ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	DISINFORMATION THAT ENTERTAINS: THE ALT-RIGHT'S USE OF POPULAR AND POLITICAL CULTURE STRATEGIES
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This project takes seriously the nested relationship of popular culture and political culture, highlighting how that relationship has promulgated alt-right disinformation in the long Trump era. Throughout this study, strategies of conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles are examined, as well as considering audiovisual concepts like realism and mimesis. Such alt-right disinformation establishes reactionary frames of racism, misogyny, and anti-governance. This work looks at both sides of the popular/political culture relationship, examining cinematic films, political campaign advertisements, and social media posts. I conclude by offering satire as one potential counterstrategy against alt-right disinformation that also resides in the nested relationship between popular and political culture.

DISINFORMATION THAT ENTERTAINS: THE ALT-RIGHT'S USE OF POPULAR AND POLITICAL CULTURE STRATEGIES

by

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Dedication

To Forrest and Skye, who only meowed at me for attention every couple of pages throughout the process of writing this dissertation.

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The road to this dissertation has been a long one, but a road that was made undeniably easier by my family, friends, mentors, teachers, and colleagues. With that in mind, I first and foremost want to thank my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Shawn J. Parry-Giles. I can't even begin to count the number of semi-panicked emails I have sent to Shawn that always seemed to be miraculously responded to within the hour, regardless of how late or early my email was sent. Shawn's expertise, guidance, and friendship throughout my entire Ph.D. journey, and especially my dissertation writing, were essential to my success and achievements along the way, culminating in this work. Her extensive knowledge relating to rhetoric, politics, and media were unparalleled, as were her always constructive comments on my writing idiosyncrasies. I will always cherish our meetings, where topics ranged from the academic projects we were working on to pets, Big Brother, and whatever frustrating things our sports teams had done that week. Choosing Shawn as my advisor five years ago was the best decision I made in this program.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is fitting, perhaps, to broach the centerpiece of this project with an example from Peter Wehner's article in the *Atlantic*, titled, "The Moral Inversion of the Republican Party." Wehner somewhat curiously begins this article not with a discussion of Republican Party tactics, or current political events, or even real-world events. Rather, he begins with a discussion of an episode from the original *Star Trek* series. Wehner retells the episode in which a supercomputer, M-5, is created to control the USS Enterprise without human assistance. That supercomputer control goes haywire, as one of the members of the Enterprise crew bemoans that the machine has no off switch. Wehner goes on to suggest, "In the wake of Donald Trump's insane conspiracy theory that his 'landslide' election victory was stolen from him . . . it is belatedly dawning on more than a few Republicans that they risk being devoured by the forces they placed in control. And they are discovering to their horror that there's no off switch."[1]

I highlight this example for two reasons. First, I believe Wehner's assessment of disinformation and conspiracy is accurate: once it is put out into the public, it is hard if not impossible to "turn off." Second, and potentially most important to this project, it is notable that in order to make that point, Wehner relies on references to popular culture to explain the intricacies of our current political landscape. Indeed, popular culture and its genres can function as a heuristic for audiences by which they are able to better understand political culture, much like how Wehner used popular culture in his article to help better explain a political culture phenomenon.[2] Certainly,

these allusions to popular culture can be benign ways we communicate, or even helpful illustrations. Yet, Michael X. Delli Carpini provides insight on the nefarious conflation of government and entertainment messaging, suggesting that "increasingly the potential power of entertainment media has not been lost on those interested in influencing the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of citizens."[3] Accordingly, the relationship between popular culture and political culture can wield either admirable or nefarious ends. With this backdrop in mind, I aim to illustrate in this project how the nestings of popular culture in political culture and political culture in popular culture have been used to fuel disinformation campaigns during the long Trump era (2014-2024) via strategies of conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles.

One of the increasingly common insults flung between the major U.S. political parties is that the opposition has lost "touch with reality."[4] At times, this just seems to be political conjecture. At other times, there seems to be some legitimacy to those accusations. The alt-right's alignment with QAnon is an example of this, where "QAnon is the umbrella term for a set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles."[5] One particularly odd example of QAnon in action was a rally held by conservative QAnon supporters in Dallas, Texas, where hundreds of supporters showed up on the grassy knoll overlooking where John F. Kennedy had been killed, expecting Kennedy's son, John F. Kennedy Jr., to appear and "to become Donald Trump's vice president when the former president is reinstated."[6] Of course, this "prophecy" did not come to fruition for a host of reasons, chief of which being that John F. Kennedy Jr. has been

dead for more than 20 years.[7] This is just one of countless examples of how disinformation has come to impact the political scene.

At times, some more establishment politicians have chosen to rhetorically push back against the growing, disillusioned sects of their party and constituents. For example, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) called out Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), one of the most active spreaders of disinformation within the Republican Party. McConnell suggested that her "Looney lies and conspiracy theories are cancer for the Republican party and our country."[8] McConnell's rebuke, however, seems to be more of an exception to the rule as Republican leaders in the past "have been mostly silent" in the case of Greene, Trump, and other prolific propagators of alt-right disinformation.[9] However, these "Looney lies" are not just looney like the JFK Jr. incident. They can have very dangerous and violent outcomes in our democracy. This work discusses some of those instances more in depth as it attempts to grapple with this rhetorical blurring of popular and political culture.

Many political commentators and academics play the blame game over who or what is to blame for the continuing spread of disinformation and its violent, damaging outcomes. Many blame demagogic politicians.[10] Some blame network news stations, suggesting Fox News functions "as party propaganda organ" as it relates to Trump and disinformation.[11] Still others suggest a connection between online personalities and this reborn right-wing populist nationalism, such as Alex Jones and Infowars.[12] With that, others note that social media itself is susceptible to disinformation (although they do chart potential avenues for combatting such

disinformation).[13] Likely, all of these and countless other factors contribute to the past and current state of disinformation affairs. I instead focus here on the reciprocal nesting of popular and political culture and how such a conflation is used to propagate disinformation.

To that end, two assumptions inform this project. First, I propose that popular culture and political culture have been and are deeply intertwined, such that it is a Herculean task to meaningfully separate the two. This is not necessarily a new claim, although there is disagreement. Some, such as Roderick P. Hart, suggest that the intermixing of popular and political culture is a new phenomenon that began with television, while John Street argues that the two have always been connected.[14] I take the latter viewpoint. I argue that this nested connection is often substantiated through concepts of realism and mimesis. Through these cinematic and visual techniques, popular culture is used either directly (references to specific franchises, films, etc.) or indirectly through generic conventions (audiovisual and narrative elements of a genre) by political actors.[15] This works to bolden the nested connections between popular and political culture and spread such disinformation. Accordingly, this project looks at both popular and political culture texts just before, during, and after the Trump presidency. I suggest that conspiracy, horror, and dog-whistle politics are common accompaniments to rhetorics of disinformation when popular and political culture intersect. What follows is a literature review of these key topics.

The remainder of my introduction proceeds in four main parts. First, I address theories related to the study of disinformation. Next, I highlight the notions of popular culture and political culture, defining each, noting their similarities, and explaining

through the concept of "nesting" how both are separably definable in theory but inseparably related in practice. From there, I focus on three rhetorical strategies often found in such disinformation campaigns: horror, conspiracy theories, and dog-whistle politics. I end with a preview of the details of this study.

Disinformation

"Disinformation" is an extremely tricky term to properly define. For one, the term has found its way into popular vocabularies as more and more people have recognized its prevalence in contemporary politics. This proliferation of the term has simultaneously led to a proliferation of definitions: many authors have attempted to define the term in slightly different ways, emphasizing unique elements depending on the purpose of their study. Further, there is deeper confusion when one recognizes the distinct but closely related term "misinformation." Some authors prefer one term over the other. Others have tried to make distinctions between the two that are either arbitrary or difficult to delineate. Nevertheless, an understanding of the ways these terms have been defined, with a focus on common themes and key distinctions, is essential to establish a connection between this work and previous scholarship. Once I offer representative definitions, I outline some of the theoretical difficulties these definitions face before elaborating the definition that will guide this project.

The European Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation attempted to define disinformation in a way that advises policy initiatives designed to counter disinformation's spread. The commission found "disinformation" to be, "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit."[16]

This definition, which Deen Freelon and Chris Wells also promote in their special issue on the subject in *Political Communication*,[17] brings "all forms of false" information meant to harm under one definitional umbrella.[18] However, this definition does not seem to account for disinformation's highly related sibling term, misinformation. As such, writing more from a scientific perspective, Shanto Iyengar and Douglas S. Massey define disinformation and misinformation distinctly. They argue that disinformation and misinformation are overlapping but unique forms of misleading information. For them, misinformation is "false or misleading information put into circulation to cause alarm and confusion."[19] Disinformation, on the other hand, is defined as "false information that is circulated with the intention to deceive."[20] Iyengar and Massey find a distinction between those information practices intended to deceive and those that cause alarm and confusion. However, I believe such a distinction is slippery, as information can often move among all three outcomes—deception, confusion, and alarm—depending on the audience receiving that information.

While deception, confusion, and alarm can be the ends of disinformation and misinformation, other authors look more at the means of these tactics. Calin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall provide a definition of misinformation targeted at these means when defining its intent as undermining "reliable evidence."[21] This definition can act as a link between misinformation and its end goals, but this conception leaves the larger impact of such misinformation vague. Such a disruption of reliable evidence would likely lead to deception, confusion, and panic, whether that was the intended outcome or not.

There is also a common element of fringe ideas embedded in disinformation and misinformation that causes concern because these ideas are presented as mainstream ideas. Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove argue just that, "disinformation" campaigns derive "from relatively fringe sites into much broader circulation."[22] As such, ideas that would typically be rejected by major portions of society are given false credence via disinformation campaigns.

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhsan take the distinction between misinformation and disinformation in a different direction based entirely around intentionality and falsehood. Instead of defining both with different intentions to harm, they find that misinformation "is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true." On the other hand, disinformation "is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors."[23] While this conceptually makes sense, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether or not an actor "believes" in what they are spreading.

Many other authors' definitions incorporate elements of intentionality as well. W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston explicitly include such an element of intent in their definition of disinformation, arguing that it is "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals."[24] James W. Cortada and William Aspray similarly use intentionality as the crux by which they distinguish disinformation from misinformation. For them, misinformation "is used to describe information that is false, whether or not it was known to be false when it was spread."[25] Conversely, disinformation "is false

information that was known to be false when it was spread."[26] This definition is incredibly similar to Wardle and Derakhsan, but exchanges "belief" for "knowledge." Nevertheless, these definitions of disinformation steeped in intentionality would imply that those deploying these strategies have immediate and nefarious, instrumental goals that they are trying to accomplish through their rhetorical deceptions.

Bringing up instrumental goals also begs the question of effect. Intent and effect are often thorny issues that can be difficult to establish, both separately and in their interactions with one another. When conducting a rhetorical analysis of such texts, it is important not to try too heavily to parse these issues but rather to focus on the instrumental and constitutive rhetorics at play in and around a text. Instrumental rhetoric tends to focus on the immediate rhetorical goals of a rhetor on the intended audience, creating what James Jasinski calls an "intentional potential."[27] On the other hand, constitutive rhetoric highlights how audiences shape and potentially distort or amplify rhetorical messages "without necessarily sharing in the intentions of the author or speaker."[28] Such a dichotomy can impact how one assesses the culpability of a rhetor. In other words, was the disinformation spread by a text an example of instrumental rhetoric or was it a by-product that the original rhetor lost control of in the constitutive process?[29]

This creates a larger definitional and methodological issue: how does one assess intent and whether a rhetor knew or believed they were lying? For many public address projects, this would require extensive archival work. That is especially true for a project such as this that deals at least in part with disinformation and the

presidency, where presidential libraries can provide an abundance of letters, drafts, and other documents that might go toward evidencing a speaker's intent.[30] Given this study's focus on contemporary rhetorics, the Trump presidency, and recent campaigns, there are no traditional archival resources like a Trump Presidential Library yet established. This is only compounded in other portions of this research that focus on senators, representatives, filmmakers, etc. who sometimes provide even less archival access to their innerworkings. As such, traditional archival work is less applicable to this project, making determinations of intent across the various texts of analysis difficult to confirm.

Beyond practical constraints surrounding determinations of intent, there is a deeper philosophical issue that undergirds all accounts of disinformation and misinformation: how does one establish truth and falsehood? Every definition of disinformation and misinformation assumes a certain level of falsity or misleading quality of the information being presented. That assumption then relies on an even deeper assumption: that there is such a thing as objective truth. Cortada and Aspray also recognize this problem inherent to studies of disinformation and misinformation. In their work, they identify two different ways of defining truth. The first is derived from the Enlightenment and assumes that facts are "regarded as true either because of their logical form or because of empirical evidence, which can be gained through observation or experimentation."[31] Cortada and Aspray trace the other understanding of truth to Friedrich Nietzsche and his position that truth is socially constructed. Indeed, Nietzsche defines truths as "illusions which we have forgotten are illusions." Further, these illusions "have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred,

and embellished."[32] However, there is a middle ground between these two extremes that is expressed by Emile Durkheim, who contrasts social facts with physical phenomena.[33] Durkheim's distinction can be useful if one wishes to believe in the truth of something like gravity while still recognizing the constructiveness of social truths (which, nevertheless, possess real force like gravity).[34] Yet, this does not bring us any closer to a falsifiable account of facts or lies, let alone actor intentionality.

For this work, I have decided to take a different approach from many past iterations of studies regarding disinformation. Instead of focusing on distinctions between disinformation and misinformation, I integrate the meanings of both terms into the concept of disinformation that I define as the promulgation of misleading information that contradicts logically grounded views without evidence or sound reasoning and relies on public fear, harm, deception, and/or chaos in the service of maintaining relations of domination. This definition synthesizes elements of previous scholarly definitions as well as incorporates "relations of domination."[35] To understand these relations of domination, I draw on John B. Thompson's definition of ideology, in which he claims ideology "is meaning in the service of power."[36] Thompson argues that ideology involves the mobilization of "meaning . . . for the maintenance of relations of domination."[37] As such, Thompson traces the etymology of his definition to the history of "the negative, critical sense" of ideology.[38]

Thompson suggests three critical benefits to understanding ideology in a critical light, and I incorporate that tradition into my conception of disinformation. First, Thompson uses the critical view to challenge the notion that ideology forms consensus by establishing shared values and norms, as there is little evidence

ideology functions in such a way. Rather, Thompson focuses ideology on the "maintenance of relations of domination," which can occur at more localized levels than sweeping societal claims made by others in relation to ideology.[39] Second, Thompson denies thinking of certain systems as inherently ideological (e.g., liberalism, conservatism, communism).[40] Instead, these systems are judged on their relation to the maintenance of power and domination, which can mean a certain system can be thought of "as ideological in one context and as radical, subversive in another."[41] This second advantage is uniquely suited for rhetorical scholars in that it requires an understanding of the socio-historical context of the text of analysis and it avoids Stuckey's critique of unjustified, "ideologically bound" criticism, which might critique a politician not for their specific actions but solely for their political affiliation.[42] Accordingly, a conservative would not be criticized simply for being conservative or a liberal criticized for simply being liberal. Rather, by looking at rhetorical texts in their contexts, we are able to ascertain how Trump's actions and other's specific rhetorical acts were done in service of maintaining relations of domination.

This ideological approach also helps to avoid the two criticisms I outlined above: intentionality and truth. Intentionality is a moot issue when determining if an action was ideological or not. As Stuart Hall argues, "in the critical paradigm, ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent."[43] As such, it is not relevant if Trump or other actors intended to spread disinformation. Rather, what is important is if the discourse functioned as disinformation and perpetuated asymmetrical systems of power.

On the issue of truth, a critical understanding of ideology also benefits us. Thompson notes this advantage when addressing how his conception of ideology interacts with the real. Indeed, Thompson argues that we should not look at ideology as an obscuring of "some ethereal other world which stands opposed to what is real." Instead, ideology's symbolic forms "are partially constitutive of what in our societies, 'is real.'"[44] As such, this articulation of ideology as being in the service of power and domination allows us to acknowledge issues pertaining to illusion and realism without falling down a rabbit hole of parsing the real from illusion. As Thompson argues, it does not really matter if there is a firm, undeniable "real." What matters is what we as a society have determined to be real, and this determination is constituted by actions, symbols, and words. As such, an ideological understanding of power and domination's role in disinformation is less concerned with any objective, falsifiable truths or lies, but instead is focused on how actors promulgate ideas and theories that go against what has logically been determined as "real" and instead promote ideas and theories that lack evidence and defy logic. This notion of "the real" becomes even more complicated as one endeavors to examine the connections between popular culture and political culture.

Popular Culture and Political Culture

I will first define popular culture and political culture before addressing the ways in which the lines between them blur. John Street argues that popular culture represents a "desire to entertain rather than inform."[45] In a traditional sense then, political culture can be thought of as the inverse: a desire to inform, particularly on issues of governance, policy, campaigning, and the like. In this simplistic understanding of two

mostly separate spheres of popular and political culture, the haunts of political culture are "the extended family, the political party, the trade union, the church and so on."[46] Popular culture in turn is often thought of as what is seen on television, in movie theaters, and increasingly in video games, online platforms, and more. Some then take this separate-spheres position and argue that substantial overlap between popular and political culture is a detriment to democratic institutions.[47]

Indeed, if one believes in a mythical past where there was a stark division between popular and political culture, the current state of affairs where entertainment runs rampant in politics and politics runs rampant in entertainment would be inconceivable. Scholars like Roderick P. Hart have made claims along these lines, such as, "Television has changed politics itself." Hart also shows the influence of each on the other when he suggests that, "In addition to forcing politics into popular culture, television encourages movement in the opposite direction."[48] Robert D. Putnam has famously argued that "the effect of electronic entertainment—above all, television—in privatizing our leisure time . . . might account for perhaps 25 percent of the decline" of "social capital or civic engagement."[49] From this perspective then, the mixing of entertainment and politics is a novel and dire scenario for political institutions, contributing substantially to the decline of democratic politics.

However, the idea that the mixing of popular and political culture is a newfound threat to politics is overstated, at best. Indeed, in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates grapples with this very issue by arguing for the exclusion of poets in the ideal city, decrying their art as false imitation (read: entertainment).[50] In writing about the Tudor monarchy in Britain, Kevin Sharpe notes that the Tudors had to secure their rule in

ways similar to contemporary politics, where "politicians, seeking to influence and gain power, draw on the texts of popular culture and seek association with its champions."[51] As such, well before the advent of radio or television, state-sponsored spectacles and rituals could be understood as a merging of popular and political culture given that "they were staged before the people, they required popular attendance and participation; and the people flocked to them."[52] This example illustrates how even political rituals can engage in popular culture through their entertainment value for the people.

Some extend popular culture even more broadly, suggesting that language itself provides a marker for this understanding of popular culture as geared toward the masses and holding some sort of entertainment value. When discussing the importance of language styles in early American life, Kenneth Cmiel argues that "middling rhetoric reached beyond the middle class at both ends of the spectrum. At the top, the rich often used it and liked it while the highly educated . . . were forced to adopt it. And below, many people with less than middle class status enjoyed hearing it. Middling rhetoric, in short, was part of a popular culture."[53] From this linguistic perspective then, some of the most important political texts in American history can be considered popular culture. For example, Cmiel suggests that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* could not "be considered either high or low culture. It was popular culture."[54] While this is an interesting angle, I believe this makes popular culture overly broad and unwieldy from a critical perspective, given nearly all language would be encompassed. Instead, I again default to Street's understanding of popular culture as that which is geared toward entertainment.

Even with this narrowed definition, I view popular and political culture as necessarily intertwined. Indeed, I concur with Street when he suggests, "popular culture has always been a part of political communication, and that less has changed than conventional wisdom would suggest."[55] In order to conceptualize this relationship more clearly, I argue for the utility of understanding popular and political culture as co-constitutive. Rather than the common depiction of separate spheres that sometimes overlap like a Venn diagram, it is better to consider popular culture and political culture as nesting phenomena. Susan Gal uses such a theoretical concept when discussing the interrelations of the public and private spheres, arguing:

> The term fractal is used in geometry to describe how a single pattern recurs inside itself—is self-similar—often with multiple nestings. . . . discussions of public and private spaces with unstable boundaries assume a single dichotomy, thereby collapsing the nested distinctions into each other, making the nesting processes and indexical recursions hard to notice.[56]

Popular and political culture function in a similar manner. At the extremes, there are examples of political culture that contain fewer elements of popular culture. Perhaps a congressional debate. However, even with something like that which is firmly a political cultural phenomenon, those debating often rely on allusions to elements of popular culture such as film franchises, books, literature, etc., and those debates are usually broadcast to the public via C-Span.

On the entertainment focused, popular culture side of things, one might think of a "mindless" summer blockbuster film. However, even the most seemingly devoid of critical-thinking films are heavily imbued with political messages and symbolism,

as the hero's race, the villain's nationality (often Russian, Chinese, or Middle Eastern), representations of government in crisis, and the conflict resolution all convey highly political messages. As Kristen J. Warner argues, even casting itself is highly political. Indeed, the casting for television shows is eerily similar to presidential politics, in that both rely on a colorblind ideology that "reinforces the contradictory nature of racial identity."[57] In other words, most mainstream politicians and political commentators would not say that the presidency is a white institution but is instead "neutral." However, this neutrality then defaults to whiteness. Warner argues that such colorblind ideology moves fluidly between presidential politics and popular culture, as television casting works in a similar way as many TV shows are written in supposedly race neutral ways that ultimately defaults to whiteness. These are just a few of the countless examples of how popular culture is imbued with political culture elements, where elements of popular culture open up in political culture and elements of political culture open up in popular culture.

Given this project's significant focus on cinematic forms and genres, it makes sense to highlight how popular culture has shaped the meaning-making process of televised political ads since their inception. The 1952 presidential campaign between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson was the first to feature televised campaign spots, and the connections to popular culture were most clear. The Eisenhower campaign's "Ike for President" ad is a prime example of this, as it features a to-this-day incredibly catchy tune that sings, "You like Ike, I like Ike, everybody likes Ike."[58] This song is played over an animated parade of what appears to be average, white Americans holding Ike signs, following Uncle Sam. There is no

overt policy discussion in this ad, as it is really only a catchy tune and fun visuals of a popular *fictional* Uncle Sam in favor of Eisenhower. As such, the ad delves quite heavily in elements of popular culture given it is more suited for entertainment than knowledge. Stevenson responded in turn, with "I Love the Gov," which was "a cheap knock-off of the 'I Like Ike' television advertisement," even using "the same rhyming scheme."[59] In 1956, Eisenhower used similar tactics, while also tapping into popular culture in novel ways like incorporating a football game into his ad, "Football/Peace."[60]

These overt references to and reliance on popular culture have continued in political advertising to this day (as have popular culture's reliance on political culture). One of the strongest generic elements of popular culture in campaign advertising came with the advent of elements of the horror genre being applied to political advertising. One of the earliest exemplars of this can be found in the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign's "Daisy" advertisement. However, before analyzing the connection between horror and politics in that ad and beyond, a more extensive discussion of the cinematic horror genre is in order, which also highlights the inverse of the examples above: how popular culture can uptake elements of political culture.

Elements of the Horror Genre

Horror is a well-established component of the political realm, especially when it comes to campaigning and advertising. John S. Nelson and G. R. Boynton verify this connection between campaigning and horror, arguing that the use of popular cinematic genres like horror must be compared with political advertisements as these spots rely on these genres for coherence and audiovisual tropes.[61] Glenn W.

Richardson Jr. furthers this idea, arguing that genre analysis allows us to understand the "crucial connective cement that glues the components of compelling narratives together."[62] In other words, genres act as emotional heuristics for viewers to make sense of the advertisement they are watching.[63] When it comes to advertisements, campaigns "evoke genre through the combination of audio and visual elements (as well as text) in a way that appeals to conventional understandings of mass audiences."[64] While it is easy to envision how such generic evocations can apply to televised advertisements, these genres can also move into the realm of stump speeches, debate performances, and other staple campaign elements through text, word choice, tone, and other such oratorical methods.

In order to better understand these connections, it is critical to describe horror more broadly. To establish this definition, I turn to James Kendrick who depicts horror as a genre that "has always been a highly socially attuned genre because it draws on what we're afraid of, and what we're afraid of changes from era to era."[65] Indeed, Kendall R. Phillips concurs that horror must resonate with contemporary events while also being able to "shock us."[66] As such, horror is a genre that evokes affects of shock, fear, terror, and horror. Further, given horror's uniquely contextual ties, it comes as little surprise that conservative appeals based in disinformation often rely on horror, given the tradition of supposed conservative victimhood.[67]

However, to fully understand the horror genre and its common elements, one must recognize that contemporary horror is both reactive to contemporary fears and built upon the lineage of past horrors. At least in terms of cinematic horror, the genesis of the genre is often traced to a 1910 adaptation of Mary Shelley's book,

Frankenstein.[68] Potentially the most consequential of the "proto-horrors" in the long term was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), which introduced elements of German Expressionism, possession, and neurodiversity as monstrosity to the horror genre. All of these elements have stuck with the horror genre throughout its development. The next major trend came in the 1930s when Universal Studios began making a series of monster films based off of gothic horror. *Dracula* (1931) was the first of these films and went a long way in establishing horror's connection with "conservative socio-politics of the day."[69] Indeed, *Dracula* was simultaneously highly sexualized and stringently conservative in its rejection of homoeroticism. Director Tod Browning placed Dracula's sexual energy in his mouth, through the erotic act of drinking blood through a victim's neck. In the original novel, Dracula attacks a crew full of men on his voyage to England. This is noticeably cut from the film, maintaining a sexual conservatism.[70] Producer Carl Laemmle Jr. was explicit in his discomfort with Dracula attacking men.[71]

This early decision in many ways signaled the complicated relationship horror would have with sexuality and gender. Throughout much of horror's history, women have been depicted as either victim or monster, without much potential for heroics until much later in the genre's development. On one hand, there is a fear over the tainting of "pure" femininity when women are victims. On the other hand, as Barbara Creed notes, there is a Freudian fear of castration when women are depicted with monstrosity images.[72] Indeed, horror's conception of the monstrous-feminine embodies "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject."[73] Further, as monstrous femininity relates to contemporary anxiety, it disrupts

contemporary norms as it "does not respect borders, positions, rules."[74] Such depictions of feminine monstrosity have persisted throughout the genre's history.

Given horror's deep-seated role in depicting threats to white, masculine hegemony, it should come as little surprise that horror also has a fraught history with depictions of race. Similar to women, actors of color were rarely allowed to play the role of hero in horror narratives until very recently. Instead, as Robin R. Means Coleman notes, "For most of film history, black actors have appeared in horror films in supporting roles. Many were deeply problematic."[75] Indeed, this trend goes all the way back to the roots of horror and film itself. Georges Méliès, one of the most influential directors of film's early days, used white actors in blackface in his proto-horror, *Off to the Bloomingdale Asylum* (1901). His presentation of supposed Black folks depicted "the violence around crossing racial boundaries, the tensions around racial masquerade, and finally the brutish end to the metaphorical White man's burden" with the destruction of the "Black" characters in the film.[76] As such, this early film is yet another exemplar of horror working ideologically to uphold cultural forms of domination via depictions of violence for those who break such norms.

Another extraordinarily influential and deeply problematic depiction of Black monstrosity is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). *The Birth of a Nation* was a highly influential film in the sense that it established the "technical and narrative standard for the industry" as one of the first feature-length films produced in the United States.[77] It was also influential in its entanglement with American history and politics. The film purportedly depicts events surrounding the end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era, positioning itself as a faithful historical fiction. In fact, the film

was screened in the White House in February 1915, where President Woodrow Wilson reportedly commented, "It's like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true."[78] As such, the film enjoyed commercial success and political support and captured the deep-seated racism of the era. Viewers are prompted "to associate Black culture with monstrosity," especially in how it depicts "a Black male sexual predator advancing on White womanhood."[79] The film resolves this monstrous threat by supposedly justifying the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan stated its explicit purpose to protect white womanhood and lynches Gus and Lynch, two of the main "Black" characters in the film.[80] Thus, the Klan is established as heroic in this early horror narrative.

This foundational depiction of race in horror has carried forward in the genre, with Blackness frequently being associated with monstrosity. However, similar to horror's interaction with gender, even when Blackness is not horrific, it is often deferred to the role of sacrificial victimhood. Yet, whereas white women are often killed off in ways that are meant to have narrative consequence, Black victims often experience "gruesome, absolutely unwarranted deaths" for the sake of demonstrating "someone's, or something's, extreme deadliness."[81] One of the first potential counter examples to this relentless narrative bind was George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). In this film, "Ben" is a Black protagonist who is faced with a zombie apocalypse. Throughout the film he acts heroically to defend himself and a group of white people from the zombie onslaught. However, while Ben is clearly framed as the protagonist of the film, there are still some racial problematics at play, such as readings of home invasion and domestic violence. The film's final scene also acts in a

way that is both potentially radical and regressive, in that Ben is shot and killed by a local police force.[82] This ending is radical in that it "demands that audiences consider who among us is truly monstrous."[83] *Night of the Living Dead* can also be considered regressive in that it takes a Black protagonist and gives them an unnecessarily violent end reminiscent of the real and traumatic killings of Black people at the hands of police, precluding more optimistic endings for Black protagonists.

Thankfully, there has been a recent new wave of truly Black horror films with strong, Black protagonists. Director Jordan Peele has been at the heart of these new developments, with critical hits *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022).[84] In fact, Peele has suggested that the ending of *Night of the Living Dead* weighed on him when he wrote the ending for *Get Out*. Indeed, "Peele's character—unlike Ben—survives."[85] As such, the cinematic horror genre has finally started to become more "imaginative and inclusive."[86] Such inclusivity goes for women too, as films like *It Follows* (2015) and *Midsommar* (2019) have established interesting takes on women protagonists that reject sexuality as a signifier of victimhood, even going as far as to critique "rape culture by highlighting the trauma of how rape survivors are often treated by culture, friend and family."[87] Horror as a cinematic genre has had a long history of conservative, reactionary politics and messages. That trend is finally changing some in the contemporary moment. However, that is not necessarily the case in horror's use in more traditionally political venues, where conservative fears surrounding white masculinity run rampant. Briefly recounting this cinematic history of horror is essential to better understanding its use in politics, as the two draw from and define one another.

Horror and Politics

One of the strongest examples of disinformation mixed with horror comes from what is potentially the most recognizable political advertisement of all time, the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign's "Peace Little Girl (Daisy)." "Daisy" juxtaposes a young girl picking the petals off of a flower with a robotic countdown and nuclear explosion. After this horrific imagery, Johnson states, "These are the stakes: To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the darkness. We must either love each other, or we must die." A montage of clouds from nuclear explosions plays before the screen cuts to a simple white text on black background saying, "VOTE FOR PRESIDENT JOHNSON ON NOVEMBER 3." The narrator adds to this message, by saying, "The stakes are too high for you to say home."[88]

"Daisy" is a famous example of a negative campaign that meets the criteria of disinformation. First, it promotes misleading information through its manufactured connection between Goldwater and nuclear warfare, a connection which is made without evidence or reasoning. Second, it uses elements of the horror genre that establish fear. Finally, the ad works in the service of maintaining relations of domination by advocating for Johnson's continued power as president and by asserting that the people's political efficacy lies only in voting for Johnson or voting for nuclear warfare.

This ad uses editing and genre to spread disinformation through indirect means. First, it is important to note that there is not a single reference to Goldwater in the advertisement. However, through heavy implication, the audience is well aware that a vote for Goldwater is a vote supposedly in favor of nuclear annihilation. There

are layers of knowledge required to reach this point, as the advertisement works heavily in the realm of enthymeme. Once the audience realizes that Johnson is the one trying to avoid nuclear warfare, they can contextualize the message, and Goldwater is then tied to nuclear warfare through visual apposition. Visual apposition works by juxtaposing political figures using "the cueing power of sound and the attention-grabbing impulse of movement," making the audience view one as good and the other as exceptionally evil.[89] This is achieved by visually connecting a political figure with images of good or bad people or visuals, as perceived of by the public. As such, even without any sort of explicit argument or even mention of Goldwater, Goldwater is connected with the looming fear of nuclear war.

The ad also works at a generic level with the horror genre. Horror frequently uses children as a way of depicting fear, given their innocence, manipulability, and symbolism for the future.[90] The horror is amplified by the fact audiences are already conditioned, through problematic genre gender norms, to view women through a lens of victimhood. The girl playing with a daisy is itself highly symbolic of the horror genre, as one of the most memorable scenes from *Frankenstein* (1931) involves a girl of about the same age offering Frankenstein's monster a daisy, before being murdered by that monster.[91] For "Daisy," the little girl in this advertisement represents the future of America. That future is horrifically threatened by massive nuclear explosions and warfare. The mechanical countdown voice and blasts evoke sci-fi horrors of the era like *Them!* (1954) and *Tarantula* (1955), which both expand on the public fear of the effects of nuclear weapons, lingering radiation, and technological innovation gone wrong.[92]

These horror elements take the ad's disinformative message—the suggestion that Goldwater would use nuclear weapons with little care or thought without evidence supporting that claim—and audiovisually elevate that disinformed fear in the American public's consciousness. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes, voters are like "pack rats" because "voters gather bits and pieces of political information and store them in a single place . . . Information obtained from news mixes with that from ads."[93] Accordingly, campaign advertising is not only able to spread disinformation veiled in deniability, it also allows that disinformative innuendo to resonate more strongly with the primal fears and emotions of potential voters watching the advertisement. Not every negative political ad is an example of disinformation, as there can be legitimate reasoning and evidence against political opponents. However, many reflect the criteria of disinformation given their reliance on horror, fear, and poor evidentiary practices in the service of asymmetrical power.

Audience efficacy is another key element of horror appeals when used in service of disinformation. Since fear is a powerful emotion that can amplify the already irrational responses of voters, audience members will be looking for a way to resolve their fears. To that end, Kim Witte articulates that "perceived threats (beliefs about severity and susceptibility) and perceived efficacy (beliefs about response efficacy and self-efficacy)" are central to how an audience will respond to fear.[94] Indeed, a high threat combined with high efficacy will create "adaptive responses," while high threat and low efficacy will deter action via "defensive motivation."[95] As such, much like a horror narrative requires a hero to defeat the monstrosity, a horror appeal needs a savior or a way for audiences to resolve their fear. However,

sometimes explicit calls to efficacy are lacking, especially when it comes to diffuse disinformation and conspiracy narratives.

Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy and conspiracy theory can be understood as another potential strategic component of a disinformation campaign imbued with elements of popular and political culture. Jenny Rice, in her book *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, defines conspiracy as, "a pretender to true evidentiary processes, a sham passing off narrative as true evidence."[96] Here, one can see how conspiracy begins to weave itself neatly as a strategy of disinformation reliant on popular culture conventions of narrative. Using the Trump election conspiracy as an example, it does not matter for adherents of this conspiracy whether or not Trump has any "true evidence" of election fraud or voting irregularities. It does not matter that "state and federal judges—some appointed by Trump—dismissed more than 50 lawsuits brought by Trump or his allies alleging election fraud and other irregularities."[97] What matters is the use of narrative *as* evidence. Part of why Trump's appeal has been so convincing to many supporters, even given the lack of "true evidence," is because he consistently maintained this narrative well before the 2020 election. Walter R. Fisher argues for such consistency in his narrative paradigm, where coherence and fidelity are key to a convincing story.[98] In the lead up and aftermath of the 2016 election—an election Trump won—he was already casting doubt upon the integrity of the U.S. election system. Thus, Trump's story had coherence in that it told the same story from start to finish. For true believers, it also had fidelity in the sense that the narrative of politics rigged against conservatives by

nefarious liberal elites is a consistent refrain, one highlighted by Richard Hofstadter's conception of conservativism's "paranoid style."[99]

Conspiracy was a long-term component of Trump's candidacy and presidency. According to Robert Farley, in the lead up to the 2016 election, Trump spread "a false narrative about rampant voter fraud in the U.S. and the likelihood of a 'rigged' election."[100] These claims centered on three main arguments: that there were dead people voting, that noncitizens were voting, and that voter fraud was rampant. All of these claims were thoroughly debunked, but that did not matter because Trump repeated the same narrative from 2016 through 2020.[101]

While Rice identifies conspiracy as a sham evidentiary process, there are others who define conspiracy with a stronger inclination toward its nefarious ends. Shevaun E. Watson argues, "Conspiracy is a crime of illicit speech and dangerous persuasion aimed to orchestrate unlawful acts. The leader of a conspiracy may enjoin participants to silence about the scheme, but the crime itself is one of speech."[102] Here we see that the intent of a conspiracy is to spur potential adherents toward unlawful acts. These attempts are often aimed to overthrow supposedly hidden, evil forces. As Michael Hameleers notes, there are three components of conspiracy reasoning: First, the cause of "novel phenomena in sociopolitical reality is attributed to hidden, goal-directed, and evil forces."[103] Second, political events are interpreted "as a Manichean 'good versus evil' struggle."[104] Third, conspiracies point toward hidden truths that are covered up by mainstream interpretations of politics in order to perpetuate power disparities.[105] Such an understanding of conspiracy, where evil

forces are at work and institutions are either oblivious or cooperating, could very well justify the unlawful acts Watson notes in the mind of a true believer.

Conspiracies can have more insidious ends than overt, criminal acts. Stephen M. Underhill describes such a function of conspiracy rhetoric in his work on J. Edgar Hoover, the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Underhill notes that "Hoover's conspiracy rhetoric shifted the epistemology of public life from one that embraced social democracy to another that imagined the American experience as a Victorian dystopia that required containment culture. The shift grounded a new worldview from which Cold War philosophy emerged."[106] Beyond spurring illegal action, Underhill argues that Hoover's rhetoric changed the nature of the epistemological framing of the Cold War. Here, we see one of the components of constitutive rhetoric as articulated by James Jasinski, where such rhetoric can ripple through the norms of political culture, communal existence, and the linguistic resources of a culture.[107] Thus, conspiracy theories are dangerous not just because of the acts they spur but also because of the ways they can change public discourse.

Here, there is another useful distinction to be made in terms of how the logic (or lack thereof) of conspiracy is articulated. Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum delineate conspiracy *with* theory from conspiracy *without* theory. Conspiracy with theory "tries to make sense of a disorderly and complicated world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events." More theoretical-based conspiracies use an overwhelming amount of complex evidence and proofs to connect the dots.[108] However, "new conspiracism," or that conspiracy without theory, the kind commonly propagated by President Donald Trump, "dispenses with the burden of

explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: 'A lot of people are saying . . .'"[109] While conspiracy has existed in many forms throughout American history, presidential conspiracism is an entirely different issue to reckon with. As Muirhead and Rosenblum argue, "No president—indeed, no national official—has resorted to accusations of conspiracy so instinctively, so frequently, and with such brio as Donald Trump."[110]

While I agree with Muirhead and Rosenblum's articulation of what makes presidential conspiracism particularly powerful (and dangerous), I would like to push back against what I believe is fairly unchecked presentism. While there are a handful of cases I could use to establish the historicism of mainstream political conspiracism, I will focus briefly on the McCarthyism of the 1950s. This example will serve two purposes. First, it illustrates the role of conspiracy in U.S. history. Second, it exemplifies that whether conspiracy is combined with theory or without, it creates metanarratives that explain the world to paranoid adherents, especially as these scandals intersect with popular culture.

