Exploring Orientation through Dangerous Publicness in Horror Narratives

Taylor Sanford

According to award winning producer Amol Mhatre, we are presently living in the Golden Age of Podcasts (Mhatre). Notably, a handful of horror podcasts have come to dominate the listening world, some featuring noticeably queer characters, produced by queer authors and actors. Author David Foster Wallace said in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery that "good fiction's job [is] to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" (1). In fiction, there is no genre better suited to the task of disturbing the comfortable than horror. Could queer individuals, and those who otherwise experience marginalization, be those reversely comforted by horror's disturbing content?

In this paper, I will argue that horror narratives which explore the affect of spatial and temporal urban environments realize the true threatening potential of these spaces, revealing how the fear of violence permeates embodied environments that subjugate marginalized bodies. Through the lens of horror narratives, I will analyze how the podcast *I Am in Eskew,* and one representative episode from *The Magnus Archives*, generate their horror-filled and spatially defined urban environments, which reproduce the felt terror experienced by marginalized people existing in real urban spaces. *The Magnus Archives* and *I Am in Eskew* are both prime examples of narratives in the "genre of existential horror, which is presented as the sense of isolation, loneliness, insignificance, inevitability, uncertainty, meaninglessness, lack of choice or a lack of

consequences despite the choice being made as if one's deeds have no real impact upon the world" (Kobus 48). I will use these horror podcasts to discuss how urban spaces become threatening in the built environment through the misapplication of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) philosophy. I will argue that harmful interpretations of CPTED can result in public spaces which produce a hostile affect, generating an intrusive feeling of surveillance. Surveillance changes the balance of power between groups of individuals interacting in public space, necessitating a shift in orientation from those threatened by external scrutiny. I will also argue that queer individuals are particularly drawn to the genre of cosmic horror narratives that describe public space in this way, as they can find solace in observing exaggerating portrayals of danger that, once fictionalized, provide generative space to explore their own identity living within threatening publicness. Finally, fictionalized portrayals of urban spaces that accurately describe the fear of being a marginalized person in public space allows individuals to become emotionally and intellectually engaged in the affectual realm of queer and marginalized people.

Cosmic Horror and H.P. Lovecraft

Noël Carroll identifies H.P. Lovecraft as the popularizer of the cosmic horror genre in America after World War 1 (Carroll 6). Cosmic horror narratives frequently feature systems of power driven by Lovecraftian entities that guide the world through supernatural means beyond the control of individual human beings. These systems embroil characters in conflict where meaningful agency is lost. In these horror landscapes, characters are at the mercy of dangerous supernatural others and the systems that govern their existence. Importantly, Carroll describes how Lovecraft's writing "attracts because it confirms some instinctual intuition about reality" (162). Through my analysis, I will reveal how cosmic horror narratives can mirror the fear and anxieties felt by real members of marginalized groups when access to safe public spaces is restricted

through its privatization as a result of systemically embedded hostile urban design.

Affective Space and Fear

Jennifer Ladino's concept of "affective agency" is useful for describing "matter's capacity to generate felt impressions on other bodies while remaining incalcitrant" (16). According to Ladino, the word "affect" performs many meanings rhetorically. Affect can be understood as an umbrella term encompassing mood, can describe how emotions are held in tension between individuals, can help elucidate actions taken toward others, or can simply be employed as a synonym for emotion (12). Ladino discusses Kathleen Stewart's concept of affective intensity to illustrate the ways in which affect is multiplicious and is experienced subjectively (12). Ladino herself describes affect as a feeling that "precede[s] or elude[s] consciousness and discourse, at least temporarily, and can transcend the individual body" (12). Ladino also says that she "treat[s] *emotions* as consciously interpreted or narrated affects" (12). In the context of cosmic horror narratives, consciously interpreted and narrated affects are produced by Lovecraftian entities whose terror transcends the experience of individual people and becomes systemically imbedded in the fabric of reality. In fictional narratives found within horror podcasts, this affect is produced by the music, sound effects, and dialogue that build tension through the story. In this way, the scope and scale of the horror is revealed, effecting a kind of marginalization that renders characters powerless against the machinations of cosmic rule. In contrast to Ladino's analysis of the vague affect produced by Mount Rushmore (10), the affect produced by the terrifying elements of horror narratives are direct and visceral. Unease, disquiet, and tension permeate the fictional landscape. Aldona Kobus explains that in the podcast *I Am in Eskew*, "it later becomes apparent that Eskew's monstrosities are just exaggerated features of our reality" (Kobus 48). As such, the fear felt by characters within the horror

landscape reflect something true about genuine urban environments. We next must ask—what affect felt within built urban environments has inspired the cosmic horror elements echoed in horror fiction? Furthermore, what can horror teach us about the ways in which individuals orient themselves in threatening public spaces while living amongst potentially dangerous strangers?

