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'Corpses… Coast to Coast!' Trauma, Gender, and Race in 1950s Horror Comics

Abstract: During the 1950s, a moral panic around youth culture and delinquency dominated the contemporary imagination. Rock n' roll and the new wave of youth-focused films seemed to critics to posit an alternative culture antagonistic to that of older generations. One cultural form sparked particular censorious intent: the horror comic book. Many critics of the 1940s and 1950s dwelt obsessively on the impact of horror comics on youthful readers. The culmination of this movement was the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency, which resulted in the implementation of a harsh new self-regulatory comics code and the end of the horror and crime genres. In this study we argue that rather than (or perhaps as well as) promoting juvenile delinquency, horror comics served an important social function in that they presented a challenge to the dominant culture in cold war America. They corroborated the veteran experience, questioned faith in science and industry, recognised women as victims of war, and embodied, on occasion, many of the themes of the early Civil Rights movement. It was because of these countercultural impulses that the horror genre in comics was, ultimately, brought to an untimely end.

There was a spectre haunting the comics industry in the 1950s – the spectre of horror comics. Business had boomed for publishers since the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (1938), a development that heralded the birth of the comic in its modern form. Superheroes grew in popularity during the 1930s and 1940s, experiencing a patriotic wartime surge as a legion of star-spangled heroes fought their way through the build-up, and American entry into, World War II. By 1944, 95% of boys and 91% of girls aged six to eleven read comics on a regular basis (Biagi and Kern-Foxworth, 1997, 249). Comics during this era were caught up in a "discourse of containment that sought to categorise and isolate potential threats to the precarious status quo of post-war America" (Brooker, 2000, 152). They were, in other words, broadly committed to maintaining hegemonic power structures in U.S society. While the industry as a whole remained in robust health, superheroes were on the wane by the mid-1940s. A glutted market could no longer bear the weight of costumed crime-fighters, and their numbers rapidly shrank as readers sought new thrills. By 1950, only Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman remained in titles of their own. They had been replaced by new genres that did not all share the sense of buoyant optimism found in the never-ending quest for 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. More problematically (for the industry), some of these new genres also critiqued dominant forward-looking narratives of opulence through scientific advancement. One such genre was horror.

Lawrence Watt-Evans (2016) identifies Prize Comics' *Frankenstein* series, beginning in 1940, as the first horror comic, followed by *Suspense Comics* in 1943.[i] The always problematic question of a 'first' is plagued by problems of classification. Many would acknowledge that although *Suspense Comics* featured 'spiders, eyeballs, devils, etc.' on their covers, the content was more consistent with the crime genre. Schoell (2014) argues that the horror

trend actually began in 1948 with the publication of American Comic Group's *Adventures into the Unknown*. Running to a total of 69 issues, *Adventures* was a popular series that established many of the themes that characterize the genre, such as haunted houses, werewolves, vampires, ghosts, and adaptations of horror stories from other media, usually literature – elements which, Watt-Evans argues, were imported and adapted from 'pulp' novels.[ii] Horror comics, along with their sister genre crime, wrote contemporary anxieties large across the cultural landscape of 1950s America, attesting to the continued relevance, and inescapability, of the violence many Americans had witnessed, been victims of, and participated in during World War II. In the process of drawing attention to these issues, horror comics also drew attention to themselves. In doing so, they triggered mechanisms of containment that nearly shut down the entire comics industry.

In existing histories of the American comic book, the horror trend is most commonly associated with the company Entertaining Comics (EC), and many of the accounts of the horror genre tend to focus on, to use Trysh Travis' words, "examin[ing] the various narrative and artistic modes developed at this most renowned of comics publishers" (2012, 184). In doing so, work on EC has contributed to an auteurist approach that overlooks the breadth of the horror trend and the prodigious output of other publishers. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet notes, "histories of American comic books have traditionally presented 1950-1954 as the age of EC.. [even though] they never threatened the crushing commercial domination of funny animals and teen comics" and he concludes by positioning EC as far less central to the period than much of the existing literature (2010, 40). What Gabilliet overlooks, however, is that there is no direct correlation between circulation figures and notoriety. Contemporary critics said as much; Senator Robert C. Hendrickson, chairman of the United States Senate Subcommittee of the Committee hearings to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, asserted that "while there are more than a billion comic books sold in the United States each year, our… interest lies in only a fraction of this publishing field" (1954, 1).