McCarthyism

McCarthyism emerged in the wake of World War II and proved to be a significant example of rampant disinformation fueled by conspiracy and horror. Named after Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, McCarthyism represented a period where a supposed communist contagion within the U.S. government was revealed, and these supposed communists were tried in very public settings. Ted Morgan defines McCarthyism as "The political practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence." It also involved "the

use of dubious methods of investigation in order to suppress opposition."[111] As such, these definitions of McCarthyism already rise to a level of conspiratorial disinformation, as dubious evidentiary practices were used to maintain American capitalism's power over communism via Cold War containment culture.[112]

One of the key public acts of disinformation during this time was a speech by Senator McCarthy on February 9, 1950, at the Women's Republican Club of Wheeling, West Virginia. In this speech, McCarthy made wild accusations of rampant communism within the Department of State and President Harry S Truman's administration, claiming that Truman tried to cover up this infiltration by issuing "a presidential directive ordering all government agencies to refuse to turn over any information whatsoever in regard to the communist activities of any government employee to a congressional committee."[113] In fact, the most memorable line of the speech serves as a poignant example of McCarthy's communist conspiracy fueling disinformation. In the copy of the speech that was entered into the *Congressional Record* on February 20, 1950, McCarthy claims, "I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of individuals who would appear to be either card carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy."[114] However, in his original speech given in West Virginia, McCarthy stated he had over 205 names of communist sympathizers.[115] Thus, even though intent is not a focus of this present study, it seems entirely likely that McCarthy was intentionally disinforming his audience in West Virginia, before censoring himself as he entered his speech into the official, public record. This is strikingly reminiscent of Trump's legal attempts to overturn the 2020 election, where what was said publicly

(substantial evidence of voting fraud) was very different than what was presented in court (no evidence of voting fraud), where perjury was a possibility.[116] The use of props like this and the widely televised and reported on nature of the hearings turned "McCarthyism" into a popular/political culture spectacle, a series of hearings that were either broadcast live or recapped in "45 minute summaries."[117] This positioned the hearings as based in supposed attempts at public information and public entertainment. As a result of McCarthy's conspiracy, many public hearings would be held over the next four years that were disseminated as a form of popular political culture.[118]

McCarthyism though was not just a conspiracy-based battle between capitalism and communism. McCarthyism also worked to defend established forms of domination via race and sexuality. The Black freedom movement—which relied on the militancy of Black workers—was making significant strides until anticommunist McCarthyism "dealt a hammer blow to that project," leading to a dispersal of unions and activists and limiting the ambitions of the movement.[119] Indeed, this racist targeting of Black unionists significantly set back the material means of antiracism in the United States.[120]

In terms of sexuality, members of the LGBT community were also targeted in a related "Lavender Scare." Similar to the Red Scare's fear of communists and McCarthyism's attempt to remove them from the ranks of U.S. government, McCarthy also tried to purge gay federal employees. McCarthy argued that "homosexuals" should not handle classified information as most homosexuals were considered "morally weak" and because "the pervert is easy prey to the

blackmailer."[121] It is estimated that "5,000 to 10,000 people were fired or resigned" during the Lavender Scare, and the "panic long outlasted McCarthy's tenure."[122] Indeed, Christopher M. Elias notes how McCarthyism defined "long-term developments in politics, gender, and sexuality," as "Gossip and innuendo" became key strategies of governmental conspiracy.[123] That these strategies were used to create a massive disinformation campaign, fueled by conspiracy and horrific fear, is apparent given McCarthyism's use of gossip to maintain dominance over marginalized groups. Gossip supplanted evidence, allowing supposedly entertaining narratives to overwhelm reasoning via conspiracy. Further, as Charles E. Morris III notes, J. Edgar Hoover led a push during McCarthyism to shift "the cultural embodiment of homosexuality . . . from an innocuous pansy to a dangerous 'menace.'"[124] As such, members of the LGBT community were viewed alongside communists as anti-American monsters, stirring fear amongst the public through horror.

McCarthyism finally fell apart in 1954 when Senator McCarthy overstepped and targeted the U.S. Army and Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration for supposed communist connections. The Eisenhower administration strategically responded to McCarthy's allegations, carefully picking apart his conspiratorial disinformation campaign piece by piece. First, they discredited the men who supported McCarthy, "notably the lawyer Roy Cohn, who was leading the investigation, and Cohn's assistant David Schine, who had recently been drafted into the Army."[125] The Army released a report that McCarthy and Cohn had abused their power to give Schine a light Army duty.[126] Eisenhower took the reports of abuse of power from McCarthy

and Cohn and went a step further, invoking executive privilege to protect himself and his administration from any calls to testify by McCarthy. Without witnesses, McCarthy's communist witch-hunt ran out of steam. Without specifically stating his name, fellow Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith was one of the first to take on McCarthy's approach in her 1950 "Declaration of Conscience," where she argued: "As a United States senator, I am not proud of the way in which the Senate has been made a publicity platform for irresponsible sensationalism. . . . As an American, I am shocked at the way Republicans and Democrats alike are playing directly into the Communist design of 'confuse, divide, and conquer.'"[127] In 1954, McCarthy was formally condemned by the Senate, which released a resolution stating, "the conduct of the Senator from Wisconsin, Mr. McCarthy, is unbecoming a member of the United States Senate . . . and such conduct is hereby condemned."[128] McCarthy died of alcohol abuse three years later.[129]

Writing in the aftermath of McCarthyism, Richard Hofstadter used McCarthy's disinformation campaign as a prime example of the paranoid style in American politics. Hofstadter notes that McCarthy's rhetoric fit within a tradition of paranoid conspiracy that was "anti-Masonic," "anti-Catholic," anti-Mormonism, anti-bankers, anti-Semitic, anti-Black, or essentially anti any group about which conspiracy can be imagined.[130] Hofstadter goes on to define the conspiratorial aspects of the paranoid style as "a vast and sinister conspiracy" that aims to "destroy a way of life."[131] Indeed, what differentiates the paranoid style is that its adherents do not see conspiracies as isolated events but rather "as *the motive force* in historical events."[132] These qualities of the paranoid style, as Hofstadter notes, can be seen throughout

American history and these elements certainly carried forward throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. McCarthy provides one of the most famous examples of this style.

Others have criticized and revised Hofstadter's conception of the paranoid style. Ryan Neville-Shepard cautions against reading the paranoid style as irrational. Rather, subtextual elements of conspiracy rhetoric, including "anti-establishment rhetoric, a critique of dominant political myths, and a broad-based political ideology" explain the logical appeals of the paranoid style.[133] Further, Michael William Pfau established a new type of conspiracy rhetoric in juxtaposition to Hofstadter's, "the political style of conspiracy." Characteristics of this style include its "proximity to the center of the political mainstream," its ability to maintain itself "by the ordinary political means of patronage and deceptive demagoguery," its invitation to audiences to "enactment in the form of political engagement," and its narrative where the "republic has recently become corrupted by conspiracy."[134] Nevertheless, the paranoid style is a useful theoretical subset of conspiracy rhetoric.

With this understanding in hand, recognizing the possible circulation of conspiracy rhetoric in both popular and political culture should be of some relevance. Rice relates rhetorical circulation to conspiracy theories by articulating an understanding of proliferation. Rice argues that in conspiracy theory literature, when a conspiracy theorist uses an overwhelming number of words for evidence, it "produces a rhetorical effect beyond the contents themselves. There is something significant about proliferation."[135] Rice draws from Hofstadter in creating this argument about proliferation. Hofstadter notes a similar phenomenon as deployed by

McCarthy. Indeed, Hofstadter argues that "paranoid scholarship" uses "what appears to be facts" in order to create "an overwhelming 'proof.'"[136] McCarthy accomplished this feat by creating a "96-page pamphlet" with "no less than 313 footnote references."[137] E. G. Creps draws similar conclusions about how proliferation functions in conspiracy, arguing that massive amounts of data are put forth "simply to give the impression of overwhelming proof for a specific contention."[138] All of these claims assume that proliferation is something inherent to the text itself. In the current age of social media-fueled disinformation campaigns, it is useful to broaden our understanding of proliferation to also include how circulation/re-circulation of narratives bolster the perceived credibility of those narratives. Seeing one website or social media user post an incredulous news story probably will not get much traction. Yet, if many websites, Twitter accounts, Facebook profiles, and even films and television shows begin circulating a narrative, that extensional proliferation can give the lie credibility. As such, proliferation can now occupy traditional, textual understandings as well as online/social media proliferation.

Accordingly, circulation is a particularly important component of this expanded understanding of proliferation. Cara A. Finnegan, writing from a visual perspective, describes the study of circulation as a tool that "helps us discover [images'] fluidity." As she explains, "circulation does important cultural work, including creating interpretive communities and constituting publics . . . it involves movement of discourse."[139] Robert Hariman and John Lucaites also find circulation to be a key component of understanding how opinion develops, arguing that circulation is an "important means for the formation of public opinion and public

agency."[140] As such, one of the key components of understanding circulation is understanding the organizations and platforms that enable this proliferation. Primary political texts such as stump speeches, debate performances, campaign advertisements, and other forms of presidential address are all helpful to understanding how disinformation campaigns are established by presidents and presidential candidates, but so are the popular culture texts that prime and amplify such understandings of conspiracy.

Contemporary Conspiracy and Horror

One particularly strong example of the detriments of the disinformative proliferation of horror and conspiracy mixed with a lack of audience efficacy is Pizzagate. Pizzagate was a conspiracy that accused a D.C. pizzeria "of being the home of a Satanic child sex abuse ring involving top Democrats such as Hillary Clinton."[141] Indeed, this "bizarre conspiracy theory" has been "relentlessly circulated by politically motivated fringe sites."[142] Pizzagate originated on 4chan,[143] which is itself a website born of the blurring of political and popular culture, hosting forums ranging in topics from "Japanese Culture," popular culture "Interests," "Adult," and the infamous "Politically Incorrect" and "Random" boards (labeled /pol/ and /b/ respectively). As such, the fact that Pizzagate originated on 4chan imbues it with an inherent popular/political culture ambiguity, blurring the lines between fact, fiction, and "bullshit."[144] This ambiguity strategically merges the revelation of supposed political truths with narratives that alt-right audiences find entertaining to consume.

The Pizzagate narrative was not contained to fringe 4chan boards. The conspiracy was even propagated by the son of former national security advisor,

Michael Flynn.[145] This conspiracy, if one believed it to be true, is truly horrific in terms of its purported treatment of children and, for Christian conservatives, its adherence to satanic principles, imbuing the narrative with elements of the horror genre. The problem for those circulating the conspiracy is that no one in the "mainstream" seemed to care. Enter Edgar Maddison Welch, who "spent three days reading about [the conspiracy] and watching videos . . . He then decided to investigate the matter himself."[146] He walked into the establishment with an AR-15, pointed a gun at an employee, and fired shots within the restaurant. Thankfully, no one was injured.[147] Still, this example shows what can happen when horrific conspiracies are propagated without explicit means of efficacy. Nevertheless, that does not mean that coupling horror, conspiracy, and disinformation with appeals to efficacy makes the situation any less explosive. The attempted insurrection of January 6th is a perfect case study of just such an instance.

As is well established by countless recounts and audits, Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election to Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Yet, Trump and some of his most loyal supporters refused to believe such a reality. Instead, they relied on propagating lies and conspiracies about the election in order to assert that the election had been rigged and stolen. There was no evidence that anything to the scale Trump alleged had happened.[148] Even some of Trump's political allies began to recognize that there was "no substantial evidence of election fraud."[149] However, he kept dragging his feet to slow down election practices which are typically formalities, all-the-while spreading fear mongering rhetoric of a country-wide takeover to his

supporters. Such horror-based election conspiracies came to a head on January 6, 2021.

As the election results were being certified by Vice President Mike Pence and Congress, Trump held a "Save America" rally. The naming of this rally alone should clue one into what might be insinuated. Trump spoke to a crowd of fanatical MAGA supporters, telling them to "fight."[150] In fact, Trump used the word fight or a derivative 20 times in this address. One of his strongest appeals to audience efficacy, combined with explicit horror, came at the end of his speech when he exclaimed, "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" before encouraging the large crowd to "walk down Pennsylvania Avenue."[151] With these appeals, Trump provided a doomsday scenario to his supporters that he had been building throughout his political life: the loss of country. And he provided a clear way for his audience to resolve that looming, horrific threat: go to the Capitol and fight like hell. His supporters did just that and stormed the U.S. Capitol.

Much of the language the supporters used to describe why they had invaded the Capitol reflected a belief in the hybrid popular/political culture horror conspiracies being fed to them and a desire to do something about it. Of those supposedly rigging the election, one insurrectionist said, "they have morphed into pure evil."[152] And in order to defeat that pure evil, that same person said, "We must smite them now and drive them down."[153] This clearly articulates the two-part narrative of horror: an inhuman threat and an opportunity for resolving that threat, in this case through audience efficacy. Another insurrectionist made similar comments,

saying, “We can’t kill nobody . . . I mean, it may come to that. I hope it don’t but it’s a democrat house, a crooked democrat house . . . they’re anti-Christian and they’re in charge now and ain’t nothing we can do to stop it.”[154] Clearly, this insurrectionist believed that nonviolent forms of efficacy in the face of “anti-Christian” Democrats were running dry and that violence might be their only recourse to save the country. Yet another Trump supporter suggested, “We are fighting good versus evil, dark versus light.”[155] Such a stark, dehumanizing divide would very well justify many forms of violent efficacy in the eyes of a believer. Credible threats of violence were also directed at specific individuals like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). For instance, one member of the coup stockpiled ammo and said he was going to “put a bullet in (Pelosi’s) noggin.”[156] This targeted threat of violence is, once again, an attempt to defeat monstrosity and reclaim efficacy. And these are just a few examples of the documented motives of some of the insurrectionists. There are certainly countless other undocumented motives that follow similar conspiracy logics and use demonizing language that mirrors that of horror.

The example of the January 6th insurrection goes to show that horror and conspiracy appeals used in service of disinformation can be dangerous with or without attempts to establish audience efficacy. This is especially true when audience efficacy is inferred by means that lie outside of established political mechanisms, such as on January 6th. Further, what is often most concerning about such rhetorical appeals to horror is when they target a specific person or group of people. Dog whistles are a strategy that allows for such targeting.

Dog-Whistle Politics

Dog whistles are another key rhetorical strategy of disinformation. Dog whistles rely on coded language in order to spread information to adherents while maintaining deniability. Such language is often used at the expense of marginalized groups. In order to understand how disinformation can rely on racist appeals, it is important to conceptualize the broader category of race appeals in political campaigning. Charlton D. McIlwain and Stephen M. Caliendo distinguish racial appeals as those that "are racial in nature but do not target anti-minority sentiment for their efficacy." Racist appeals, conversely, target anti-minority sentiment to establish efficacy. In other words, "All racist appeals are racial, but not all racial appeals are racist." Since these distinctions can sometimes become murky, McIlwain and Caliendo have argued not for a "definitive distinction between racist and non-racist appeals," but rather rely on the idea of "racist potential" in order to indicate "the various gradations of possibly racial content found in political ads."[157] What matters most is if audiences interpret messages as promoting racism.

One way that racist appeals have maintained themselves through increasing scrutiny is via "color-blind ideology." We have already seen the harms of color-blind ideology—in campaigning, politics, economics, and our society broadly. The backlash to Barack Obama's presidency serves as one more recent and starker example.[158] Stephen F. Ostertag and William T. Armaline argue that color-blind ideology works at three levels: racism doesn't exist, inequalities are not the result of racism, and white elites no longer see race.[159] Indeed, such an approach to race, especially in the context of campaigning, has become a type of racist appeal. These

racist appeals function by covering up the systemic disadvantages marginalized groups face and allowing for "civil" forms of racist appeals to insidiously infect campaigns, such as "symbolic racism" or "dog whistle politics."[160] Ian Haney López notes how colorblind ideology and dog-whistle politics go hand-in-hand as "conservative advocates of colorblindness use this term as a short-hand for their opposition to affirmative action."[161] Thus, while racist politicians claim they don't see color, they actively pursue policies that harm people of color.

Here, it is important to clearly define symbolic racism and dog-whistle politics as they are common, contemporary strategies of racist appeals in campaigning. Both of these tactics unlock the racist potential of certain rhetorical appeals amongst audiences more attuned to racist messages, while allowing deniability on the part of the candidates. Symbolic racism is defined by P. J. Henry and David O. Sears as a system of beliefs that downplays the ongoing role of racial discrimination, instead suggesting that "racial discrimination is no longer a serious obstacle" for marginalized groups. According to this racist logic, those who complain of racial discrimination "are not truly justified" in such complaints. This belief system fed into "subtle racism" that allows for racist attitudes to persist under the guise of "traditional values."[162] Indeed, Kevin Drakulich, Kevin H. Wozniak, John Hagan, and Devon Johnson found evidence of such subtle racism in the 2016 election. Even though "White Americans increasingly agree that society needs to do more to ensure equal rights," there has continued to be "racially charged anger about the state of country directed at, among others, Black citizens." This anger is often disguised "by using

crime and justice issues as racial dog whistles."[163] As such, the symbolic racism behind rhetorics of crime and justice in the 2016 election became a racist dog whistle.

Dog-whistle politics, then, is a rhetorical strategy by which racist appeals persist in an environment of symbolic racism. López argues that the Republican Party has frequently relied on the coded language of dog-whistle politics to balance racist appeals with deniability. As López illustrates, the GOP's uses of coded language "operate like a dog whistle—a metaphor that pushes us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another."[164] This can make racist appeals somewhat challenging to study, as many require a deep contextual understanding of how messages operate differently with different audiences. Part of what can illuminate these strategies, especially in campaign advertisements, is what Kathleen Hall Jamieson calls "veiled visual cueing." This strategy relies on the visuality of ads and works because "Visual cueing is enthymematic."[165] In other words, the audience is the one filling in explicitly racist ideas based on the framing of an ad, giving candidates a shield of deniability behind editing tactics.

One of the most infamous examples of race, horror, and disinformation converging in presidential political advertising was George H. W. Bush's 1988 "Willie Horton" advertisement. The ad opens with an image of Bush alongside opponent Michael Dukakis, with text reading, "BUSH & DUKAKIS ON CRIME."[166] The narrator first focuses on Bush, saying he supports the death penalty for first-degree murderers. The narrator then shifts to Dukakis, saying he opposes the death penalty and allowed murderers to have weekend passes away from prison. Here, the

ad then focuses on one convicted murderer who was given such a pass, Willie Horton. Horton's image is shown on screen, making it visually apparent that he is a Black man. The narrator notes that Horton, "murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times."[167] The ad then shows another picture of Horton and describes how he was given numerous weekend passes. The narrator claims that "Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend."[168] Finally, the advertisement concludes that Dukakis is weak on crime because he supported weekend passes for heinous criminals who committed acts outrageous acts of carnage.

The "Willie Horton" ad combined popular culture elements of horror (the description of graphic violence and rape) with political culture elements of disinformation (that Dukakis bore responsibility for Horton's crimes) and race (that Horton was a Black man assaulting a white couple). Indeed, as López argues, the most pertinent part of the story for Bush's campaign manager, Lee Atwater, was that "Horton was black and his victims were white. The image of a black man breaking into a home and raping a white woman conjured the hoariest of racist narratives: the vile and violent black rapist victimizing white purity."[169] As was previously discussed, such vile narratives have deep ties to visual popular culture with *The Birth of a Nation* as a key example. The Willie Horton advertisement used this visual narrative to function at the level of dog whistle: never once does the ad explicitly mention race. Yet, the implications were clear for white voters, as the ad "hit its mark," activating white, racist fears and furthering Bush's disinformation campaign.[170]

Dog whistles were a mainstay of the Trump candidacy. Trump's dog whistles have often taken the form of *paralipsis*. More colloquially defined as, "I'm not saying, I'm just saying," *paralipsis* "offers accusations without explanations or evidence . . . and gives a speaker 'plausible deniability.'"[171] Thus, deniability is again a key advantage of this rhetorical strategy. Indeed, as Jennifer Mercieca notes of Trump's attacks on Ted Cruz during the 2016 primary, "Trump's use of *paralipsis* allowed him to recirculate the rumor and gave him the out-of-plausible deniability, but it also allowed him to impeach the credibility of his opposition, increasing his followers' suspicion of those in power."[172] An example of *paralipsis* as a racist dog whistle came when Trump retweeted an erroneous graphic suggesting an overwhelming amount of Black on Black and Black on white crime. Trump's defense of the retweet was, "I didn't tweet, I retweeted somebody that was supposedly an expert, and it was also a radio show … am I gonna check every statistic?"[173] Here, Trump deflects by saying he didn't say or make the graphic, he only retweeted it. Mercieca highlights another example of Trump's use of *paralipsis* to deflect from his racism when he refused to disavow David Duke and the KKK.[174] In an interview with CNN, when pressed on the issue, Trump said, "I don't know anything about what you're even talking about with white supremacy or white supremacists . . . I don't know—did he endorse me, or what's going on? Because I know nothing about David Duke; I know nothing about white supremacists."[175] Again, deflection through deniability. One of Trump's most famous instances of paraliptic dog whistle was in the first 2020 presidential debate against Joe Biden. When asked to denounce white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys, Trump said, "stand back and stand by."[176]

Such an utterance gives him deniability in that he can claim he did denounce the group, while simultaneously blowing a loud dog whistle for the group that he has aligned himself with, signaling that he may need their help in the future. These examples illustrate how dog whistles can be used to spread an inherently disinformative ideology of white supremacy via code and deniability.

In the preceding sections, I have defined disinformation, the nesting of popular and political culture, and the strategies of horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles that populate the convergence of these phenomena. With this definitional work in mind, it is now time to turn to the details of the project at hand.

Project Details

This project explores the role of popular culture in the political culture of the long Trump era (2014-2024) by examining the rhetoric of popular films, political ads and videos, and debates over culture wars. This project takes seriously the role of popular culture in stoking the reactionary sentiments against government empowerment, racial progress, and women's rights. Specifically, this project asks the following three questions: 1) *how did popular films contribute to such reactionary sentiments;* 2) *how did the audiovisual and narrative features of popular culture animate alt-right disinformation campaigns of the long Trump era;* and 3) *How did the rhetorics of conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles bolster such reactionary sentiments of the long Trump era?*

Scope of Study

This project centralizes the rhetoric of Donald Trump, his alt-right allies, and popular films that enhance the anti-government, racist, and misogynistic themes that helped shape the reactionary rhetoric of the Trump era. The alt-right era of conservative politics is "characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes" and "eschews 'establishment' conservatism, skews young, and embrace[s] white ethnonationalism as a fundamental value."[177] Alt-right rhetoric is reactionary because it reconfigures "the old regime" by absorbing "the ideas and tactics" of that which it opposes in order to undermine progressive achievements. In this case, alt-right rhetoric reconfigures the racism, misogyny, and conservatism of the past by using trendy memes and platforms in order to "transform" the "old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses." With this transformation, reactionary conservatives then work to undo progressive legislative and judicial gains with the aim of recreating traditional power dynamics that reify the inequalities of the past.[178]

While the rhetoric of Donald Trump is central to alt-right conservatism and this project, so too is the rhetoric of alt-right affiliated congressional candidates, including Paul Gosar (R-AZ), Ted Cruz (R-TX), and Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), among others. Trump tapped into anti-government, racist, and misogynistic sentiments circulating across political and popular culture and ultimately emboldened these "reactionary" ideologies amongst his allies, coopting an alt-right agenda as candidate and president.[179] In tracing reactionary themes across popular and political culture, I analyze the ways Trump and his allies infused their disinformation

campaigns with popular culture themes steeped in racist and misogynist tropes and government corruption narratives.

Critical Lenses

Rhetoric plays a unique role in the co-constitutive relationship between political and popular culture and the disinformation campaigns they shape. Thomas Rosteck broadly defines rhetoric as "how we make sense of experience, construct our collective identity, produce meaning, and prompt action in the world."[180] Rosteck's definition of rhetoric relies on both instrumental and constitutive renderings, where instrumental rhetoric examines the impact of the speaker's message in its immediate context and constitutive rhetoric traces the way texts, ideas, and ideologies move across time and context, contributing to meaning making in more abstract and less traceable ways.[181] Understanding the co-constitutive relationship between political culture and popular culture suggests that each concept "is both cause and consequence" of the other.[182]

James Jasinski delineates two competing traditions of rhetoric that are relevant to this study. Both date back to Antiquity. The Platonic tradition highlights "a negative or pejorative sense of rhetoric," suggesting that rhetoric "is both beneficial and dangerous, a tool for building human community and a device for tearing it apart." The other tradition is more positive and holds that rhetoric "was a force for civilization and human advancement" and celebrated "language and rhetoric."[183] Given the focus of this project, much of the rhetoric examined here is viewed in a critical light. Yet, the conclusion of this project also explores a path forward where

the nesting of popular and political culture can be used to dispel, rather than disseminate, disinformation through satire.

This project also draws from the rhetorical traditions of public address and visuality. Studies of public address largely focus on persuasion in the public sphere, with Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan arguing that such studies "now encompass a broader range of voices and a greater variety of written and mass mediated texts, including advertisements, autobiographies, cartoons, films, manifestoes, memorials, photographs, television and print news, and many other forms of discourse."[184] Cara Finnegan in particular explores the role of visual rhetoric in public life, which serves as "a mode of inquiry, defined as a critical and theoretical orientation that makes issues of visuality relevant to rhetorical theory."[185] Indeed, visuality "refers to a process of imagination and invention" making it "the province of rhetoric."[186] Thus, visuality intersects public address by connecting events in the world in a "visualized fashion."[187]

Visual images of course do not exist in isolation, as they are frequently a part of broader media texts. The meaning making of visual images often depends on written and spoken words, sounds, music, colors, and editing practices of these media messages. Marguerite Helmers and Charles A. Hill term these "material[s] around the primary texts" as "paratextuality." Visual meaning making in media texts (e.g., ads, films, videos) often rely on references to other media texts as well to demonstrate the rhetorical force of "intertextuality."[188] Intertextuality highlights how "each media manifestation makes a distinct but interrelated contribution to the unfolding of a narrative universe."[189] In a way, the visually-based media texts of the Trump era

build an intertextual web of public discourse that helps embolden an alt-right worldview.

One of the key rhetorical theories pertaining to the analysis of media texts is "frame" theory. As Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just explain, "The essence of framing is selection to prioritize some facts, images, or developments over others . . . thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events."[190] While Norris et al. and others apply frame theory to news coverage, Leslie A. Hahner argues that "frame analysis provides a way to understand how a single text may prompt a number of different arguments," adapting such a theory to visual texts like memes.[191] Indeed, frame theory is useful for understanding contemporary, online visual exchanges as "online images . . . swiftly circulate on the internet" allowing for "seemingly discrete frameworks to collide and converge." Thus, as Hahner concludes, contemporary visual media frames are key to perpetuating the "cognitive schemes" or arguments that "infect potential viewers."[192] Accordingly, this project analyzes "reactionary frames" where alt-right groups take popular-culture iconography and repurpose it to undermine progress in racial justice, gender equity, and government uplift. As Janis L. Edwards indicates, the power of visual media lies in their "perceived ability to frame an event and to suggest more universal values that attach to the event in the public imagination."[193] Trump and the alt-right reclaimed values from the past and visual and textual imagery from popular culture to bolster their disinformation campaigns designed to create a cadre of reactionary true believers.

The power of such imagery owes much to the ideological doctrines that bolster them. As John Thompson makes clear, ideology is deeply tied with how meaning making establishes and maintains power.[194] This power is often hegemonic in nature. Antonio Gramsci describes hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group."[195] In other words, hegemony works by making the ideology of the ruling classes the cultural norm for subaltern groups. Indeed, Stuart Hall suggests that this function of ideology makes the understandings of the dominant group "appear universal, natural, and coterminous with 'reality' itself."[196] This study underscores how popular and political culture function as hegemonic tools propagated by alt-right ideologues.

Such discussions of how ideology might appear "natural" or a part of "reality" necessitates a critical perspective that accounts for the meaning-making associated with realism and mimesis. I argue that both of these audiovisual and narrative strategies strengthen the fusion of popular and political culture. "Realism" represents a critical lens that examines the visual and storytelling strategies that films use "to represent reality as effectively as possible." In other words, as Colin MacCabe argues, realism techniques attempt to create "an authentic relation between film and fact."[197] Further, as Jason Farman notes, realism can draw some viewers "into identificatory relationships with the protagonist,"[198] which could lead to troubling implications in the case of disinformation.

However, there are inherent flaws when discussing theorizing realism. As Andrew Kania notes, "One of the first things one learns about film is that its initially

most striking feature—the apparent motion of its images—is an illusion. When new viewers (usually children) ask us how the pictures move, we explain the illusion."[199] Thus, even when realism techniques appear to capture "the real," film is ultimately ontologically unable to fully achieve such goals of realism because it is simply a mediation of "the real." One might then argue that such realism might not function in contemporary disinformation campaigns. This might be especially true in the face of what Damien Smith Pfister and Carly S. Woods term "the unnaturalistic enthymeme," where "interpreters of images" assume that an image is "less tethered to realism" due to "the figurative potential of digital manipulation."[200] Yet, as Youjung Jun, Rachel Meng, and Gita Vekataramani Johar note, people are "less likely to verify statements when they perceive the presence of others." This presence can be either physical, like watching a movie in a theater, or mediated by social media, like many of the texts of this study.[201] Further, as David S. Morris, Jonathan S. Morris, and Peter L. Francia observe, people are more likely to accept disinformation if it aligns with their partisan beliefs.[202] Thus, realism might still be an impactful illusion for those adherents of alt-right disinformation. Indeed, as many of the comment examples I highlight in my study reveal, viewers of alt-right disinformation often assign it a documentary quality. Thus, at least for some viewers of alt-right disinformation, they might still be functioning "in the context of a documentary-realist ocular regime."[203]

Whereas realism attempts to imitate reality or some distortion of it, "rhetorical mimesis" instead works to copy the aesthetics of another genre or area of discourse. As Belinda A. Stillion Southard argues, "Classical notions of mimesis persisted in the notion of *imitatio*" or "the imitation of mere appearance."[204] Further,

Arne Melberg suggests that "*mimesis* is always the meeting-place of two opposing but connected ways of thinking, acting and making: similarity and difference."[205] Given this study's focus on the intersections of popular culture and political culture, we can see where this "meeting-place" occurs. Thus, mimesis is noted in these texts as the moments where popular culture attempts to mimic the trappings of political culture, or where political culture uses the genre qualities of popular culture to further its disinformative ends. And while Stillion Southard highlights mimesis's "potential to empower marginalized groups,"[206] I recognize its danger in spreading disinformative messages. Given Richardson's argument that "Genres serve as emotional heuristics" within popular and political culture texts, mimicking genres through audiovisual markers can work to shortcut and circumvent audiences' information processing.[207] Accordingly, appeals based in genres like horror and action might more quickly and easily prime audiences to receive a disinformative message through the use of audiovisual illusion. Imitating popular genres like action and anime in political ads also stands to attract unique audiences for such disinformation campaigns.

Further, this analysis highlights political power struggles, especially those that fuse "hegemonic masculinity" and racism with disinformation campaigns to perpetuate "relations of domination" against marginalized groups.[208] Rebecca Feasey defines hegemonic masculinity as "those white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and aggressive men in the paid labour force who dominate the moral, cultural and financial landscape."[209] Kristen J. Warner further highlights how whiteness subsumes perceptions of authentic enactments of race in popular and

political culture. Some messages espouse a "colorblind" approach to race that "neutraliz[es] race and expel[s] it from legal discourse."[210] The colorblind approach reifies a long tradition of whiteness and misogyny that has occupied "a dominate position" in American popular and political culture.[211] However, other contemporary political messages draw on more overt racist appeals. Indeed, Katherine Cramer notes that "attention to symbolic and implicit racism may have drawn attention away from explicit or blatant racism too soon."[212] Trump and his alt-right allies have spewed overtly racist rhetoric against Latine, Muslim, African American, Asian Pacific Islanders, and other communities, making their "openly racist statements . . . too numerous to itemize."[213] And commonly, alt-right actors integrate both misogynistic and racist tropes into the same political campaigns. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, for example, track the ways that Republicans relied on their "southern strategy" to mobilize white voters through racist and sexist symbolism. We see such strategies at work when "Confederate flags fly in Iowa," "white supremacists gathered around a statue of Robert E. Lee to March in Charlottesville," "Trump demonized Christine Blasey Ford," and Trump crowds "chanted . . . 'Lock her up!'" in response to Ford and Hillary Clinton. As Maxwell and Shields conclude, the racism and misogyny of the southern strategy helps explain "why Trump won."[214] Further, as Catherine Knight Steele notes, "In 2016, Black women were exposed to trolls, bots, and fake news stories on social media. Indeed, they were often the target of such campaigns of disinformation."[215] Thus, not only does alt-right disinformation work to organize white supremacists but it also attempts to directly target Black women and other marginalized groups.

In the face of this reactionary racism, misogyny, and anti-governance, this project interrogates and resists such alt-right disinformation in popular and political culture. Nathan Crick suggests that "to study the rhetoric of fascism is to engage in an explicit political project of resisting fascist movements by exposing the insidious attractiveness of their rhetorical appeal."[216] Given that disinformation is one of "the cornerstones of fascist rhetoric," I adopt a similar approach to combatting disinformation through rhetorical criticism: an explicit political project of exposing the rhetorical appeals and ideological foundations of disinformation campaigns.[217]

Precis of Chapters

Chapter Two focuses on cinematic popular culture texts during and surrounding the Trump era (2014-2022). These films in particular reinforced themes of misogyny, racism, and anti-governance that are a mainstay of the disinformation campaigns associated with Donald Trump and his alt-right supporters. Before turning to a focus on political culture texts in future chapters, this chapter is designed to show the ways that these themes permeated popular culture. An analysis of these films shows the proliferation of messages that cast doubt on the efficacy and morality of government programs. In many cases, these popular films suggest the U.S. government is at best incompetent and at worst outright evil. This project presumes that popular culture, like political culture, helps shape the psyche of Americans toward their government. Such texts often rely on markers of realism to build on the intertextuality of alt-right, extremist views. One salient film to examine in the leadup to the 2016 election is *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016), a film directed by Michael Bay and starring John Krasinski. This film is billed as faithfully depicting the events of the

attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and the ineptitude of the government's handling of that attack.[218] The Benghazi event was used heavily during the 2016 campaign to criticize the Obama administration and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's role in the government response to the attack. Even though the film never mentions Obama or Clinton, Katey Rich argues that the film relies heavily on dog whistles to allow "anyone invested in Benghazi conspiracy theories [to] easily find exactly what they're looking for."[219] This film's release months prior to the 2016 election highlights the use of popular culture to spread conspiracy and disinformation. *13 Hours* also links to two other disinformative films of the era—*A Quiet Place* and *Songbird*.

The links from *13 Hours* to *A Quiet Place* (2018) are Michael Bay, who went from directing *13 Hours* to producing *A Quiet Place*, and John Krasinski, who went from being the lead actor in *13 Hours* to directing and starring in this horror film.[220] Even though Krasinski refutes a conservative reading of the film, *A Quiet Place* combines horror and conservative dog whistles to bolster a conservative reading of the implications of "silencing" the white "majority."[221] This film also contains an inherent anti-government narrative, as the U.S. is overrun by highly sound-sensitive monsters. The link from *13 Hours* to *Songbird* (2020) also comes from conservative director Michael Bay, who later produced the anti-government COVID-19 commentary film. *Songbird* tells of increasing government crackdowns in the face of new strains of COVID-19, leading to people being put into concentration camps.[222] Released during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this film used horror tropes to play into conspiracies surrounding government actions to curtail the virus (e.g.,

mask mandates). Realism is deployed here to mix the lived experiences of mid-pandemic audiences with apocalyptic government narratives.

Finally, *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), its sequel, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017), and its prequel, *The King's Man* (2021), provide other strong examples of conservative political disinformation in popular culture.[223] As Peter Suderman highlights, "no recent big-budget film leans more overtly to the right in its politics" with a narrative "that pits its heroes against a wealthy coastal tech mogul who is obsessed with global warming."[224] The Kingsman franchise thus mixes realistic political trappings with disinformative fantasy. Each of these films provide strong examples of how primarily popular culture texts uptake and proliferate political culture disinformation before, during, and after the Trump presidency.

Chapter Three pivots toward genres of popular culture used in traditional political culture texts—particularly campaign advertisements—that reinforce disinformation themes. One trope in particular that has become more common is that of the masculine (predominantly white and occasionally woman) hero, a trait that can be found in horror, action, and military genres, among others.[225] An example of this trend is an ad released by Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) in 2020, which was dubbed an "Avengers-style political ad."[226] The ad relies heavily on realism and mimesis to create a highly cinematic advertisement. There are no direct mentions of popular culture franchises, but there are a plethora of popular culture tropes and references used, such as the computer voice telling Crenshaw, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, will be to save Texas." The advertisement uses swelling music as Crenshaw gathers a team of militaristic, hyper-masculine Texas politicians

to his cause of saving Texas from alleged disinformative threats. These white women in particular are portrayed as highly masculine, as Genevieve Collins is shown wrestling a man to the ground. When she asks who's next, Republican congressional candidate Beth Van Duyne is the one who steps forward. [227]

This pattern of white women enacting more traditionally masculine hero roles is not limited to this Crenshaw advertisement but can also be seen in countless other political spots. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene's (R-GA) ad, for example, shows her shooting a .50 caliber sniper rifle at a Prius, or Michele Fiore's gubernatorial ad depicts her shooting bottles labeled with "VACCINE MANDATES," "CRT," and "VOTER FRAUD." Ads like these promulgate disinformation themes by relying on conspiracy and mimetic genre elements of popular culture films.[228]

Additionally, I analyze how ads based in the genre tropes of home-invasion horror have used horror and dog-whistles to spread disinformation surrounding crime and police funding. Ad's like Trump's "Break In" and "Defund the Police" both highlight the escalation of violent crime thanks to supposed wide-spread police defunding by mainstream Democrats.[229] Republican New Mexico gubernatorial candidate Mark Ronchetti also relied on such audiovisual and narrative tropes that helped heighten its feel of realism in his ad, "Krysty's Story."[230] All of these ads follow traditional narrative patterns of home-invasion horror to spread disinformation about dwindling police readiness. Such "tough-on-crime" positions are racist dog whistles that disproportionately harm marginalized communities.