Urban Publics, Urban Fortresses

Modern urban landscapes can produce a threatening affect, amplified in the horror-filled fictional world of *I Am in Eskew*. Kobus asserts that "*I Am in Eskew* presents the concept of hostile architecture taken literally" (56). Hostile architecture originates from misapplication of the philosophy of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED is a design strategy of "defensible space [that] is made up of four design elements [territoriality, surveillance, image and milieu, and environment], which act individually and in combination to help create a safer urban environment" (Cozens and Love 394-395). The effectiveness of defensible space lies in its ability to steer "illegitimate users" away from areas intended to feel private or inaccessible. CPTED, in principle, aims to create a safer urban environment for all people. However, targeted misapplications of CPTED design philosophy can produce damaging outcomes. Hostile architecture results when designers fail to consider, or even intentionally dismiss, the good of *every* individual interacting in public space, instead privileging exclusive use by "legitimate users." From bars added onto public benches to dissuade their use for sleeping (Hu), to inhuman anti-loitering spikes placed under bridges that prevent homeless encampments (Hu), examples of profoundly hostile architecture abound in cities. Even the removal of public spaces in areas prescribed as "crime ridden" reflect attempts to control the interactions of certain groups of individuals within public space for the perceived benefit of the "legitimate" public good.

The effectiveness of CPTED to keep out prescribed individuals is proof that affect can be intentionally created to divide individuals within public space into "legitimate" and "illegitimate" publics. Michael Warner describes the idea of publics as "stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds—have manifest positive content" ("Publics and Counterpublics" 75). Though publics fundamentally exist only "by virtue of their address" (Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" 73), publics are called into being by their "relation to texts and their circulation" (Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" 66). These stranger relationships are thus developed in public space in ways that assert the identity of distinct publics in contrast to others. Counterpublics likewise orient themselves to strangers through the organization and hierarchization of publics as established through public discourse (Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" 74). Discourse, in this context, is communicated through the affect felt by marginalized individuals, and is produced by the hostile built environment. Counterpublics are essentially like publics in every sense, except in their "awareness of [their] subordinate status" (Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" 119). As a result, the reality of subordinating affective measures impose harsher intensities on those for whom public space is also their primary space. Unhoused and otherwise marginalized persons who already experience the extreme scrutiny of publicness are further impacted by attempts to surveille and control them through the built environment (Hu). Though CPTED principles can be applied for the general betterment of global safety—for example, the addition of renovated lighting that improves visibility for all publics—design choices can also work exclusively, rather than inclusively. When CPTED is improperly applied, or when biased policies are enacted to push marginalized counterpublics out of public space, publicness itself becomes undermined. Hostile architecture can work in tandem with discriminatory policing practices to create further harm to marginalized communities. Where marginalized counterpublics are perceived as being ignored

or are targeted and harrassed by law enforcement, negative associations and relationships result (Boehme et al.). In fact, "citizens who have negative perceptions of police are less likely to report criminal activity or cooperate with police investigations" (Samuels-Wortley 1139), thereby compounding the fears of discrimination felt by marginalized counterpublics in public space. Consequently, marginalized counterpublics lose additional agency as a result of the combined effects of passive architectural affect and active law enforcement efforts.

Case Study: *I Am in Eskew*

I am in Eskew follows the main character David Ward as he attempts to navigate the horror laden landscape of Eskew, an urban city that "takes the metaphor of hostile architecture literally, presenting the city as determined to devour its citizens and by that emphasizing the dehumanizing aspect of this social practice" (Kobus 47). The investigator, Riyo, who later intervenes in the narrative and attempts to free David from Eskew, reveals Eskew's constructed nature. David and Riyo's feelings of social isolation, alienation, and learned orientation in space reflects the lived experience of marginalized people navigating threatening publicness. In episode 8, Riyo describes how "weaponized environment[s]" (*I Am in Eskew* 8:47-8:48), like haunted houses, have always existed unintentionally, but can be purposefully built with "exactly the right length and width and angles to elicit a response of horror and absolute despair in its inhabitant[s]" (*I Am in Eskew* 9:26-9:34). She asks the audience, "why does it never occur to us that the same might be possible in construction of a street… or a village… or a town?" (*I Am in Eskew* 9:36-9:45). In episode 11, Riyo interviews Henley, a researcher who worked with the Orion institute, the malevolent organization responsible for creating Eskew. Riyo mentions to Henley that she had read about "hostile architecture" in one of his books (*I Am in Eskew* 6:39). The podcast *I Am in Eskew* does not attempt to obscure its reference to hostile architecture and misapplied CPTED

as the inspiration for its horror-laden landscape. Instead, the narrative directly accuses this design philosophy of producing the real affect that is transformed into the cosmic horror of Eskew.