According to Bradford Wright, horror comics "stood apart from virtually every source of information and entertainment available to young Americans in the early 1950s" and, particularly through EC, these comics constituted "a commercial expression of cultural defiance" (2002, 152-3). To say horror comics stood alone, however, is an exaggeration. The crime, western, science fiction, and romance genres also made up a large portion of comics sales, and were associated during the anti-comics crusade with juvenile delinquency and deviant behaviours. Beyond comics, defiance was big business; James Gilbert (1986, 64) notes that "sixty films on delinquency were produced in the 1950s," and not all of the thoughtful quality of *The Wild One* (1954) or *Rebel Without A* Cause (1955). Well over one hundred science fiction films were made in the 1950s, increasing in number produced per year as the decade progressed, and many dealt with similar issues to the horror comics; over fifty horror films were also produced, again increasing in number year on year.[iii] Popular films became popular genres as new producers began work on films featuring similar themes. The same was true of horror comics. From 1950 to 1954, the industry comprised almost one hundred titles, produced by twenty-eight publishers, not taking into account crime comics which shared genre characteristics and thematic preoccupations with horror comics (Wright, 2002, 156).[iv] Superheroes attempted to follow the trend, but unsuccessfully.[v]

In many regards, horror comics stood against all that is most commonly associated with the success story of the Eisenhower 50s. During the 1950s childbirth peaked, the American economy grew, and in World Fairs across the country, U.S. citizens flocked to see 'the future' that would soon be delivered to them through scientific and industrial progress. Such technological wonders served the cause of international politics during the 'Kitchen Debate' of 1959 between Vice President Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev in the American National Exhibition in Moscow, a cultural exchange project. The exhibition constituted something of an 'Ideal Homes Exhibition', with the American exhibitors putting together the best that American capitalism had to offer and positioning it as affordable to all. These utopian visions, however, belied the reality of a population, in many cases, irreparably damaged by World War II, and fearful of the threats posed by communism and nuclear war. Ideas of economic equality enshrined in the American National Exhibition were also, as members of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement argued, far from an achievable reality. Horror comics traded on this, exposing the flaws in the dominant mythology of social harmony and a scientific utopia. The popular mythology of 1950s America enshrined in the illustrations of Norman Rockwell offer a place of order, principle and conformity. For many, though, this conformity was suffocating. As Daniel Immerwahr notes, "we tend to treat the upbeat aspects of the period as defining its character and to regard malcontents… as lonely prophets in the wilderness" who were unsuited to or uncomfortable with the affluence and power of the US in its post-war glory (2016, 280). Kendall R. Phillips states that science fiction films of the 1950s reinforced notions of consensus through "acquiescence to the authority of the state," but it is more complex than this allows (2005, 42). The trend for giant creatures created through exposure to nuclear material, as in 'creature features' such as *Them!* (1954), or the effects of such materials on the human body, as in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), demonstrate very real fears about the side effects of the very weapons that had helped the US to end the war.[vi] Jim Trombetta states that this nuclear threat "reasserted itself in the 'junk' medium of the horror comic, giving it an especially uncanny quality all its own," drawing on the trauma of war and the threat of nuclear conflict to represent deeply-rooted fears (2010, 23).

It is perhaps unsurprising that, given political discourse at the time, the threat of nuclear war arises frequently in horror comics. The atomic bomb, horror comics repeatedly assert, made faith in science untenable. In 'The Thing that Walked at Night', for example, a childless couple adopt a war orphan. This young girl, it transpires, is a murderous werewolf-like creature. In the final panel the woman, having killed her husband, addresses the child: 'He never knew and I could never reveal that you are my real daughter, Joan... That you were born as the atom bomb fell while I was a prisoner of war in Hiroshima! [and to her husband's corpse] She really isn't dangerous, Fred' (1953, unpaginated). As she speaks these words her daughter, looming behind her, lifts a branch in preparation to strike. When America bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the comic suggests, it gave birth to something beyond control - something which threatens to return the violence meted out by the US to the homeland.[vii]

[Fig.1]
'The Thing that Walked at Night'