Chapter Four examines debates surrounding specific popular culture franchises within political culture as a way of exacerbating supposed culture wars. Whereas Chapter Three examines the ways that political culture draws on genres of popular culture, Chapter Four looks at the ways that congressional leaders use direct references to popular culture franchises for political gain.[231] Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) has found himself in multiple battles over the public understanding of popular culture as it relates to political culture. For example, he got in a scuffle with Mark Hamill—the actor who plays Luke Skywalker—over the political takeaways from the Star Wars saga as it related to disinformation about net neutrality.[232] Cruz and Hamill later battled again about disinformation on Twitter as it related to Star Wars and vaccine campaigns.[233] Cruz and other conservatives' selection of Star Wars seemed to build off of the alt-right criticisms of the franchise at the same time, where conservative audiences protested the inclusion of more Black, Asian, and women characters in the main cast of the new films.[234]

Such racism, and misogyny in the conservative film community has also been tapped into by Trump and Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL). Trump accessed this alt-right xenophobia when he criticized *Parasite* (2019) for winning the Oscar for best picture, saying, "What the hell was that all about? We've got enough problems with South Korea with trade, on top of it they give them the best movie of the year?"[235] Another strong example of alt-right cultural battles over intellectual property is Governor DeSantis and his ongoing clash with Disney over the "Don't Say Gay" bill.[236] This strategy of attacking and reinterpreting popular culture franchises is not new, as 1992 Republican vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle famously attacked

the sitcom *Murphy Brown* over its depiction of single motherhood.[237] However, each of these cases highlight how alt-right aligned politicians have doubled down on this strategy of debating the meaning and interpretation of popular culture franchises in order to perpetuate disinformation within political culture.

One of the most recent and most shocking examples of this convergence is Representative Paul Gosar's (R-AZ) video (that has since been removed from Twitter), which edited the intro of the popular Japanese horror anime, *Attack on Titan*, to reflect alt-right views on immigration and political violence. The producers of this video frame undocumented migrants, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), and President Joe Biden as titan monstrosities. The video even depicts Gosar as one of the protagonists of the show, killing the titan that has Ocasio-Cortez's face photoshopped on top of it.[238] This text deploys mimesis to tap into the alt-right following of *Attack on Titan*. Gosar further uses all of the strategies of horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles in this video. Yet, Gosar blew that dog whistle a bit too loud and his video was met with strong rebukes, formal censure, and his removal from committee assignments for his depiction of political violence.[239]

The conclusion of this project then ties all of this back together to demonstrate the potential harms of disinformation campaigns tapping into the overlaps between popular and political culture. Here, I offer satire as one potential path forward for interrogating and rejecting disinformation in a world where politics continue to mingle with entertainment.

As a whole, this project looks to expose the mechanisms and great harms at work behind rhetorics of alt-right disinformation. As Michelle Bachelet, UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights noted, "We need to look at how best to contain the harms caused by disinformation, while addressing the underlying causes that give disinformation life and allow it to gain traction."[240] This analysis endeavors to look at those specific rhetorical dimensions endemic to the nesting of popular/political culture. These dimensions allow for the spread of disinformation, while also suggesting one possible method of countering and containing such disinformation. What's at stake is revealing the insidious modes by which rhetorics of political, racist, and misogynistic violence permeate our entertainment and our politics.

Notes

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[4] For examples, see Nancy Pelosi (@SpeakerPelosi), "Republicans want to ignore reality. That is completely unacceptable. The Trump Admin must be held accountable. #WakeUpGOP," *Twitter*, July 14, 2017, https://twitter.com/speakerpelosi/status/885891357902090240; Justin Wise, "Ocasio-Cortez says fake TV interview shows 'Republicans are so scared of me,'" *The Hill*, July 24, 2018, https://thehill.com/homenews/398581-ocasio-cortez-on-fake-interview-gop-cant-deal-with-reality-anymore/; Scot Lehigh, "What happens when much of the country loses touch with reality?" *Boston Globe*, January 27, 2022, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/01/27/opinion/what-happens-when-much-country-loses-touch-with-reality/; Henry Blodget, "DAVID FRUM: We Republicans Have Completely Lost Touch With Reality," *Business Insider*, November 21, 2011, https://www.businessinsider.com/republican-david-frum-the-gop-has-completely-lost-touch-with-reality-2011-11; Eugene Robinson, "The biggest threat to America is the Republican break with reality," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-biggest-threat-to-america-is-the-republican-break-with-reality/2021/05/10/22117f54-b1b9-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798_story.html; Arlie Hochschild, "Think Republicans are disconnected from reality? It's even worse among liberals," *Guardian*, July 21, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/21/democrats-republicans-political-beliefs-national-survey-poll.
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[7] Kornfield, "Why hundreds of QAnon supporters showed up in Dallas."

[8] Catie Edmondson, "McConnell says 'looney lies' spread by Marjorie Taylor Greene are a 'cancer' on G.O.P.," *New York Times*, February 1, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/us/politics/mitch-mcconnell-marjorie-taylor-greene.html.
[9] Edmondson, "McConnell says 'looney lies.'"
[10] There is some question on whether demagogues are able to manipulate the masses or coordinate the masses with disinformation, but regardless they are active participants in this process. See Michael Bang Petersen, "The Evolutionary Psychology of Mass Mobilization: How Disinformation and Demagogues Coordinate Rather than Manipulate," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2020): 71-75. For more on demagoguery in general, see Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Rhetoric and Demagoguery* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2019).
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[15] "Generic conventions" refers to editing practices and narrative techniques that are analogous to various popular culture genres. For example, generic conventions of horror would include narratives of monstrosity, affects of fear, and editing effects like dark shading and distortions, amongst a handful of other conventions.
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[25] James W. Cortada and William Aspray, *Fake News Nation: The Long Standing History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 3.
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[27] James Jasinski, "A Constitutive Framework for Rhetorical Historiography: Toward an Understanding of the Discursive (Re)constitution of 'Constitution' in the Federalist Papers," in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 78.
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[32] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, 1873, http://nietzsche.holtof.com/Nietzsche_various/on_truth_and_lies.htm.
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[35] John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 8.
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[38] Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, 5.
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[40] Of course, many do argue that political and economic systems like liberalism, conservatism, and communism are all examples of ideology. For example, Anabela Carvalho argues, "In the Marxist tradition, ideology has often been linked to social domination and to distortion of reality. Alternatively, I understand ideology as a system of values, norms and political preferences, linked to a program of action vis-à-vis a given social and political order." Hannah Schmid-Petri also forwards this latter definition, explicitly connecting it to conservative media. However, given my study's focus on power ("social domination") and how disinformation aligns with nestings of popular and political culture to create "distortion[s] of reality," I align more with the previous definition, where I highlight specific instances of ideological domination. Anabela Carvalho, "Ideological Cultures and Media Discourses on Scientific Knowledge: Re-reading News on Climate Change," *Public Understanding of Science* 16, no. 2 (2007): 225; Hannah Schmid-Petri, "Do Conservative Media Provide a Forum for Skeptical Voices? The Link Between Ideology and the Coverage of Climate Change in British, German, and Swiss Newspapers," *Environmental Communication* 11, no. 4 (2017): 555.
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[47] For examples, see Hart, *Seducing America* and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
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Chapter 2: Alt-Right Disinformation in Popular Culture

"In Iraq we had Blackhawks to get us out of shit like this."

"Yeah well here we have nothing."

"Uncle Sam's on a budget right now."

"That's some real .gov shit."

"Do we have air support?"

"We don't have any support."

"Libyan government has gone home for the night or they're just not picking up the phone."

"What about ours, are they picking up the phone?"

"I'm working on it."

These are just a few of countless assertions of a lack of government support of U.S. military contractors and diplomatic staff in Benghazi, Libya found in Michael Bay's *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016).[1] For many conservative audience members in the leadup to the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, this film acted as a sharp criticism of Clinton and President Barack Obama's handling of the Benghazi attacks. Some conservatives believed this film to be an accurate depiction of those events, with Deroy Murdock of the *National Review* asserting, "It is impossible to experience the gripping new film *13 Hours* and escape this conclusion: Obama and Hillary Clinton have lied through their teeth, gums, and cheeks about Benghazi."[2] Such fervent proclamations coming from the details of a

Hollywood blockbuster film raises the question: what is it about popular culture, especially film, that allows for some to view their narratives as conclusive evidence?

In order to highlight the ways that alt-right disinformation thrives at the intersections of popular culture and political culture, I begin my analysis with a focus on popular culture texts. In particular, I examine a number of films which exemplify some of the key strategies of alt-right disinformation's propagation: conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles. The films I analyze are *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016), *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017), *A Quiet Place* (2018), *Songbird* (2020), and *The King's Man* (2021). Each of the disinformation strategies examined here work toward greater goals of spreading reactionary disinformation that fuels racism, misogyny, and anti-governance. My analysis works to highlight how the characters and the plotlines, audio-visual techniques, and the films' circulation rely on strategies of realism and amplify popular culture's intersection with alt-right political culture. Recognizing how these strategies and themes appear and function in popular culture texts is an essential foundation for recognizing how such popular culture strategies work their way into political culture texts.

This chapter is organized along the lines of the three alt-right disinformation strategies that guide my larger work. First, I analyze conspiracy and conspiracy theories as they arise in these films. This section is broken down into populist conspiracies and deep-state conspiracies. Second, I examine the way that horror is used in order to propagate alt-right disinformation. *A Quiet Place* is featured heavily here as a strong exemplar of these tactics. Interestingly, as this section will show,

elements of the horror genre can be used selectively in films that are not necessarily classified as horror films. Finally, I highlight the ways that alt-right dog whistles are present throughout these films. Many of these dog whistles take form in the casting choices and the way that identities are represented in these films; others draw upon narrative and conspiratorial understanding of world events by audience members. Even as I cover each of these strategies on their own, I will also show how they overlap and intersect. Ultimately, my analysis emphasizes how alt-right disinformation, as spread by popular culture texts, normalizes and justifies the fascistic tendencies and harms to marginalized groups during the long Trump era.

Conspiracy

Conspiracy and conspiracy theories are some of the key strategies through which alt-right disinformation manifests itself within popular culture texts. Indeed, it should not be surprising that conspiracy, defined by Jenny Rice as passing off narrative for evidence,[3] often embeds itself within popular culture texts like film. That is because film *is* narrative, mediated through audio-visuals. As Barna William Donovan argues, "The political conspiracy film's roots reach far back in cinematic history . . . the classic political films usually involve a clash between idealistic outsiders . . . and a covert, 'back room' culture of crooked insiders subverting democracy for personal gain."[4] Fictional films in particular are not beholden to any standards of truth or any rigorous evidentiary process. And yet, films frequently parallel or mirror political reality through the fictional narratives they weave. As Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles note, conspiracy and realism can certainly be linked in film texts, although "presuppositions about conspiracy theories work to undermine . . .

realism."[5] Nevertheless, the closer a conspiracy film comes to achieving realism, the more troubling the implications are for the blurring of fictional narrative with political realism, especially if one understands voters as Kathleen Hall Jamieson does, where "voters gather bits and pieces of political information and store them in a single place" much like "pack rats."[6] Thus, for some viewers, information, disinformation, fiction, and reality can all stir together, making a soup of political beliefs and attitudes.

Anti-governance is one of the most common messages that alt-right disinformation spreads through conspiracy in popular films. Such anti-governance narratives can take on many forms and manifest against many political targets. One of the two more common narrative approaches is that of the populist struggle against elite, often economic, government conspiracy. The other, sometimes related style, is a narrative of a sinister deep state, often tied up in globalist conspiracies, where a cabal of international politicians look to harm individual nations and the people of those nations—or the world as a whole. Gordon B. Arnold suggests that in the age of Cold War conspiracy film, fear and paranoia was the dominate form of conspiracy theory film, while "over recent decades the concept has often drifted quite far from its Cold War-era fear-and-paranoia origins." Instead, what Arnold suggests was most prominent in 2008 is "disaffection, not paranoia . . . this disaffection suggests varying degrees of alienation from some aspects of contemporary life."[7] I argue that these two styles of conspiracy—disaffection and fear/paranoia—map nicely onto the two types of anti-governance narratives I have suggested, with populist anti-governance often drawing on disaffection and "deep state" anti-governance drawing on fear and

paranoia. Unlike Arnold, however, I argue that both disaffection and fear/paranoia have very much been in play during this era, sometimes even in the same film or franchise. As Corey Robin argues, political fear is "a people's felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being—the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay—or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups."[8] We can begin to see where and how fear might begin to weave itself with political conspiracy.

As such, the remainder of this section will be broken down into two parts. The first will examine the ways that populist conspiracy has been used to spread alt-right disinformation through cinema. The second part will interrogate the use of deep-state-styled conspiracy within these films. The Kingsman cinematic trilogy functions as a particularly strong example of the popular culture manifestation of both types of alt-right conspiracies against governance, with *13 Hours* and *Songbird* also exemplifying alt-right conspiratorial themes.

Populist Conspiracy

In the first movie of the series, *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, Gary "Eggsy" Unwin is recruited into a secretive, British spy organization known as the Kingsman.[9] One might suspect that such a powerful, behind the scenes organization would be the focus of the conspiracy of the film, but the Kingsman agents are instead framed as the romantic, conservative ideal of heroes, unencumbered by governmental influence. Indeed, as Laura Grattan notes of reactionary populists, "Populists often foment reactionary backlash against elites and marginalized groups. To achieve their fantasies of unity . . . populists rely on antistatist tactics."[10] Here, we see the very

narrow, contradictory line that such reactionary populism walks: a balancing act between railing against elites while also ensuring those that are most harmed by such elites remain marginalized.

In a way, *Kingsman*'s choice of main character reflects this alt-right populist tight-rope. Eggsy is privileged in the sense that he is an educated white man whose father died in service to the Kingsman when Eggsy was very young. This familial connection is ultimately what gets Eggsy's life moving in the right direction and allows him to join the Kingsman. Eggsy is recruited by Harry Hart, a member of the Kingsman whose life was saved by the self-sacrifice of Eggsy's father. This privilege is physically manifested in the form of a coin Eggsy is given bearing the Kingsman emblem. This coin, the plot makes clear, will help him get out of any difficult situation. Eggsy's privilege allows him to leave jail after being arrested for hijacking a car and running it into a police officer's vehicle. While Eggsy overtly gets out of this situation thanks to the coin, it is also not shocking that Eggsy, a white man, is able to escape a significant run in with the law with no consequences. Indeed, as Shasta N. Inman notes, "African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at five times the rate of whites. Black men face disproportionately harsh incarceration experiences as compared with prisoners of other races."[11] Similar discriminatory disparities can be found in Britain, where the first *Kingsman* movie is set. Indeed, "White British people were charged least often, with 69.9 percent of cases resulting in prosecution. Black people were charged 74.7 to 77.5 percent of the time."[12] Thus, Eggsy's inherent privilege is established early in the film, clearly separating him from

any marginalized communities that alt-right groups would position themselves against.

At the same time, Eggsy symbolizes the disaffection of an economically and socially disadvantaged class of white, British citizens. Eggsy lives in an apartment with his mother, baby sibling, and two men who are romantically involved with his mother. Eggsy is ordered around and threatened with violence by these men. Eggsy dresses and behaves without refinement, a stark juxtaposition to the economically and culturally elite members of the Kingsman.

Our first encounter with true refinement comes with Harry's bar brawl, emphasized by stylized violence and slow motion effects. While Harry and Eggsy are talking at a local pub, some of the posse that Eggsy has been quarreling with bursts in and tries to pick a fight with him. Harry tries to deescalate the situation. When that fails, he calmly locks the doors of the pub while saying, "Manners maketh man."[13] This action sequence, while stylized with gruesome effects, emphasizes Harry's poise and grace, as he effortlessly dispatches with those he is fighting against. The camera remains focused on Harry's movements as those trying to fight him fly around him. Harry pops the tooth out of one brawler, uses another as a human shield against a knife attack, and gracefully uses his umbrella as a weapon for dispatching the posse with ease. When the camera is not focused on Harry, it centers on the bloodied and disfigured faces of those he is fighting. This is in sharp contrast with Harry, who gets hardly a drop of blood on himself or his finely-tailored suit. When the main agitator pulls a gun on Harry, Harry unfurls his umbrella into a bullet proof shield before sending the shooter flipping through the air with a stun shot. He then hits the

bartender who is about to call for help with an amnesia dart, before sitting back down, finishing his pint, and reengaging Eggsy in casual conversation. Through this encounter, Harry reveals to Eggsy a key lesson on how to be a proper gentleman, an important aspect of the Kingsman society. For the viewer, the stylized camera angles, slow motion effects, and stunt work toe the line between grounded, realistic violence and comic-bookish carnage. These film techniques emphasize that being a gentleman means fighting violently against supposed injustice and boorishness.

Eggsy's "of the people" status is again highlighted when he meets the other potential Kingsman recruits during his training. The other recruits are all dressed in luxurious attire, compared to Eggsy's athletic polo, jacket, and flat-billed hat. Charlie, one of the poshest recruits, comes up to Eggsy and asks, "Where did they dig you up?" Rufus, another recruit, incorrectly names Eggsy and asks, "So, Eggy, are you Oxford or Cambridge?" Eggsy says he is "Neither," which prompts Charlie to ask, "St. Andrew's?" Rufus then chimes back in and says, "No wait, I think we may have met, did you serve me at a McDonald's in Winchester Service Station?" Eggsy makes a crude comeback to Rufus, prompting Charlie to say in a belittling manner, "He's definitely St. Andrew's."[14] This interaction emphasizes Eggsy's difference in status from the other recruits' elitism. He ultimately overcomes this difference and makes it further in the training process than any of the recruits that belittle him.

While this arrogant elitism is rejected, Eggsy still slowly gains more and more class and refinement throughout the film, echoing the conservative myth of "the self-made man." This myth highlights how "the values of individual and social virtue" combine with "the self-made entrepreneur" to establish "the self-made man" who is

"at the core of the American Dream."[15] Further, as Ashley Noel Mack notes, "Discourses of self-made-ness reinforce an 'inner,' 'innate,' and 'natural' conception of subjectivity that frames power as only accessible from within and through practices of the self."[16] As such, the mythic self-made man must focus on his own predispositions in order to achieve success. Man is used intentionally here and throughout, as this conservative worldview is often highly misogynistic and exclusionary of those who are not cis-white men.[17] And while this project is focused on American politics, much of *Kingsman* is set in Britain. Thus, it is worth noting that according to Inderpal Grewal, "American identity as a form of consumer nationalism" has the "ability to disseminate the power of the American Dream to many who have never lived in or visited the United States."[18] As such, Eggsy is very much able to represent the populist, mythic self-made man for conservative viewers in both the U.S. and Britain through its polysemous ideological position.

The disaffected, populist conspiracy angle of *Kingsman* taps into the economic disaffection many were feeling at this time. Many in the United States were in the middle of recovery efforts in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, in 2014 when the first Kingsman film released, the Pew Research Center found global dissatisfaction levels had risen to a median of 69 percent, with 62 percent of people in the U.S. dissatisfied with the state of the nation. Another 58 percent of Americans also viewed the U.S. economic situation as bad, with only 35 percent of Americans expecting the economy to improve in the near term.[19] Such strong economic dissatisfaction likely built and played a role in Trump's victory in 2016, as almost "half the U.S. counties carried by President Donald Trump in the 2016 election were

arguably in recession at the time."[20] Further, many voters viewed Trump as an embodiment of the "self-made man." Jared McDonald, David Karol, and Lilliana Mason argue, "The Narrative of Trump as self-made is simply false," and yet that misguided belief accounted for "at least a 5-percentage-point boost in the president's job approval." That swing is even stronger with Republicans, where a lack of understanding of Trump's true biography swung conservative perceptions of him by "more than 10 percentage points."[21] As such, we can catch a glimpse of the importance of the populist, self-made man myth and conspiratorial form of thinking in the long Trump era, a theme that plays out significantly in the narrative development of *Kingsman*.

However, this anti-elitist, populist conspiracy is not confined to popular culture narratives focused on the economy. *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* is another prime example of the mythic self-made man fighting against conspiratorial elites.[22] *13 Hours* claims to tell the true story of the soldiers that attempted to defend the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya in 2012. The framing of the movie clearly suggests that this is an accurate account of what happened, with special features included with the film titled, "For the Record: Finding the Truth Amid the Noise" and "Uncovering Benghazi's Secret Soldiers."[23] In a sense then, director Michael Bay seems to view this film as a recovery project of sorts from the distortions of the media. In an interview with *Collider*, Bay said:

> You know, getting this right, you have to get it all right. You know, you have to have your facts all straight. You know, so much research went into this from the book to the probably sixty interviews with people . . . the breadth I

> have in terms of military connections, people, boots on the ground, way more so than any investigative reporter would ever have access to. This movie puts it in there, and it puts it in there very accurately.[24]

So even on a meta level, Bay views himself as the type of self-made man who has done the "research" necessary to make a more accurate depiction of this story than the media. Indeed, conservatives have made "Fake News" a rallying cry in the long Trump era, with conservatives "distrust[ing] more than trust[ing]" the majority of news sources.[25]

We can see the conspiracy of elite news media versus the populist conservative in the way *Kingsman* and *13 Hours* circulated amongst conservative circles. For example, in 2019, an edit of *Kingsman*'s church fight made waves on social media and mainstream media outlets because the scene depicted Trump killing political opponents and attacking news organizations.[26] In this original scene in *Kingsman*, Harry finds himself in a highly conservative church service while investigating a plot by tech mogul Richmond Valentine to make people kill each other using cell phone frequencies. Valentine activates a test of the device within the church, causing Harry to go on a killing spree against relatively well-armed, conservative churchgoers. The actions of this scene are out of Harry's control and not necessarily something to be praised within the film (although the scene is certainly one of the more memorable of the film for its highly stylized, highly violent choreography). Nevertheless, conservative uptake and circulation of the film valorized this plot point in tandem with the more outright conservative messages of the film.[27]

The edit with Trump depicts the then president brutally murdering political opponents and fake news media, in what is dubbed, "The Church of Fake News."[28] In fact, the video is so violent that news outlets could "only show a few seconds of it" and, in a somewhat surprising decision, the Trump campaign tried to overtly distance itself from the video. The edit was first shown at a "pro-Trump conference by an outside group" and received criticism from some congressional Republicans and Democrats. Former White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany stated that Trump "has not yet seen the video . . . but based upon everything he has heard, he strongly condemns this video."[29] However, in classic Trump administration fashion, Trump himself never denounced the video, as it bore a message that aligns very neatly with his populist rants against news organizations. Indeed, Trump on numerous occasions has called news media organizations "the enemy of the people," rallying populist understandings of the common people versus the media elites. Further, Trump has circulated similar memes depicting explicit violence against news organizations. Trump tweeted a clip of himself tackling and punching a person at a wrestling event with "CNN" photoshopped over the face of the person he tackled. This video was tweeted with the caption, "#FraudNewsCNN #FNN."[30] Interestingly, in the sequel Kingsman film, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, Fox News is the only news channel shown reporting the events of the movie, making a number of long and pronounced cameos throughout the film, even in Britain where the channel was discontinued "due to a lack of viewers."[31] Nevertheless, the consistent depiction of Fox News using its real anchors and real production visuals heightens a sense of realism amongst viewers, especially conservative viewers who might be intimately

familiar with the trappings of Fox News. These examples evidence the overlapping of conspiratorial, populist narratives targeting elites that converge in popular and political culture texts in the long Trump era.

We further see how this narrative of the populist, everyday man versus conspiring elites plays out in discussions of university education. I have already touched earlier on how in *Kingsman*, Eggsy is belittled by his fellow Kingsman recruits for not having gone to a top university in the United Kingdom. This scene works to solidify Eggsy as an everyday man of the people, establishing an "us versus them" narrative against college-educated individuals. Indeed, this narrative strand is connected with an incredibly rapid shift in views on higher education held by Republican voters. According to Kim Parker of the Pew Research Center, as many as 53 percent of Republicans said that colleges and universities have a positive "effect on the way things are going in the country." That statistic peaked in 2015 at 54 percent, before declining rapidly by 2017 with only 36 percent of Republicans holding a positive view of higher education. By 2019, only 33 percent of Republicans viewed higher education as positive, with 59 percent believing colleges and universities are actively harming the direction of the country.[32] This sudden shift in conservative thinking has been highlighted most viscerally by Republican Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis. DeSantis rallied conservative outrage around higher education systems, suggesting they had been overrun by "woke activism." One bill being backed by DeSantis to combat this supposed wokeness, "looks to defund diversity, equity and inclusion efforts at state institutions; concentrate hiring power in the hands of trustees; allow for posttenure faculty review at any time; eliminate

majors in certain subjects focused on race and gender; and create new general education requirements."[33] In defense of this action, DeSantis suggested, "In Florida, we will build off of our higher education reforms by aligning core curriculum to the values of liberty and the Western tradition, eliminating politicized bureaucracies like DEI."[34] Indeed, for many conservatives and their adherents, universities have become viewed as elite institutions that do not provide practical guidance to their students.

Some of the roots of this conspiratorial understanding of higher education can be seen in films predating DeSantis's battle cries in Florida, such as *13 Hours*. In the film, we focus on John Krasinski's character, Jack Silva, and his fellow soldiers as they constantly butt heads with CIA analysts, with the mistakes of those analysts preceding the breach and attack of the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi. When Jack first meets the CIA chief stationed in Benghazi, he tells Jack, "We have the brightest minds from the farm, educated at Harvard and Yale, doing important work. The best thing for you to do is to stay out of their way."[35] Here, we can see the strong depiction of Ivy League educated CIA elites as disdainful of boots-on-the-ground, practical soldiers. This distinction is made even more clear, as the CIA director is somewhat out of shape and says he is about to retire. These disclosures and the onboarding discussion as a whole are intercut with one of the contract soldiers, Tyrone "Rone" Woods, loudly working out, shirtless, outside the chief's office window. Tyrone is clearly in peak physical shape, highlighted by the workout-montage-esque camera tracking. This is juxtaposed with close-up, side-to-side pans of Jack and the CIA chief, highlighting the tension of their conversation. The chief's open disdain for Jack, Tyrone, and the other soldiers is readily apparent when, after

his conversation with Jack, he yells out the window, "Quiet! You act like animals!"[36] This emphasizes the ideological battle between practical knowledge/skill and elite education that carries on throughout the film.

Later, Jack and Tyrone are tasked with escorting two CIA operatives as they conduct an intelligence gathering mission. Jack, however, interrupts the meeting the operatives have when Tyrone alerts him that they are being followed. He ushers them into a car and a highspeed chase ensues. The operatives are highly annoyed, with the woman analyst, Sona Jillani, becoming notably frustrated with their mission being blown. She yells, "Who the fuck do you think you are" at Jack, before later stating in frustration, "This is my second war tour, I know what I'm fucking doing." Jack calmy retorts, while cocking his gun, "Well, this is my twelfth."[37] Not only does this interaction highlight the wide gulf in practical knowledge between the solider Jack and the analyst Sona, but it also reinforces the misogyny of the film, where only men are portrayed as having much practical wisdom, calmness, or fighting ability. The camera is largely positioned inside the vehicle during this exchange, violently shaking at times with the movements of the car as the group is chased by pursuers. Such dynamic camerawork amplifies the realism of the scene, suggesting to the audience the threat of the pursuit and the validity of Jack's retorts. After the soldiers and analysts successfully outmaneuver their pursuers, Tyrone quips, "I might not have gone to Harvard, but I'm pretty sure that was a tail."[38] Later, when the diplomatic compound is under attack, another one of the soldiers, Kris "Tanto" Paronto, tells one of the CIA operatives from the earlier mission to "Grab a gun, meet me on the roof." The operative then questions, "He isn't serious, is he? Because that's his job, that's

not my job."[39] All of these moments highlight the short fallings of elite education when compared with practical, populist grit and determination.

13 Hours fed into conservative conspiracy narratives given the film's release in the middle of the 2016 campaign and Benghazi's status as a political black eye on Clinton's time as secretary of state. Director Michael Bay claimed the film is "not political. It's a story of Americans who became heroes."[40] For his part, lead actor John Krasinski was a little more forthwith about the film's politics, acknowledging, "We'd be naïve if we didn't think this would be politicized." However, he later makes a "both sides" argument, suggesting, "Look at 'American Sniper' and what a Rorschach test it became—you can take any piece of art to support your side. But for the guys on the ground, there was no politics."[41] The problem for Bay and Krasinski is that even if they were setting out to make an apolitical film (which, there is good reason to doubt such claims),[42] such a film was going to be understood by conservative viewers in an election cycle as an accurate depiction of the ineptitudes of President Obama and Secretary Clinton. And while Bay is careful not to explicitly portray Obama or Clinton, the film does enough groundwork to establish that the leaders back in Washington had at best failed these soldiers and, at worst, conspired with their fellow elites against them. Indeed, as editor Katey Rich notes, there are plenty of allusions to conservative conspiracies surrounding the events of Benghazi, including a moment in the film when the soldiers are told to "stand down" instead of helping the besieged diplomatic compound. Such a theme is in line with "persistent rumors . . . that Hillary Clinton herself issued a 'stand down' order to rescue forces outside of Libya that potentially could have intervened."[43] Thus, even though Bay

and Krasinski outwardly expressed opposition to criticism of *13 Hours* as political, the film's hard lean into conservative conspiracies, along with its timing and content, certainly positioned it for heavy political reads amongst alt-right and conservative circles.

Indeed, the circulation of *13 Hours* in conservative circles was immediate and apparent. For instance, Trump's son, Eric Trump, in an attack on Clinton on Fox News, said, "My wife and I watched *13 Hours* this weekend, right? And literally I was livid after watching the movie. I think in order to vote in this next election, you should have to watch that movie."[44] Here, similar to Bay's claims of research and factuality, we see Eric Trump suggesting that *13 Hours* is reality, and that it should function as a required form of political education for the American voting public. And certainly, between Bay's claims and the film's emphasis on seemingly realistic guns, explosions, settings, sound effects, and camerawork, *13 Hours* positions itself as a realistic account of what happened in Benghazi. The biggest problem with this narrative of *13 Hours'* realism, beyond the ones already discussed, is that some of the key elements of *13 Hours* have been disputed by those who were there. For example, the actual CIA chief in charge of the Benghazi base, told the *Washington Post*, "There never was a stand-down order . . . At no time did I ever second-guess that the team would depart."[45] Such a direct dispute discredits the truthfulness of the film's depiction of the events surrounding Benghazi, cutting at some of the biggest conservative conspiracies found in the film.[46] Nevertheless, the conspiracies of the film were a rallying cry for conservatives beyond just Eric Trump, as Republican

Senator from Texas, Ted Cruz, closed his January 15th Republican Primary Debate by saying:

> "13 Hours"—tomorrow morning, a new movie will debut about the incredible bravery of the men fighting for their lives in Benghazi and the politicians that abandoned them. . . . if I am elected president, to every solider and sailor and airman and marine, and to every police officer and firefighter and first responder who risk their lives to keep us safe, I will have your back.[47]

Cruz clearly used *13 Hours* to signify the Democratic Party's alleged wider abandonment of the armed forces and public safety members.

Other ordinary voters, however, similarly depicted *13 Hours* as a factual account of events that evidences conservative conspiracies surrounding Benghazi. The conspiracies found in *13 Hours* were picked up and circulated amongst wider alt-right audiences online. For instance, one of the highest upvoted comments on the Reddit discussion thread for *13 Hours* on r/movies highlighted the realism of the film:

> I just saw 13 Hours. I went into it thinking it would be Libya brought to me by the guy who made movies about space robots that come to earth to turn into Dodge Chargers. It was absolutely interesting and got nuanced details correct. I was shocked seeing it after review after review saying it was propaganda. I thought it was absolutely amazing in the details it got correct. Just to be clear, this is a Hollywood film, I would say it's not a documentary, but documentaries aren't necessarily accurate. I could drone on and on about details, but I was really blown away.[48]

Such a take suggests that, for some viewers, even despite warnings of the propagandistic underpinnings of the film, they read the film as largely correct, potentially even rivaling documentary filmmaking while still being a "Hollywood film."

Both the Kingsman franchise and *13 Hours* tap into populist conspiracies. Such conspiracies rely on narratives of "the self-made man" and disaffection with (often government) elites disregarding the lives of "everyday" people. However, as alt-right responses to *13 Hours* show, these feelings of disaffection can quickly turn to fear as the narratives move to more sinister, deep-state conspiracy.

Deep-State Conspiracy

13 Hours has continued to circulate as a conservative rallying cry against "the deep state" in the highly alt-right message board /pol/ on 4chan. For example, one anonymous user responded to a request for "best movies" that don't include non-white characters by saying, "I've got a couple that are a must see if you follow the deepstate 1) 13 hours It's the story of how BENGHAZI went down. Great movie, tells it how it actually happened, exposes Hilary and Obama as the scum they are."[49] And even beyond the messages of Obama and Clinton's failings, many alt-right audiences' view of *13 Hours* acts in a meta way as a symbol of conservative populism, fighting against Hollywood's elitist, liberal, conspiratorial nature. Another poster on /pol/ suggested, "I wish this would take off in a way that the 13 Hours movie about Hillary fucking the soldiers and ambassador of Benghazi never did. Fuck we need more right/conservative leaning movies."[50] In another/pol/ thread asking if John Krasinski is "secretly redpilled," one commenter argued, "Also, 13 Hours. I'm

sure there are some in Hollywood who would rather forget all about Benghazi."[51] As such, *13 Hours* has circulated through both mainstream conservatism and alt-right communities as a populist anthem against liberal political elites, highlighting the disaffection of those within these communities.

The "deep state" is a diffusely defined term that has become very common in popular parlance during the long Trump era. As Rita Santos notes, "The abnormal 2016 election cycle introduced average Americans to the term 'deep state,' previously used only by conspiracy theorists and those who studied Eastern European politics in the years following World War II."[52] This historical context of the term has, unsurprisingly, been largely dismissed by Trump, where it "has no meaning in the United States, and refers to one of many conspiracy theories that found a home at *Infowars*, *Breitbart*, and, ultimately, in the president's brain." Trump and his allies often use the term to allege foul play by intelligence agencies, at the beck and call of President Barack Obama.[53] Indeed, Representative Steve King (R-IA), suggested, "We are talking about the emergence of a deep state led by Barack Obama, and that is something that we should prevent . . . The person who understands this best is Steve Bannon, and I would think that he's advocating to make some moves to fix it."[54] As such, in the long Trump era, the deep state is often deployed against Democrats and their supposed bureaucratic and technocratic henchpersons.

However, the nefarious paranoia surrounding the deep state does not end at the borders of the United States, and such globalist fears are not necessarily new. As Charles P. Blair and Rebecca L. Earnhardt make clear, "Preoccupation with a global cabal akin to today's 'deep state' has animated American thinking for hundreds of

years—dark intrigues involving Jesuits, Freemasons, Illuminati, Communists, and so on." Indeed, such nefarious constructions of the deep state often draw connections with "new world order" conspiracies, which "virtually all major elements of the diffuse far-right fringe" draw upon. This far-right conspiracy connects abortion with "centralized efforts to exterminate the white race," taxation with "infiltration and subversion of the US government by an insidious conspiracy," Judaism with "satanic . . . origin," and international governance with the destruction of the U.S. Constitution.[55] As such, one can see how this extreme, alt-right paranoia can easily cross borders, making domestic issues into international conspiracies and international relations into domestic threats.

Popular culture certainly has a strong role to play in the construction of such conspiratorial paranoia in the minds of the public. As Santos suggests, "Separating fact from fiction when it comes to the deep state can be confusing," in part because such "conspiracy theories . . . often mix facts with fiction."[56] Thus, while I have already demonstrated the role of populist conspiracy theory in alt-right film texts, I further highlight here how such deep state conspiracies also take shape in such films. Often, these narratives mirror Richard Hofstadter's understanding of the "Paranoid Style" in American political discourse, where he suggests that "the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press, he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional)."[57] Indeed, as these films clearly exemplify, it is often a brave individual or group of typically cis, white men

fighting against a sinister enemy that has such a strong grasp on secretive, nearly insurmountable sources of power.

The Kingsman franchise again exemplifies this type of conservative conspiracy to an extreme degree throughout all of its films. To start, *Kingsman: The Secret Service* establishes a conspiratorial deep state through the plotting of its main protagonist, Richmond Valentine. Valentine is a tech mogul with seemingly massive funds and influence at his disposal. His goal is to save the planet by killing off a large portion of the Earth's population through cell phone signals that make people uncontrollably kill each other. In order to accomplish this plan, Valentine collaborates with university professors and many world leaders, including the president of the United States (who is without a doubt meant to be Barack Obama through his skin tone and back profile, marked by caricatured large ears) and the Swedish prime minister. Depicting actual politicians like President Obama as being wrapped up in this conspiracy contributes to the sense of realism the film plays with in developing its broad, sinister conspiracy. Played by Samuel L. Jackson, Valentine represents much of what conspiratorial conservatives fear: a tech giant, an environmental extremist, someone who conspires with liberal and global politicians, someone who collaborates with higher education "elites," someone who "has unlimited funds,"[58] and, as will be discussed further in the dog whistle section, someone who is a Black man.

Part of what makes this narrative so deep state driven is the idea that world leaders would willingly collaborate with someone like Valentine to hurt the vast majority of the population at the benefit of a few members of society. Indeed, as

Arnold suggests, “A popular motif, in which shadowy figures and clandestine machinations imperil the hapless public, the conspiracy theory vision of reality has a considerable presence in the mainstream.”[59] Valentine and his elite co-conspirators certainly fit this mold of imperiling the masses, as some of the sole remaining members of the Kingsman discover that even their own organization’s leader has been seduced by Valentine. And, especially given the environmental angle of this conspiracy, some conservative viewers might already believe in such conspiracies. As Michael Butter argues, “For those who believe in them, the representation of plots and intrigues in film and television surely confirms the suspicions they harbour in real life.”[60] It seems that Americans, in particular, are predisposed toward understanding climate science through conspiracy. As Matthew J. Hornsey, Emily A. Harris, and Kelly S. Fielding find in their study on the relationship between conspiratorial, conservative ideology and climate denial, “positive correlations between climate scepticism and indices of ideology were stronger and more consistent in the United States than in the other 24 nations tested.”[61] As such, Americans might be especially inclined to buy into the narrative of the first Kingsman movie.

Part of such conspiratorial inclinations relates to the long tradition of U.S. conservatism’s conspiratorial understanding of global environmental efforts. As the Southern Poverty Law Center notes, there has been a building “demonization” of environmental movements in conservative thinking since at least the release of Agenda 21 by the United Nations in 1992. This planning paper was “a nonbinding statement of intent aimed at dealing with sustainability on an increasingly crowded planet.” The document was signed by then Republican President George H.W. Bush,

along with 177 other nations. However, as the Southern Poverty Law Center argues, "at the hands of groups like the John Birch Society, Agenda 21 has been transformed in much of the America public mind into a secret plot to impose a totalitarian world government, a nefarious effort to crush freedom in the name of environmentalism."[62] One might think that such beliefs were only held by the most extreme sects of the conservative movement, but the 2012 Republican National Committee, platforming for noted moderate presidential candidate Mitt Romney, denounced Agenda 21 as "a 'destructive and insidious scheme' that is meant to impose a 'socialist/communist redistribution of wealth.'"[63]

This type of conspiratorial climate rhetoric has only expanded amongst right-wing politicians in the long Trump era. As Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) tweeted, "The Green New Deal & climate lies are a SCAM that waste trillions of taxpayers dollars & only serves the Liberal World Order enriching Klaus Schwab & those like his WEF frat boys."[64] Representative Lauren Boebert (R-CO) has shared similar sentiments on Twitter, stating, "Proposals like the Green New Deal and the Paris Agreement work for globalist career politicians but they do not work for everyday Americans who are suffering under job-killing policies and unreliable energy."[65] And Representative Dan Bishop (R-NC) went as far as to say, "Biden's 'climate crisis' is just the latest excuse for the Left to abuse executive power to push an anti-American, anti-freedom agenda."[66] As such, the conspiratorial, globalist environmentalism of *Kingsman* is no stranger to alt-right discourse.