Queer Counterpublics Evicted from Public Space

In the '90s, Michael Warner describes how "New York's most legendary gay strip" ("Zoning Out Sex" 149) was transformed through zoning laws that limited the location of "adult establishments" ("Zoning Out Sex" 150), displacing the queer community that had previously inhabited the strip. Warner writes that "sex publics in New York that have been built up over several decades—by the gay movement, by AIDS activism, and by countercultures of many different kinds—are now endangered by a new politics of privatization" (Warner, "Zoning Out Sex" 153). Warner further describes how, in 1994, a queer meeting place alongside the Hudson River was "closed down, fenced off, subjected to curfew, and heavily patrolled" to create a "tidy model of respectability" ("Zoning Out Sex" 154-155). In this way, the displacement of a queer counterpublic—whose identity and community were tied to a physical space—was intentionally produced through the policies and actions of the dominant heterosexual public. These changes occurred as "public space in general… dwindled in the city" (Warner, "Zoning Out Sex" 156), the result of which produced a "sterile or semicommercial area, closed to loiterers or the homeless, heavily patrolled and inaccessible at night" (Warner, "Zoning Out Sex" 157). The removal of marginalized people belonging to radical queer counterpublics in New York is only one example in a long history of law enforcement and government officials policing queer bodies in public space. Recent backlash over drag queens reading to children (Brend), or simply the additional danger to which queer people are exposed while existing in public space (Government of Canada), reveals how publics exert violent power over public space to exile members of queer and marginalized communities.

Case Study: *The Magnus Archives*

While the podcast *I Am in Eskew* describes the physical fear of the public space, *The Magnus Archives* explores the deep threat of interpersonal horror in the public sphere. Through the explicit inclusion of queer characters, *The Magnus Archives* relates its narrative of queer affect in threatening publics more directly to its audience. In 2018, *The Magnus Archives* was locally and internationally one of the most listened to podcasts in the UK, with a significant portion of its fan communities located on Tumblr (Watts 12). Fan engagement that revolves around the explicit characterization of its cast as queer is evidenced in the positive fan response that resulted from the reveal "that three of its main characters were gay, asexual, and bisexual respectively" (Watts 13). Significantly, "the show also features a young Muslim woman as a main character" (Watts 13), with many of its other cast portrayed as BIPOC and queer in fan art depictions (see @gras-art and @kowbojkii).

While many episodes of *The Magnus Archive*s explicitly describe the experiences of queer characters, episode 188 of *The Magnus Archives* concretely describes the fear of surveillance, threatening publics, and isolation in a way that perfectly encapsulates the fear of the queer audience. Episode 188 describes the plight of a woman named Carmen who is trapped in the domain of the Eye—the cosmic horror entity made from the fear of an omnipotent and ceaseless watcher. In this episode, Carmen finds herself trapped in "the most surveilled city in the world" (*The Magnus Archives* 12:00-12:03). The Archivist describes the feeling of constant surveillance, which causes Carmen to become more reclusive, rarely leaving her apartment. The horror follows her inside, with Carmen's roommate taking part in it by dictating her behaviour with constant critique, ceaseless observation, and judgment (*The Magnus Archives* 14:10-14:14). The infringement on Carmen's ability to assert bodily autonomy is socially controlled within an oppressive system that

exposes her nakedly before a judging public. The city and its watchful inhabitants know the secrets of her intimate relationships as well. Disturbingly, a little girl on the street taunts Carmen after she passes up an opportunity to play with her, saying that "you're just like everyone said you were," and exclaiming that it's "no wonder Simone left you" (19:42-19:55). The revelation of Carmen's queerness rendered shameful by the judgment of the city is made more acute in the moments when Carmen meets with her therapist. Carmen works to "quiet the flutter of her heart, choke down and try her best to hide the seed of lust that had settled inside her long ago" (20:33-20:41), to no avail. Carmen's therapist flashes a brief look of disgust at her, as though reading Carmen's mind. Carmen fears that the therapist knows the deepest unspoken shame of her own queerness (20:45-20:48). Though Carmen's queerness is not the source of the horror, its reflection in her sharp fear of being discovered echoes the deep anxiety of exposure that queer people face should others reveal their identity within unsafe publics. Queer counterpublics are especially vulnerable to surveillance that threatens to expose private affairs within hostile environments.