The threat of nuclear war also manifests in body horror, such as the story 'Wax Museum' in *Tomb of Terror* #3 in which characters are made into wax statues by a demented museum owner (1952a). When they enact revenge first their skin and then their bodies melt in a visual style which seems to anticipate the melting bodies which appear in Hiroshima-survivor autobiography *Barefoot Gen* (1973-1974). In some instances, as with 'The Thing that Walked at Night', this body horror seems to be conjure accusatory spectres of and pangs of guilt. On the cover of *Tomb of Terror* #4, for example, a decomposing man walks toward the reader, saying 'You did this to me, I'm going to kill you!' (1952b)

[Fig. 2]
'The Wax Museum'

More explicitly, the reverberations of the atomic bomb manifest in a general distrust of science. In 'Evolution', for example, a story that appears in *Tomb of Terror* #12, a man uses science to make himself a superior being but eventually devolves into non-sentient goo. In 'Death Sentence', similarly, a scientist creates a 'mutant' cell that grows, destroys his lab and escapes. The opening panel of the comic shows the mushroom-cloud-like goo looming over a city as people run in terror. Horror comics repeatedly deployed signifiers typically associated with the science fiction genre but, where science fiction tended broadly to celebrate scientific advancement, the horror genre inevitably played out scenarios of scientific 'advance' leading to mankind's destruction. In 'The Survivors' in *Tomb of Terror* #6, for example, human explorers fight against, and are killed by, aliens.
The serum they design to pacify the creatures inadvertently causes the one surviving human to become a monster himself (1952c), engaging with the same kind of narrative devices as Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, *I Am Legend*.[viii]

[Fig. 3]
'Death Sentence'

Not only was the anxiety over possible future wars a recurring theme in 1950s media, but the trauma of World War II was also a continuing presence in the lives of veterans and refugees living in the United States. Such individuals often found their internal lives to be jarringly inconsistent with affluent post-war realities, or felt the dislocation of their acquired skills no longer having any purpose.[ix] Linnie Blake articulates how through its "generic strategies, its representational practices and its recurrent thematic concerns," horror film is "ideally positioned to expose the psychological, social and cultural ramifications" of cultural attempts to work through traumatic incidents; horror comics served a similar function in the 1950s (Blake, 2008, 2). For instance, horror comics often articulated the experience of living with what came to be classified as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A typical story opening, as in 'The Demon of Devonshire' below, is the protagonist being repeatedly awoken by ghosts, one of whom describes itself as a manifestation of 'the dead—the slain—the un-avenged' (1953b).
[Fig. 4]
'The Demon of Devonshire'

The Holocaust, too, loomed large in horror comics. In some cases this was overt, such as Bernard Krigstein's 'Master Race', published in *Impact* in 1955, or the anonymously authored 'Corpse of the Jury' published in *Voodoo* #5 in 1953. In Krigstein's comic, a Belsen survivor confronts and then witnesses the death of a former death camp commander in a New York subway. In 'Corpse of the Jury' a former concentration camp commander is flayed alive by the ghosts of the prisoners he killed. The representation of the persecution of Jews under Nazi rule is somewhat sanitized in these comics (the number of dead in 'Corpse of the Jury', for example, is no more than twelve), but they nonetheless represent one of the earliest American Holocaust narratives in any medium.[x]

'Master Race' and 'Corpse of the Jury' were the first comics to address the Holocaust directly, but the spectre of the *Shoah* appears in the genre much earlier. Horror comics frequently featured trains filled with skeletons (see, for example, 'Midnight Limited', which appeared in *Witches Tales* #16 in 1952c), obliquely referencing the means by which people were transported to the death camps. 'Corpses… Coast to Coast!' from *Voodoo* #14 (1954b), expanded upon this idea, imagining an entire industry devoted to the creation and distribution of corpses. Such comics seemed to critique the growth of American industry by pointing, inadvertently, to the use of the factory model to carry out the most terrible genocide in human history.