The second Kingsman film, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, continues dealing in such globalist conspiracy. This time, it's not an environmentalist tech giant but a

drug cartel leader, Poppy Adams, who is at the center of the sinister plot against the world. Adams, played by Julianne Moore, is upset that recreational drugs like marijuana and cocaine are not legal in the United States. So, in order to force the president's hand, she laces her cartel's drugs with a virus that will kill those who use the drugs within a few days. She attempts to leverage the president by saying she has an antidote for the virus that she will release if the president legalizes recreational drug use. The president, played by Bruce Greenwood, claims to be willing to cooperate with Adams, but tells his staff, "What I'm proposing is we appear to agree to her demands to prevent global panic and then let the junkie scum go down in flames."[67] Such a narrative seems to take a middle-ground approach, criticizing both drug legalization and hardline anti-drug rhetoric in order to portray the mainline conservative approach to drugs as the most reasonable. The problem is that the more conservative approach against recreational drug use is couched in an absurdist, "let the junkie scum go down in flames" policy. This is portrayed as the ulterior, deep-state motive of the president. Most would recognize such a policy as over-the-top given the massive global catastrophe happening in the film. However, the legalization of recreational drugs, a much more reasonable and feasible policy, is also played out to an absurd conspiratorial degree, connecting such legalization with globalist conspiracy and cartels running wild. Thus, the film pushes viewers to the supposed "middle ground" of status quo criminalization of recreational drug use. Even though *Golden Circle* strawmans the right and the left, it uses the unrealistic deep-state policy of the right-leaning president and the more realistic policy (not plot) of the drug cartel to push viewers into a conservative stance on drugs. Thus, *Kingsman: The*

Golden Circle works to balance realism with excess in order to propagate a conservative worldview.

The third Kingsman movie, *The King's Man*, goes a bit off the rails both in terms of plot and conservative, deep state conspiracy.[68] A prequel to the other two films, *The King's Man* is set in the lead up to and years during World War I. The film establishes that the true cause of World War I was a group known as "The Flock," made up of members of many different nationalities (including Russians Grigori Rasputin and Vladimir Lenin). The Flock's goal, and the reason they start the bloodiest war to date, is to achieve Scottish independence. The Avengers-esque post-credits scene even establishes Adolph Hitler as a member of the Flock. Why so many globalists, especially Russian nationals, would have such a vested interest in Scottish independence is never clearly articulated. Nevertheless, the film trots along this conspiracy that such a sinister global cabal was behind World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and World War II. Further, this cabal was so nefarious that it required the establishment of an extra-governmental spy organization to combat them: the Kingsman. This speaks to the deeper, more globalist strand of deep-state conspiracies where extra-governmental cabals are secretly running world affairs.

While many American audiences might miss the highly conservative nature of anti-Scottish rhetoric in this film, conservative conspiracy theorists could very easily understand the film's plot as an extension of the New World Order (NWO) variation of deep state conspiracy. In America, such theories have combined anti-Semitic and anti-Communist messages, with organizations like the John Birch Society "focused on rooting out communism in the United States by making claims of global plots by

communist elites." This laid the foundation for rising interest in other globalist conspiracies like the Illuminati. Myles Flores, writing for the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, notes:

> Even more recently, we can see NWO presence in response to violent events. With mass shootings an unfortunate commonality in present-day America, many turn to social media to broadcast their reactions. Without fail, NWO commentary is noticeably peppered within the responses, with claims that the NWO orchestrates these mass shootings as false flag events to enact the widespread disarmament of citizens to better conquer them.[69]

The muddied plot of *The King's Man* clearly confused some viewers, with one Reddit poster asking, "What was the bad guys' goal in The King's Man?" However, the conspiratorial connections were not lost on others, with one Redditor responding, "I would say their goal was a new world order with them in power. Basically, good old world domination."[70] As such, *The King's Man* continues a tradition of bringing globalist conspiracies to mainstream audiences through Matthew Vaughn's work on the Kingsman franchise.

Songbird, another right-wing film released in the later part of the long Trump era, propagates disinformation through the elaboration of a domestic deep state conspiracy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.[71] Produced by Michael Bay, the director of *13 Hours*, *Songbird* depicts a dystopian future where COVID-19 has mutated into COVID-23. This depiction of a mutated version of COVID-19 certainly plays into the attempted realism of the film, as it builds off of the reality of viewers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of the deadlier COVID-23 version

of the disease, the U.S. government begins enforcing far more draconian containment measures. Part of this includes forcing everyone to check their temperature through their cellphones on a daily basis. Anyone who is running a fever is taken away to containment zones, where they are left to die or miraculously get better with little to no medical treatment. Already, one can see the conservative backlash against quarantine and public safety measures throughout the pandemic flowing through in this film.

Songbird's plot primarily follows the story of Nico Price, who is allowed to break quarantine and deliver goods to people because he has immunity to the disease. He falls in love with Sara Garcia, who he is unable to physically interact with because of the pandemic lockdown measures. The plot unravels from there, as there is a bizarre side-love story between an online music streamer and a disabled veteran sandwiched between plot developments of Sara's grandmother getting COVID-23, dying, and Sara being threatened with quarantine. Nico races against the clock to get her an immunity bracelet, which it turns out the rich and powerful are illicitly manufacturing. He eventually does get one and saves Sara from the containment zone.

The primary angle of conspiracy in this film comes from the government's locking up of citizens in what are essentially concentration camps. The Sanitation Department that is heading this effort is led by a man named Emmett Harland, who is portrayed as exceedingly cruel and corrupt. After one of Sara's neighbors is forcibly taken away to the quarantine zone, Harland contacts her through her door video system, questioning her quarantine practices. He says, "Disobedience is spreading

like a tornado. Well, don't forget your temp check in the morning! And remember, stay safe, sane, and sanitized."[72] As he lists those three reminders, he forms a gun with his hand, cocking and shooting it at Sara's camera. As such, the primary representative of the government in this film is made out to be exceedingly corrupt, violent, and disturbing. Director Adam Mason was pressed on this point in an interview with *Inverse*. Mason was posed with this question: "The Sanitation Department plotline in the film presents this idea that in a pandemic dystopian situation, the government is not trustworthy. Was that your intention?" Mason responds accordingly:

> I mean, the point I was trying to get across with Harland, the Peter Stormare character in the movie, is that, essentially, he's running the department by default. There isn't really, intentionally anyway, a plot of government corruption within the movie, I wasn't in any way trying to make a political movie.

The interviewer then pressed further, suggesting, "Sure, I get that, but once the movie is released, you're not in total control of the message, right? Do you ever worry that maybe the message of the film is a little irresponsible at this moment in time?" Mason again tries to deny a conservative angle to the film, saying, "No, not at all. I was just trying to make a movie that was kind of cathartic and hopeful. It was a kind of deeply personal message that I was writing, it wasn't written in any way as a cynical piece of work."[73] As much as Mason tries to work his way out of the notion that *Songbird* is an extremely politically-charged film, interviewer Jake Kleinman is on to something with his suggestion that, regardless of intent, there is a loss of control of the message

of a film upon release. And while I and seemingly Kleinman have doubts about Mason's position that he was not intentionally trying to feed into anti-government narratives, it seems abundantly clear that this film did synergize with such messages.

Indeed, those who identify as conservative strongly opposed increased restrictions and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Pew Research Center, 52 percent of those on the right believed that "there should have been fewer restrictions on public activity" during the pandemic, compared to only 19 percent in the center and 7 percent in the left.[74] Even though a bipartisan majority of Americans wanted to continue shelter in place policies during the pandemic, Trump spread many conflicting messages attempting to appeal to both the center and his alt-right supporters. Officially, the Trump administration's policy was "recommendations for a slow and phased reopening, as well as warning from its own medical experts that opening the economy too fast risks a resurgence of the novel coronavirus."[75] Unofficially (although directly from his Twitter account), Trump continued to stoke the fears of malicious, deep state government takeover, by tweeting, "LIBERATE MNNESOTA!" "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" and "LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!"[76] All three of these tweets were targeted at states run by Democratic governors who had been facing conservative backlash for stay-at-home orders, with substantial protests occurring in Minnesota and Michigan.[77] When asked specifically if these protestors should listen to local authorities, Trump cast his own ironically anti-local government position, stating, "I think they're listening. I think they listen to me. They seem to be protesters that like me."[78] And as Aaron Rupar saliently commented, almost a year

before January 6th, 2021, "One shudders to contemplate what sorts of actions right-wing protestors might take if they interpret Trump's call for them to 'LIBERATE' their states seriously."[79] Such liberation talk by Trump synergizes and amplifies conspiracies of deep state, government takeover during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, online alt-right users picked up on the conspiratorial messaging of *Songbird* and easily connected it with their conspiracies about COVID-19. For example, comments under the film's YouTube trailer suggested things like:

> "Ronald Reagan once said 'The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"
>
> "This is the fastest I've seen a documentary be released."
>
> "This is not a movie, it's a documentary from the future ;)."
>
> "This is their ultimate goal, they're trying to program you to think that it can only happen in a movie."
>
> "This is a preview of what's next . (sic) Hang in there boys and girls this is just the beginning."
>
> "They make this so when we voice our concerns, other people get to say 'you watch too many movies.'"
>
> "The Devil knows his days are short. His little helpers are stepping things up. These agents of evil are mocking us."
>
> "Illuminati has to tell us before they make their next move. It's usually through movies."

> "The cabal is screaming…everybody louder!!! They can't control what is coming.. (sic) we the people are waking up day by day!!!! From dark to light everything is gonna be alright."[80]

Such comments highlight just how much COVID-19, *Songbird*, and conservative deep state conspiracy rhetoric all synergize with one another. Similarly, a user posted the trailer on the subreddit r/conspiracy_commons, suggesting, "Songbird (2020): A COVID-based thriller released last year. This movie predicted every step that Australia and New Zealand have taken so far. Naturally this movie was buried and no one I know has heard of it."[81] Here, another interesting point arises. Conservative viewers often seem to care little about the quality or success of a film. *Songbird* was an aggressively bad and commercially unsuccessful film, receiving a 9 percent score on Rotten Tomatoes and only earning $1,033,533 at the box office.[82] But to the alt-right, conspiratorial viewer, this is just further evidence that the narrative—an anti-government message warning of a totalitarian deep state takeover—is being buried by liberal elites. As such, conspiracy narratives in popular culture circulate, amplify, and reinforce such conspiratorial disinformation in political discourse in a variety of ways, ranging from commercially successful franchises like the Kingsman, to alt-right cult "classics" like *Songbird*.

Horror

Horror is a genre that, much like conspiracy, pervades and easily shifts between popular and political culture. As a genre defined by the arousal of fear or disgust, horror is particularly well-suited for conservative audiences, as "Conservatives tend to focus on the negative . . . have a stronger physiological response to threats . . . fear

new experiences" and are generally "more reactive to fear."[83] Even more fine-tuned, fear is a powerful tool for extremist sects such as the alt-right because "using fear appeals potentially enables smaller and extremist parties to break people's political routines and attract them towards their own (extreme) positions."[84] Disgust has similarly played a large role in conservative lawmaking, with Martha C. Nussbaum highlighting how disgust has been used "as the primary or even sole reason for making some acts illegal," including "obscenity laws," "the illegality of homosexual relations," and even "banning human cloning."[85] As such, when discussing the spread of alt-right disinformation through popular and political culture intersections, the emotions of fear and disgust certainly deserve attention in horror texts. To begin, I will examine *A Quiet Place* in depth, as its horror highlights a variety of alt-right disinformation strategies. From there, I will then spotlight how elements of horror within *13 Hours*, *Kingsman*, and *Songbird* amplify elements of fear, fueling their alt-right disinformation.

Director and actor John Krasinski uses auditory horror in *A Quiet Place* to spread alt-right disinformation.[86] Unlike the critical derision of *Songbird*, *A Quiet Place* was hailed by critics as "a very personal triumph for Krasinski," garnering a 96 percent positive rating amongst critics.[87] *A Quiet Place* follows a prototypical, white, nuclear family as they navigate a postapocalyptic Earth that has been invaded and overrun by alien creatures that hunt humans based on sound. As such, this film relies heavily on auditory horror, as the main characters must remain silent for the majority of the film, only speaking through sign language and code. Indeed, sound plays a major role in the cinematic horror genre, with Isabella van Elferen suggesting,

"Sound in horror cinema and television functions as a foreboding, a suggestion of unseen and undefined but imminent horror."[88] Technically, *A Quiet Place* is then a masterclass in the minimalistic and strategic use of sound to amplify the horror and suspense surrounding this family that constantly feels like hiding prey.

However, for a film that is mostly silent, *A Quiet Place* has a lot to say about conservative fears surrounding political censorship, family, education, abortion, and guns/self-defense. As Timothy Lawrence suggests, "[W]hat happens if you do try to say something anymore? So far as conservatives are concerned, a social media mob comes to harang you for not knowing . . . the current appropriate vocab . . . and in Krasinski's film, that mob is simply a toothy and brutal alien which patiently listens for anything vaguely human, then pounces."[89] We witness the breaking of silence being followed by death over and over in this film. First, we see the youngest of Lee and Evelyn Abbott's children, Beau, playing with a space shuttle toy in an abandoned shop. Beau is clearly too young to recognize the immensity of the danger that the family is in. Beau's father, Lee (played by Krasinski), takes the toy away from him, signing to him that it is too loud. However, Beau's older sister Regan, gives the toy back to Beau, since Beau had told her that a rocket is how he dreamed of escaping the nightmare that has become Earth. Predictably, the toy rocket begins to go off as Beau is playing with it, generating loud noises. His family is helpless as Beau is eaten by the predatory aliens. While the film had been largely silent up to this point, the music builds as the camera shows a dramatic attempt by Lee to reach his son before the monster does. However, he is too late, and he is left reaching at what used to be his son. The tension from this death, especially between Lee and Regan, is felt

throughout the entirety of the rest of the film. Here, if we apply the interpretation of the aliens representing the "woke mob," we can understand Beau as a criticism of how this mob supposedly prays on those too young or too ignorant to know any better than to keep quiet.

The next two deaths portrayed in the film also speak volumes to a conservative read of the film. The first happens after Lee and his eldest son, Marcus, are returning from a venture to a river waterfall. This waterfall scene is significant in and of itself because it is where Lee tells his son that he can yell, since the noise of the waterfall will drown it out from the predators. This suggests a conservative "safe space," where such individuals can freely voice their opinions without fear of being eaten/cancelled by the Left. However, after leaving this "safe space," Lee and Marcus encounter an old man in the woods who is standing beside his dead wife. After an intense stare down between Lee and the old man, the old man decides to essentially commit suicide and begins screaming with rage. This scream is built up to with a closeup of the man's face, as he shifts from sadness to uncontrollable rage. Lee grabs Marcus and begins running, as the old man is tracked down and devoured off-screen by the alien predators. The camera focuses on a closeup of Marcus expressing utter fear and disgust with his father's hand silencing him as we listen to the sounds of the old man being eaten.

Here too, we see how an older white man decides to scream-out against the restrictions supposedly placed on his free speech, accepting his fate as the monsters come for him. For many conservatives, this fulfills the fantasy of regaining self-sacrificial agency from a "sense of oppression" which "has become central to

motivating conservative voters, a way of keeping them engaged, angry and feeling that they have a personal stake in the outcome of every political event."[90] Indeed, as a part of the long Trump era, Trump and his allies have put in significant rhetorical effort to convince constituents that any legal or political vexation aimed at Trump is really aimed at all conservatives. For example, in 2022, as Trump defended his illegal hoarding of classified documents at his Mara-Lago estate, the House Judiciary GOP tweeted, "The IRS is coming for you. The DOJ is coming for you. The FBI is coming for you. No one is safe from political punishment in Joe Biden's America."[91] Here, we see the merging of predator/prey narrative with disinformation about supposed conservative persecution, where the predators are not simply the "woke mob," but also the government itself coming after you. These narratives find their way into *A Quiet Place* and have continued throughout the long Trump era. As such, the conservative politics of *A Quiet Place* can be understood as a criticism of both the cancel culture of private actors, and a conservative refrain of anti-governance, suggesting persecution of conservative politicians and citizens by government bureaucracy.

The third death in *A Quiet Place* comes at the climax of the film. The alien predators have invaded and overran the Abbot homestead. One of them is actively attacking Regan and Marcus as they hide in a car. Their father Lee sees this happening and decides to sacrifice himself to save his kids. Similar to the old man who had died earlier, Lee lets out a loud yell as the alien stops attacking the kids and runs and kills Lee. The shot framing is also fairly similar, as a closeup of Lee shows him transitioning from his sad love for his children to his rage-filled, sacrificial

scream. This self-sacrifice demonstrates Lee's valuing of his family over his own life. Through the same conservative lens, this represents how the older generations need to "fight" for, and potentially even sacrifice themselves for, younger generations so that they will not be targeted by the Left. This is especially salient, in light of Lee and Regan's fighting and disagreements throughout the movie. Ultimately, Lee's sacrifice proves his love for his daughter, even through their disagreements. Read into the conservative worldview, this can be symbolic of the pretty stark generational differences in political alignment, with Gen Z voters swinging 27 points in favor of Democrats in the 2022 midterms.[92] As such, even though Lee does not always agree with his daughter, he sacrifices himself for what he sees as her greater good. For the conservative father, then, even if their children disagree with them politically, it is worth fighting the Left that will supposedly still come after them in order to protect them. Thus, Lee's final act of resistance in a conservative film about silence is speaking up and speaking up loudly.

Political censorship is not the only conservative theme featured prominently in *A Quiet Place*. Conservative ideations of the white, nuclear family also play a central role in this film. As Richard Brody notes, "The one sole avowed identity of the Abbott parents is as their children's defenders; their more obvious public identity is as a white rural family."[93] And with that, traditional notions of conservative family roles are put into place. Lee is the one who leaves the house to collect food and supplies, while his wife Evelyn is homebound for the entire film beyond the film's opening. Here, we see her performing domestic tasks like cooking and homeschooling her son, Marcus. One of the film's main points of tension arises when

Lee decides he needs to take Marcus out on one of his adventures outside of the homestead. Marcus is scared to go, while Lee's daughter Regan wants to go with him. Lee reassures Marcus, "There's nothing to be scared of," while telling Regan, "I need you to stay and help your mother" and "Just stay here. You'll be safe."[94] The following camera shot highlights the separation felt between Lee and Regan, as Lee walks off camera to the left and Regan storms off in anger toward the corn fields in the background. There is dissonance in the arguments made by Lee, as he is telling his son there's nothing to be afraid of, while telling his daughter that there are things to be afraid of and that she should stay home. Clearly, there are regressive gender dynamics at play, with Lee attempting to reestablish the conservative hierarchy of men as providers and women as caretakers. Christian family values are also exemplified in this film, as the family pointedly joins hands and silently prays together before one of their dinners.

Such conservative family dynamics also come into play through the film's depiction of education. In the scene preceding Regan and Lee's argument, Evelyn is shown homeschooling Marcus. Obviously, there is no public education system present in the world of *A Quiet Place*, given the failure of government. This theme is highlighted by a flyer from the U.S. Department of Defense that Lee keeps in his workshop. It states: "YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN THE GOVERNMENT AS WE KNOW IT HAS BEEN COMPROMISED DUE TO INVASION BY HOSTILE ALIEN FORCES. REMAIN SAFE. STAY STILL."[95] Such official-looking documents spread throughout Lee's workshop heighten the aura of realism portrayed by the film. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Evelyn teaching Marcus math out of a

textbook, in a world where the value of such an education is likely minimal, is significant as it highlights a very conservative worldview of education. Indeed, Trump supported this movement against public education in favor of private and homeschooling when he "named Betsy DeVos, a longtime advocate for homeschooling (and other forms of school choice), his first secretary of education."[96] As such, in a horror film that depicts a strong fear of political censorship, the choice to highlight homeschooling education again emphasizes the strategies by which conservatives can supposedly survive through "woke" public school indoctrination on matters of race, gender, and sexuality, a disinformative narrative in and of itself.

Through these traditional family values and one of the most horrifying sequences of the film, a strong pro-life narrative can also be interpreted within *A Quiet Place*. Near the climax of the film, Evelyn, who has been pregnant for the whole film, begins to go into labor while Lee and Marcus are out on their expedition. Simultaneously, one of the aliens is stalking the homestead, trying to find Evelyn. Evelyn is subjected to unreasonably terrifying and painful occurrences during this time. It starts when she impales her foot with a nail that is sticking up from the wooden stairs going down to the cellar. She has to stifle her scream as the audience viscerally sees about a six inch nail slam through the sole of her foot. She is able to limp off to a bathtub, bleeding from her foot all the way, and attempt to give birth in silence. She knows that if she makes any noise, the alien predator will come for her and her child. Here, we see an extremely horrific upward panning shot, where bright red blood runs down the sheer white bathtub, as Evelyn seems to desperately try to hold her baby in. The emphasis on blood in both of these scenes can work to amplify

the audience emotions of fear with reactions of disgust. Shots of her whimpering in immense pain and silence are intercut with the alien slowly grabbing the stairway railing and making its way up toward Evelyn. The lights flicker as behind Evelyn we see the alien's claw grab onto the wall at the top of the stairs. Incredibly tense music is about the only noise playing right now. Thankfully, Evelyn had been able to activate the danger lights before moving upstairs, which let Lee and Marcus know that one of the creatures had invaded their homestead. Marcus sets off fireworks right as Evelyn is about to give birth. This distracts the alien. The music stops dramatically and all we hear is Evelyn let out a blood-curdling scream as she gives birth to her child. With the alien distracted, Lee enters the home with a shotgun, looking for Evelyn. He only finds her bloody footsteps and collapses to the ground in fear that she has been killed, before her bloody hand smacks the shower door next to him. They quickly move the baby to a soundproofed cellar and put it in a sealed, soundproofed wooden box.

It is incredibly telling that, what is pretty definitively the most horrific sequence in the film, is centered around childbirth. Indeed, as Saskia Nislow suggests of this pro-life message:

> Most of all . . . it means protecting Evelyn's unborn child, who is not really a child yet, does not have any of the complexities of a real child, and is, therefore, the ideal child to protect. While their two real, live children run around getting attacked by monsters and nearly suffocating to death in grain silos, Lee and Evelyn focus all their efforts on ensuring the safe delivery of their almost-child. . . . [I]t's astounding to watch a blockbuster film made

> within this decade by a run-of-the-mill good Hollywood liberal broadcast such glaringly pro-life message. I was particularly struck by the care taken to highlight Evelyn's noble, silent suffering in service of the birth of her child. The most heroic thing a woman can do, the film suggests, is to martyr herself for the sake of the unborn.[97]

The evangelical conservative movement has a deep seated "moral panic" where "moral topics like teen sexuality, drug use, and abortion are seen as evidence of evil's encroachment into everyday life."[98] As such, *A Quiet Place* envisions the infringement of such evil forces upon the life of a mother, suggesting that pro-choice (or, as evangelical conservatives often term them, pro-abortion) advocates are coming to steal away and kill newborn and unborn children.

It is at this nexus of the unborn and the newborn that we see conservative disinformation's ability to spread fear through horror. Clearly, abortion access is one such obvious marker of the fears and efforts of conservatives in the long Trump era. As Jackie Calmes argues:

> While Republicans lately have been attacking Democrats for plotting to 'pack' the federal courts with like-minded judges, their party has been doing it for years. Through bare-knuckle tactics in the Senate . . . Republicans have stocked the federal bench at all levels with conservatives who share the right's support for whacking at the wall between church and state and at the powers of federal regulatory agencies, banning abortion and expanding gun rights.[99]

This sustained court-packing effort culminated in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), which overturned Roe v. Wade (1973)—the long-standing court

decision protecting some level of abortion access nationally.[100] As a highly popular film in the leadup to this decision, we can see how the audio-visualization of *A Quiet Place*'s pro-life message envisioned liberals as the predatory alien, coming to steal family's unborn or newborn children if conservatives try to speak up.

The film's response to such supposedly malicious and predatory behavior by the Left is, predictably, guns and property defense. While Evelyn spends her time conducting household chores to make sure the postapocalyptic Abbott homestead is as pristine as possible, Lee dedicates himself to establishing an elaborate home defense network and stockpiling weapons. The Abbott homestead is filled with surveillance cameras and equipment which is all controlled from Lee's post-apocalyptic bunker. Later in the film, Lee rushes into his home while Evelyn is giving birth with a shotgun in hand. The film ends with Evelyn shot gunning the head off of one of the aliens after Lee's death. Literally, the last shot of the film before it cuts black to credits is a pan from Regan to a closeup of Evelyn, who smiles in the direction of the camera and pumps her shotgun. The camera framing here strongly emphasizes Evelyn's empowerment by the gun she is holding, leaving this as the final image presented to viewers. Such conservative fears of home invasion are propped up by disinformation surrounding crime. As Sandhya Dirks argues, "Even when we have more complete data, the stories we tell about crime are filled with holes that misinformation can crawl into and take up residence."[101] Further, contrary to what the NRA and many amongst the alt-right would suggest about guns increasing the safety of owners, Arthur L. Kellermann et al. have found that "keeping a gun in the home was strongly and independently associated with an increased risk of homicide."[102]

Nevertheless, crime and gun rights have played a huge role in conservative fears during the long Trump era, with the Trump campaign itself airing at least two ads that viscerally depicted home invasion through a lens of horror.[103]

A Quiet Place is perhaps the film par excellence when it comes to horror's application to alt-right disinformation given its sustained treatment of multiple threads of conservative fear. Yet, there are a number of other films mentioned here that draw on horror. The horror genre is very adaptable. Horror can comprise the entire thrust of the film like *A Quiet Place* or elements of horror can pop up here and there in films that we would otherwise not really classify as a horror flick in general. For example, let's look back at *13 Hours*.

13 Hours would certainly be categorized by most as falling within the action or war genres. However, there are key moments in this film where cinematographic horror techniques are used to amplify the fear, and certainly the disgust, instilled in viewers. The strongest example of this comes in the climax of the film, where the American military contractors are defending the U.S. diplomatic compound. The contractors look out into the fields, trying to spot incoming attackers in the dark. The field is foggy, with different rocks and structures sticking out. It gives the eerie vibe of a classic horror graveyard. In fact, the American contractors even say, "We call it Zombieland," in reference to this field.[104] Such a setting, with clear connections to horror, dehumanizes those the contractors are fighting, allowing for audiences to more readily accept the visceral, gory bloodshed that the contractors rain down upon them. Viewers witness shots of people getting hit by grenades, people getting shot in the head, people getting run over and shot, people getting burnt alive, and people

losing limbs. Since the audience is primed to dehumanize these people, the perpetrators are treated as monstrosities, justifying the violent acts of the contractors. In fact, as a very tongue-in-cheek reference to such horror framing, Rone says, "When they come, they're coming through Zombieland," after which Kris notes an odd cop car and says, "I feel like I'm in a fucking horror movie."[105] And that is exactly the sentiment audiences seem guided toward—fear for the Americans, disgust toward the Libyan "monstrosity," and outrage at the government and its leaders that allowed these soldiers to be put in this position. Disgust is also used to amplify the audience reaction to what happened to these soldiers, as very realistic gore special effects are used to show Tyrone's arm hanging on by just a couple of tendons after being hit by a mortar shell. This disgust is amplified when the team is flown out on a commercial airline, with a closeup of flight attendants looking on in saddened disgust at Tyrone's bloodied condition. One flight attendant covers her mouth as if she's about to vomit and rushes aboard the plane.

The Kingsman franchise similarly draws upon the stylized gore common to the horror franchise in order to heighten some of its action sequences. Beyond the infamous church scene and bar brawl scenes already discussed, the climax of *Kingsman: The Secret Service* features a scene where all the political leaders who were involved in the plot to kill off much of humanity have their heads explode. The gore of this scene is infused with patriotic comedy, as the "1812 Overture" plays, a song synonymous with the Fourth of July, while various conspirators' heads explode in a mix of gore and fireworks along with the song's beat.[106] The White House Situation Room is shown with various military and cabinet members' heads

exploding, culminating in Obama's head erupting into fireworks. This intermingling of gore and comedy establishes a triumphant feeling in the viewer as liberal world leaders are killed off. With the glorification of gore in the film, it is little surprise that alt-right meme makers focused on ultra-violent scenes like the church fight in *Kingsman: The Secret Service* in order to spread their disinformation.[107]

Drawing less upon the gory elements of horror and more on its roots in suspense, *Songbird* similarly incorporates, or at least attempts to incorporate, the genre as a way of heightening audience fear. We especially encounter this through the audio and shot techniques of the film. The music is often used in a building way, filled with crescendo. In between these rising, eerie noises are often more staccato notes which work to discombobulate the audience. Indeed, as Larina Sue Meinel and Caludia Bullerjahn find in their study of the psychophysiological effect of music in horror films, "[T]here was an additional effect of the music even though there is already a strong emotional statement of the visual material." They also point out that "the placement of music prior to the shock moment can lead to the stress level increasing."[108] The camera shots are also done with plenty of excess motion, creating a "shaky-cam" style of film. While not quite on the level of a found footage film, *Songbird* still delves into the anxieties of the camera itself through the way it films moments of tense action in order to heighten a sense of realism. As Kjetil Rødje argues, such an "assemblage" where "the camera performs as a dynamic relational entity . . . creates suspense, since the vulnerability of the camera threatens to sever the viewer's access to the filmed events."[109] And while the camera's precarity is not at the level of a found-footage film, its seeming involvement in the various chase,

action, and suspense scenes of *Songbird* heighten audience fears as they feel as if they too are a part of the action through such cinema verité strategies.[110] The audience accordingly experiences fears that the government is coming to lock people up because of COVID-19 and fears that the government will cut off access to the "truth" of what is actually happening with pandemic quarantine measures.

Thus, whether it be in a traditionally defined horror film, or used in bits in pieces in other genres, horror can work to amplify the fear surrounding alt-right disinformation in conservative popular culture films. We saw the many ways this can happen in a feature length horror film like *A Quiet Place*, while also recognizing how instances of horror amplified alt-right disinformation in films like *13 Hours*, *Kingsman*, and *Songbird*. Such a priming of elevated fear then synergizes with the next strategy I discuss: dog whistles.

Dog Whistles

Dog whistles are a key strategy of many regressive, alt-right disinformation campaigns because of their ability to use code to disseminate information while maintaining deniability. As Ian Haney López notes, the Republican Party has frequently used coded language when it comes to their racist policy choices, with that code functioning "like a dog whistle—a metaphor that pushes us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another."[111] Racist dog whistles have certainly been some of the most prominent in the modern conservative movement, with issues of crime, education, immigration, and many others being used to pursue racist policy agendas that bolster white supremacy.

However, dog-whistle politics can also be targeted at and harm other marginalized groups. For example, Nancy Chi Cantalupo notes that gendered dog whistles have been a weapon in service of misogyny. Indeed, as Cantalupo points out, Trump's Department of Education used a "'due process' dog whistle as a key weapon in the establishment of . . . [a] broad attack on civil rights [that] will undermine the rights of not only sexual harassment victims, but all discriminatory harassment victims, especially women students of color and other intersectional populations who are disproportionately vulnerable to harassment."[112] As such, it is crucial that, when one is attempting to recognize and decipher alt-right dog-whistle politics, they remain vigilant of all the different ways such coded language can be targeted at vulnerable populations. Applying an intersectional lens of analysis is particularly important, since certain dog whistles only reach their full discriminatory potential when read through multiple angles of oppression. As Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw articulates, intersectionality highlights "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence against women of color."[113] Thus, recognizing the multitude of ways that regressive alt-right disinformation can be targeted at and harm marginalized populations is essential. As Loren Cannon notes, dog whistles have become "relevant to the politicization of trans and other gender transgressing persons," culminating in a recent surge of anti-trans rhetoric and policy by the Right.[114] In what remains of this section, I will examine these various, intersecting dog whistles present in the alt-right films analyzed thus far.[115] Exposing these dog whistles with greater specificity is essential to decoding and bringing to light such marginalization strategies. This analysis reveals how dog whistles are

present in these films at nearly all levels, ranging from casting and production to plot points and overarching messages.

A prime example of these intersecting dog whistles is visible in *A Quiet Place*. As was discussed with the horror embedded throughout the film, there are multiple identities that are fear mongered and only one identity (the white, nuclear family) that is praised by the film's narrative. Indeed, the strongest dog whistle of Krasinski's film comes from the identity of the humans presented in the film. Every single human character shown in *A Quiet Place* presents as white. The Abbot family consists of two white-presenting parents and four white-presenting children. The only other humans ever encountered in the film are an older couple in the woods, who also appear white. So, from casting alone, we see a move in support of the white nuclear family, at the exclusion of any other racial identities.

Some might argue that these characters were not intentionally written as white, but instead just happened to be white. Indeed, in an interview with 34th Street, director and actor Krasinski described the film as "a movie about a relatable, simple family."[116] However, these suggestions of relatability are where issues of colorblind dog-whistle politics come into play. Such sentiments beg the questions: Relatable to who? Simple to who? Kristen J. Warner provides insight on these questions as they relate to casting, suggesting, "The notion of desiring someone to be identifiable, relatable, and familiar—regardless of background, experience, or racial identity—is crucial to casting a successful television program." The problem for Warner, however, comes into play when such an appeal "opens up a space for the ideology of colorblindness to emerge and take hold. Colorblindness is inherently seductive in a

well-intentioned society full of liberal guilt." Such colorblindness is problematic because it allows "for the continued mistreatment of minorities because if, in theory, every individual is treated the same, there can be no measuring stick by which to judge inequality."[117] However, colorblind ideology goes even further beyond the inability to recognize marginalization. As López highlights, "conservative advocates of colorblindness use this term as a short-hand for their opposition to affirmative action."[118] Thus, a racist dog whistle is at play in *A Quiet Place* regardless of intent, where audiences are meant to understand the white nuclear family as relatable and view the dark-colored monsters as the opposition to such an ideal.

In the majority of other films analyzed thus far in this chapter, we can also see the dog whistle of casting at play. For example, *13 Hours* focuses almost entirely on an all-white and all-male main cast. Here, the issue of dog-whistling comes into play when deciding that they are the individuals who should be featured. There were women and non-white operatives in the Benghazi diplomatic compound, as the film itself highlights. And while nearly all of these characters are relegated to a few lines, the way those few lines are used is also telling. For example, Sona—one of the film's only women—is pretty much only featured as a know-nothing Ivy League elite. She gets in a verbal argument with Jack after he interrupts their meeting because of a militant group tracking them. She yells that this is her second tour and she knows what she's doing. Jack dismisses her saying, "Well, this is my twelfth."[119] As such, the film blows a pretty loud dog whistle early on that one of the film's only women knows nothing compared to the men's practical combat knowledge. We see this at play with the people of color in this film as well. The film features a diversity of

characters. The problem is that nearly all of them are either Libyan militants or Libyan allies who bring little to the fight. There is, however, one character, Amahl, who is featured pretty heavily as a Libyan interpreter helping out the main characters. However, Amahl is primarily used for limited comic relief, as he bumbles around with an oversized helmet, has trouble using and carrying guns, and is pretty regularly made fun of. Moments before Amahl has an emotional moment of courage, where he tells the American contractors he's going to stay and fight with them, he's greeted by Tanto with, "Hey, the stripper's here!"[120] This line also acts as a transition from one of the few other scenes featuring Sona. Thus, in *13 Hours* the only characters who are given any sort of credibility are the main six contractors who are all white and all men. These depictions act as a loud dog whistle on who can be credible and patriotic in a conservative worldview.

Beyond the way that women and people of color are uniquely marginalized in *13 Hours*, there are also a number of anti-government dog whistles present in the narrative of the film. Indeed as researchers Bart Bonikowski and Yueran Zhang find, conservative dog whistles often come in the form of populist, anti-elite, ethno-nationalist, and anti-government talk.[121] Along these lines, Katey Rich highlights six of these dog whistles, tied to specific dialogue like, "We don't have any fucking support," "Uncle Sam is on a budget . . . that's some real dot-gov shit," "I called for air support; it never came," "There is no real threat here," "Stand down," and "We didn't hear any protest."[122] The first three quotations highlighted here are part of a narrative which suggests that the government vacillated between negligent and outright hostile in the lack of resources it provided to the teams in Libya. While never

explicitly talking about then President Barack Obama or Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, these anti-government dog whistles are meant to ring loudly for conservative audiences, decrying the supposed ineptitude with which Benghazi was handled by high-ranking government officials. The narratives of there being no real threat and that soldiers were ordered to "stand down" also speak heavily to conservative dog whistles, where deep-state operatives like the CIA chief were clearly inept in their handling of the situation. As previously discussed in the conspiracy section, the stand down line in particular is a clear allusion to conspiracy theories suggesting that Clinton gave a direct stand down order.[123] Finally, the "We didn't hear any protest" line is a bit of a deeper-cut, anti-Islamic dog whistle for alt-right adherents. In the lead up to the attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, anti-American protests had flared up across Islamic nations over a hate-filled, anti-Islamic YouTube video titled, "Innocence of Muslims." As Peter Bradshaw characterizes the film, "Innocence of Muslims is a 13-minute low-budget video on YouTube, abysmally scripted, acted and directed; it might be risible were it not for the ugly Islamophobia which it promotes and whose effects are now being seen around the world."[124] Obama and Clinton both, at least in part, blamed the Benghazi attack on the video, referring to the event as a part of wider protests. Even up into the 2016 election, Clinton said, "I still believe to this day that the video played a role."[125] This enraged conservative conspiracy theorists, who viewed this as a cover up for what they believed should be classified as a large-scale terrorist attack by Islamic extremists. Thus, the line "We didn't hear any protest," while incredibly insignificant to the average viewer, is pointed directly at whose who believe that this was no protest and

that the Obama administration and Clinton were working to distort and hide what had happened.[126]

The Kingsman franchise also blows casting dog whistles which highly prioritize white men. In the first film, *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, every single original Kingsman appears as a white man. Eggsy similarly fits this mold. The name of the organization itself is somewhat telling of this. However, as Eggsy is going through recruitment training, there are two seemingly white women amongst the recruits—Roxy and Amelia. In particular, Roxy comes to the forefront and ultimately beats out Eggsy for the open spot in the Kingsman. However, while the men are portrayed as relentlessly courageous and willing to do whatever it takes to complete the mission, Roxy is depicted as cowardly, especially when it comes to high altitude maneuvers. She is also unceremoniously killed off within the first 30 minutes of the second film. It is further telling of the conservative dog whistles at play in the franchise that the main villain in the first film is a Black tech entrepreneur, and the villain in the second film is a drug cartel leading woman. As mentioned in the discussion on conspiracy, Samuel L. Jackson's character in the first film is particularly laced with conservative code given his status as a Black man, a tech elite, and an environmentalist—all aspects that the alt-right largely disdains.[127]

Further, the Kingsman films include many coded nods to conservative ideals. Conservative leaders are romanticized through Easter eggs, like the team using a prototype device "developed as part of Reagan's Star Wars project" during their climax mission or Harry bragging that he foiled the assassination of conservative icon, former United Kingdom Prime Minster Margaret Thatcher.[128] Further, basically

the entire narrative of the third film, *The King's Man*, is a loud conservative dog whistle against Scottish independence movements, as this independence movement is blamed for both World War I and World War II. While this odd dog whistle is blown loudly, the silence of the film on criticism of British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War also becomes a loud dog whistle. During this war between Britain and South African, nearly 48,000 people died in concentration camps at the hands of the British.[129] These concentration camps are shown at the beginning of *The King's Man*, with the main character's mother, acting on behalf of the Red Cross, being shot by a South African soldier while visiting this concentration camp. Rather than decrying this concentration camp, the film brushes it aside as just another tragedy of war. Even the person in charge of the camp, Lord Kirschner, is given an extended role as the "good guy," and, when he is killed, it sends ripples of tragedy through the other protagonists. Thus, the film's lack of criticism on this British concentration camp, which led to an extreme loss of human life, becomes a dog whistle through silence and the framing of the people involved in this genocide. This further echoes conservative British politics in the lead up to the film, where conservative politician Jacob Rees-Mogg made comments seemingly justifying "the use of concentration camps by British colonists during the Anglo-Boer War."[130] Thus, *The King's Man* played into conservative dialogue of the time. One can easily see how such an open portrayal of concentration camp tactics without criticism could easily be picked up as code by the alt-right and neo-Nazis even outside of the British context.

