the source of the hoodies’ violence may defeat the effect of the horror film (and is often left to the likes of kitchen sink dramas such as *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), *Neds* (2010), and *Top Boy* (2011)) or even give them a patronising tone, it is nevertheless problematic to avoid this. The demonisation that is enforced in these films shifts our attention from a government that systematically makes us think that it is the working class, the immigrants, the benefit claimants, or whatever other social group is demonised at the time that is the root of all problems in society. This is not to say that there are no

films that aim to shift our viewpoint and allow us to experience the hoodies' alienation whilst retaining some elements of horror (for instance, *Attack the Block* (2011)). Nevertheless, the majority of the hoodie horror films seem to make no such attempt to give voice to the youths but rather reinforce a culturalised and sometimes even biological understanding of inequalities. In so doing, they successfully reproduce a neoliberal ideology in which a powerful elite gets away with economic exploitation by systematically demonising those who are less well off. As Owen Jones put it when discussing *Benefits Street* and the fact that benefit fraud costs Britain but a fraction of what is lost through tax avoidance by the super-rich, what these films do is merely to shift "our glare away from the real villains of modern Britain" (Jones, 2014).

CV

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