Horror comics were not only concerned with events overseas, they also commented indirectly upon the effects of war at home. Schoell notes the "appallingly sexist" nature of many of the representations of women found across the genre (Schoell, 2014, 40). Women are often murdered or 'punished' within the narrative for acts of deviance (generally failing to show sufficient subservience to men, usually through being an inattentive or overly-demanding wife or girlfriend). Women who exercise power, typically through a criminal organization, supernatural means, or seductive charm, are particularly likely to suffer (often tacitly sexual) violence. This can be seen as an unconscious illustration of Elaine Tyler May's argument that "profound connections existed among anxieties over sexual roles, the Cold War," and the ideologies of 'traditional' family roles being forcefully advocated across American society through popular culture (May, 1989, 155). Horror comics contributed to a discourse of sexual containment by locating women within the frame of the male gaze and simultaneously subjecting them to violence. This can be seen to unconsciously reproduce traditional gender roles (the active male who bears the gaze and commits violent acts vs. the passive female who is the object and subject of both) as "a source of stability in the face of trauma," and also to enact "a historical narrative of forgetting, where victimization replaces responsibility for aggression" (Lowenstein, 2005, 86). Horror comics are actually more complex here as gendered violence is certainly reproduced as a method of socio-political containment, but also as a legacy of the role of American men in perpetrating such violence during World War II. The archetypal horror comics cover shows a buxom woman in a state of undress recoiling in fear from a monster. In many cases (as with the *Ghost Comics* #6 cover shown below), female characters were depicted with arched backs and parted lips - poses that suggest both pain and sexual climax.

[Fig. 5]
Ghost Comics #6

In many cases, the comics would deliver on the promise made on the cover, often, as with 'The Snow Beasts' which appeared in *Tomb of Terror* #4, playing out (or, at least, heavily implying) crypto-zoological rape (1952e).

[Fig. 6]
'Snow Beasts'

Horror comics were not necessarily unique in their fixation upon the imperiled woman. Michael R. Lavin argues that bondage was a consistent theme in comics of all genres in the 1950s. Such images would be familiar to many comics readers; in the 1940s run of William Moulton Marston and Harry Peter on *Wonder Woman*, Tim Hanley argues, as many as 27% of the panels featuring a character being tied up (Lavin, 1998, 93-100; Hanley, 2014; Berlatsky, 2014). What made horror (and crime) comics different from superhero comics, Lavin argues, is that while superhero narratives repeatedly enact a scenario of bondage and emancipation (often, in *Wonder Woman* with the titular character freeing herself), in horror (and crime) titles female characters remain imprisoned or, more often, end up dead.

In part, the misogyny of the horror genre can be read as a backlash against the apparent wartime empowerment of women. During World War II able-bodied men were recruited to fight, leaving a large gap in the employment market. Women filled that gap, leaving the home to work in factories, warehouses, and offices (Chafe, 1991). In the postwar environment many men saw women's presence in the workplace as a threat and, in part, the misogyny of the horror genre can be read as a response to that fear. Pearl James states that

> Female bodies signify the most abject wounds and deaths in wartime. Images of women function as a governing, organising paradox in many wartime and postwar narratives. On the one hand, women seem immune to and ignorant of war's realities; at the same time, those realities seem to find clearest expression when they are imagined as happening to women (James, 2013, 6-7)

Horror comics offered a space in which the violence of war could be acted out on the bodies of women; this can be seen as a response to the dual challenges to masculinity mounted by the bodily threats posed by combat and the social threat posed by women moving into traditionally male spaces. Mediation of these fears through horror comics and the new forms of expression they offered attests to the "preposterousness of trying to speak of modern war within the bounds of traditional language and while respecting cultural prudery," simultaneously pushing boundaries of taste and acceptability while reinforcing notions of men as active and women as passive (James, 2013, 6).

The treatment of women in horror comics can also be read as an attempt to critique the ideal promised by the pinup by recognising the reality of women as victims of war. The pinup girl, perhaps the most iconic among them being Betty Grable, was a regular feature in the lives of American servicemen during World War II. The pinup is, Despina Kakoudaki argues, a "representation of sensual innocence" and an "embodiment of patriotic values" (Kakoudaki, 2004, 335). The pinup girl codified heterosexual coupling into wartime propaganda, encouraging men to play the role of protector and guardian of women. The

pinup girl promised sex, a utopian America, and a world untouched by war to which the serviceman, provided he has done his duty, might one day return. The pinup girl is also intimately associated with the violence of war through the practice of painting images of such women on the cockpits of airplanes in alluring poses. Such poses are reproduced in horror comics, and the violence done to these desirable female bodies demonstrates the pervasive nature of the pinup girl in American culture, but also tensions around the mythology of war as a wholly male concern.[xi]