Songbird is an interesting film for discussion because it is so clumsily overbearing in its anti-government position that while the film seems to attempt to

use coded messages, they are so over-the-top that they might exceed code. Between COVID-23, a militant Sanitation Department, forced lockdowns, and government concentration camps, the film takes a very clear stance on what it thinks of government policies surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what is a potentially more interesting dog-whistle is the film's extremely bizarre side plot centered on May, a singer who streams her performances online; William, a record executive who is extorting May for sex; and Michael, a disabled war veteran who flies drones for a living. This side plot is so random and has so little to do with the rest of the film, it makes one question what it was doing in the film other than portraying some bizarre message to audiences. On the one hand, it removes most of the agency from May, who is forced to go along with what William wants. She only begins resisting after chatting with the veteran Michael. After she rejects William, William decides to silence her. In what is an incredibly bizarre film sequence, Michael sends out a drone painted with the stars and stripes and equipped with a gun to go watch over May without her knowledge. William shows up and starts choking May, but Michael's drone arrives just in time, blowing William's head off as it splatters all over May's car and viscerally traumatizes her. The film cuts back to Michael, who whispers to himself, "Tango is down. We're at bingo fuel. Recalling. We're going. We're going home."[131] Thus, not only does this sequence show the supposed dangers of a woman trying to make a living in the pandemic and post-pandemic online economy, but it also depicts May as largely helpless, requiring a man's assistance to break free from such oppression. That message is even further complicated, as that man uses military technology to violently execute her assailant,

obviously traumatizing May in the process. His use of military code language after reducing William to red mist clearly highlights the film's pro-military stance, along with a strong dog whistle suggesting that guns and surveillance tools aren't actually bad when used by such exemplary white men. Without any production context, this plot wrinkle seems to make little to no sense. But when one remembers that notoriously conservative filmmaker Michael Bay produced and edited much of the film, the pro-masculine, pro-military, and pro-gun messages grafted onto white masculinity begin to make a lot more sense. Thus, be it through casting, dialogue, omissions, or plot, alt-right dog whistles feature prominently in these films of the long Trump era.

Conclusion

Popular culture texts are rife with meaning for audiences to decode and consume. The analysis within this chapter has shown the many ways that messages of alt-right disinformation are spread through popular culture via plot, realistic production features, and circulation amongst alt-right communities. Combining strategies of conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles, conservative films are able to feed into reactionary messages of misogyny, racism, and anti-governance. Often times, these sentiments are emboldened through nods toward alternative facts, alternative world views, fear, and coded messages.

While some audience members might be able to recognize disinformation within the realm of cinema, others might not, allowing for popular culture texts to augment and amplify disinformative world views. As Santos reminds us, "Separating fact from fiction . . . can be confusing" given that the strategies discussed in this

chapter "often mix facts with fiction."[132] Thus, properly analyzing these coded messages is a critical task in and of itself in order to understand how popular culture can function as a cog in the alt-right disinformation machine. As has been emphasized in this chapter, it is this disinformation machine that props up fascistic politics targeting marginalized groups, with racist, misogynistic, and anti-governance messages being normalized through cinematic realism. This analysis is also essential in order to further understand how these strategies are echoed and built upon in political culture texts. The following chapter aims to provide just such an application and analysis of the strategies highlighted here as they unfold within political advertising.

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Chapter 3: Indirect Uses of Popular Culture in Alt-Right Political Ads

In the previous chapter, the connections to popular culture were apparent given the analysis of mainstream cinema texts. What required deeper exploration was the way these texts propagated alt-right, political messages. Now, in this chapter, I turn my attention to a selection of political advertisements during the long Trump era that draw upon genre elements of popular culture, without much in the way of direct references and applications. Such applications often lean heavily on editing tactics steeped in realism and mimesis. One would expect, then, for the roles to be flipped in the present analysis and for the explanation to focus primarily on popular culture applications. And that is partially true: it takes more explanation to show how popular culture genre elements appear in these political advertisements. However, the political messaging of these ads also requires a substantial amount of unpacking. On the surface, most of these political spots have a fairly straightforward message: vote for X, or don't vote for Y, or, often, both. Yet, it's the way that most of these ads delve into deep layers of coded language and visuals—dog whistles—that often define how their alt-right message is developed and spread to their initiated followers.

As such, the organizational schema of this chapter deviates some from the previous chapter. Whereas I discussed strategies of conspiracy, horror, and dog whistles in sequence in the chapter on films, this chapter will first focus on the combination of conspiracy *and* dog whistles. From there I will move to horror *and* dog whistles. I combine dog whistles with both of these strategies since much of the alt-right messaging that is achieved through conspiracy and horror functions because

of an added level of coded appeals. Accordingly, this chapter first looks at a selection of conspiratorial advertisements that mostly rely on generic tropes from action, superhero, and conspiracy films. Next, I analyze ads that rely on horror and dog whistles to seed alt-right disinformation. In particular, I focus on a sub-genre of horror: home invasion. The application of this genre to political advertising has deeply problematic roots, as I first highlight with a brief analysis of one of the first examples of this crossover: Willie Horton. From there, I apply this analysis to two Trump ads and a New Mexico Republican gubernatorial ad, all of which amplify racist crime disinformation through the use of tropes and narrative form from the home-invasion horror subgenre.

Conspiracy and Dog Whistles

Given the substantial history of conspiracies intermingling with U.S. politics, it should come as little surprise that such rhetorics found their way into the advertisements of alt-right candidates and politicians during the long Trump era.[1] Further, given the long history of these conspiracies being connected to racist and misogynistic disinformation, it should also be predictable that these two strategies of conspiracy and dog whistles would continue to intertwine in the long Trump era, where progress toward racial and gender equality took a number of steps backward.[2] My analysis certainly works to reinforce these assumptions. However, it is the connection between these strategies and disinformation that is then adorned with popular culture elements that I find particularly troubling. As Glenn W. Richardson Jr. notes, the use of genre within political advertising "serve[s] as emotional heuristics."[3] In other words, viewers can, often subconsciously, arrive at problematic and irrational

decisions based on the use of genre within a political advertisement, since that genre provides a decision-making shortcut. In what follows, I first analyze an example of populist conspiracy intermingling with dog whistles through "Texas Reloaded" and its use of action-hero tropes. Then, I examine deep-state conspiracy messages in "Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!" and "Michele Fiore for Governor," both of which rely on some of the most disturbing forms of misogynistic dog whistles found in action films.

Populist Conspiracy

Harkening back to the myth of the "self-made man" discussed in the previous chapter, many political advertisements wrap themselves in such populist trappings in order to present the preferred candidate as an exemplary and ordinary person. As Kenneth J. Levine notes, "When an ordinary person becomes a leader . . . he or she transformes [sic] himself or herself, and through that transformation these people begin to act in a way that is no longer their own but rather act in the way of society. Once transformed, these leaders advance society."[4] Indeed, "the Ordinary leader" is one that "relates both the current and traditional stories of the audience (e.g., rags to riches)."[5] For many conservative candidates, this is part of how they relate themselves (as frequently socioeconomically elite individuals) to their often less elite base. Nicholas D. Kristof puts this conundrum succinctly, suggesting that "one of the Republican Party's major successes over the last few decades has been to persuade many of the working poor to vote for tax breaks for billionaires."[6] As such, in order to successfully "catapult the person from ordinary to influential," candidates frequently

rely on the hero narrative to convince voters that they were once one of them but are now exemplary and heroic, ready to work on their behalf.[7]

Such a hero's narrative has many explicit and underlying connections with the types of popular culture texts discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, as Howard Gardner suggests, leaders offer "a *dynamic* perspective to their followers . . . a drama that unfolds overtime, in which they . . . are the principal characters or heroes."[8] One of the most common hero archetypes, the hero's journey, is traced by Joseph Campbell as essentially following the tale of an average person venturing "forth from the world of common day," fighting and winning "a decisive victory" against some force, and then returning from this battle "with the power to bestow boons" on the people around them.[9] Briefly, we can see how this narrative structure is at work in *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), as Eggsy starts off as a an average, even delinquent, individual. He then is summoned on his adventure, where he gains new abilities, and uses those abilities to save the world and benefit the average person.[10] *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016) follows a similar narrative pattern, where the main protagonist, Jack Silva, is called away from his wife and children to once again serve in a faraway land. Silva and his comrades fight a decisive battle, a battle that the film frames as largely successful despite loss and tragedy. The soldiers then return home, where they should be greeted as heroes (although, director Michael Bay subverts this as he illustrates how their heroics were little recognized back on the home front).[11] Regardless, both of these films tie the hero's journey to notions of populist conspiracy, where the average day person must become heroic to counter nefarious, elite forces.

There are countless alt-right political ads where we can see this mixing of popular and political culture through heroic narratives that thrive on populist conspiracy. One particularly strong example of this is the 2020 ad "Texas Reloaded," furnished by Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX).[12] At just under four minutes in length, this ad features incredibly high production value for any political ad, let alone a congressional ad. The ad is a joint campaign effort by a number of Republican candidates in Texas running for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The ad opens with Crenshaw sipping on a cup of coffee as ominous music plays. Yellow text appears across the bottom of the screen, accompanied by generic digital sound effects, which reads, "0500 – Crenshaw Command Center." This opening very quickly establishes that Crenshaw is similar to the average person—someone who wakes up and drinks their coffee—but also exemplary and heroic, as he has his own command center.[13]

From there, Crenshaw's hero's journey is introduced. He opens a package that reads "TOP SECRET" in bold, red text. Inside the package is an advanced smart phone. Crenshaw then lifts his signature eye patch, revealing a cybernetic eye that is able to decipher the message on the phone. A static-filled, digital image of Texas appears on the screen with more random computer bips and boops. A somewhat robotic, feminine voice says, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, will be to save Texas."[14] This is already a reference to popular culture, as the "Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . ." line is a signature quote from the Mission: Impossible television and film franchise.[15] And just like the Mission: Impossible stories, this also marks the beginning of Crenshaw's hero's journey within this ad.

Epic music plays as the feminine narrator continues to describe Crenshaw's task of "saving Texas," suggesting that he will need to "recruit an exceptional team of congressional candidates. They must be courageous, patriotic, and absolutely fearless." Crenshaw is recruiting this team to win seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and to supposedly save Texas. While this is explained, we see Crenshaw boarding a small sky-diving plane. He suits up with a parachute and a futuristic helmet that projects his mission. The narrator emphasizes the importance of this mission, stating, "Time is of the essence, the nation's future is dependent upon your success." The music then stops for a moment as Crenshaw heroically hangs out of the airplane before he lets go and begins sky diving (with at least one camera filming the event). Thus, Crenshaw's heroic journey is officially underway in this ad.[16]

The ad's extraordinary production quality also stands out in ways that reinforce its qualities of realism and mimesis. The cinematic and CGI quality of this advertisement rivals, and perhaps even surpasses, most presidential ads.[17] This ad certainly plays on realism in the event that Crenshaw did actually sky dive out of a plane. He posted about getting his skydiving requalification on Instagram in anticipation of the ad's production and release.[18] On the one hand, there is a certain realism to the ad in that Crenshaw is doing the stunts and much of the ad looks realistic. On the other hand, this brings into question what is real and what is illusion, as many other scenes of the ad toe the line between reality and action genre tropes. Along these lines, there is a flair of popular-culture mimesis at work, in the sense that at many points the ad is not seemingly going for a realistic production of the real

world, but rather a mimicry of action/superhero film tropes. The CGI, static-laced screens and visuals, voice-edited narrator, and quote from Mission: Impossible all point to the fact that the ad is, at least stylistically, relying more on popular culture tropes than real-world trappings. The aspect ratio for the ad is even artificially changed when Crenshaw sky dives, introducing letterbox mattes (black bars) at the top and bottom of the video, giving the feel of a big-screen blockbuster.[19] This imitation of cinematic texts works to further blur the already highly distorted lines between popular and political culture, providing viewers yet another opportunity to mix political narrative with popular narrative.

With his hero's journey underway, Crenshaw's next move is to begin recruiting his team of supporting cast. The first person he approaches is Representative Wesley Hunt (R-TX), a Black veteran who is seated in an Apache helicopter. The ad plays up the cheesiness of the dialogue exchanged between these two, as Crenshaw approaches, asking, "You still know how to fly one of these things?" Hunt pulls a cigar out of his mouth and, not responding to the question posed to him whatsoever, simply says, "Dan Crenshaw." Crenshaw then says, "I'm putting a team together Wesley. You in?" Hunt then steps out of the helicopter, saying, "You know I wouldn't miss this for the world, right?" Throughout this exchange, the camera shot cuts back and forth between close up shots of each person speaking, highlighting the pseudo-dramatic nature of this exchange. The ad then freezes on Hunt, dropping the background to black and displaying in large, gold text, "WESLEY HUNT" followed by his district and his qualifications, which include, "Apache Helicopter Pilot," "West Point Graduate," "Ready to Make D.C. Work for us [sic]."

Everything about this exchange plays into the realism of the ad, with Hunt dressed in his helicopter pilot fatigues and sitting in an actual combat helicopter. In order to avoid legal issues but to not distract from this realism, there is incredibly small, white text at the bottom of this image that reads, "Use of military rank, job titles, and photographs in uniform does not imply endorsement by the Navy, Army, Air Force, or Department of Defense." Compared to the size and coloring of the other text, this is almost unnoticeable in comparison.[20]

Next, Representative August Pfluger (R-TX), an Air Force veteran, is recruited to join Crenshaw's team. He is similarly dressed in pilot's attire and shoots out from under the helicopter he is working on. Pfluger banters with Crenshaw and Hunt, asking, "You guys looking for a real pilot? Let me get cleaned up." From here, a similar list of large gold text appears on screen. Pfluger's qualifications are "F-22 Combat Pilot, US Air Force Colonel," "National Security Council Advisor," "7th Generation Texan and Rancher," and "Husband, Father, Christian." This last line is particularly interesting, as the ad emphasizes Pfluger as the ideal white, conservative man: married, fertile, and religious. One viewer noted this in their response on Reddit, saying, "I wasn't going to vote for him until I realized he was a husband and father. I like someone who fucks women and puts babies in them. Highly qualified. He has my vote."[21] While none of this is particularly surprising in a conservative political ad, what is peculiar is this emphasis with Pfluger's qualifications, while Hunt, who is also a husband, father and Christian, is only given three qualifications based on his military service and his plan as a congressional representative.[22]

Even in this ad's attempt to champion Hunt as a part of Crenshaw's team, there is a subtle dog whistle at play in his qualifications. As Ian Haney López argues, one common dog whistle used to blame the Black community for its own marginalization is supposed "dysfunction in the black family." Such family-oriented dog whistles move "attention away from the structural components of racism into a bitter, poisonous fight over the health of black family life." Indeed, as López explains, "Whites believed in structural remedies when they saw the poor as people like themselves . . . They shifted to a belief in personal failings when they began to see the poor as non-white fundamentally unlike themselves."[23] With this conservative trope in mind, it becomes clearer why Hunt's family life would be left out and Pfluger's would be included. Even as alt-right disinformists use Hunt's race as evidence of their openness to diversity, they have to maintain one of the key facades of social inequality: that Black people have a poor family life and, as such, social welfare programs would be wasted on them. It is an extremely tight rope to walk in this ad, as conservative cognitive dissonance abounds.

Nevertheless, what is emphasized as it relates to populist conspiracy is Hunt's and Pfluger's qualifications as simultaneously ordinary and heroic individuals. They are positioned as ready to figuratively and literally fight the ill-defined and ill-intentioned elites in D.C., for the betterment of the common person. Hunt's "Ready to Make D.C. Work for us" qualification line is especially pointed in its aim at elites. And Pfluger's, "Husband, Father, Christian" line emphasizes his ordinariness. This ordinariness is further highlighted in the banter after their qualifications are presented. This exchange momentarily breaks from the action-movie style of the ad into almost

a behind the scenes look, presenting a seemingly normal bit of banter among some "guys." While walking on a runway, Crenshaw asks Pfluger, "If you're an F-22 pilot, what were you doing working under a helicopter." Pfluger responds, "I have no idea what I was doing, but typical Air Force fixing the Army's problems." Hunt then barely responds to this insult, saying, "This guy, this guy." He then jabs Crenshaw over his sky dive scene, saying, "Dan, bro, you could've just texted me, man. Why you gotta jump out of an airplane, this would've been way easier." Crenshaw then, in fake frustration, retorts, "Because it's cooler… never mind."[24] This exchange breaks through the ad's tense, action-flick narrative to provide a brief moment of comedic relief that presents this trio as relatable, "an essential predictor of electability."[25] However, this is ultimately a momentary respite, as the ad then cranks up the epic music volume and shows a fighter jet and military helicopter flying through the air.

With the "core" of Crenshaw's team assembled, the ad moves fairly quickly through three more additions to the team. The first is Representative Beth Van Duyne (R-TX). She is introduced at a staged (but meant to be realistic) award ceremony, where she presents a medal to a police officer standing in front of an American flag. Van Duyne says, "And I want to thank these officers for a job well done." Crenshaw calls out, saying, "Hey Beth, when you're finished over there, Texas could use your help." Van Duyne's qualifications are then listed similarly to the previous candidates. They read as, "Former Mayor of Irving," "Kept Communities SAFE," and "Regional Director for HUD."[26] While brief, this portion of the ad emphasizes conservative disinformation campaigns focused on crime and policing. As will be discussed heavily in the following section on horror and dog whistles, these crime and policing

conspiracies are often presented in the form of dog whistles used against non-white communities.

The next member of Crenshaw's team is Tony Gonzales (R-TX), a cryptologist and Navy veteran. Gonzales is presented as a stereotypical action movie hacker, typing away at a keyboard while a screen reads, "SECRET INFORMATION," accompanied by a growing percentage indicating how much access he has to this information. He switches from the keyboard to a laptop, where the screen then shifts to another generic, green shaded screen that reads, "INITIALIZING SEQUENCE." We then see someone unplug the power, causing the screens to go black and Gonzales to exclaim, "What the?" Here, we have the pretty odd choice to introduce Gonzales's qualifications after he has seemingly been sabotaged. His qualifications are "US Navy Master Chief, 20 Years," "Hispanic Conservative," and "Cyber Warfare Expert." The inclusion of Gonzales's ethnicity as one of his three key qualifications is telling of the ad's overt attempt to depict a diverse team of conservatives, while again toeing the line of traditional, conservative beliefs (Gonzales's family, religion, etc. is again noticeably absent). As Gonzales looks at his computer screens in a confused, almost frantic way, Crenshaw walks in with the unplugged power cord, saying, "Hey Tony, Texas has a better use for your talents." Gonzales is provided no chance to respond. This entire sequence is bizarre, because it implies that Gonzales was working on highly complex cyber defense issues. But Crenshaw shows a complete disregard for that work or for Gonzales, as he unplugs the power and essentially tells him his cyber defense work is not important. Gonzales's agency is entirely stripped from him, as he is dragged along and does not have another line of dialogue after his annoyed, "What

the?" for the entire ad. As such, even though his service to the Navy as a cyber warfare expert is his most qualifying credential, that service is belittled as he is reduced to the "Hispanic Conservative" tagline.[27]

Genevieve Collins is the final candidate added to the team. She is also, coincidentally, the only candidate in the ad that did not win their election, losing the race for the U.S. House in Texas's 32nd Congressional District to Democrat Colin Allred.[28] Collins is introduced fighting a man in a martial arts studio. The camera and editing work really emphasize her strength as a fighter, as distortions and slow-motion effects are used in a style very reminiscent of the bar fight scene in *Kingsman*.[29] After pinning the man she's fighting and then dramatically looking up in the direction of the camera, Collins's qualifications are presented. They are listed as "Problem Solver," "Business Woman," and "Athlete." Compared to the other candidates, her qualifications are incredibly short, vague, and underwhelming. Essentially, she is boiled down to a physically strong and yet fairly ordinary woman without any other notable accomplishments expounded upon in the ad. This aligns, in part, with the framework of populist conspiracy but falls fairly short when compared to the others presented before. After Collins's qualifications are displayed, she looks at the other members of the assembled team and asks, "Hey guys, who's next?" The four men all look at each other, shaking their heads and crossing their arms before all looking and pointing toward Van Duyne. Van Duyne then shakes her head at the men before stripping off her business jacket, revealing her white business top. She steps forward saying, "I've got this."[30]

Here, we see gendered dog whistles and stereotypes come into play, as the women of the ad are essentialized to their physicality. None of the men in this ad have their physical appearance or prowess ever addressed in any overt ways. However, here we have Collins being put forward as a physically strong woman and "Athlete." Meanwhile, Van Duyne is presented in a sexualized manner reminiscent of the "Bond Girl" trope, which puts women with fighting prowess in a "traditionally exhibitionist role."[31] Further, the male gaze is activated when women are made to fight against one another in front of a group of four men. This has been a common theme in women's UFC and MMA competitions. Erin Whiteside, a professor with expertise in gender and sexuality discourse in sports, suggests that the oddity of attractive women fighting is a component of the male gaze:

> Although girls and women are more accepted than ever in sports, participating in sports is still in many ways a violation of gender norms. Largely because the traits we most value in sports—physicality, aggression, strength, etc.—are traits also associated with masculinity. Because of this disconnect, we often see female athletes objectified as a way to make them appear more feminine. Doing so 'brings things back into balance,' by assuring viewers that the women we see are not violating gender norms, but still are 'real women' in that they are feminine and, in many cases, available for sexual consumption.[32]

We consequently see the "oddity" of a brewing spar between Van Duyne and Collins defused through the inclusion of the sexualization of Van Duyne. This is reflected in viewer responses. As one Redditor commented, "My favorite part was the implied girl-on-girl wrestling that those dudes were about to watch," to which another

Redditor responded, “I mean that one is pretty fine but chick wrestling doesn’t do it for me.”[33] Discussion of their fitness for office is diverted into discussions of their physical attractiveness and discussions over the merits of watching women’s athletic competitions.

Further, while some might read the men’s reluctance to fight Van Duyne as being intimidated by her, through the conservative worldview it functions as a part of the coded message in support of traditional, gender specific competition in sports. This, in turn, can then be connected to a deeper dog whistle against trans individuals, whose participation in sports has grown in reactionary significance during the long Trump era. For instance, a 2021 Gallup poll found that 62 percent of respondents believed that “transgender athletes . . . should only be allowed to play on sports teams that match their birth gender,” compared to 34 percent believing that “transgender athletes should be able to play on sports team that match their current gender.” In just two years, that margin grew even further, with a 2023 Gallup poll finding that 69 percent favored birth-gender sports participation and only 26 percent in favor of gender-affirming sports participation. In other words, that margin grew from a 28-point margin to a 43-point margin against trans athletes, part of a wider trend in anti-trans rhetoric and opinions during the long Trump era.[34] As such, the women preparing to fight one another in this ad not only sexualizes and minimizes them to their physicality through the male gaze, but it also dog whistles traditional conservative gender notions about not fighting women and only biological females physically competing against one another.

With Crenshaw's team now established, the ad concludes with a flurry of hyper-militaristic and action-movie imagery. This begins with a montage of images such as the Texas Capital, the U.S. Capitol, and military vehicles and equipment. Digitally styled text then reads, "TEAM ASSEMBLED. AWAITING NEXT OBJECTIVE" before transitioning to a shot of the six candidates walking down a runway. Two helicopters fly over their heads as a large, CGI explosion detonates behind them. They then strike a cool pose, before the title of the ad, "Texas: Reloaded" is emblazoned on the screen in fiery text.

As a whole, "Texas: Reloaded" mostly deals in populist forms of conspiracy, with the ad focused on gathering together a team of simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary candidates to complete a vague mission to "Save Texas." However, it is the very vagueness of this threat that allows viewers to plug in their own fears and beliefs as to what might be menacing Texas. One viewer articulated what is threatened by these vague forces, commenting, "I love the AD.... makes me proud to be Texas born. Thank you Jesus I was born here and have y'all protecting our families, religion and gun rights." Predictably, others associated the threat with the Left/liberals, with one commenter saying, "I can literally hear left wing heads exploding" and another saying, "SAY NO TO MOB RULE AND MARXISM." One viewer resonated with the militarized tone of the ad, pleading, "Please send reinforcements to IDAHO!! We are under siege by liberals fleeing communist states." Another commenter combined an articulation of this threat with their discontent with mainstream, Hollywood films, saying, "We need this team to represent us, not the liberal lemmings in Hollywood [sic] and elsewhere." Indeed, the Hollywood-styled

mimesis of the ad also struck a chord with many viewers, especially those dissatisfied with the perceived liberal lean in filmmaking. Some of these comments included:

> "It really is the greatest political ad, ever. Dan Crenshaw might want to go into movies if he gets fed up with politics (maybe as Tom Cruise's MI franchise replacement?). It hit emotional touchstones for me: real patriots with records of service, it combined action and humor in a (movie) context I could associate with it. I just wish I was living in Texas."
>
> "Better than most Hollywood movies. They need to make a full version."
>
> "Better than most of the movies coming out of Hollywood as of lately."
>
> "I LOVE IT!!! Gave me goose bumps. Best Movie I've seen in a damn long time! Tom Cruise better up his game!"
>
> "Also, can I just point out that these campaign ads (Klacik's, this one) are way better than anything Hollywood puts out ahahah"
>
> "I would actually watch this as a movie also meeting them would be like meeting superhero's just in real life"[35]

The press also picked up on the production value and action movie/Hollywood trappings of the video. The *Dallas Morning News* ran the headline, "Crenshaw stars in a new 'Avengers'-style ad with five other Republicans to 'save Texas.'"[36] The *Houston Chronicle* headlined the ad as, "Republicans as Avengers? Houston Rep. Dan Crenshaw goes all Captain America in new political ad."[37] The *New York Post*'s headline on the ad claimed, "Dan Crenshaw's Texas campaign ad looks like a Hollywood action movie trailer."[38] The *Hill* came to a similar conclusion in their headline, "Dan Crenshaw releases Hollywood-type action movie trailer."[39] Thus, as

viewers and the press recognized, “Texas: Reloaded” drew upon many of the editing techniques and genre tropes of bigger budget action and conspiracy blockbusters, seemingly creating a strong resonance amongst conservative and alt-right viewers, further spreading its disinformative narrative.

Deep-State Conspiracy

While Crenshaw’s “Texas: Reloaded” ad largely sticks to the populist form of conspiracy, many other conspiratorial ads released by alt-right candidates have delved into more deep-state style conspiracies. These ads focus heavily on the federal government’s nefarious policies, often linked to globalist schemes. In the last chapter, we saw such deep-state conspiracies most strongly depicted in the Kingsman franchise and *Songbird*, where nefarious actors conspired to hurt the average person.

One prime example of deep-state conspiracy theory in political advertising is Marjorie Taylor Greene’s 2021 ad, “Win Marjorie Taylor Greene’s 50 Cal Rifle!” Unlike most of the other ads analyzed here, this was not a campaign ad per se but instead tried to capitalize off of Biden’s withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, along with related conspiratorial threads. This ad relies on popular culture through its visual and practical effects that mimetically replicate the types of effects used in blockbuster action films (especially those with hacking sequences). Running at one minute and 21 seconds, Greene’s ad opens with multiple different shots of a military-grade Humvee driving around while a distorted guitar and drum soundtrack play in the background. As the Humvee drives up, letterbox mattes are overly present on the top and bottom of the video, similar to Crenshaw’s sky diving scene, giving the ad a mimetic “movie theater” viewing quality. However, these mattes slowly transition

away as the Humvee drives up and we see a pair of feminine leather boots step out of the car. The feet and legs of this "mystery" individual are focused on by the camera as they walk across the grass. After 10 seconds of this build up, the individual is revealed to be Greene. Here, we can again already see the attempts at cinematic mimesis and realism at play in this ad as Greene and her team use editing techniques, like the black mattes, and a real military vehicle, to amplify the tense, militaristic nature of the ad.[40]

From here, Greene starts going through a list of conspiratorial disinformation allegations about Joe Biden. For each point, "JOE BIDEN" is continually presented in bold, yellow letters, while the accusation is then listed in bold, white text (with some words emphasized in yellow). None of these points are backed up by evidence and are instead simply asserted. Greene's list of accusations includes: "Joe Biden abandoned Americans in Afghanistan, got thirteen of our best soldiers killed, gave a kill list of Americans to the Taliban, and armed an Islamic terrorist nation with $83 billion in weapons."[41] Most of these points come in the context of Biden's hasty withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. However, nearly all of these points represent partial truths and reflect the criteria of disinformation. For instance, the "kill list" Greene references was a "limited information sharing" initiative "designed to expedite the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan."[42] This was deemed necessary given the defense perimeter made around the airport by the Taliban. Regardless of whether or not one believes this was functionally a kill list, the lack of context provided by Greene allows for far more sinister associations to be made, implying that Biden wanted to arm the Taliban specifically to kill Americans.

This points to a thread of globalist conspiracy often at play in deep-state conspiracy narratives.

From here, the ad transitions to a focus on a 50-caliber rifle that Greene is giving away. She suggests the gun is similar to those supposedly given away to "an Islamic terrorist nation." Greene then quickly slips in a "Biden should be impeached" line, before saying, "Now I'm doing a gun giveaway of my own, but for Americans only." As she says this and holds up the large sniper rile, the screen is filled with messages meant to look like computer error messages that say things like: "Taliban Banned From Entry," "Warning: Taliban Not Allowed," "NO TALIBAN ALLOWED," and "If this is the first time you've seen this stop error screen, remove the Democrats from power." These error messages look like they're ripped straight from a hacking sequence in an action-thriller, adding to the genre-specific mimesis of the conspiracies Greene is propagating. After these error messages dissipate, Greene suggests that Democrats "will ban" a rifle like the one she is holding if they keep the House. This, in particular, seems misguided given that Democrats had control of the House, Senate, and presidency and enacted no such policy.

The third stage of the ad is Greene setting up and firing the rifle, while continuing to rapid-fire nuggets of conspiratorial disinformation. We see Greene laying prone in the back of the Humvee with the rifle set up on a bipod. She says, "While Joe Biden broke America's pledge to never leave a man behind, Nancy Pelosi is sneaking the Green New Deal into the $3.5 trillion budget."[43] Here, we see two brand new conspiracies linked to the ongoing attacks on Biden. First, Greene brings up Pelosi, a favorite target of demonization amongst alt-right groups in the long

Trump era. Indeed, this attack on Pelosi by another woman in Congress is interesting given the way such attacks often "bolster their misogynistic claims against Pelosi and the broader Democratic Party."[44] Greene's tapping into this misogynistic dog whistle suggests how alt-right women must conform to the misogynistic principles espoused by such an agenda. We can visually see such misogyny at play in this ad, where Greene is enacting hypermasculine fantasies like driving a military vehicle and shooting a comically large sniper rifle.

Second, Greene attacks the Green New Deal, a continuation of the alt-right environmental conspiracies seen in movies like *Kingsman*. Greene in particular has been critical of the Green New Deal, one of the "right's favorite boogeymen."[45] In fact, Greene's conspiratorial ramblings about the Green New Deal are rather tame by her standards, with Brian Kahn suggesting that, "It appears no conspiracy is too outlandish for Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene to peddle. There's QAnon, false flag conspiracies about the Parkland shooting, and the whole election fraud lie." Greene also made the outrageous claim, "That the deadly 2018 Camp Fire was ignited, intentionally, by a space laser so California could build a high speed rail system."[46] Greene's dealing in alt-right conspiracy theories, especially environmental ones, allow her to engage in "a form of identity-protective cognition" with her supporters. Such thinking allows adherents of these conspiracies to "deflect threats to important worldviews that they hold to be important, by continuing to endorse the belief that climate change is a hoax."[47] Such a move allows conspiracy-minded conservatives to build up an in-group identity against an imagined out-group: nefarious environmental actors bent on globalist principles. Such deep-state conspiratorial thinking dates back

at least to Agenda 21 and the John Birch Society, as discussed in the previous chapter.[48]

Greene then takes this environmental conspiracy rhetoric and ties it in with conspiracy against socialism in the climax of her ad. Greene boasts, "And in 2022, I'm going to blow away the Democrats' socialist agenda." From here, Greene chambers a round in her rifle and takes aim at a Toyota Prius with "SOCIALISM" written on the side. The aiming reticule we see edited over the car again establishes a supposedly realistic encounter for the audience, where they feel as if they are looking down the scope of the rifle. However, the scope has a tech-styled filter, with green coloration and a spinning, high-tech looking reticule. Such effects again mimic action movie qualities more than actual reality. She fires a round, with the gun's recoil heavily knocking back into her. That one bullet, we are led to believe, makes the Prius explode into a massive fireball, captured from multiple angles. The explosion itself certainly appears real, but one would have to imagine there were a lot of explosives rigged to the truck to make it detonate in such a dramatic fashion. However, in line with Crenshaw's ad, mimesis is seen here as it works to mimic the fantasy of what viewers see in military/action movies on the big screen, not what would actually happen if one fired a 50-caliber bullet at a Prius without additional explosives. The ad ends with Greene standing cross-armed in front of the Humvee, with the sniper rifle standing up on the side of the trunk and a magazine of large, 50-caliber bullets posed under the rifle. Greene urges the viewer to "go to the website below and sign up to win my 50-caliber gun before Joe Biden bans it."[49]

This climax of Greene's ad awakens another alt-right, deep-state boogeyman for the viewer: socialism. As Robert Kozinets argues, "The word 'socialism' has become a trigger word in U.S. politics . . . Critics call socialism anti-American and charge that it undermines free enterprise and leads to disaster."[50] Such ruminating allows those amongst the alt-right to further establish their own, conspiratorial identity in the face of supposed deep-state attempts at consolidating increasing power. Thus, in some ways, Greene acts in this ad as a populist hero for the alt-right: a woman enacting masculine, militaristic traits in what they view as a real culture war against socialism and other dark, elite forces. However, her populist appeal is certainly drowned out by her laundry list of deep-state-styled conspiracies she proclaims. Whereas Crenshaw's ad emphasized the populist qualifications of each of his team members, Greene's ad hardly focuses on her own qualifications or policies other than her stating she will destroy socialism, with her firing a gun to prove that. Beyond that, her ad instead works to build up a list of thinly evidenced conspiracies ranging from Biden's kill list, the Pelosi's Green New Deal, and the Democrats' larger socialist aims. And while none of these claims are backed up in any meaningful way, the accumulation of these accusations begins to congeal into what Jenny Rice calls "thick evidence," or "how rhetorical accumulation . . . manages to create palpable impact through an experience of densities."[51] In this case, Greene's laundry list of accusations and conspiracies can, for the alt-right true believer, provide an overwhelming list of deep-state accusations against Biden, Pelosi, and the Democrats. Even if one conspiracy on this list is disproven, these conspiracies accumulatively cohere together so that this ad works by "passing off narrative as true evidence."[52] It

matters little if these accusations are grounded in reality, because the narrative maintains coherence and fidelity and can withstand arguments against portions of it.[53]

Michele Fiore's ad follows a similar pattern to Greene's, drawing upon notions of Western action films and sexualized Bond girls. In 2022, Fiore ran for governor of Nevada as a Republican before dropping out to run for Nevada State Treasurer (a race she lost).[54] Her ad, "Michele Fiore for Governor," released about one month after Greene's. One has to wonder if the parallels are intentional.[55] "Michele Fiore for Governor" opens with twanging, country guitar music as a Ford pick-up truck loudly drives across an empty stretch of desert. The truck comes to a screeching break, as the camera switches to a pan of a bumper sticker that reads: "TRUMP 2024 TAKE AMERICA BACK." This introduction is highly reminiscent to Greene's, and enacts a similar, hypermasculine fantasy of driving a large, powerful vehicle without societal restraints. However, the setting in the desert and the music prop this ad up as being more aligned with the Western sub-genre in the tropes that it uses.