Orienting in Fear

The horror that results from the combined terrors of spatial control and public surveillance targets marginalized bodies through concerted effort. Likewise, as the characters in *I Am in Eskew* and *The Magnus Archives* attempt to orient themselves in terror-laden environments, they must do so in accordance with the rules governing their new reality. Sara Ahmed writes that "the concept of 'orientation' allows us then to rethink the phenomenality of space—that is, how space is dependent on bodily inhabitance" (6). Eskew is "a city of the 'unwanted,' people who do not fit into society" (Kobus 61). Ahmed explains that "the question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (Ahmed 7). This question of orientation is especially pertinent to those "who do not fit into society," as they work to find

novel ways of inhabiting the same environments. This difference in interpretation by publics reveals how "adding 'orientation' to the picture gives a new dimension to the critique of the distinction between absolute space and relative space, also described as the distinction between location and position" (Ahmed 12). Location is imagined as an absolute fixed place in the world, and position is understood as a space that exists in between, and in reference, to others (Ahmed 13). In this way, absolute space is itself also defined by its relative position in relation to other locations. Consequently, given the same literal space, publics will experience the broad affect of absolute space, whereas counterpublics will experience the relative space that targets their marginalized status as part of its affect. This aspect of orientation accounts for differences between the orientation of publics and counterpublics existing in the same space. Additionally, in the case of horror narratives, feeling at home becomes warped by the ever watching, ever threatening weight of the Lovecraftian entities whose attentions are cast on all those who inhabit the world. In public space, queer counterpublics and other marginalized peoples must likewise negotiate systems of oppression whether they be visibly queer or appear straight and cisgender passing. Hostile architecture seeks to make "certain people feel unwanted in public spaces, putting the 'public' part of the term into question" (Kobus 56). In its fictional representation, "the omniscient nature of Eskew can be understood as standing for the representation of surveillance in contemporary cities, the unspoken knowledge that a city stores information about us, knows more about us than we are comfortable sharing" (Kobus 58). We can understand efforts to create "safe spaces" as both ways of cultivating safe communities, and as means of avoiding dangerous publicness inherent to the daily horrors of marginalization. Orientation becomes an act of self-generation, where publics and counterpublics come to understand themselves through negotiating publicness.

Fictional Queer Counterpublics

If built structures within physical space restrict the movement of marginalized peoples in public, narrative space offers queer and marginalized individuals a sense of shared belonging. By identifying with fictional queer characters, or those who endure the othering affect of urban public space, marginalized counterpublics build community through expressions of shared experience. Horror narratives allow the full weight of hostile spatial affect to be profoundly felt, as they transport the danger of the real world into cosmic horror domains in which violence is fictionalized, but never trivialized. In this way, affective horror translates real fear into its most generative form—revelation through fictionalization. Fictional narratives can transform public opinion when properly interpreted, because they reveal authentic truths about injustice baked into systems of power that compose the background of daily life. The true danger of hostile architecture and hostile publics is revealed through fictional narratives that illustrate how systemic processes uphold territorial policing efforts that terrorize marginalized people in public space.

Conclusion

Horror describes the extremities of fear not experienced by the majority, but acutely obvious to those subject to the scrutiny of the public sphere. The production of a built environment that aims to generate a specific marginalizing and disorienting affect reflects knowledge of publicness more broadly, and effects a kind of malevolent speech act between publics. The affect produced by the combined effort of privileged publics to exert territorial control and enact total social surveillance are thus best reflected in "supernatural horror… [that] confirms a deep-seated human conviction about the world, viz., that it contains vast unknown forces" (Carroll 162). Kobus explains that "*I Am in Eskew* epitomizes many tendencies of contemporary podcast culture, including an experimental use of the

medium, overtones of counter-culture and a critique of capitalist market and society" (62). *The Magnus Archives* similarly reveals the fear produced by the anxiety of interacting with surveillant hostile publicness in uncontrollable and unpredictable public space. The kinds of publics who support and enforce the deployment of defensive and hostile architecture in public space, via misapplied CPTED, do so according to the belief that they should be the exclusive users of public space. We can identify the intended recipient of a designed environment by analyzing who is negatively affected by its architectural design. Warner states that publics "select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership" ("Publics and Counterpublics" 75). In the case of improperly applied CPTED—as expressed through existential horror and witnessed in reality—strangers are targeted by environmentally produced affect that maintains societal hierarchy through the systemic displacement of marginalized people. Kobus explains that "there is no escape from Eskew and there is no escape from various deterministic social, class, geopolitical etc. forces that shape our biographies as a form of narration" (59). Witnessed through the lens of horror, we are easily able to imagine how the effects of surveillance intentionally cultivated by the built urban environment may produce feelings of alienation and social isolation. Marginalized members of counterpublics vulnerable to these effects may further feel trapped where purposeful public scrutiny forms the designed foundation of their neighbourhoods.

I began this essay with a quote by David Foster Wallace, and I will end it with a quote from him as well. Wallace said that "a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull… imaginative access to other selves" (1). A critical reading of horror narratives that considers how horror's affective elements are drawn together from aspects of the real world allows us to more readily describe the overlapping and intersecting factors which produce marginalization. Through the interpretation of horror fiction, we can imagine the affective

influences which motivate each person's particular orientation in public space, providing rich ground to design more inclusive urban environments.

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