Even as the pinup positioned women beyond the reaches of warfare, as every American serviceman stationed overseas was aware, women numbered among the victims of World War II. Sexual violence was a grotesquely routine means by which invading soldiers both asserted and celebrated the acquisition of territory. German soldiers raped Jewish women when they entered the Soviet Union and, in apparent (and entirely misplaced) retaliation, Soviet troops participated in mass rapes as they entered Germany (Messerschmidt, 2006, 706-712; Burds, 2009). Japanese soldiers, famously, participated in mass rapes in the Chinese city of Nanjing and forced Korean, Chinese, Filipino and other women into sexual slavery as 'comfort women.' Women, acting as nurses, also died on the battlefield, and in attacks on civilian populations. In horror comics, then, the repeated depiction of violence against women can be read as a means to bring the weight of war to bear upon the mythology of the pinup. It is a rejection of the promise of a world unaffected by war, an unconscious testimony to the fact that society and its roles and structures cannot simply be turned back or the destruction of war forgotten.

The depiction of women as victims of wartime violence often coincides with other narratives concerning disenfranchised groups. Horror comics frequently featured prototypical anti-racist or socially aware stories. One of the most celebrated examples of an anti-racist narrative is 'The Whipping' from *Shock SuspenStories* #14 (1954), where a bigoted father opposed to his daughter's relationship with a young Mexican man arranges a lynch mob to kill him – only to accidentally kill his own daughter (Feldstein 1954). A glance through other issues of *Shock SuspenStories*, published by EC and one of the most notorious titles discussed at the subcommittee hearings of 1954, indicates an ongoing commitment to racial equality, alongside a critique of the prevailing political atmosphere. In 'The Patriots!' for example, a war veteran, blinded while serving his country, is beaten to death by an anti-communist mob when he fails to remove his cap to salute the American flag (Feldstein, 1952).[xii] One potential causal factor for racially aware material is the burgeoning Civil Rights movement, though it must be remembered that, because horror comics almost entirely ceased to be published after 1954 thanks to the implementation of the Comics Code Authority, the genre was unable to engage with the later, more widespread and energized politics of race in America.[xiii]

The pervasive nature and popularity of horror could not help but attract the attention of censorious critics who saw the trend as part of a wider issue in American youth culture. In 1954 comics publishers and critics met at the Senate subcommittee hearing on Juvenile Delinquency, just as Senator Joe McCarthy began his ill-fated hearing into communism in the US Armed Forces.[xiv] The hearing on comics, then, was part of the high water mark of the domestic process of containment, the internal application of a principle from American foreign policy. Comics never had a chance in these hearings; they were positioned as un-

American, as a force promoting deviance, immorality, and communism. The persuasive testimony of Dr. Fredric Wertham, star witness at the trial and author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) as well as a series of widely-circulated articles, easily overpowered those defending the industry.[xv] Bill Gaines, publisher of EC Comics, was a notable casualty; unable to counter the moralistic tone of his interrogators, Gaines was ultimately forced out of the comics industry all together. In response to the hearings, comics publishers agreed to self-regulate through the Comics Code Authority – a set of criteria concerning comics content. The CCA forbade the depiction of, among other things, werewolves and vampires and collectively made the publication of horror comics impossible.[xvi]

The success of Wertham and the failure of Gaines can best be understood through Stanley Cohen's work on moral panics. Cohen identifies five stages of a moral panic, which map neatly onto the horror comics crisis of the 1950s: first, prevalent concerns about the imagined threat, which can certainly be seen at this juncture; second, hostility towards the source of the threat, in this case the publishers of horror comics, as evident through the vilification of Gaines; third, the existence of a consensus, reinforced by the mass media, that the threat exists and that action must be taken to remedy it, action which is evident in the subcommittee hearings and the formation of the Comics Code Authority; fourth, disproportionality in the reporting of the threat and its potential to harm society and its constituents, in this case specifically children and, as a result, the future ability of the US to resist communist penetration, or their increased susceptibility to sexual practices seen as deviant, such as sado-masochism or homosexuality; fifth, volatility, where a panic swiftly reaches a climax and is forgotten just as quickly (Cohen 2011, xxvi-xxvii; for a specific discussion of the application of Cohen's approach to horror comics see Springhall, 1999). The fury of public opinion, first seen in mass comic book burnings in 1948, was thus turned against horror comics through a series of editorials and agitation, resulting in huge changes in the comics industry as a whole (Goodrum, 2016, 46-7). With comics apparently cowed, the restless anxiety of the 1950s and its attempts to contain social challenges moved on to the next scandal.