After stepping out of the truck, Fiore begins listing her own qualifications tinged with conspiratorial understandings of government. She proclaims, "I spent my whole life fighting the establishment" and suggests that she was "attacked" for being one of the first elected officials to support Trump. Here, we can already see Fiore drawing upon the rhetoric of fighting and tying it back to the ill-defined and malicious "establishment." As Roland Imhoff et al. articulate, these "anti-establishment beliefs" are a marker of "conspiracy mentality" amongst the political right.[56] This is especially connected to power, as these anti-establishment

predispositions are greatest when the president is not a Republican, an effect more strongly observed amongst conservatives than liberals.[57]

Next, Fiore directly acknowledges her gender status as a woman, conforming her enactment of gender to conservative ideals. She claims that the "Washington Post called me a gun-toting calendar girl. And Politico magazine said that I was the Lady Trump. And I don't care."[58] This line not only establishes a conspiracy against her by mainstream political news outlets, but also indicates that such attacks will not work against her. Indeed, the idea of Fiore accepting her position as a "gun-toting calendar girl" calls upon a flurry of gendered dog whistles and stereotypes that are embedded within the American consciousness. Laura Browder makes this case, arguing:

> The armed woman has held, and continues to hold, enormous symbolic significance in American culture. . . Throughout much of American history, the gun has served as a recurrent symbol that links violence and masculinity. For over two centuries, there have been women who have escaped conventional gender roles by picking up guns. In doing so, they became armed icons. Paradoxically, to succeed with the public, these famous armed women have had to embrace female stereotypes and expectations. Iconic women with guns have challenged and yet reinforced the masculinist ideal of America—that guns are inextricably tied to both masculinity and American identity. Public discussions of these women reflect the discomfort that they have produced in American culture.[59]

Obviously, for any political candidate, one would not want to produce discomfort, at least among their voting bases. Thus, in ads like Fiore's and Greene's, there are

efforts to reinforce masculine principles rooted in big trucks and big guns, while also forefronting traditionally feminine appearances associated with conservative notions of femininity to defuse some of the tension of these women's hypermasculine performances. For example, in Greene's "Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!" we see a lingering shot of her feminine boots, which are slim and contoured in style, when she steps out of the vehicle. Further, in practically every shot of Greene, her hair is styled such that her diamond earrings, diamond necklace, and cross necklace are all readily displayed. She also holds her gun, such that her fairly large diamond wedding ring is clearly visible in front of the gun. All of this works to mark her femininity in an otherwise very masculine-oriented ad.

Fiore similarly embraces such feminine appearances to offset her status as a "gun-toting calendar girl," while leaning further into action-movie tropes. The setting of the ad, out in the middle of a desert, certainly emphasizes the Western sub-genre style, as twanging country music fills the background of the ad. Fiore's appearance also plays into this ad's popular culture trappings, as she wears a red dress with a black leather belt and jacket, over-emphasizing her feminine physique. Such an appearance offsets the gun shooting she does later in the ad by drawing upon the sexualized male gaze. Fiore again fits the trope of a "Bond girl" here, as she is a self-proclaimed sexualized woman demonstrating her prowess with a gun. As Kelly Oliver explains, the male gaze uses the "movement of the camera" to establish that "women's bodies are objects that give pleasure through voyeuristic and fetishistic forms of scopophilia, pleasure in looking."[60] Fiore's appearance in her ad seems to play into such voyeurism, a common trope of the action movies she is riffing off of,

as she exploits such invitational markers. Thus, the visuals themselves act as a coded message for alt-right viewers, who can understand her feminine appearance mixed with masculine violence. Her choice of red dress is not lost in this coded appeal, as it emphasizes her feminine physique while also reiterating that she is a through and through, red-blooded conservative (with red typically representing the Republican Party).[61]

After acknowledging a supposed conspiracy against her by the mainstream media, Fiore then turns on fellow Republicans, highlighting her appeal to more fringe, alt-right groups of conservatives. She walks up behind an old, cathode-ray tube (CRT) television. On it, Mitt Romney is shown giving a speech before Congress in black and white. Fiore claims, "We need outsiders. Fighters. Not the same old boring, moderate, compromise, blue-blazer politicians." After rattling off this attack on moderate Republicans, Fiore knocks over the TV, clearly revealing the gun she has holstered on her hip. As such, she once again plays into conspiracy here by establishing a narrative of her as an outsider, not like those people in Washington (the reason being a Washington outsider would matter for a Nevada gubernatorial race is left unexplained).[62]

Finally, Fiore reaches the climax of her ad where she begins shooting her heavily coded targets. Fiore dawns chic sunglasses as she unholsters her gun and says she has a "three shot plan." From here, she shoots three bottles of beer that are labeled "VACCINE MANDATES," "CRT," and "VOTER FRAUD." Notably, CRT here stands for "critical race theory," not the type of television she just knocked over. Each of these bottles also have text reading "SOCIALISM" and "EST. 2020" written on

them. Thus, Fiore links the overarching deep-state conspiratorial notion of socialism to all three of these separate conservative dog whistles. First, on the vaccine mandate thread, this is a clear anti-government dog whistle that highlights notions of government conspiracism. The anti-vaccine movement gained momentum during the COVID-19 outbreak within the long Trump era. As Vera Bergengruen argues:

> The growing power of the joint anti-vaccine and anti-mandate movement could also provide cover to darker forces of anti-government sentiment . . . the exhortations to "reclaim our country" and "refuse to comply" carried the implication of violence on the horizon. Some speakers threatened the press and Dr. Anthony Fauci, invoking the Nuremberg trials of leading Nazis.[63]

Accordingly, Fiore's anti-vaccine mandate appeal can ring loudly for alt-right viewers who are invested in such anti-government conspiracy logics.

Fiore's next target, CRT, is another clear dog whistle, this time being used to tap into racist sentiments amongst her base. As professor of law Bridgette Baldwin argues, "Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become the new dog whistle—pitting conservatives against CRT based on the myth that this legal framework is being taught in K-12 public schools."[64] Indeed, the conservative extrapolation of CRT has been incredibly misguided and overbroad. As properly defined by the person credited with coining the term, Kimberlé Crenshaw and co-editors Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas argue that "Critical Race Theory embraces a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole."[65] As

such, CRT is most commonly studied in law schools and fields that grapple with social theory in academic contexts rather than K-12 public schools. Nevertheless, the alt-right has glommed onto this highly contextual area of study and devised a grand conspiracy that socialist leftists are trying to destroy the country by casting white children as villains and stirring up broad culture wars. As Baldwin highlights, "The anti-CRT mobilization has been swift. Donald Trump issued executive Order 13950 to ban teaching 'divisive concepts,'" with many states and schoolboards following in kind. Indeed, "the concept has served as a catchall to prevent any classroom discussion of not just racism, but also homophobia and sexism in this country."[66] Such a rejection of identity-based marginalization plays into colorblind racism, allowing for white supremacy to continue to remain unexamined under the guise that one should not consider any identity factors when addressing societal inequality.

Fiore's final target of "voter fraud" also plays into broader notions of conspiracism and racial dog whistles. Such accusations of voter fraud are very often combined with Republican lawmakers "crafting and passing voter ID laws in which the effort to suppress black and Latino votes [is] explicitly stated." Such voter suppression tactics are not new for the Republican Party, but Trump took this "old playbook" and "has created a story line that is creating fear and is living off the xenophobia that has been a part of his campaign from the start."[67] Further, in light of Trump's continued, false claims that he won the 2020 election, such voter fraud claims also embolden anti-government conspiracies, such as conspiracies surrounding Dominion's voting machines which led to a $787.5 million settlement paid by Fox News.[68] Further, as the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University

School of Law highlights, “The verdict is in from every corner that voter fraud is sufficiently rare that it simply could not and does not happen at a rate even approaching that which would be required to ‘rig’ an election.”[69] However, even through countless legal losses and a complete lack of evidence, there are still plenty of true believers out there who think there is a concerted government conspiracy to keep far-right candidates from winning elections. And such beliefs are frequently based in racist and xenophobic fears.

After shooting her three conspiratorial boogeymen, Fiore ends her ad with one final appeal to deep-state conspiracy. She holsters her gun, awkwardly moving her hand off of her gun before reaching back for it. She claims, “The Joe Biden administration is coming after me. I’m Michele Fiore, and I’m ready for the fight.” Her campaign logo then blazes in fire onto the screen as she drives off in her large truck. Fiore’s assertation that Biden is personally coming after her, beyond just a delusion of grandeur, suggests that Biden’s deep-state ties are so strong that he is influencing Republican gubernatorial primaries. Further, the fact that she makes such a charged claim of sinister government action while grabbing at her gun suggests that violence is not off the table to combat such a threat. She confirms this with her final words being, “I’m ready for the fight.” Thus, Fiore uses action movie tropes to suggest to her audience that such sinister conspiracism is at work in the federal government, necessitating that she and her supporters might need to take up arms to combat it. Her gendered, racist, and anti-government dog whistles further heighten the stakes of her claims.

As we have seen in these ads by Crenshaw, Greene, and Fiore, alt-right politicians often rely on a mixture of conspiracy and dog whistles in order to propagate their violently inclined rhetoric. That such rhetoric is also couched in many of the tropes and production techniques of action films is of little surprise, given the potentially violent conclusions that can be drawn from such conspiratorial logics. As I explore in the next section, these dog-whistle politics are not limited to action genre tropes. Indeed, the merging of dog whistles with political horror is also an apparent strategy amongst alt-right political advertisements of the long Trump era.

Home-Invasion Horror and Dog Whistles

Often, when one thinks of horror, they think of scary monsters, supernatural powers, and ghosts and ghouls from the afterlife. This is what Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart and David A. Frank term the "classic horror frame." However, Picart and Frank also highlight another frame of horror, the "conflicted horror frame." This frame thrives much more in the realm of normalcy, focusing on human horrors like violent crime.[70] As such, this is part of why this specific frame of horror can often be so effective as a political device because the horrors it portrays are very much grounded in our real world and in our humanity, not something that can be as easily cast aside as hyperbole.

In what follows, I reveal the use of the conflicted horror frame in alt-right political advertising of the long Trump era through the horror sub-genre of home invasion. I briefly revisit then Vice President George H.W. Bush's 1988 "Willie Horton" as an infamously understated example of this genre of political advertisement, before pivoting to the contemporary moment with President Donald

Trump's 2020 "Break In" and "Defund the Police," and New Mexico gubernatorial candidate Mark Ronchetti's "Krysty's Story" as more dramatic examples of this type of campaign advertisement. Each of these ads act as a short film version of a home-invasion horror. Interwoven in these ads are notions of violence, white woman victimhood, and "tough-on-crime" policies, all of which have the potential to act as powerful catalysts of racist political fear. I argue in this chapter that as the home-invasion horror genre is deployed by tough-on-crime political advertisements, the confirmation stage of the horror narrative is the turning point which drives the narrative impact of such ads. This is the stage where the victim of a horror narrative tries to reach out and confirm the presence of an intruder to outside authorities. Further, via dog-whistle politics, racist sentiments are activated among target audiences to promote stricter crime policies. To begin, it is important to briefly examine the cinematic subgenre of home-invasion horror, including the stages of its narrative development before moving on to an analysis of specific political ads.

Home-Invasion Horror Films

One of the driving aspects of home-invasion horror films, especially as it relates to the conflicted horror frame, is the subgenre's emphasis on space and place. Indeed, the home is one of the most sacred subdivisions of traditional American life, where the family unit is in many ways insulated and secured from the outside world. Indeed, in order for this to at least superficially be the case, one must maintain "sovereignty and control" over their home and property. These notions are inevitably "bound up with political considerations," forming the basis for both individual home units and broader metaphors of the American home front.[71] And yet, while this somewhat

simplistic division between the outside world and inside the home may seem sturdy enough, the modern home has become increasingly porous to the outside world. Within a typical home, there are physical networks of gas, electricity, and water running through the home that allow it to function. There are also information networks, such as telephones, cable, Wi-Fi signals, cell service, and the broader internet all potentially flowing into homes.[72] These connections mean that, in an increasingly modern society, the home is far more networked than it was before, both in terms of physical resource supply and, potentially more importantly, in terms of the exchanging of ideas. *When A Stranger Calls* (1979), its remake, *When A Stranger Calls* (2006), and its semi-parody, *Scream* (1996), are all strong examples of this type of utility based horror, where the killer seemingly first gains access to the victim via the telephone.[73] For some, this apparent breakdown of the supposedly clean divide between the public sphere and the private sphere (if there ever was such a divide) is a seemingly newfangled, terrifying reality of an increasingly globalized and networked world.

However, the fears of a breakdown in the security of the walls of one's home go beyond the leakages of information into the home. The breakdown goes both ways as there is also a loss of privacy as private information seeps outside of the home. Indeed, as Steffen Hantke suggests, "contemporary discourses on urban space reflect the same anxiety about the dissolution of private and public space which some serial killer narratives articulate so insistently." Along these lines, there are certain "daily rituals" which have been "assigned to the privacy of our homes."[74] Certainly, physical invasion is fear invoking in part because it threatens to reveal and disrupt

these private rituals. However, increasingly there is a fear of digital invasion, as private information, images, videos, and the like can leak into the outside world via government surveillance, hackers, acquaintances, or intentional or unintentional mistakes. Such digital invasions of home privacy can be seen in a number of contemporary horror film, like *Host* (2020), which features supernatural killings on Zoom, or *Assassination Nation* (2018), which revolves around a Purge-esque home-invasion narrative stemming from a hacker's release of a town's personal secrets.[75]

Yet, beyond these increasingly prevalent ideas of networked home invasions, there remains the fear of a visceral, physical home invasion. Think of classic slashers like *Halloween* (1978), or more contemporary takes like *The Strangers* (2008), *You're Next* (2011), and *The Purge* (2013), which all highlight killers invading and rampaging through private homes.[76] For some of these, like *Halloween*, *The Strangers*, and *The Purge*, the killer(s) force their way into the home to commit violence. For others, like *You're Next* and the recent slasher film, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), the killer (or, in the complex case of *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, the supposed killer) is welcomed into the home before things go south.[77] This represents a different kind of home invasion film, where the host's hospitality plays a key role in the events that unfold. Indeed, as Paula E. Geyh highlights, "Extending hospitality might, given a bad guest, result in the displacement, undermining or destruction of everything – and everyone – in the house." Thus, the role of the host as an effective filterer of their guests plays an essential role in narratives such as these.[78] Whether the invasion occurs via a person physically breaking in, a person being welcomed in,

a utilities breach, or a digital incursion, the titular home plays a central role in the claustrophobic setting of a home-invasion horror film.

Finally, while much attention has been placed on the setting of the home-invasion horror, understanding the narrative order of these films is also crucial. As Dario Marcucci explains, horror narrative tends to unfold in four stages: "onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation." The onset stage of the film is when the antagonist's presence is made known to the viewer. The discovery stage is when the characters in the film are made aware of the invader's presence and prepare to fight back. The confirmation stage is when those who have discovered the antagonist's presence must convince someone else, typically a person of authority like the police, of that antagonist's presence. Finally, the confrontation stage is when the antagonists and protagonists fight it out, typically in the climax of the film.[79] Marcucci argues that the confirmation stage is typically lacking from the home-invasion horror, because "the subgenre generally features a limited range of characters," meaning that "the protagonists face the antagonists relying exclusively on their own resources; they are isolated, and the source of their isolation is the very space in which the action takes place."[80] While I believe that Marcucci is largely correct in this assessment, I would argue that the confirmation stage does typically still happen in these films as the protagonists desperately try to call for help or convince the police they are not just fooling around. However, the protagonists almost always fail at this confirmation stage (not being able to get ahold of or convince authorities). This lack of an authority force to intervene and help the protagonists is a key outcome of this failure at the

confirmation stage, a narrative moment that is abundant in home-invasion political advertisements.

Home-Invasion Political Ads

When discussing the problematics of the home-invasion horror genre as applied to campaign advertisements, one would be remiss not to start with a discussion of the "Willie Horton" ad. "Willie Horton" was released by the George H.W. Bush presidential campaign as a part of the 1988 presidential campaign. This might seem like an odd choice, given that the ad has very few, if any, genre hallmarks of a horror film. The ad is, on the surface, presented very matter-of-factly, with a narrator discussing the differences in policies on crime between then Vice President Bush and Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis. The Horton ad highlights that while Bush is in favor of the death penalty, Dukakis both opposes that measure and supports prisoner furloughs. Here, the Bush campaign team uses the story of Willie Horton to emphasize their point. Horton was in prison for murdering "a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times." The visual accompaniment to this narration is straightforward, as an image of Horton, a Black man, is presented above large text of his name. The ad then depicts another image of Horton being led away by police officers, as the narrator notes that Horton had received 10 weekend furlough passes. During one of these furloughs, the narrator tells of how Horton kidnapped a couple, stabbing the man and raping the woman. Here, big text under the picture of Horton in custody is shown, reading, "Kidnapping," "Stabbing," and "Raping." This visual then transitions into a picture of Dukakis. The ad wrapped up with the narrator and text on the screen stating, "Weekend prison passes. Dukakis on crime."[81]

Indeed, for such an enduring and highly discussed ad, the "Wille Horton" political spot is, on the surface, rather clandestine. Why then, is the ad still remembered to this day as one of the most infamous ads of all time, earning the #4 spot on *Time*'s "Top 10 Campaign Ads" list?[82] First and foremost, "Wille Horton" is a textbook example of the use of racist dog-whistle politics in political campaigning. López elaborates his definition of dog whistles when arguing that as "a metaphor," dog whistles push "us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another."[83] In this regard, "Willie Horton" then was quite successful in never once mentioning race, but making those racist undertones clear in its prominent featuring of Horton's mugshot and the public's knowledge of his crimes against a white family. Indeed, López notes that Bush's campaign manager, Lee Atwater, found that the ad was so successful because "Horton was black and his victims were white. The image of a black man breaking into a home and raping a white woman conjured the hoariest of racist narratives: the vile and violent black rapist victimizing white purity."[84] Accordingly, this ad was so powerful that it not only reshaped the 1988 election but has also continued to reshape the rhetoric of crime policies for Republicans and Democrats alike.[85]

So, while the "Willie Horton" ad clearly played on highly problematic racist dog whistles to achieve its desired results, why include this in a discussion of home-invasion political ads? That's because, given the details of Horton's crime and the success of this ad, it proved that home-invasion narratives were and are potentially powerful and problematic campaign tools, even absent explicit audio-visual tropes of

the genre. This ad and the surrounding news coverage of the Horton case was ultimately a retelling of a violent home invasion. Indeed, the details of the attack are as follows:

> On April 3, 1987, in a small, working-class Maryland suburb near D.C., an intruder broke into the home of Clifford Barnes and Angela Miller. Barnes, a sales manager for a car dealership, was bound to a pole in the basement and knifed over the course of several hours. When Miller, a bookkeeper at a development firm and Barnes's fiancée [sic], arrived home, she was raped multiple times at gunpoint. Eventually Barnes escaped out the basement window and ran to get help. He never got a look at his assailant's face, he told police, since the man was wearing a stocking cap. But the intruder had taken off in Barnes's Camaro, loaded with items stolen from the house.[86]

Thus, even as the ad itself underplayed the home-invasion element of this narrative, it is a key element of this tragic crime and the problematic framing of the incident moving forward. However, this ad also had the benefit of using a real-life crime as the basis of its narrative. As we'll see as we weave through other prominent examples of home-invasion campaign ads, the home-invasion element is often fictious and/or metaphorical, meaning that a more audio-visually compelling narrative of the invasion supplants fact to craft a compelling fear appeal.

Alt-Right Home-Invasion Ads

With this backdrop, there are a handful of home-invasion horror ads during the long Trump era that are worth highlighting as examples of alt-right disinformation. The first, and potentially most prominent, is former President Donald Trump's 2020

advertisement “Break In.” As the title suggests, this ad dramatizes a home-invasion of an unsuspecting, elderly woman. The ad opens inside a home at night, with the older woman at the center of this ad watching supposed news coverage of Defund the Police movements. The faux news narrator states, “Seattle’s pledge to defund its police department by fifty percent, even including a proposal to remove 911 dispatchers from police control,” as images of people protesting the police are montaged on the woman’s screen. The ad then cuts to the woman disapprovingly shaking her head as the tense music escalates. A bass drops as a shadowed person moves behind the woman, which causes her to turn around and try to spot the home invader. After being unable to spot the intruder, she reaches for her landline phone and dials 911. As she’s calling, the intruder inexplicably ends up outside of her home, wiggling the doorknob in an attempt to get inside of the home. The narrator then suggests that Joe Biden is “absolutely on-board with defunding the police,” before an audio clip of Biden saying, “Yes, absolutely” is played. The ad then cuts to a dark and abandoned police department. An automated voice message from the 911 line states, “Hello, you've reached 911. I'm sorry that there is no one here to answer your emergency call. But leave a message and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.” As this happens, the ad cuts back to the woman’s home where the invader is shown breaking into the woman’s door using a crowbar. As the woman seemingly yells in silence, the intruder grabs her and she drops her phone on the ground, ending the ad.[87]

“Break In” clearly follows the stages of home-invasion horror, as described by Marcucci.[88] The onset stage occurs first, as the audience sees the intruder moving behind the woman before she knows what’s going on. The discovery stage happens

next, as the woman looks around and realizes something isn't right. Here, she attempts to mimetically engage in the confirmation stage of horror, by calling 911. This ad is a prime example of why I think including the confirmation stage in discussions of home-invasion horror, even if it is failed, is so essential. The entire political messaging of this ad hinges on the fact that the woman attempts to engage in the confirmation stage but is ultimately unable to because Joe Biden and Democrats have supposedly shut down the 911 lines in this fictional future. Here, too, we see an essential interplay between the home-invasion horror narrative and the permeability of the home via utility, the telephone line. The use of a home phone, instead of a cellphone, is notable as the home phone is particularly susceptible to a home invader since the wires can be cut. The increasing use of cellphones makes this trope more difficult and convoluted, meaning this choice of technology is notable in a 2020 advertisement. Indeed, cutting the phone line is an extremely well-established horror trope, such that audiences have come to "[e]xpect the obligatory scene where the potential victim picks up the phone and, not getting a dial-tone, repeatedly rattles the switch-hook while going, 'Hello? Hello?'"[89] Examples of this trope can be found in films like *Murder by Death* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Stage Fright* (2014).[90] This trope is so expected at this point, that viewers are probably waiting for the intruder to cut the older woman's line in the "Break In" ad. But this is what allows the ad to function narratively. The intruder doesn't have to cut the line. Joe Biden and Democrats have essentially done that by supposedly defunding 911 dispatchers, functionally aiding the attacker in this fictional narrative. Further, we see the permeability of the traditional home to information through these

actions by Joe Biden, Democrats, and protestors, as supposedly dangerous ideas of defunding the police enter the home through the television. Finally, from this attempt at the confirmation stage, "Break In" enters the confrontation stage. This climax of the ad is exceedingly quick, as the woman is overpowered by the intruder and the phone drops to the ground, again notably highlighting this utility but also clearly establishing a physical failing of the home to keep the intruder outside.

While "Break In" visibly relies on home-invasion narrative elements and utility-based horror, the ad can also be seen as leaning into enthymematic dog-whistles via its lighting (or lack thereof) of the villain. The ad does clearly depict the intruder as human, given the person's silhouette and need to use human means to break into the home. This establishes the ad as falling within the conflicted horror frame, where the evils of humanity rather than monstrosity are showcased. However, while the invader is human, that's really all we know about the villain. Because of the extremely shadowed lighting that silhouettes the intruder there is no conclusive way of determining the race, gender, or age of the intruder. Such dark shading is a mainstay visual marker of horror.[91] Thus, with the invader's identity shrouded in shadow, "Break In" relies on visual enthymeme, where one of the premises of the ad's argument is left up to audience interpretation. Valerie J. Smith notes that a visual enthymeme's "effectiveness depends on agreement between messenger and audience, discovered in the common opinions shaped by the contexts and culture of the people addressed."[92] Here, via visual enthymeme, racist dog whistles enter the advertisement. Given the long-standing conservative "southern strategy," based in racial vilification, and the tendency for "whites [to] attribute an exaggerated amount

[of crime] to people of color,"[93] it wouldn't be surprising if Trump's intended audience consciously or unconsciously filled the intruder's identity in as a Black or Hispanic man. Further, the victim's status as a white woman continues the white woman victimhood found in the southern strategy and "Willie Horton." However, since the invader is never clearly shown in "Break In," this ad can activate these racist predispositions surrounding violent crime, while maintaining a level of deniability inherent to such dog whistles.

Closely aligned with "Break In," Trump's 2020 ad "Defund the Police" also presents a narrative of lawlessness in the face of defund the police movements. The ad opens with the same shot of an empty police office as was seen in "Break In." The phone rings for a moment then goes to the same automated voice from "Break In." In this ad, the automated voice gives a few more details to the caller/viewer, stating:

> You have reached the 911 police emergency line. Due to the defunding of the police department, we're sorry but no one is here to take your call. If you're calling to report a rape, please press one. To report a murder, press two. To report a home invasion, press three. For all other crimes, leave your name and number and someone will get back to you. Our estimated wait time is currently five days. Goodbye.[94]

As the robotic voice gives this message, videos of violent protesters are shown on the right side of a split-screen. The split-screen then cuts away to an image of Biden's head superimposed over fire and protestors, as text reads, "You won't be safe in Joe Biden's America."[95]

"Defund the Police" synergizes with "Break In" on its core message of the supposed dangers posed by defunding the police. However, "Defund the Police" is less focused on home invasion and instead on society-wide crime. This type of societal-level violence, combined with the feminine narrator's distinct robotic quality, is immediately reminiscent of *The Purge* (2013) and its subsequent sequels.[96] Thus, while home invasion is not explicitly depicted visually (although there are numerous shots of looters breaking into stores), home invasion is implied from the genre tropes of such horror, where looters and opportunists will break into homes and commit violent crimes when given the opportunity. This implication is solidified explicitly in the automated call response providing a separate, "press three" option for home invasion. Further, it is certainly worth noting that "Defund the Police" aired almost two weeks before "Break In." As such, given the three options presented by the automated call response, its notable that the Trump team homed in on the home-invasion option for a subsequent advertisement.

In the 2022 midterm election for Governor of New Mexico, Republican challenger Mark Ronchetti released another controversial home-invasion political advertisement, titled "Krysty's Story." The ad opens with a black screen with white text reading, "Home Invasion of Ronchetti Home." Mark Ronchetti's wife, Krysty Ronchetti, then comes onto the screen and tells her story of when someone supposedly tried to enter their home. She says she "saw the front door starting to shake" and "heard the door slam downstairs and I knew somebody was in our house." The ad then notes, via white text on a black screen, that Krysty Ronchetti hid in a closet with her daughters, called 911, and texted Mark Ronchetti. Krysty Ronchetti

says she and her daughters were so scared because "I knew that it would take seconds for somebody to come and do whatever they wanted to do to us." As Krysty Ronchetti tells her story, a dramatization of an intruder entering a home and stalking around is shown. Again, the invader is dressed in all black and is fairly non-descript, however, it is a little clearer that the actor playing the invader is a white man. This again steeps the ad in the conflicted frame of horror, as the villain is certainly human, and somewhat generic and mundane. From here, Mark Ronchetti narrates the phone conversation he had with Krysty Ronchetti, noting that Krysty said she had the gun in the closet and wanted him to come home. Krysty Ronchetti then comes back and says, "I've never been more relieved, more happy to see those cops." Mark then tells of how when he got home and looked at his family, he fell apart. He elaborates further, "Not every situation ends this way. Everybody seems to have a crime story." The ad then transitions to an attack on sitting Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, suggesting that she has "made it easier to be a criminal than a cop," by releasing "criminal[s] from prison early and appoint[ing] soft on crime judges." Finally, Mark Ronchetti is shown on screen talking to law enforcement officers about how he is going to end "catch and release." The ad closes with a shot of Mark Ronchetti walking and talking with his family.[97]

In this ad, a few things stand out in relation to its realism. First, the victims, Krysty Ronchetti and their children, are very noticeably white women. This plays into the white, feminine victimhood also present in "Willie Horton" and Trump's "Break In" ad. Second, "Krysty's Story" relies on a supposedly true crime account, similar to "Willie Horton" and unlike the fictional narratives of the Trump ads. Indeed, Curtis

Segarra, a local New Mexico news reporter, conducted a fact check of the ad, finding that there was in fact a police record filed in 2012 that mirrored many of the claims made in this ad. However, unlike the ad where Krysty Ronchetti suggests, "I knew somebody was in our house," the police records never indicate if someone made it into the house and corroborate that "No one got into the bedroom."[98] Nevertheless, the narrative seems to be mostly based in an actual event like that of "Willie Horton."

However, it is the level of implication where this ad deals in disinformation, again similar to "Willie Horton." First, Segarra notes the slippage of timeline, as the home-invasion events of this ad happened in 2012, "well before Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration began in 2019."[99] Here is a strong example of the process that Shawn J. Parry-Giles calls "decontextualization-recontextualization." In this process, images are decontextualized from one instance and recontextualized into another.[100] In the case of "Krysty's Story," the narrative is decontextualized-recontextualized, as the home invasion that happened in 2012 is used as evidence to blame a governor that was not yet elected at that time. This narrative is then further used to criticize Grisham's early release policy. Such an argument immediately brings up comparisons to the "Willie Horton" ad's stance on furloughs, where Ronchetti is again harnessing a conservative stance of being tougher on crime. However, the timeline again proves to be a problem here as Grisham's early releases were authorized in 2020 when COVID-19 was spreading in prisons. Further, unlike the Horton furlough, Grisham's order "stipulated that sex offenders, firearm users, intoxicated drivers, domestic abusers or people charged with assaulting police were not eligible for early release."[101] In the context of "Krysty's Story," this means two

things. First, there is no way that the potential home invader in 2012 would have been linked to Grisham's 2020 policy. Second, even if they had been, they likely would not have been released, just as Horton would not have been released under Grisham's order. However, through decontextualization-recontextualization, Ronchetti's ad makes these arguments implicit.

As far as the narrative structure of "Krysty's Story" goes, the inflection point is once again placed on the confirmation stage. The onset stage occurs at the very beginning of the ad, when the audience is immediately made privy to the supposed home invasion with the text, "Home Invasion of Ronchetti Home."[102] The discovery stage then occurs as Krysty recounts her experience of hearing the doors shake and slam. Here, we reach the confirmation stage. Krysty called the police, and they sent police officers over, ending the encounter "roughly 30 minutes after police arrived."[103] Because of this successful confirmation stage, the narrative skips the confrontation stage, since the supposed intruder seemed to have fled at some point. This is somewhat analogous to horror films like *Freaky* (2020), where police officers show up and end or help with ending the villain's killing spree.[104] Thus, unlike the Trump ads—"Break In" and "Defund the Police"—which highlight a failure at the confirmation stage, "Krysty's Story" highlights a supposed law enforcement success. Through this example, Ronchetti argues for more tough-on-crime policies. However, such a narrative, even with the intruder being subtly coded as a white male, still ends up promoting racist outcomes, as such incarceration and crime policies have disproportionately harmed Black communities.[105]

Conclusion

The analysis I have undertaken in this chapter highlights the connections that certain popular culture genre tropes have to the propagation of alt-right disinformation within political advertising during the long Trump era. Such connections frequently rely on realism and mimesis. The study of conspiracy and dog whistles reveals how both populist and deep-state conspiracy messages can work to bolster a message of violent resistance to the supposedly nefarious goals of the political Left. We see this highlighted by Crenshaw gathering a fighting team to save Texas from an ill-defined threat, Greene firing a massive gun at a socialist Prius, and Fiore taking target practice at supposed threats to democracy, dripping in coded racism. Further, I argue that while Republican women are featured prominently in these ads, their appearances are couched in misogynistic dog whistles that lessen the cognitive dissonance of the masculinely defined "empowerment" of women politicians. We can see this time and time again through the simultaneous sexualization and masculinization of these women through the use of action-hero tropes.

Additionally, through my analysis of home-invasion horror, I have established the relevance of home-invasion horror narratives and dog whistles to political advertising focused on alt-right conspiracies surrounding tough-on-crime policies. "Willie Horton" is a clear, historic example of how a real-life home invasion was used to activate racist sentiments about crime via dog-whistle politics. While the "Willie Horton" ad is one of the more infamous political ads in U.S. history, the more contemporary ads of the long Trump era that I have examined take the home-invasion narrative and provide many of the audio-visual elements of a home

invasion/lawlessness in order to ratchet up their fear appeals. As such, I forward two key arguments. First, while some like Marcucci argue that home-invasion horrors skip the confirmation stage of horror narrative,[106] I posit that the confirmation stage (or its failure) is the crucial turning point of the political home-invasion disinformation, where the candidate can either establish the success of policing or the deficiencies of "soft on crime"/defund the police policies. Second, these ads carry racist dog whistles, either through their portrayal of the invader or through their tough-on-crime stance, which disproportionately impacts Black communities.[107] Indeed, while classic horror framing is often more noticeable through its outright depiction of monstrosity, the conflicted horror framing exemplified by these ads is just as, if not more, dangerous, because that which is meant to be feared is portrayed at an insidious and deniable level. Accordingly, we must remain vigilant in recognizing the way these popular culture genres, and their many subgenres, are continually exploited for political gain by alt-right politicians at the expense of democratic deliberation.

Notes

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[2] For examples of the racist and misogynistic underpinnings of historical American political conspiracies, see Charles E. Morris III, "Pink Herring & The Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002); Paul Heideman, "How McCarthyism and the Red Scare Hurt the Black Freedom Struggle," *Jacobin*, May 21, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/mccarthyism-red-scare-civil-rights-movement; Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism & Wrecked the*

Middle Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For examples of the steps backward taken on various civil and human rights during the Trump administration, see, "Trump Administration Civil and Human Rights Rollbacks," The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, https://civilrights.org/trump-rollbacks/.

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[9] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 30.

[10] *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, directed by Matthew Vaughn (2014; 20th Century Fox, 2017), Blu-ray.

[11] *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*, directed by Michael Bay (2016; Paramount Home Entertainment, 2019), Blu-ray.

[12] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded – Greatest Joint Campaign Ad in History," YouTube, September 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd6b_8OlwXU.

[13] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded."

[14] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded."

[15] AussieAudience, "Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It…" YouTube, August 8, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGFylgTrdr0.

[16] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded."

[17] For my analysis on a wide range of presidential advertisements, see Fielding Montgomery, *Horror Framing and the General Election: Ghosts and Ghouls in Twenty-First-Century Presidential Campaign Advertisements* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021).

[18] Dan Crenshaw (@dancrenshawtx), "Had to get my skydive requal last weekend (get ready for what we have planned with that!!) with my friends at @skydivespaceland !!" Instagram, August 19, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CEFWEfEpfgn/.

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[24] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded."

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[27] Dan Crenshaw for Congress, "Texas Reloaded."

[28] "Genevieve Collins," Ballotpedia, https://ballotpedia.org/Genevieve_Collins.

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Chapter 4: Direct Uses of Popular Culture in Culture Wars

Throughout this project, I have carefully worked through the different intersections of popular culture and political culture as it relates to alt-right disinformation. That work has moved from popular culture's uptake of political disinformation, to political culture's use of popular culture trappings in order to spread disinformation. Now, this chapter moves that connection a step deeper. I work to examine the ways that alt-right political figures have used direct references to popular culture intellectual properties (IPs) to spread disinformation. Some contest and reformulate the narrative meanings of these franchises toward disinformative ends. Others attempt to synergize with franchises that already have alt-right supporters.

All of this, I argue, builds some of the tensions behind the ongoing "culture war" of the long Trump era. As defined by Dan Hunter, a culture war is "a war over the means of production of creative content in our society."[1] As we've already seen for many on the alt-right, there is a belief that liberal elites have controlled the means of cultural production through Hollywood and other avenues like education. Hunter argues that "areas of telecommunication spectrum management and internet regulation . . . form part of a culture war."[2] Accordingly, the texts of analysis in this chapter represent a small sampling of the alt-right's attempt to stoke the culture war campaign, directly engaging with and bending popular culture interpretations toward disinformation, largely via online platforms.

Toward that end, this chapter is broken up into two sections. The first focuses on disinformation campaigns that directly engaged with popular culture franchises and celebrities in an attempt to contest, reconstruct, and/or reclaim narratives from

those franchises to enhance their reactionary aims. The first section examines four examples that contest understandings of specific popular culture texts and franchises. I begin with an example of arguments made by FCC chair Ajit Pai and Senator Ted Cruz, as well as counter arguments by actor Mark Hamill, that highlight the issue of net neutrality and their grappling with the Star Wars franchise. Within this example, we can see a wide range of disinformation strategies that enhance their reactionary goals. In particular, these alt-right leaders turned to conspiracies and dog whistles to make their case. Other similar culture war episodes include Governor Ron DeSantis's feud with Disney and President Donald Trump's attack on the Academy Awards. The first section also examines another Twitter feud Cruz got into, this time targeting Big Bird and COVID-19 threats. Here, conservatism's dislike of Big Bird and PBS is tied in with pedophilic and Satanic conspiracy. And once again, Hamill makes an appearance.

The second section of this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of Representative Paul Gosar's video edit of the opening of the popular Japanese anime, *Attack on Titan*. This anime, which has broad popularity, has also found particular online energy amongst alt-right and white supremacist groups. Gosar uses rhetorical mimesis here in order to imitate the intro to *Attack on Titan*, reinterpreting it for reactionary ends. This Gosar exemplar is a fitting conclusion to the main analysis of this project given how thoroughly it deals in all of the alt-right strategies (horror, conspiracy, and dog-whistles) and reactionary frames of disinformation (misogyny, racism, and anti-governance) via an attempt to directly synergize with a popular culture franchise. Further, the message of political violence directed at political

opponents and migrants is so substantial that the video drew harsh criticism, including the censuring and stripping of committee assignments for Gosar.[3]

Alt-Right Contestations of Popular Culture Franchise Interpretations

This section is based largely upon Twitter exchanges that reconfigure or refute interpretations of popular culture franchises. I begin with Cruz and Hamill's political debate surrounding net neutrality and how it devolved into anti-government disinformation fueled by conspiracy, as well as racism and misogyny spread by dog whistles. In this section, I also mention the extension of these threads into larger culture wars by Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL) and Trump. From there, I then analyze a different Twitter feud by Cruz surrounding COVID-19 vaccine outreach. All of these examples show how alt-right politicians attempt to reinterpret popular culture franchises and understandings to fit their disinformative messages.

Broader Alt-Right Culture Wars and Net Neutrality

Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) stoked a number of Twitter fights involving understandings of popular culture franchises. The first saw Cruz squaring off on Twitter with actor Mark Hamill over understandings of the Star Wars franchise, and how such understandings play into debates surrounding net neutrality and anti-governance. Further, there are underlying issues of racism and misogyny spewing forth from dark corners of the Star Wars fandom.