The comics that remained after the imposition of the code contained virtually nothing that could upset anyone. The Comics Code of 1954 ruled out the ongoing publication of crime and horror series while also establishing new criteria on what could be represented in comic books. Regulations restricted the representation of women, respected institutions such as law enforcement, the government, and marriage, and, most importantly, codified the idea that comic books were read solely by children. Under the auspices of the Comics Code Authority, comics no longer posed the same apparent level of threat as emergent cultural forms such as rock n' roll music. Projects of social critique aimed at the large audience of more mature readers, many of which could be found during the early 1950s, were therefore ruled out. In order to escape further censure, comics became what their critics had always imagined they were: something purely for children. The brief, grotesque, bloom of the horror comic, however, requires further consideration, given its ability to work through the significant trauma of the past and anxieties about the present and future in complex and detailed ways.

Despite the potential for reinforcement of underlying conventional morality, Martin Barker states in his analysis of the British campaign against horror comic-books that "there was not

a single defence" offered on their behalf (Barker 1984, 19). George H. Pumphrey, a contemporary British critic, certainly felt that horror comics were irredeemable, that they contributed to acts of delinquency and caused a retardation of reading ability (Pumphrey, 1955). It is not quite true to say that no defence was offered in the US - the industry itself did begin to respond to the charges against it. In an editorial in *Adventures into the Unknown* #60, the editor actually praised the campaign against horror comic-books, remarking that "such protest is constructive we feel – save where it attempts to condemn the entire realm of comics because of the sins of the few" (Schoell, 2014, 11). 'The few' is something of an underestimation of the state of the industry at this time, a rhetorical device employed to shift blame to other rogue companies with no respect for what might be termed basic American values – the very ideas that would subsequently be set out in the Comics Code of 1954 following Bill Gaines' failed attempts to defend the industry at the Senate subcommittee hearings (*Hearings* 1955, 97-109). His comments, although perceptive, did not convince the committee:

> We print our crime news. We don't think that the crime news or any news should be banned because it is bad for children. Once you start to censor you must censor everything. You must censor comic books, radio, television, and newspapers. Then you must censor what people may say. Then you will have turned this country into Spain or Russia (*Hearings,* 1955, 100).

Wertham himself saw comics as part of a broader problem with representations of violence in society, but Gaines' attempt to put American culture in the dock instead of comics was unsuccessful.[xvii] Gaines' next ploy, to commission a new study into comics and their effects, was rejected by his fellow publishers who opted for self-regulation in compliance with the tone of the hearings in order to save what they could of their industry.

Horror comics, then, were demonized and misunderstood. Despite the fact that campaigners claimed that horror comics corrupted the morals of their young readers, narratives often conform to horror tropes of punishing those who transgress moral boundaries.[xviii] From the beginnings of the horror genre, beneath the gore and tales of the undead, is a relatively conventional moral framework that ensures the guilty are punished and do not benefit from their crimes. Mark Jancovich notes a critical consensus that horror of the 1950s "presumes a natural order which must not be disrupted or transgressed" before critiquing that notion by showing how horror can have more radical potential (Jancovich, 1996, 12). As the representations of racial equality, trauma, and political commentary certainly demonstrates, horror comics are certainly more complex than straightforward morality tales.[xix]

Questions remain as to how readers responded to these narratives and images. A contemporary account of horror and crime comic-books states that "a sense of reality is not one of the distinguishing marks of this brand of literature," yet much of the storm around them was motivated by critics' fear that readers would reproduce events they had seen ('Horror Comics' 1954c, 1042; Coates, 1955). That creative teams intended things to be read in a certain way does not mean they were necessarily received that way by all readers. In fact, Fredric Wertham, the most prominent contemporary critic of horror and crime comic-books, states that the industry responded to his attacks on comic morality by

"pointing with pride to the 'moral' lesson imprinted on many crime comics" (Wertham, 1955a, 98). Wertham argues that comics glamourize crime through the balance between the representation of crime and its rewards and its inevitable punishment. As criminals prosper until the last couple of panels, when they are usually tried and executed or go down in a hail of bullets, the glorification of their crimes significantly outweighs their punishment, which occupies so little space it could easily be overlooked; though justice may come as the end, it is a justice marginalized by the text it allegedly concludes. Horror comics, however, are different to crime comics. Both the wrongdoing and the outcome are generally depicted in equal detail, suggesting that readers came to these texts because they were gory, not for the promise of a narrative closure with a moral epiphany. This is borne out in Schoell's oft-made observation that horror narratives are generally weak, relying on spectacle as a technique for securing closure rather than intricate plotting.

Ultimately, Gaines' sought to defend his profits rather than his ideals. As Trombetta remarks, "the success of horror comics… had nothing to do with politics, idealism, or the artistic avant-garde; it had to do with money," and this remained a potent motivator for publishers (Trombetta, 2010, 31). However, Trombetta goes on to say that horror comic-books were "genuinely and brazenly subversive in a way that might not even be possible today," largely due to the fact that every value, every ideal, held dear by middle class America was shown to be questioned in their pages (Trombetta, 2010, 31).[xx] In this approach, publishers can be seen to have deliberately courted controversy both to make money and to rebel against the conformity of the time. Images certainly did call values into question, and while some horror comics pushed boundaries further than others, there is a general underlying trend towards the restoration of order; horror comic narratives punish transgression. In this way, horror comics of the 1950s mediated Jancovich's description of the political climate more broadly, where "difference was defined as a failure to adjust to reality, and was either prevented or punished" (Jancovich, 1996, 110). More work needs to be done to tease out the complexities of the genre and its relation to contemporary socio-political conditions, as well as to other forms of media in the period. As the US tried to define what it should be and how it should act in the Cold War climate of the 1950s, horror comics spattered body parts, and unconscious anxieties, across the cultural landscape. The Senate subcommittee hearings of 1954 may have silenced their voice, but not before they had uttered many compelling truths.

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[i] Bradford Wright (2002), like many other critics, attributes the origins of the genre to EC in 1950, the year *Tales from the Crypt*, *Vault of Horror*, and *The Haunt of Fears* began publication.

[ii] The most useful aspect of this book is Schoell's meticulous documentation of the publishers and series that constituted the horror comic industry.

[iii] There is often some cross categorisation in these two genres, and films such as *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* [1954], and indeed the other contemporary 'monster movies', are often attributed to both genres.

[iv] Horror and crime comics were often put together due to the level of violence involved in both genres. Trombetta includes non-supernatural comics describing crimes, such as the kidnapping of a child, in his study of the horror genre.

[v] A last hurrah for Captain Marvel before Fawcett ceased publication of comics saw him enter the horror field; Captain America embarked on a similar, and similarly unsuccessful, project in 1949 when the series was rebranded as *Captain America's Weird Tales* for issues 74-5, prior to ceasing publication. That this was seen as a potential strategy for reviving popularity demonstrates that the horror trend had begun before 1950.

[vi] See, for instance, William M. Tsutsui (2007). For *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, see Jerome F. Shapiro (1998). For a broader analysis of horror and science fiction cinema in the 1950s, with occasional references to the ways in which horror comics contribute to the contemporary climate of production, see Mark Jancovich (1996).

[vii] This could also engage with the contentious topic of 'Amerasians', children born to American servicemen while stationed in Asia, many of whom faced social stigma in their country of birth and as a result sought to emigrate to the US (Gage 2007; for an account of similar stigma in Europe, see Biddiscombe 2001).

[viii] There is a familial connection between *I am Legend* and the horror comics genre. The book was published by Gold Medal Books, the paperback arm of Fawcett Publications, which was also the publisher of the Captain Marvel family of comics and horror series such as *Strange Suspense Stories*, which deliberately drew on EC titles and style.

[ix] Both of these themes are clearly seen in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), a William Wyler film narrating the experience of three returning veterans (Kaiman 2003, 32-42; Silverman 1992, 65-90).

[x] For more on 'Master Race' and its influence on the Pulitzer-winning comic *Maus,* see Art Spiegelman (1999).