At the time of the Cruz-Hamill debate, net neutrality was a policy position held by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). President Barack Obama had pushed for an expansion of net neutrality protections during his presidency. As

defined by Jan Krämer, Lukas Wiewiorra, and Christof Weinhardt, “Net neutrality prohibits Internet service providers from speeding up, slowing down or blocking Internet traffic based on its source, ownership or destination.”[4] President Obama’s White House website promoted this policy, suggesting:

> More than any other invention of our time, the Internet has unlocked possibilities we could just barely imagine a generation ago. And here's a big reason we've seen such incredible growth and innovation: Most Internet providers have treated Internet traffic equally. That's a principle known as "net neutrality" — and it says that an entrepreneur's fledgling company should have the same chance to succeed as established corporations, and that access to a high school student's blog shouldn't be unfairly slowed down to make way for advertisers with more money.[5]

Here, we see the crux of Obama and many Democrats’ positions on net neutrality: the Internet should not be unduly limited or regulated by Internet service providers (ISPs) for profit. This seems pretty straightforward and widely popular. This popularity is evidenced by polling, where one 2019 Comparitech poll found that “87 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of Republicans surveyed said they support net neutrality.”[6] Another poll by the University of Maryland Program for Public Consultation found that 82 percent of Democrats, 68 percent of Independents, and 65 percent of Republicans favored reinstating net neutrality, illustrating “a contrast between Republican voters and their elected representatives on Capitol Hill, where Republicans have been seeking to block a Democratic nominee whose confirmation would likely pave the way for the return of the rules.”[7] This more recent poll also

gives away some of the plot surrounding Cruz's 2017 Twitter feud. President Donald Trump's administration was able to successfully eliminate net neutrality protections in December of 2017 through the work of then FCC chair Ajit Pai.[8]

Just prior to the repeal of net neutrality regulations, Pai released a video on the "conservative site *The Daily Caller*."[9] This video features Pai acting out a list of things people will still be able to do online after the repeal of net neutrality. The video opens with Pai, dressed in a Santa Claus outfit, wearing solar eclipse glasses, twirling a fidget spinner, and holding a Nerf rifle next to text that reads, "7 THINGS YOU CAN STILL DO ON THE INTERNET AFTER NET NEUTRALITY." Cheerful, whistling music plays as Pai introduces himself as the chairman of the FCC, framing his plan to repeal net neutrality as "his plan to restore Internet freedom . . . after these Obama era regulations are repealed."[10] From here, Pai acts out a wide range of popular online activities, such as Instagramming your food, posting photos of cute animals, and shopping for Christmas presents.[11]

The final three things Pai acts out, however, carry the most relevance to this project. Pai suggests that "you can still binge watch your favorite shows," as the opening theme for the *Game of Thrones* television adaptation plays. We see Pai eating popcorn, looking away from the camera, and gazing toward a green-screened shot of a battle scene from the series, with a dragon flying over his head. Next, Pai says, "You can still stay a part of your favorite fan community," as the Star Wars theme song plays. Pai is shown in a black hooded sweatshirt with the hood up, swinging a blue toy lightsaber around with some basic lightsaber visual and sound effects put in place. He stares the camera down and puts the lightsaber forward, as if to strike an

attack pose. Finally, as "Harlem Shake" by Baauer plays, Pai claims, "You can still drive memes right into the ground."[12] Pai, and some others he recruited for his video, then dance around in an intentionally chaotic fashion, made popular by the 2013 "Harlem Shake" meme trend.[13] Pai again shakes around his lightsaber from earlier. The PSA ends with Pai suggesting that after net neutrality you can still do "everything else you ever did on the Internet… like, everything. All of it. All of it."[14]

This video, in and of itself, uses direct references to popular culture in order to spread a disinformative message. Indeed, Pai suggests that there are no ill-effects that will be felt from the repeal of net neutrality and that everything, including your Star Wars fandom and *Game of Thrones* binging, will remain the same as it was before. However, as many who opposed the repeal of net neutrality know, that's not the case. As outlined by Lindsay Stern, two years after net neutrality's repeal, there have been many instances of broadband providers taking advantage of this repeal. Such examples include Sprint throttling Internet speeds to those accessing Skype, a competing service, and Verizon throttling Internet speeds that impacted "Santa Clara County Fire Department's ability to provide emergency services during the California wildfires." And beyond that, the deregulation has opened up the sale of "real-time location data," which "Domestic abusers have used . . . to stalk current and former partners."[15] Thus, Pai's pop culture-laced campaign attempted to justify his deregulation of net neutrality, a policy that has directly impacted consumers in very real, very negative ways.

The debate surrounding this policy did not end with the posting of Pai's video. With the release of this video, Mark Hamill, the actor who portrays main character

Luke Skywalker from the Star Wars franchise, took to Twitter to voice his displeasure with Pai's use of Star Wars to justify his disinformative policy. On December 16, 2017, Mark Hamill posted a still from Pai's video of Pai in his Santa Claus outfit, with eclipse glasses, fidget spinner, and Nerf rifle in hand. On his verified Twitter account (@MarkHamill), Hamill captioned, "Cute video Ajit 'Aren't I Precious' Pai [vomiting emoji]-but you are profoundly unworthy 2 wield a lightsaber-A Jedi acts selflessly for the common man-NOT lie 2 enrich giant corporations. Btw-did you pay John Williams for his royalty? @AjitPaiFCCorpShill #AJediYouAreNOT."[16]

In response to Hamill's tweet, Cruz jumped into the fray, quote tweeting Hamill and saying, ".@HammillHimself Luke, I know Hollywood can be confusing, but it was Vader who supported govt power over everything said & done on the Internet. That's why giant corps (Google, Facebook, Netflix) supported the FCC power grab of net neutrality. Reject the dark side: Free the net!"[17] Here, we see a few elements of conspiratorial disinformation at play in Cruz's response. First, his suggestion that "Hollywood can be confusing," plays into the notion explored more thoroughly in Chapter Three that the alt-right believes Hollywood is one big liberal propaganda machine. Cruz ultimately leans into this conspiracy to discredit Hamill's stance on net neutrality. Further, conservative conspiracy theorists, especially QAnon, commonly target Hollywood elites for political gain. One thread of this type of conspiracy is the "adrenochrome conspiracy, a bizarre theory with antisemitic roots, [which] posits that Satan-worshipping global and Hollywood elites run a massive child trafficking ring to drain their blood and harvest the chemical adrenochrome to stay young." QAnon and Pizzagate supporters especially promulgate this

"conspiracy."[18] While Cruz makes no overt reference to this conspiracy, his suggestion that "Hollywood can be confusing" can act as a coded dog whistle for alt-right adherents, signaling to them that Hamill should not be trusted because he is a part of this supposed Hollywood cabal.

From here, Cruz engages in a direct argument over the political interpretation of the Star Wars franchise. As I have stated in previous research, "Whether or not audiences realize it, Star Wars has always been a series heavy with political messages, some more obvious than others."[19] So Cruz is certainly engaging in a series ripe with political implications. The problem is that the Star Wars franchise has historically criticized American wars abroad, including the U.S. role in the Vietnam War during the original Star War series, and the Bush administration's War on Terror during the prequels.[20] Thus, while the franchise does not align with conservative, U.S. centric ideologies, Cruz attempts to reinterpret the franchise toward such ends.

And indeed, Cruz's interpretation of Star Wars and net neutrality led to disinformation of both. First, Cruz's assertion that "it was Vader who supported govt power over everything said & done on the Internet" is misleading given that, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, there was no Internet.[21] Even though the villain of the Star Wars series, Darth Vader, used the consolidated power of the empire to control people, the inclusion of net neutrality in Vader's empire epitomizes the kind of mischaracterization common in alt-right misinformation campaigns.

Cruz's message plays into broad, longstanding conservative distrust and conspiracy that synergizes with a reactionary, anti-government frame. Cruz equates a government regulation, meant to protect consumers from having their Internet

controlled by ISPs, with an evil empire that blows up planets. Indeed, Cruz's "Reject the dark side: Free the net!" line suggests that consumer protection regulations are the equivalent of the ultimate evil in the dark side of the Force in Star Wars. Such an understanding only partially makes sense from a "laissez-faire conservatism," which Karen Stenner describes as "a persistent preference for a free market and limited government intervention in the economy."[22] However, the comparison is impudent because it pits a consumer-friendly initiative popular amongst Democrats and Republicans with the dark side, the root of all evil. Stenner recognizes that modern conservatism has two other, sometimes intermingled, branches consisting of "status quo conservatism" and "authoritarianism."[23] Such understandings further complicate Cruz's logics, since status quo conservatives might prefer regulations that maintain a sense of laissez-faire Internet access. Authoritarian conservatives also have no qualms with using government regulations to suit their political agendas.[24] Cruz establishes a reactionary frame of anti-governance that not only muddles the message for the masses, but actually disinforms a large portion of his own conservative voting base who has been in favor of net neutrality.[25]

Cruz expands this stance in other tweets. Hamill responded to Cruz's attempt to explain Star Wars lore to him by quote tweeting Cruz's response and saying, "Thanks for smarm-spaining it to me @tedcruz I know politics can be confusing, but you'd have more credibility if you spelled my name correctly. I mean IT'S RIGHT THERE IN FRONT OF YOU! Maybe you're just distracted watching porn at the office again[heart emoji]-mh."[26] Hamill certainly did not take the high road and shied away from any policy discussions surrounding net neutrality, possibly in response to

Cruz very clearly acting in bad faith in his characterization of the policy. Hamill's line, "Maybe you're just distracted watching porn at the office again," is a reference to when a porn video was liked by Cruz's official Twitter account on September 11, 2017.[27]

Of course, Cruz again responded to Hamill with a two-part quote tweet response. The first part of his response read, "Yes, that's it. So sorry to misspell your name. Respond not with facts, but with anger. Who was it that said, 'Fear is the path to the dark side…fear leads to anger…anger leads to hate'? (1/2)."[28] The second part of his quote tweet response read, "(2/2) Rather than insults, try civil discussion of facts. Fact 1: until 2015, the FCC had NO authority over Internet. The Net grew free & unregulated. Fact 2: W/ "net neutrality" the FCC declared power to regulate everything said & done on Internet. That's really bad for freedom."[29] Here, we see Cruz doubling down on his claim that Hamill, and those who are in favor of net neutrality, are metaphorically in league with the dark side. Further, Cruz again engages in blatant disinformation in order to push a narrative suggesting that net neutrality is a nefarious government project aimed at censoring and controlling the population. Cruz's assertion that "until 2015, the FCC had NO authority over Internet" is demonstrably false. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was the first time that the Internet was included in previously defined broadcasting and spectrum telecommunications. While the goal of this overall act was to deregulate telecommunications, the inclusion of the Internet meant that it was now under the purview of the federal government and FCC.[30] As Krämer, Wiewiorra, and Weinhardt note, "Since 2005, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has worked

towards a codification of principles that ensure the open and interconnected character of the Internet."[31] Further, in 2010 the FCC released an order titled, "In the Matter of Preserving the Open Internet Broadband Industry Practices," which was a regulatory precursor to the net neutrality policy of 2015.[32] So Cruz's first "fact," is instead false and feeds into the power-differential between consumers and ISP companies, a key element of disinformation.

Cruz's second "fact," that net neutrality allowed the FCC "to regulate everything said & done on Internet" is also simply not true unless one takes a very skewed view of what regulating everything said and done on the Internet means.[33] In a certain sense, the FCC is regulating everything on the Internet, but only in a way where "internet service providers like Comcast and Verizon should treat all content flowing through their cables and cell towers equally."[34] This is not the sinister, authoritarian control and censorship that Cruz implies through his references and connections to Darth Vader and the dark side of the Force. Thus, Cruz (and Pai) appropriate the popular culture franchise that is Star Wars, shifting its meanings and symbolism to promote a highly disinformative campaign against net neutrality, relying upon reactionary frames of anti-governance and fear mongering.

However, beyond the surface level attacks on net neutrality and government regulation, Cruz's tweets were tapping into deeper cultural angst over the alt-right's relation to Disney and the Star Wars franchise. In 2012, Disney bought Lucasfilm from George Lucas, the creative mind behind Star Wars, for a whopping $4 billion.[35] From there, in order to recoup that investment, Disney immediately started producing a new series of Star Wars films. The first, *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force*

Awakens (2015), was wildly successful, grossing over $2 billon and becoming, at the time, the third highest grossing film of all time.[36] And while the film was generally received very positively by critics and fans, there were already calls from far-right groups to boycott the film, "claiming it to be 'anti-white propaganda.'" Indeed, some started promoting the hashtag "#BoycottStarWarsVII," suggesting that "the casting of black actor John Boyega . . . was promoting 'white genocide.'" Others further criticized the film by referring "to director JJ Abrams as a 'Jewish activist.'"[37]

Such arguments tie directly into the "great replacement" conspiracy popular amongst white supremacists and the alt-right. As defined by Milan Obaidi, Jonas Kunst, Simon Ozer, and Sasha Y. Kimel, the "replacement conspiracy theory taps onto the perception that White people are facing existential decline—even extinction—because of the planned proliferation of immigration."[38] This conspiracy often gets played out through understandings of white, masculine culture being overtaken by women and people of color. The decades-old Star War's franchise was not immune to such conspiratorial attacks because of the decision to cast a Black man and a woman as the two main leads in the new Star Wars trilogy.

This dog-whistled racism and misogyny reached a head when Disney released the next Star Wars film in its trilogy, *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017).[39] As Maureen Lee Lenker notes, "*The Last Jedi* has been a hit with critics and at the box office . . . Still, in spite of that, the film has proved divisive online among fans, with many railing against the film's depiction of Luke Skywalker, aspects of the Force, and other subplots."[40] Such criticism led some fans to question the direction of the new trilogy under Disney. Mixed in with this criticism was the same threads of

racism and sexism found with the prior film, with many believing the polarized response was thanks to "internet trolls, particularly racism and sexism against a film that displays a wide range of female leadership and heroic actions from a diverse cast."[41] For many alt-right viewers, the inclusion of a love subplot between a Black man and Asian woman, a pink-haired woman commanding the Resistance, and a woman as the main protagonist proved too "political" for their tastes. As Helen Armitage notes, survey data back up such controversy, where "*Star Wars* fans who demonstrated sexist and anti-PC beliefs were more likely to enjoy the original and prequel trilogies, but less likely to enjoy the sequel trilogy." Yet, Armitage found that "the more sexist and anti-PC a *Star Wars* fan, the less likely they are to like the characters Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo, Rey, and Rose Tico, who have faced the brunt of sexist critique leveled at the sequel trilogy."[42] The reactionary alt-right thus turned their attention to anti-Star Wars and anti-Disney sentiment to attract attention to their replacement theories.

It is within this context that further meaning can be made of Cruz's Twitter showdown with Hamill. Cruz's tweets were posted on December 17, 2017, just two days after the release of *The Last Jedi*. For alt-right viewers of the films, many believed that Disney had ruined the Star Wars franchise (by including women and people of color and supposedly emasculating Luke Skywalker). Cruz is consequently tapping into a deeper current of unrest here, deeply connected with dog whistles and blatant racism and misogyny, and conspiracies like the great replacement conspiracy. Cruz's rejection of Hamill targets one of the main actors within the Star Wars franchise and, specifically, in *The Last Jedi*. Thus, Cruz's rebuff of Hamill has a

layered meaning of further rejecting Hamill, Hollywood, and their interpretations of Star Wars, politics, and the world. We can see this in some of the responses to Cruz, with one Twitter user stating, "I am comforted by the fact you are right there guiding our laws to protect us and Hollywood wannabes are boozing it in Hollywood trolling the net for relevance. You have my support as a TRUMP supporter Ted."[43] Another posted, "Hammill [sic] played an alien in a science fiction movie. Go easy on him Ted. He's a dim bulb."[44] Still another user, brandishing a U.S. flag emoji in their Twitter username, tweeted a poll with the caption, "Hey @tedcruz was #TheLastJedi good?" All four of the options in the poll were "No."[45] Here, we can see a mixing of these two different currents of reactionary conspiracy: a rejection of Hollywood and a rejection of Disney's interpretation of Star Wars, believed to be broadly fueled by racism and misogyny.

This anti-Disney trend amongst the right certainly did not die down after Cruz's Twitter fight with Hamill or with the completion of the Star Wars sequel trilogy. Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL) has continued this anti-woke, anti-Disney crusade within Florida. Much of this battle started in 2022 when the Republican-backed Florida Senate passed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. This bill bans discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity before third grade "or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards."[46] In response, due to uproar from within Disney, Disney publicly opposed the legislation. DeSantis then looked to punish Disney by asking "the state's legislature to terminate long-standing special privileges granted to Walt Disney World and its associated theme parks in the area."[47] Part of this was DeSantis appointing his

own board to control Disney's special district. However, the departing board members quietly signed contracts that severely limited the power of this new board, greatly dampening DeSantis's ability to harm Disney. After all of this, Disney's CEO Bob Iger called DeSantis's policies "not just anti-Florida, but anti-business" and added that Disney "has a right to freedom of speech just like individuals do." DeSantis further threatened Disney, suggesting that he might build a prison next to the Florida-based Disney World theme park. Then, in April 2023, Disney filed a lawsuit against DeSantis, "alleging he's threatening billions of dollars in business as retaliation for the company speaking against his policies."[48] This entire fiasco shows how "anti-woke," anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-Disney sentiments within the long Trump era's alt-right can prevail above policy consistency. DeSantis's policies are surely a far more draconian response against laissez-faire business than Cruz's evil net neutrality depiction ever was or would be.

Trump himself has also leaned into these culture wars of interpretation and replacement theory within popular culture, suggesting that white film culture is being wiped out and replaced by non-white cinema. During a 2020 campaign rally, Trump spoke out against *Parasite* (2019), "the first film not in the English language to win the Academy Award for best picture."[49] Trump decried the decision, "How bad were the Academy Awards this year, did you see? 'And the winner is . . . a movie from South Korea' . . . What the hell was that all about? We've got enough problems with South Korea with trade, on top of it they give them the best movie of the year? . . . can we get like 'Gone with the Wind' back, please?"[50] In this one passage, Trump rejects a non-English film, one that he even asks and answers, "Was it good? I don't

know," simply because it is not in English or originating from the United States.[51] Further, Trump's choice of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as his counterpoint to *Parasite* is, itself, laced with racist dog-whistles, as the film has been criticized for romanticizing enslavement. As Ted Anthony argues, "If we're showing our kids Hollywood classics, and we put 'Gone with the Wind' in front of them, what do we say when Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) acts like a happy slave who adores her masters?"[52] Trump was thus more than happy to openly campaign on the need to move away from diversity in cinema and return to white-centered, racist "classics." This speaks to the wider trend of disinformative racism and misogyny, highlighted here within alt-right disinformation during the long Trump era. Such threads of reactionary conservatism find their ways into debates surrounding popular culture and even seemingly wonkish policy debates like net neutrality.

The Alt-Right v. Big Bird

Cruz continued his trend of using conspiracy theories to contest the memories and interpretations of pop culture during the later stages of the long Trump era. In 2021, still in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Twitter account for Big Bird from *Sesame Street*, tweeted, "I got the COVID-19 vaccine today! My wing is feeling a little sore, but it'll give my body an extra protective boost that keeps me and others healthy. Ms. @EricaRHill even said I've been getting vaccines since I was a little bird. I had no idea!"[53] This fairly innocuous, pro-vaccination tweet by a popular character of the PBS children's series, turned into a political firestorm. At the time of writing, this tweet had garnered 257,900 likes, 55,800 retweets, and 17,300 comments. President Joe Biden responded to the tweet, saying, "Good on ya,

@BigBird. Getting vaccinated is the best way to keep your whole neighborhood safe."[54] And of course, Ted Cruz and other alt-right figures jumped into the fray. Cruz decried, "Government propaganda…for your 5 year old!"[55] Mike Cernovich, "one of America's most visible right-wing provocateurs, known for boosting or generating massively successful conspiracy theories like #Pizzagate,"[56] tweeted, "Isn't it illegal to advertise drugs to children?"[57]

Such responses highlight a conspiratorial understanding of the government and its response to COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic was rife with conspiracies, ranging from "misinformation around its origins" to the virus being "intentionally created and released for evil purposes" and "more dangerous than it actually is."[58] Indeed, as Samayoa et al. find, engaging in these COVID-19 conspiracies can even act as "initial 'gateway' conspiracy theories that pave the way for greater receptivity to a wide variety of conspiracy theories." These subsequent conspiracies can range from "New World Order to alien contact" to "fraud in the 2020 American Presidential election."[59] Cruz and others are certainly engaging in this gateway-level conspiracy about the sinister relationship between the government and COVID-19 vaccines.

Cernovich's response also signals a deeper, more concerning level of conspiracy. Indeed, Cernovich's success with conspiracies like Pizzagate allowed him to make a career by "trolling the liberal establishment by accusing people of pedophilia or child sex trafficking."[60] Here, we see the concerning aspect of Cruz and Cernovich both highlighting this campaign as being targeted at children. It plays into a wider alt-right obsession with battling pedophilia in the wrong ways. Indeed, as John Feffer notes, "Instead of combatting real-existing pedophilia, the far right has

waded into the deep end to battle Satanism and homosexuality, which they tend to equate."[61] According to this horror-laced logic of conspiratorial disinformation, promoting protective vaccines to children is actually a way for government elites to indoctrinate, poison, and possess your children.

Sesame Street in particular has been a boogeyman for conservatives even before the long Trump era. For example, during the 2012 election cycle, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney said during a debate with President Obama, "I'm sorry Jim. I'm gonna stop the subsidy to PBS. I'm gonna stop other things . . . I like PBS, I like Big Bird, I actually like you too."[62] Romney doubled down on his stance in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, after criticism following the debate, saying, "We've got one-out-of-six Americans now in poverty, 47 million on food stamps, and the President is spending his time talking about saving Big Bird."[63]

The media and Obama's campaign, predictably, teed off on Romney. *Saturday Night Live* brought Big Bird on as a guest for their "Weekend Update" segment. Big Bird was asked if he had any "political statement you'd like to make?" to which, Big Bird responded, "No, I don't want to ruffle any feathers."[64] The Obama campaign similarly ran a tongue-in-cheek horror advertisement based on this incident, suggesting that Romney and Republicans were more concerned with Big Bird than corrupt Wall Street executives.[65]

Similar to the response to Romney's 2012 comments, many chastised Cruz for his 2021 attack on Big Bird. In response to Cruz's tweet against Big Bird, *Saturday Night Live* again used Big Bird, this time to mock Cruz. As *Saturday Night Live* actor Aidy Bryant responds to the dust up by satirically portraying Cruz. Bryant says: "For

50 years I stood by as 'Sesame Street' taught our children dangerous ideas like numbers and kindness . . . But when Big Bird told children to get vaccinated against a deadly disease, I said enough, and created my own 'Sesame Street' called 'Cruz Street.' It's a gated community where kids are safe from the woke government." The segment references a slew of conspiracies and right-wing figures, such as QAnon, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Joe Rogan, and the Proud Boys.[66]

Hamill also again jumped into the fray with Cruz. Hamill quoted tweeted Dr. Tara C. Smith, whose original tweet read, "Man, wait until antivax politicians find out about how R2-D2 and C-3PO tried to encourage vaccination… in 1978. Almost like this isn't a new thing and programs that cater to kids want to keep them safe and healthy." The tweet includes an image of a vintage Star Wars poster featuring characters R2-D2 and C-3PO, which reads, "PARENTS OF EARTH, ARE YOUR CHILDREN FULLY IMMUNIZED? MAKE SURE—CALL YOUR DOCTOR OR HEALTH DEPARTMENT TODAY. AND MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU."[67] Hamill's quote tweet of this tweet, reads, "A long time ago, before science was politicized."[68] Thus, Cruz and Hamill's feud reached another milestone, with Hamill relying on a primary historical document—the Star Wars vaccination poster from 1978—to combat Cruz's conspiratorial disinformation.[69] This speaks to the continued battle over interpretations of cultural texts and narratives, with Hamill simultaneously suggesting that Star Wars and popular culture more broadly have always promoted health and science awareness campaigns, and that such campaigns are apolitical. This position works to defuse Cruz's disinformation by undercutting the contemporary alarmism Cruz promotes in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, even with opposition voicing itself on Twitter and television, conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 persisted. Cruz's Twitter attack on Big Bird marked another example of the alt-right's obsession with engaging in cultural victimhood and reinterpretation, what many have called a culture war. Cruz, as well as many other alt-right political figures like Trump and DeSantis, have used these culture wars justifications to fight and contest understandings of popular culture IPs, franchises, and actors themselves. The next example, however, attempts to embrace an extant interpretation of a different popular culture text in order to fuel its reactionary disinformation.

Gosar's Violent, Anti-Migrant Disinformation through Attack on Titan

Similar to many of the horror-infused political ads discussed in the previous chapter, Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) released a bizarre video on Twitter on November 7, 2021, figuratively and literally attacking migrants and his Democratic political opponents.[70] This video though deserves special attention in this project given how deeply it relies on horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles in order to establish disinformation geared toward all the reactionary frames of racism, misogyny, and anti-governance through the editing of a popular culture text. This example checks every box of this project so strongly that Gosar became just the twenty-fourth representative in U.S. history to be formally censured because of the video.[71] This section will examine Gosar's video in depth, analyzing the show it is based on, broader disinformation currents, and audience reactions as needed to clarify the grotesque nature of this video.

Gosar's video, which he released on Twitter, relied upon direct reference to a popular Japanese anime, *Shingeki no Kyojin* (known in the U.S. as *Attack on Titan*)[72] to establish the anime as an intertextual node in the alt-right's world view. *Attack on Titan* is one of the most popular manga and anime ever produced, being one of only three manga series ever to have an initial print surpass two million copies. The televised anime also held the top market demand spot in the United States amongst all television, animated or live action, during the run of its final season.[73] On the one hand, even with such popularity, the cooption of *Attack on Titan* still feels somewhat bizarre for an older Republican candidate. On the other hand, when one considers Gosar's overt attempts to tap into the alt-right, a faction of the conservative movement that skews younger and more online, perhaps this decision makes a bit more sense.

Indeed, the show's controversial uptake by U.S. audiences seems to play into Gosar's strategy of directly coopting the show's messages for his own political ends. As Benjamin Leatherman notes in the *Phoenix New Times* on November 9, 2021, Gosar's move was likely "an attempt to court anti-immigrant and white supremacist members of *Attack on Titan*'s fanbase."[74] As Megu Itoh and I noted in a different project on *Attack on Titan*, "Seeming alt-right supporters can reject *Shingeki no Kyojin*'s critique of U.S. militarism and turn its narrative against Japan," thus working "in favor of using the series to 'redpill' Western audiences, ignoring the show's conclusion that rejects racially motivated violence."[75] As such, there was already a thriving alt-right interpretation of *Attack on Titan*'s narrative circulating amongst

online forums, even if these interpretations are confusing and contradictory to the show itself. This is the audience Gosar seemingly sought to target.

Gosar's video clearly exudes calls for political violence through a framing of titan-based horror, as well as expressing dog whistles (and outright racism and misogyny) through the video's continued anti-migrant imagery and coded messages (i.e., words and phrases written in Japanese). However, on top of all of that, this video also builds on a deep and sinister conspiracy theory within alt-right circles: the great replacement conspiracy. As discussed earlier, Obaidi et al. explain that this conspiracy erroneously claims that white people are at risk of extinction "because of the planned proliferation of immigration." Obaidi et al. provide multiple recent examples of this type of rhetoric leading to violence, with "the 2019 Walmart El Paso shooter who killed 20 people and wounded 26 others near the U.S.-Mexico border." That shooter wrote "in his manifesto that 'in general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas." Obaidi et al. have also found that "recent shooters in the US including Charleston, Pittsburgh, and Poway . . . used similar language and justifications." Obaidi et al. note that such rhetoric has spread from "the fringes of public discourse" to "mainstream politics," infiltrating the White House and many online platforms.[76] Luis M Hernandez Aguilar further reveals how this conspiracy is frequently turned into a meme format and disseminated on alt-right message boards like 4chan. As Aguilar notes:

> On 4chan/pol, memes turn Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories . . . into incitement to discourse. The memes . . . talk about and discuss the replacement of populations while prescribing a particular manner to think

> about replacement. . . . The compression of PRCT by memes then entails encapsulating a rather long narrative and details into an image causing the loss of data during the compression while adding new details . . . Such a new information, moreover, given the affordances of 4chan/pol, is usually blatant racism and sexism.[77]

Thus, with Shaan Amin substantiating the heavy intersections between *Attack on Titan* and alt-right, white supremacists on 4chan,[78] the ability for Gosar's video to be up taken as another meme in support of the great replacement conspiracy is apparent. But this meme bears even more "credibility" for adherents as it comes from a sitting member of Congress, giving it an institutional authority that typical 4chan memes do not wield.

Further, when one considers the new, memed meaning of Gosar's anti-migrant rhetoric and the narrative of *Attack on Titan*, it becomes very clear how dangerous this line of thinking can be. The entire premise of *Attack on Titan* is that the humans living inside walled cities believe that they are the last of humanity. Large swaths of humanity were wiped out when monstrous titans appeared over a hundred years ago. Thus, for the main characters for most of the series, any threat of a breach of the walls is an existential threat. The main character, Eren, after reconsidering the destruction of his home and death of his mother, exclaims in what one YouTuber calls the show's "Best speech": "I'm gonna put a stop to this. I'll kill them all, every last one."[79] While this makes some sense in the horror-fueled context of monstrous, people-eating titans, such messages of violent retaliation quickly become highly problematic when fused with the heavy anti-migrant dog whistles and conspiracies Gosar weaves

together. We see this come to an even more visceral level when, much later in the show, Eren becomes able to harness the ability of the titans. After a number of twists that reveal there is a world of people outside of the show's walls, Eren vows to commit genocide on an unprecedented level through the "Rumbling" that will kill every human living outside of the walls.[80] The fact that Gosar and his team specifically selected Eren to be his stand in for this video leads to some highly problematic conclusions and inferences. The average viewer (and certainly not most members of Congress who censured Gosar) might not pick up on these conclusions, but anime viewers and the creators of the video (who seem quite attuned to the nuances of the show) are likely quite aware of these genocidal connections. Thus, the video's caption of "Any anime fans out there?" signals for an even deeper level of dog whistle, as alt-right fans familiar with the show are able to add interpretations supporting race replacement conspiracies and justifications of genocide.

Gosar's video is both simple and complex in its form. It's simple in the sense that it is just an edit of the musical opening of *Attack on Titan*'s first season, which plays before each episode.[81] It is complex in just how elaborate the edit is, fitting in violent messages against migrants and Democratic leadership in nearly every frame. Some of these edits are obvious and a bit cheesy. Others, however, are extremely subtle and possess a sort of "Easter egg" or search and find quality, requiring audience members to comb through the video for hidden messages and dog whistles. The video is also interesting in how it fluctuates between edits that look like they fit right into the anime and other edits that look rather fake. Nevertheless, it's clear that a significant amount of editing went into this video, lending itself to an anime specific

mimesis.[82] Slipping these disinformative messages into a video that many viewers found funny and entertaining due to its mimicry represents a nefarious twist on how "Aristotle considered mimesis a natural instinct and a pleasurable process as it not only offered a means for learning, but for understanding and acquiring knowledge."[83] Here, we see that natural instinct and pleasure aimed toward promulgating disinformation rather than knowledge. Thus, such mimesis represents the "meeting place" and merging of anime violence with political violence.[84]

Gosar's video immediately deals in this mimesis, opening with the same image as the *Attack on Titan* opening. It depicts a side profile of a royal-looking woman, symbolic of Wall Maria, one of the massive walls that keeps roaming, human-eating titans away from the people living inside the walls of the *Attack on Titan* universe. The show's iconic musical score, "Guren no Yumiya" by Linked Horizon, plays as the depiction of Wall Maria bursts open in sync with a musical crescendo. This initial moment of the intro is where the first edit is made by Gosar's team, as there is a large line of text in Japanese symbols and then a smaller line of text that reads, "Rep. Paul Gosar." The original opening follows a similar design, with large Japanese text that symbolizes the show's Japanese name, *Shingeki no Kyojin*, and smaller English text that reads, "attack on titan." This lends itself to a mimetic rhetorical style, where Gosar attempts to graft U.S. politics onto a fictional anime opening. The extreme attention to detail and editing demonstrated the application of the *Attack on Titan* narrative and metaphors to alt-right disinformation.

However, beyond the mimesis of this edited title card and the replacement of the show's name with Gosar's name, there is the first of a number of hidden Easter

eggs for English-speaking audiences. The Japanese symbols have also been altered, with the new symbols translating to "attack on immigrants."[85] Thus, Gosar's primarily English-speaking audience would have to do their own detective work to decode this hidden message, likely sharing their findings on alt-right discussion forums. Indeed, as Amin notes, *Attack on Titan* has been a wildly popular discussion topic on alt-right political forums. For example, "On 4chan, a website now nearly synonymous with the alt-right, the rabid message board /pol/ has archived 57 distinct threads with *Attack on Titan* in the subject line" over a four-year span.[86] We can see praise for this type of coded messaging in the YouTube comments themselves, with one user stating, "In Japanese, the opening title says 'immigration attack.' This content is just too good."[87] Even beyond this circulation of such a hidden code (at least hidden for primarily English- speaking audiences), the message of "attack on immigrants" or "immigration attack" clearly signals the racism and xenophobia that permeates the rest of this video edit.[88]

After this title card, we see the next substantial edit by Gosar's campaign that plays on elements of gothic horror. In the original opening, Eren Jaeger, the main protagonist (who later becomes the main antagonist) is depicted in black and red shading amongst a field of dead comrades. Gosar's video similarly relies on black and red shading, mimicking the colors of this shot in the original opening. However, in the edited version, Gosar is superimposed in front of the U.S. Capitol, with rain streaming down the screen. This cuts to an even bigger image of Gosar that slowly moves across the front of the Capitol as the melodramatic music continues to play. Such shaded and gloomy imagery plays on gothic themes of horror, where dark and

decrepit buildings function as the setting of such dark dramas.[89] This imagery clues the audience in on the fact that there are supposedly sinister forces afoot in the Capitol.[90]

The next edit gives us the strongest clue as to what those evil forces are in the eyes of Gosar and his alt-right supporters. In the original intro, titans are depicted wandering menacingly through the streets of Shiganshina, the main character's hometown. In *Attack on Titan*, titans are giant sized, human-like creatures whose sole purpose seems to be eating humans for sport. Thus, the driving narrative of the show, at least initially, is for Eren and his fellow Scouts to kill titans and defend the humans living inside of the large walls surrounding what seems to be the last remnants of human civilization. With this narrative in mind, the move Gosar makes in his video becomes highly problematic as he depicts streams of migrants walking through open fields with a red, blood splatter effect superimposed over them. The shot moves from this field to migrants then crossing a river, as the camera bounces around in a frenzied manner, seemingly mimicking a cinema verité fashion. This shot style implies that the otherwise fairly orderly stream of people are, instead, moving into the country in frenetic and uncontrolled ways. The symbolism is so clear that the connection is immediate for fans of the anime, even those uninitiated in alt-right conspiracies. Gosar has taken migrants and framed them as an existential, monstrous threat to those living "inside the walls" (i.e., Trump's incomplete wall along the southern border).[91] Thus, as *Attack on Titan* justifies its attacks on the titans as a necessary defense for humanity, Gosar is metaphorically justifying racist, violent action against migrants in defense of the (white) United States.[92]

Such promotion of racist violence is made even more clear in the next shot, as Gosar replaces images of the *Attack on Titan* Scouts saluting with lines of border patrol officers standing at attention. The shots again try to mimic their counterparts in the original *Attack on Titan* intro to a high degree of stylized realism. Gosar's video uses shots with a bright sun and lens flares over the border patrol agents to mimic the sun and glare that is portrayed over and at the backs of the Scouts as they prepare to battle the titans lurking in the shadows. Such symbolism illustrates that the Scouts are supposedly on the side of good, while the titans are evil. In theorizing about "light and dark metaphors," Michael Osborn emphasizes "their strong positive and negative associations with survival and developmental motives" that can result in "intense value judgments . . . . from an audience."[93] The metaphorical symbolism of Scouts in the light and Titans in the dark was certainly not missed by Gosar's team, as they attempt to mimic this in their recreation: border patrol on the side of good, migrants on the side of evil.[94] However, there is a deeper layer of racism at play here, as the white border patrol agents are aligned with the sun and the Mexican and Central American migrants are aligned with shadows. As Lucy Jarosz notes, such usage of darkness to signify the racial "Other" has long-standing precedence within the West's tradition of racism.[95]

Gosar's video also relies on a racist reinterpretation of *Attack on Titan*'s use of nature as violent symbolism. Within his video, there is a quick montage of images that matches up with the timing and loosely connects with the imagery of the original intro. In the original opening, we see the camera slowly pan up the face of the Colossal Titan, the largest titan in the series who initiates the woes of the protagonists

by kicking down the wall protecting them. This face is stylized in green, blue, white, yellow, and orange colors. These bright colors remain, as different Japanese symbols and images—a praying mantis, a smiling, feminine titan, and a titan peering through a window—all flash by in rapid succession.[96] This original montage speaks to the show's messages on violence and death in nature, as applied to humanity. In *Attack on Titan*, there is a parallel made to how bugs like the praying mantis eat each other, and how the titans of the show eat humans. Thus, titans are cast as predators and humans as prey.

Gosar's video follows a similar pattern with some fairly obvious pieces of disinformation planted in the form of racist dog whistles that suggest migrants are preying on Americans. The Colossal Titan is replaced by a similarly colored and upward-panning face of a heavily tattooed man perceived as Latine. The image seemingly provokes fears of Central American gang members (e.g., MS-13) coming into the United States, given their heavily tattooed faces.[97] And indeed, a Google Images search of "Central American gang members" brings up the image of the individual used for this video. Known as "Psycho," the individual is most identifiable by the 15805 tattooed on his upper lip.[98] There is also strong irony here as the creators behind Gosar's video clearly did not care to look extensively into "Psycho's" background, or care much for the history of MS-13. As the video depicts, the fear is that gang members like this are going to spill over into the United States. However, "Psycho" was arrested and imprisoned in Guatemala, not the United States. Further, MS-13 is a gang that originated in Los Angeles, spreading across the United States, and then exporting its influence from the United States to other Central American

countries, participating "in numerous transnational crimes." As Jennifer J. Adams and Jesenia M. Pizarro argue, MS-13 gang members "are involved in the illegal trafficking of stolen vehicles from the United States to Central America. They also participate in weapon smuggling and illegal firearm sales."[99] Thus, while Gosar and his alt-right disinformation would lead one to believe that migrants are simply bringing violent crime *to* the United States, there is much more going on as crime and weaponry is exported *from* the United States to Central American countries (e.g., "Psycho" in Guatemala).

Gosar adds to the racist disinformation of the MS-13 gang member image by associating Japanese (and English) characters with "drugs," "crime," "poverty," "money," "murder," "gangs," "violence," and "trafficking." These images all appear in rapid succession. Imagery of money exchanging hands is included with the "money" tag, while another individual with face-tattoos is shown next to "gangs." Interestingly, except for a bit of blurring, the imagery of "trafficking" is unaltered from the original depiction of a titan peering through a window behind bars.[100] All of this imagery, especially the upward pan shot of the MS-13 gang member, relies on imageries of horror, as the deeply uncanny nature of the titans is imposed upon migrant depictions of crime and violence. This is combined with the messaging of the original *Attack on Titan* opening to further the disinformative narrative that migrants are rampantly attacking Americans. This visual notion of predator and prey feeds into conspiratorial fear of invasion and the replacement of Anglo-America by Spanish-speaking migrants. Through all of this fear mongering, it is again heavily reinforced

via racist dog whistles that migrants attempting to come into the United States are bringing violent crime with them.