[xi] Film noir, another genre enjoying its peak of popularity in the 1940s and early 1950s, explored similar territory and representations (Brookes 2017).

[xii] There were similar stories in issues 3 ('The Guilty!'), where a sheriff kills a black man accused of a murder by the white man who actually committed it. In issue 6, in 'Under Cover!' a reporter is killed by the Ku Klux Klan. In issue 11 in the story 'In Gratitude…', a black soldier who sacrificed himself to save his white friend in the Korean War is refused burial in his hometown's churchyard. In issue 13, 'Blood-Brothers', a racist discovers his life was saved by a blood transfusion from a black man. In issue 16, in 'The Hazing', a student accuses an unpopular professor of being a communist in order to join a fraternity and in 'A Kind of Justice', an African American vagrant is accused of sexually abusing a teenage girl and is beaten to death, when the real perpetrator is revealed as the town's sheriff.

[xiii] In a strange twist of fate, Wertham, who completely misunderstood 'The Whipping' and used it to support his thesis that horror comics were racist, was actually recruited by the NAACP as an advisor to one of the cases that made up *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), which eventually led to the desegregation of schools in the US. See the testimony of Dr Fredric Wertham, *Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-third Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to S. 190* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954, 87. Wertham talks of a girl being whipped and a man looking satisfied – which he is, until he discovers he has killed his daughter. Examples such as this show some of the flaws in Wertham's methods of analysis, such as taking images out of context. Bill Gaines pointed out Wertham's mistake in his own testimony, 99-100.

[xiv] For a full discussion of the hearings, see Amy Kiste Nyberg (1998). For a detailed consideration of Joe McCarthy, see David M. Oshinsky (1983). For broader overviews of the 1950s, see Gilbert (1986) Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes (eds) (2000). An excellent introduction to Cold War culture more broadly can be found in Stephen J. Whitfield (1991).

[xv] Wertham is one of the most discussed, and most misunderstood, figures in Comics Studies. Curious readers would do well to consult his work themselves, most prominently *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955), and 'It's Still Murder' (1955) though some of his earlier work is also worthy of attention, such as 'The Comics… Very Funny' (1948). For the most comprehensive, and most balanced, account of Wertham, see Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (2005).

[xvi] The full transcript of the hearings has been scanned and made available online. It can be found here: https://archive.org/details/juveniledelinque54unit, last accessed 5 January 2017.

[xvii] Wertham had written about the problem of representations of violence at length in *The Show of Violence* (1949).

[xviii] This has become such a common theme that it is now the subject of postmodern self-parody in films such as *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), which establishes the basic premise of most horror films, the death of young people, as a sacrifice to ancient gods: one of those organizing the sacrifice remarks that "they have to make the choice of their own free will, otherwise the system doesn't work… If they don't transgress, they can't be punished" (*Cabin in the Woods* 2012).

[xix] There are exceptions to the idea of horror comics as a means of punishing immoral behaviour, as in the famous case of 'The Orphan' from *Shock SuspenStories* #14, where a young girl kills her alcoholic father and

neglectful mother so that she can live with an aunt instead. This story was met with considerable disfavor at the subcommittee hearings (*Hearings* 1955, 86; Feldstein 1954). The girl's is not the only transgression here, though, and it is worth noting how blame for her actions is attached to inadequate parenting, suggesting that parents and cultural guardians were also at fault for the perceived rise in juvenile delinquency. The thrill for readers was undoubtedly in witnessing the details of wrongdoing, whether characters are striking bargains with the devil or taking an axe to their wife, but these actions are confined and contained by the narratives in which they appear, with escape from the tedium of 1950s conformity fleeting and punishment for it enduring. Martin Barker remarks that "it is almost as though the very horror medium is unstable, tending to slide either into impoverished weird tales, or into a very parody of itself," where comics reproduce basic generic conventions for diminishing returns, or expose those very conventions, and the culture that underpins them, to sustained critique (Barker 1984, 133). While some horror comics consciously set out to interrogate contemporary values and socio-political structures, many focused on the primary purpose of horror comics – gratifying the reader's desires for some terrible thrills, both through the texts themselves and their conspicuous consumption as an apparently countercultural product.

[xx] *MAD*, Gaines' noted satirical comic, became a magazine in order to escape the Comics Code Authority.