Gosar's anti-migrant rhetoric is directly in line with Trump and the alt-right's position on migration from the southern border. Trump made sure during his 2016 campaign to blow this dog whistle so loudly that it no longer relied on code and became an overt expression of racism. As Trump stated during his campaign announcement at Trump Tower: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."[101] Indeed, Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods argue that this speech "pushed the boundaries of this tradition of implicit racism," suggesting that he "put down his racist dog whistle and picked up a bull horn."[102] This has led to doubling down of such racism amongst the alt-right, both in the form of dog whistles and overt racism. For example, Robert Bowers, "who allegedly killed 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue," had also been targeting migrants. As Michael Hirsh and Robbie Gramer suggest, "Could it have been an accident that in recent weeks, as Trump sought to gain advantage for the Republican Party before the midterms by condemning migrant caravans from Central America, Bowers in his various internet posts also focused on the migrants?"[103] Gosar's anti-migrant rhetoric accordingly plays into an ever-deepening racism within alt-right disinformation spheres, some coded in dog whistles and others more explicit. Gosar simultaneously harmonized with and amplified such violent disinformation.

Gosar's next move is to conflate the walls and Scouts of *Attack on Titan* with the southern U.S. border and border patrol agents. The original opening cuts to a shot

of the protective wall being broken open and the main character, Eren, floating above the wall in his omni-directional mobility gear (ODM gear). This ODM gear is the weapon used by Scouts to dispatch titans, allowing them to fly around with grapple-like hooks and slash at the titans' weak point: the nape of their neck. In Gosar's version, we see the broken wall replaced with a shot of border agents driving across open land, presumably suggesting that the lack of border wall is an already broken wall. The shot of Eren in his ODM gear is replaced with border patrol agents riding horses along what one might assume to be the border, suggesting that these horses are the tools with which border patrol agents can "dispatch" migrants attempting to cross the border. Finally, an aerial view of a border wall with patched spots is displayed. This imagery of a dilapidated border wall plays into a vision of "border neglect," which Anne Demo argues "dramatize[s] the social disorder engendered by federal negligence."[104] Thus, Gosar again emphasizes that migrants are comparable to titans breaking through the border and invading the United States. And just as the Scouts attempt to kill any titans that make it through the walls, one can only presume what Gosar believes border patrol agents should do with any migrants that attempt to cross the border. This imagery also articulates an anti-government message, in that it illustrates the supposed negligence of the federal government, with Gosar suggesting that vigilante-esque border patrol agents and state-level actors have to pick up the slack.

From here, the video briefly transitions from such calls of violence against migrants toward further notions of political violence against political opponents.[105] Much of the second half of Gosar's video follows even more closely to the original

opening, with the main edits being the crudely added faces of political allies and foes on top of characters depicted in the original video. In a certain sense, this adds to the mimetic blurring between popular and political culture in this video, as the actual anime sequences of the original introduction are mixed with the superimposed faces of U.S. politicians. This also speaks to a sense of realism with the actual faces of real politicians being used. In the original opening, we see a variety of Scouts performing fast-paced, acrobatic movements in the air as they move into position to attack and kill a titan. Gosar's video uses this same montage but begins by adding an unidentifiable individual with meme-styled sunglasses over the first character shown. The original blonde-haired character is replaced next by Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA). Next, a dark-haired Scout is replaced by Representative Lauren Boebert (R-CO). Finally, Eren's face is replaced by Gosar's himself who serves as the main character of the video.[106] These choices highlight how Gosar views himself as aligned with the most extreme segments of the Republican Party and as the leader of this alt-right group.

Gosar's depiction of himself as the leader of this alt-right Scout group bolsters the video's calls for political violence. This call for violence is accomplished by placing the faces of political adversaries over the titans that Eren/Gosar and his allies are killing by slashing their napes. The first titan we see Eren/Gosar maneuvering around and killing has its face replaced by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Here, we see the violence of the video as Eren/Gosar flips into an aerial position above the Ocasio-Cortez titan and cuts her nape. Blood gushes forth as a

stunned side-profile of her face is shown on the titan, as it falls to the ground and dies.

This violent imagery targeted at Ocasio-Cortez speaks to the alt-right's fear of her, channeled through racism and misogyny. As Jessica Valenti argues, "The Republican, mostly male obsession with the 29-year-old Bronx native is more than run-of-the-mill misogyny; it's existential panic. Because . . . Ocasio-Cortez represents a vision of the future of the United States—a future that's no longer centered around old white men."[107] Such fears play on great replacement conspiracies, where white men fear that they are being replaced by women of color like Ocasio-Cortez. Thus, it is both shocking and unsurprising to see such violent, horror-based imagery directed at Ocasio-Cortez. Gosar's strategies reflect the horror-based imagery commonplace in the long Trump era. As E. Brooke Phipps and I note, "the Trump campaign positions the U.S. political sphere as dominated by white, masculine bodies. Such bodies are then framed as precarious and threatened by powerful women—or powerful feminine monsters"—that reify "mediated disinformation and racialized misogyny."[108] Gosar harnesses this strategy of precarity vs. threat and directs it at Ocasio-Cortez. She is after all depicted as an outright monstrous, towering titan. That titan threatens the supposedly precarious Gosar and his racist and misogynistic alt-right supporters once she breaches the protective walls surrounding humanity (i.e., the United States). Killing the monstrosity that is Ocasio-Cortez in a fairly gruesome manner implicitly protects a white, masculine future for the United States.

After killing Ocasio-Cortez, Gosar's video immediately jumps back to a montage of highly militarized border imagery—highlighting the reactionary racism

common between the killing of Ocasio-Cortez and the killing of migrants. The original video shows Scouts shooting large cannons off the side of the walls at incoming titans. This is followed by a group of Scouts lifted above some titans in a wooden elevator, firing off countless rounds of rifle shots at the titans. Gosar's video picks up this theme of protecting the wall via military weaponry by showing border patrol agents now riding around on ATVs and a pilot patrolling the border in a military helicopter. These shots emphasize Gosar's support for the highly militarized approach to the southern border of the United States, where migrants should be struck down like Ocasio-Cortez was moments earlier in the video. These depictions are in line with what Demo has found of militaristic imagery along the border. Indeed, "When juxtaposed with images of neglect and lawlessness even the most militaristic strategies of deterrence . . . appear to be basic, almost benign, efforts."[109] As if right on cue, the next shot features a seemingly lawless mass of people walking around both sides of a highway, with makeshift tents in view. This imagery of what seems to be migrants near the border is clearly meant to connect with the imagery of the titans outside of the walls, who wander aimlessly until confronted with a human to eat or a breach in the wall. The lawless, almost state-of-nature titans are accordingly reconnected with migrants. Once again, Gosar depicts migrants as deeply monstrous threats to the United States, trying to justify highly militarized and violent responses to their attempts to come to the country. Such responses are arguably further "justified" when one considers the world view of a replacement theory conspiracist.

From here, the Gosar video jumps back to promoting violence against political opponents through the strategy of superimposing the faces of political allies and foes

onto different characters. We see Eren/Gosar charging out of some smoke with ODM gear raised to attack. In the original opening, Eren is depicted as jumping forward in a furious frenzy, ready to attack the Colossal Titan. This titan is the most horrific looking of the bunch, as it has no skin, leaving its underlying muscles and tendons exposed. It glares at Eren, who is almost fly sized in comparison; as Eren leaps to attack it, the frame freezes. In Gosar's version, Eren/Gosar leaps forward and the Colossal Titan is revealed to be President Joe Biden. The Colossal Titan plays a major role in the plot of *Attack on Titan*, something that viewers of this edit quickly acknowledged as significant. As one YouTube commenter noted, "I couldn't believe it when we found out the [sic] Joe Biden was the colossal titan, probably one of the biggest plot twists in all of anime."[110] This comment speaks to a merging of the narrative of *Attack on Titan* with contemporary U.S. politics.

With this shot of Gosar attacking Biden, we see a second, explicit call to violence against a political adversary. In the abstract, seeing such heightened threats of violence against Biden is mildly perplexing, as a president who made his political career out of being a very moderate, centrist politician.[111] However, within the context of Trump's increased political divisions, conspiracies surrounding the 2020 election, and the January 6th insurrection, such violent calls against Biden (and really any other Democrat), have become more and more common. As Nicholas Riccardi notes, the fatal shooting of a Utah man by the FBI who "threatened to assassinate President Joe Biden" is "just the latest example of how violent rhetoric has created a more perilous political environment across the U.S." Across the following two weeks, a man in Texas threatened to kill Arizona election workers and a Michigan woman

conspiring to buy guns for her son "threatened to use them against Biden and that state's Democratic governor." [112]

Gosar tried to brush aside condemnation for the political violence featured in his cartoon video that promulgated anti-migrant rhetoric. As Gosar argued, "There is no threat in the cartoon other than the threat that immigration poses to our country." So even in his defense of cartoon violence targeting rival politicians, Gosar doubles down on the racism present in the video, leaning into fear-mongering notions of great replacement conspiracies. In his own defense, he went so far as to say that "Our country is suffering from the plague of illegal immigration," which lines up with his dehumanizing, horror-fueled way of depicting migrants in this video.[113] Indeed, this synergizes with the racist metaphors J. David Cisneros highlights in media representations of immigrants. He argues that "The metaphor of immigrant as pollutant articulated in popular discourse is significant for the ways in which it constructs immigrants . . . as objects, aberrations, and dangers." Such "images," Cisneros concludes, portray "immigrants as . . . destructive pollutants," which "dehumanize immigrants by constructing them as threatening substances, denying them agency and reinforcing common stereotypes."[114] Thus, when we combine Gosar's use of words like "threat" and "plague" with the xenophobic imagery of his video, it becomes abundantly clear that Gosar is participating in the same dehumanization that Cisneros describes.

Nevertheless, it was Gosar's depictions of violence against opposition candidates that resulted in him becoming only the twenty-fourth House member to be censured in U.S. history. This was primarily because, as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi

(D-CA) stated, “Death threats against a member of Congress and a president of the United States in an animated video does not make those death threats any less real or less serious.”[115] This certainly seems to be the case, as Gosar’s video delves into a complicated mimetic mixture. Gosar presents animated characters with real images of political allies and adversaries superimposed over them, along with animated shots that become entirely replaced by real videos of migrants and border patrol agents. While these threats of violence against political opposition were certainly egregious, focusing only on them as Pelosi and other House members did overlooks the heavy calls to violence against migrants that are also presented in the video.

Following the dramatic imagery of Gosar attacking Biden, the video again targets migrants and political opponents with violent disinformation. The music amps up as the video comes into a final, twenty-second montage that highlights such a militarized approach toward combatting migrants and political opponents. In place of the Scouts Regiment flag in the original opening, Gosar’s home state flag of Arizona is shown. In the original opening, we next see various Scouts jumping up and performing aerial maneuvers with their ODM gear. This imagery is once again replaced with a border patrol agent sitting on an ATV, peering through binoculars. We then see these border agents on horses preventing migrants from crossing a river. A lone border patrol agent is then shown patrolling a wide swath of open land. A shot of titans again roaming outside of the walls is replaced with another aerial shot of a large group of what are presumably migrants setting up many tents for shelter. From here, we see another highly militarized response to the supposed migrant-monstrosity. In the original opening we see many members of the Scouts Regiment falling from the

sky with their ODM gear engaged. In Gosar's video, these Scouts are replaced with a massive group of paratroopers being dropped from military transport planes with parachutes deployed. Clearly, Gosar's use of extreme militaristic imagery in relation to the border emphasizes how, for adherents of such a xenophobic ideology, "border militarization functions as an unproblematic exercise of state independence, security, and strength."[116] Thus, such imagery certainly heightens the violent response Gosar believes is justified against migrants trying to come to the United States, while also amplifying notions of anti-federal governance in favor of state responses.[117]

From here, we see a quick flurry of even more political allies and foes, stylized in comic-book frames that work to further highlight the allies and enemies of Gosar's mimetic narrative. This use of comic-book framing mirrors the original opening, which shows a flurry of frames from the *Attack on Titan* manga. First, Gosar is depicted next to an angry-looking Biden, with a comic frame separating them. Another image of Gosar is shown, before two unflattering images of Pelosi smiling are presented side-by-side. This lines up with the manga frames in the original opening that depict a woman titan—large, blonde-haired, smiling—who is the one that eats Eren's mother in the first episode of the series. Smiling has a deep history in the horror genre, as smiling and laughter can, as Caroline Joan S. Picart notes, establish incongruity "where humor springs from a sense of superiority over the target of the joke."[118] Thus, unsurprisingly, Gosar highlights Pelosi's monstrosity, tying her smile and femininity to horror. The video next depicts Gosar alone, before standing beside Boebert and Greene, with a comic frame separating them from Ocasio-Cortez. These frames further depict Gosar and his allies as heroic soldiers and Ocasio-Cortez

as an evil monster, standing in for a titan. Again, horrific monstrosity is applied to political opponents, with Biden, Chief Medical Advisor Anthony Fauci, and Vice President Kamala Harris (D-CA) all depicted next to one another, replacing the original titans within these comic frames. The final set of these comic-stylized shots, as they fade away, depicts Obama on one side of the comic framing and Trump on the other. While this flurry of comic frames last no more than two seconds, they provide an even deeper list of political foes and adversaries who are each cast as either heroic or monstrous, depending on their political affiliations.[119] The starkness of these comic borders and frames visually highlight the clear divisions Gosar articulates in this video. As these comic-framed shots dissolve, we see another quick flurry of images fade into one another. These include migrants crossing a river, a woman border patrol officer superimposed over what appears to be a shoe,[120] Gosar sitting in his office with more border patrol agents superimposed over him, Gosar giving a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, more migrants crossing a river, and Gosar again talking at his desk. These montages work to further highlight and extend Gosar's worldview: one of support for militarized border patrol forces, advancement of xenophobia toward migrants, and promotion of stark political divides between allies and enemies. All of these notions call for supposedly righteous violence from the alt-right to take down the horrific monstrosity of the left/migrants.

From here, Gosar again delves into genre specific mimesis. While the original opening shows the three main characters of *Attack on Titan* framed between their ODM hooks, Gosar's video depicts another slew of political allies between similarly edited hooks. The three main characters shown here are Representative Matt Gaetz

(R-FL), Trump, and Gosar, with Gosar's shoes off and his feet kicked up on his desk. Again, the decision to include these ODM hooks, when simple lines or frames would have probably worked for the two second shot, clearly illustrates an attention to detail and an attempt to realistically match the style of *Attack on Titan*'s opening. The inclusion of the minor ODM hooks detail functions at two levels, as it suggests to viewers that Gosar is meticulously attuned to the fine details of *Attack on Titan* and that, through that attunement, audiences should apply the morals of this imagined story to the real-life scenarios he grafts onto that fictional narrative. Further, the use of the militaristic ODM hooks as the framing for Gosar's allies again amplifies his reliance on militaristic responses to the monstrous threats constituted in this video.

The final shot mirrors the opening, which depicts a number of Scouts looking up to the sun. Gosar's video shows a group of five border patrol agents patrolling on horses against a sunset background. Again, this highlights the extreme attention to detail put into this video, while furthering the metaphoric message of the Scouts/border patrol agents belonging to the light/goodness. We can again draw from Osborn, who argues that "the sun can symbolize more aptly human character. Most often it serves a eulogistic purpose, suggesting qualities of goodness" and the preference of "Natural, sun-produced light . . . over man-made light."[121] Thus, the presentation of border patrol agents as aligned with lightness implies strong, racist sentiments of their goodness. Migrants, by contrast, are presented as aligned with darkness and evil. These metaphoric and mimetic expressions fit with the connections Gosar is making to *Attack on Titan*, while also emphasizing the "naturalness" of extreme border militarization through the naturalness of sunlight. And with that and

the music reaching its dramatic conclusion, the whirlwind that is Gosar's *Attack on Titan* Twitter edit concludes.[122]

Gosar's video generated numerous reactions once posted on YouTube. They ranged from finding this to be a "funny meme" to more concerning implications. One of these more concerning comments relates to the show's substantial genocide plot. One commenter suggests, "The GOP gonna unleash the rumbling on the world" to which another commenter responds, "The trumpling." In another comment thread, we can see how someone recognizing the irony (or intent?) of this ad quickly spins out into blatant racism. One commenter notes, "Did they only watch the trailer and not realize that he's portraying himself as a guy who kills 70% of all life on Earth." Another commenter then responds, "you do understand that it was to defend his land, right? regardless, its still a fight for freedom which he accomplished in the short term." In response to this land defense comment, another user argues, "Native Americans: Bruh.." before that user is pelted with comments like, "Native Americans stay losing lmfaoo" and "Native Americans: losing noises." Another commenter then responded, "Based, wish Eren went all the way," implying that they wish Eren (i.e., in the context of Gosar's video), had gone all the way and killed everyone outside the walls. Finally, the thread devolves into one commenter claiming, "Its [clapping hands emoji] just [clapping hands emoji] a [clapping hands emoji] meme [clapping hands emoji]."[123] This sentiment of "it's just a meme" or "it's just a joke" is found widely throughout the comments and speaks to the deniability of memes and dog whistles. The messages can be quite real for viewers until they are criticized, at which point the

critic is taking everything too seriously and supposedly does not know how to recognize a meme or joke. Some examples of these types of comments include:

> "How the hell is this causing an investigation? This is legit so funny and satirical"
>
> "I haven't laughed this hard at something in a while. This time line is never boring"
>
> "This meme is hilarious almost entirely because of the reaction it spurred."
>
> "Imagine being outraged about this. This is hysterical."
>
> "Not an anime fan, but God that was funny"
>
> "This is hilarious. People take it way too seriously. It's a funny metaphor, not a threat."
>
> "I enjoyed and found this so funny!!! . . . Let's go, Brandon!!!"
>
> "Wtf, this is one of the funniest things I've seen this year"
>
> "Now the fact that he's censured over this is more hilarious HAHAHA"
>
> "Nancy Pelosi told me about the meme. Thank you witch, I'm enjoying it."[124]

That is just a very small sampling of such comments in response to criticism and censure from Democratic members of Congress.

I argue, however, that we must recognize the deeper, sinister disinformation at play in this video that is not simply a meme or joke. As Aguilar has demonstrated specifically in the context of memes related to the great replacement conspiracy, "memes perform a crucial biopolitical compression of large content; memes condense, abbreviate, and repack the vast amount of (mis)information postulated by the intellectual sources of [Population Replacement Conspiracy Theories]."[125] As

such, this video by Gosar is not "just a meme" as many commenters attempt to argue. Rather, Gosar's edit of the *Attack on Titan* opening is one of the most complete and tightly packed instances of the phenomenon that forms the basis of this project: it deals in horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles in order to spread blatant disinformation toward racist, misogynistic, and politically violent ends. It accomplishes this by directly and explicitly mixing political culture with popular culture.

Conclusion

The analysis of this chapter has endeavored to crystalize the intersection of popular and political culture as it relates to alt-right disinformation. Here, I relied upon a selection of largely online posts in order to demonstrate how alt-right political figures engage with popular culture interpretations directly. Such strategies bolster the "culture war[s]" by either contesting or synergizing with the narratives of these popular culture franchises.

My first set of examples illustrated the way that the alt-right attempts to contest and coopt popular culture messages. We saw how Cruz fought with Hamill, the actor behind Luke Skywalker who is one of the most central figures of the Star Wars franchise, over the correct interpretation of the political messages of Star Wars itself. This was all fueled by the net neutrality debate, which Cruz used to heavily promote a reactionary frame of anti-governance. However, in the larger contextual understanding of the alt-right's displeasure with Star Wars in this moment because of the casting of women and actors of color, we can see how Cruz's rhetoric also taps into dog whistles that activate a misogynistic, white supremacist base. That base had also been fighting with other fans over interpretations Disney's Star Wars trilogy,

something that has continued throughout the long Trump era via DeSantis's feud with Disney. Further, Trump's own ideation of how white culture is being wiped out by modern cinema came into play with his disdain for the South Korean film, *Parasite*.

The next example also largely came from Cruz, as he went after Big Bird for promoting COVID-19 vaccinations. Cruz's response synergized with extremely far-right conspiracy theorists like Cernovich, who have propagated disinformation surrounding sex trafficking by political and Hollywood elites. Thus, as Samayoa et al. note of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, Cruz's tweet could very well act as a gateway to deeper, more sinister conspiracies and disinformation for some.[126]

Finally, the focus on Gosar's *Attack on Titan* edit pulled together all the elements of this project to demonstrate my argument in its totality. Gosar used horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles linked directly to a popular culture text to spread alt-right disinformation geared toward racism, misogyny, and anti-governance. Through rhetorical mimesis, Gosar was able to imitate *Attack on Titan*'s original opening, while bending its narrative toward reactionary ends. Indeed, Gosar's depiction of extreme violence against migrants and political opponents was sufficiently appalling to garner a wide range of rebuke, including censure and the stripping of committee assignments.[127] However, *that's the point* for many alt-right supporters of Gosar and others because the establishment shouldn't like you. As one viewer commented, "Considering Nancy Pelosi is calling for criminal charges over this… I'd say its the best AD of all time [crying with laughter emoji]."[128] This then begs the question: if flying in the face of traditional political standards and decorum is part of the alt-right strategy, how might one refute these disinformative rhetorics?

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Chapter 5: Conclusion: Fight Fire with Satire

"I think in order to vote in this next election, you should have to watch that movie."[1] That was what Eric Trump said during a 2016 Fox News interview when discussing *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016).[2] That sentiment hits at the heart of the study I have conducted here. Eric Trump and other alt-right allies of the long Trump era believe that all voters should be informed of their worldview through texts like a Michael Bay blockbuster film. With reality television star Donald Trump winning at least one term of the U.S. presidency and largely defining this era of U.S. politics, the question is, where does the film end? How do illusions of reality and mimesis resonate within American politics? Does anything actually separate (disentangle) popular culture and (from) political culture for alt-right audiences?

This study has worked to outline the many ways that alt-right disinformation functions at the intersection of popular culture and political culture, mixing the two toward reactionary ends. This disinformation works to maintain, as John B. Thompson coins it, "relations of domination."[3] These reactionary relations of domination include alt-right ideologies steeped in anti-governance, racism, and misogyny. Throughout this study, I have revealed how alt-right disinformation has perpetuated these hegemonic ideologies. In particular, I have suggested that disinformation strategies of horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles have been used, in combination with the bi-directional nesting of political and popular culture, in order to achieve these reactionary ends. Through my reading of these alt-right texts, the popular/political culture nesting is often substantiated through audiovisual and

narrative strategies associated with realism and mimesis. I have evidenced this argument through a range of conventionally popular culture and conventionally political culture texts. As such, this conclusion starts by reemphasizing the disinformation and reactionary frames examined in previous chapters. From there, I will provide four critical implications related to such detrimental ends of disinformation campaigns that blend popular and political culture. Finally, I will provide a potential counterstrategy to be used against these strategies and ends of alt-right disinformation: satire.

Where We've Been and the Implications of Alt-Right Disinformation

First, I have shown how alt-right disinformation has found a home in popular culture films. By examining the tactics and messages of films like *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), *13 Hours* (2016), *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017), *A Quiet Place* (2018), *Songbird* (2020), and *The King's Man* (2021),[4] I have demonstrated instances of alt-right disinformation in Hollywood cinema. The conspiracy used in these films often falls into two camps: populist conspiracy and deep-state conspiracy, with the former focusing on anti-elite disaffection and the latter focusing on governmental and global plots. The character of Eggsy in *Kingsman* provides one of the clearest examples of this populist conspiratorial mindset, as he represents economic and social disaffection that runs directly counter to those educated at elite institutions like Oxford or Cambridge. Indeed, Gordon B. Arnold highlights that it is this disaffection that became common for conspiracy films in 2008.[5] However, as I have argued, the plots of some of these films resonate with those who believe in deep-state conspiracies. Examples like *Songbird*'s COVID-19

concentration camps help stoke such paranoia. Horror is also clearly at play in how these films spread alt-right disinformation. *A Quiet Place* functions as a strong exemplar of this, using horror audio-visual effects and narratives to emphasize the need for traditional conservative values in the face of a supposed liberal invasion of the home and family. *13 Hours*' use of horrific violence enhances its realism qualities that also work to amplify such alt-right disinformation. Finally, dog whistles play a prominent role within these Hollywood films. These dog whistles function at the level of coded language, often taking the form of "a metaphor that pushes us to recognize . . . modern racial pandering."[6] This coded metaphor is at play in movies like *A Quiet Place*, which signal the destruction of the white family at the hands of dark-colored alien invaders. Such casting decisions themselves can represent a type of dog whistle. As Kristen J. Warner suggests, notions of identifiability and relatability are "crucial to casting a successful television program."[7] Such a casting dog whistle is at play in all of these alt-right aligned films, which include largely white casts (with people of color almost always playing villains or side characters).

Second, I have demonstrated how the trappings of popular culture are used to spread alt-right disinformation via campaign advertisements. I began by highlighting the intersections of conspiracies and dog whistles at play in certain alt-right advertisements. A prime example of this is Representative Dan Crenshaw's (R-TX) "Texas Reloaded" ad from 2020.[8] This advertisement uses genre-realistic action effects in order to mimetically establish a populist conspiracy. Further, Crenshaw uses dog whistles through portrayals of the women and people of color presented. Deep-state conspiracies are pushed even further by those like Representative Marjorie

Taylor Greene (R-GA), who again used action film tropes to highlight supposed globalist plotting between President Joe Biden and the Taliban.[9] Finally, I focused on the intersection of horror and dog whistles in a series of Republican ads focused on violent crime. These ads imitate some of the strategies of home-invasion horror in order to promote "tough-on-crime" policies, which also act as a particularly harmful dog whistle against Black communities.[10]

Third, I examined social media arenas of culture wars, where political actors draw on popular culture texts to enhance their partisan agendas. I began by highlighting examples of politicians contesting interpretations of popular culture franchises. Much of this analysis centered around Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) and his promotion of culture wars via arguments with Star Wars actor Mark Hamill. I demonstrated more specifically how the strategies of disinformation come to bear on franchises like Star Wars and *Sesame Street*.[11] Cruz promoted interpretations of these franchises that propagated horror and dog whistle-laced conspiracies surrounding net neutrality and COVID-19. Indeed, Cruz fought for such interpretations even as actors and accounts from these franchises explicitly defended other interpretations. From these Twitter fights, I then focused on what I view as perhaps the strongest example of alt-right disinformation dispersed via popular/political culture entanglements: Representative Paul Gosar's *Attack on Titan* edited video.[12] This edit took the strategies of horror, conspiracy, and dog whistles and used them all to create a mimetic, reactionary, and violent message against migrants and political opponents.

Through the analysis of the disinformative strategies at play in these texts, I have come to four critical implications.

Takeaway One: The alt-right's disinformation campaign based in popular/political culture propagates violent racism via distorted notions of self-defense. In popular culture venues, such racist themes are at work by establishing narratives that elevate white protagonists, while depicting Black and Brown antagonists as horrific monstrosities. In *13 Hours*, audiences watch as a cast of white men defend their compound from Muslim invaders who are visually framed as inhuman monstrosity spilling forth from "Zombieland."[13] In *A Quiet Place*, we watch again as an all-white cast defends their compound from dark-colored aliens, again using whatever guns and weapons they can to repel the invaders.[14] Both *13 Hours* and *A Quiet Place* play on conservative fantasies of defending one's own home or compound. Indeed, the castle doctrine that permits "a property-owning man to use lethal force to repel someone who has invaded a space considered his private property" has historically "protected white male hegemony."[15]

This idea of violent self-defense is again a through thread of many of the campaign ads I examined, all of which center on gun culture and action hero tropes in one way or another. The home-invasion horror ads in particular emphasize supposed horrors of what would happen if people cannot defend themselves and police are also not available to defend against home invaders. We see this very clearly visualized in Donald Trump's 2020 ad, "Break In," where an elderly woman is attacked and potentially killed by a darkly shaded home invader because the police have been defunded.[16] These types of ads promote increased "tough-on-crime" policies, which perpetuate violence against marginalized communities.[17]

Finally, Gosar once again relied on notions of violent home defense from invaders in his direct application of popular culture for the purposes of disinformation. This time migrants served as the villains. Gosar expands the ideology of the castle doctrine to the nation as a whole, promoting violent militarism as a natural response to the supposed horrors of migrants entering the country through the southern border.[18] All of these examples, and many more throughout this study, demonstrate how the alt-right disinformation spreads and normalizes violent racism.

Takeaway Two: Such disinformative strategies, which rely upon popular/political culture, are used to compel women to either conform to conservative norms of masculinity or be cast aside. In *13 Hours*, we see how one of the few women in the movie is spoken down to by the men of the film, suggesting that her Ivy League degree doesn't mean anything in comparison to the men's practical battle experience.[19] The Kingsman franchise furthers these notions, where men are cast as leading characters and women are forced into masculine roles of "gentlemanly" culture (and then often being quickly and unceremoniously killed). Traditional gendered family roles are reinforced in *A Quiet Place*, as Evelyn is expected to home school the kids and maintain a perfect home environment in the midst of an alien-invasion apocalypse. Lee instead forages, hunts, and sets up home defense systems.[20] In all of the action-based political ads analyzed in Chapter Three, women are cast in masculine, violent roles, with women wrestling in Crenshaw's ad, and Greene and Michele Fiore's (R-NV) ads relying on tropes of the "armed woman" and "Bond girl."[21] We further see misogyny at play in the conspiracies and dog whistles Cruz taps into, as his attempt to reinterpret Star Wars coincided with alt-right outcry at the

casting of more women and more people of color in the franchise.[22] Additionally, Gosar's video promotes violent misogyny, as he brazenly depicts Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez being killed by an anime depiction of Gosar.[23] All of these examples demonstrate how alt-right disinformation normalizes exclusionary and violent misogyny via intersections of popular and political culture.

Takeaway Three: These long Trump era texts have demonstrated how alt-right disinformation relied on popular/political culture strategies to undermine government and democratic institutions. The Kingsman trilogy relies on deep-state government conspiracies, spreading notions that elites like President Barack Obama and other world leaders are conspiring against most of the world's populace.[24] There are also plenty of anti-government messages in *13 Hours*, where many alt-right conspiracies are propagated that say the Obama administration was colluding against Americans in Benghazi.[25] This end of violent anti-governance is further carried over into the political advertisements, as Fiore shoots and destroys bottles with phrases like "VACCINE MANDATES," "VOTER FRAUD," and "SOCIALISM" emblazoned on them.[26] As Vera Bergengruen notes, these notions play into "anti-government sentiments" that rallied for a reclamation of the country with "the implication of violence on the horizon."[27] Further, Cruz's attacks on government initiatives as evil highlights the reactionary frames of alt-right disinformation.[28] Gosar's blatant promotion of violence against political opponents just furthers the spiral of the alt-right into attacks on democratic values. Such violence directed at the federal government and political figures is, sadly, of little surprise in the alt-right climate surrounding January 6th, 2021.

Takeaway Four: These disinformation messages rely on the meshing of popular and political culture where audiovisual techniques heighten the aura of realism and mimic genres, expanding popular interest. These audiovisual techniques are often the glue that holds all the components of these alt-right disinformation campaigns together. Visual techniques of realism were prominent throughout all of the films analyzed in Chapter Two. But even beyond that, a potential reason many like Eric Trump hold movies like *13 Hours* up as so important is because they supposedly offer the most realistic account of what happened in Benghazi—even as a popular culture blockbuster. Director Michael Bay pats himself on the back for just that type of realism as he notes that he had "way more" access than "any investigative reporter" ever would.[29] Viewers reacted similarly, describing that the film as potentially even more detailed than a documentary.[30] Many audience members felt the same about the COVID-19 thriller, *Songbird*, as numerous commenters noted the film's documentary quality, with one commenter suggesting that the dystopian COVID premise was a documentary "from the future."[31]

Reading these films through the lenses of realism and mimesis also help us make meaning of the alt-right's disinformation campaign. Indeed, images of Crenshaw sky diving out of an airplane suggest the camera caught Crenshaw in candid moments that were not simply staged for a political ad. I also read the ad's use of military vehicles and uniforms as strategies to heighten the ad's realism. Mimesis further comes into play with many of the texts in Chapter Three as they imitate the genre trappings of action movies through big guns and large, unrealistic explosions. These shots do not correspond with reality but *do* correspond with cinematic norms

that enhance the possible reach of the message to new and perhaps younger audiences. Similarly, Gosar's creative team intricately recreates the original *Attack on Titan* intro by replacing words and phrases with on-theme Japanese characters. The aura of realism is further heightened when the ad's producers replace the characters' faces with those of political allies and enemies.

This nesting of popular culture and political culture through such audiovisual techniques may reach expanded audiences through complicated cognitive processes. Spreading alt-right disinformation at the intersections of political and popular culture mixes cinematic narratives with markers of political realism.[32] Given that Kathleen Hall Jamieson demonstrates that voters act like "pack rats" that store information "in a single place,"[33] such popular/political mixtures can quickly become problematic. Indeed, all of the alt-right disinformation I have analyzed here functions by integrating popular culture and political culture. These mediation practices heighten an aura of realism that may in turn enhance perceptions of "truthfulness" while the mimicking of popular culture genre could help attract more attention and more potential converts. As Liesbet van Zoonen notes, the difference between popular culture fans and political citizens might be "the different subjectivities on which they seem based; affective relations in the case of fans, cognitive processes in the case of citizens."[34] Thus, making a political text more popular in its characteristics or vice versa might reach different audiences and activate different affective or cognitive processes. The nesting of these concepts, then, can lead to a complicated and potentially confusing interplay for audiences. Reading such blended texts through the

lens of realism and imitation reinforces the complex meaning-making process at work in these alt-right, reactionary campaigns.

A Possible Counterstrategy: Satire

With all these different ways that violent, reactionary disinformation has manifested through the intersections of popular and political culture, what still remains is the answer to the question: How might one refute these disinformative rhetorics? What I offer here as a potential answer to that question is a counterstrategy that is itself largely rooted in the nesting of popular and political culture: satire. There are certainly many other strategies that can and have been used to combat disinformation in one form or another. One of the more prominent avenues in the later stages of the long Trump era has been legal strategies, where Trump and his allies have faced indictment and trial over disinformation surrounding 2020 election fraud claims, among other issues.[35] However, given that the disinformation within this study is deeply enmeshed in the nestings of popular and political culture, I offer satire as another potential counterstrategy. Satire is a genre that figures within popular culture and is accessible to the general public both in consumption and possibly production. James E. Caron argues that "satire bears the legacy of the Enlightenment's values of reasoned debate, facts and evidence, accountability, and transparency that characterize Habermas's concept of the public sphere . . . no matter how aggressive its laughter-provoking presentation."[36] As such, I argue that it is this mixture of reasoned evidence mixed with laughter-inducing ridicule that makes satire an ideal counter to the poorly-reasoned, harmful disinformation of the alt-right.

Satire is a political strategy which has been around since antiquity. As Victoria L. Crittenden, Lucas M. Hopkins, and J. M. Simmons define it, "With roots in classical Greek and Roman history . . . satire, as we know it today, is the art of using language to communicate in such a way as to hold shortcomings up for censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other similar methods."[37] I believe that just such ridicule is an appropriate response to reactionary disinformation that reinforces rhetorics of racism, misogyny, and anti-governance. Further, satire's deep roots in popular and political culture mediums like "comic strips, television shows, and print media" allow this strategy to fight fire with fire.[38]

To some, however, satire might seem like an odd choice for combatting disinformation. For example, Julia R. Fox and Edo Steinberg suggest that Jon Stewart's use of satire on *The Daily Show* may have contributed to declining trust in network television news. They note, "If satiric critiques further undermine public trust to the point it turns to cynicism, it can pose a danger to democracy itself." Fox and Steinberg do hedge their findings, saying, "It is difficult to disentangle whether Stewart simply mirrored the trend in declining public trust in network television news or whether his attacks accelerated it."[39] Nevertheless, there is a word of caution here in satire going too far. Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius extend this criticism of Stewart a step further, going as far as to say, "We accuse Jon Stewart of political heresy. . . . Our specific charge is that Mr. Stewart has engaged in unbridled political cynicism."[40] As such, it is important when using satire as a counterstrategy against disinformation that it does not fall into the realm of overarching cynicism of democratic norms and institutions.

However, when used properly, many find satire to be a crucial component of a functioning democracy. As Dennis Lichtenstein, Cordula Nitsch, and Anna J. M. Wagner argue, satire is "a power for democracy" with satirists being "credible and integral sources that serve as socio-critical authorities and opinion leaders for their audiences . . . Satirists are said to explain politics in a relatable way and provide moral orientation in the context of contemporary global political disorder or to perform the role of antagonists in relation to distrusted political elites."[41] This last function, in particular, is where I locate the value of satire in combatting the disinformation embedded within the long Trump era. Fox and Steinberg and Hart and Hartelius are concerned with overarching political cynicism about institutions like news media.[42] Yet, the satire I have in mind is much more targeted in how it can be mobilized for political ends when individuals or groups are targeted and discredited for their association with disinformation harmful to marginalized groups and our democratic systems. Drawing from my original definition of disinformation, those who spread disinformation are promulgating misleading and illogical information that reifies relations of domination for the elite. Thus, if satire effectively performs the role of antagonist for distrusted political elite as Lichtenstein, Nitsch, and Wagner suggest, then satire seems like the perfect tool for combatting such elite interests.[43] Indeed, satire's embeddedness in the intersections of popular and political culture allow it to operate at similar registers to the disinformation I have highlighted in this work, using humor to expose and undermine reactionary disinformation.

Such a strategy of satire is potentially bolstered when combined with the continuing growth of digital platforms in the long Trump era. Crittenden, Hopkins,

and Simmons suggest that "the rise of interactive media via the Internet has resulted in a shift in the balance of power . . . This shift in power has resulted in the emergence of amateur satirists . . . Of critical importance is the fact that expertise in social media platforms could drive the dissemination of satirical messages."[44] Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons express valid concerns over this amateurized satire, due to platform expertise overriding political expertise. I believe, however, that there is also the potential for a more democratized rejection of reactionary disinformation available. Future projects could certainly look more in-depth at the role of amateur satire in combatting alt-right disinformation on digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter, etc. Yet, my point is that satire in the hands of "professional satirists" can mobilize "humor as constructive criticism."[45] I will now refocus on one exemplar of such satire related to one of the texts from my study.

The most obvious place that I have briefly touched on satire in this study is in the responses to Senator Ted Cruz's disinformation concerning COVID-19 vaccine campaigns. Cruz's targeting of Big Bird's pro-vaccination message on Twitter invited a wide range of responses on social media and beyond. However, the most vitriolic rejection of this disinformation might very well have been *Saturday Night Live*'s satiric depiction of Cruz and his allies' reactionary, alt-right platform. This sketch functions by weaving reality with humor, using an exaggerated portrayal of many of the positions Cruz holds in order to cast his worldview as ridiculous. The video centers Cruz's rhetoric against Big Bird, with Aidy Bryant's portrayal of Cruz specifically stating that "when Big Bird told children to get vaccinated against a deadly disease, I said enough." The sketch sets itself against the backdrop of a

spoofed *Sesame Street*, known as Cruz Street, and uses a slowly degrading mimesis in a way that directly contends with alt-right uses of that style. The setting is made to mimic the setting and colors of *Sesame Street*, including the iconic green, yellow, and white *Sesame Street* sign, with "Sesame" replaced with "Cruz." The performance style of the sketch mirrors that of *Sesame Street* too, with actors singing satirically alt-right messages to a children's tune and actors dressed as characters like Big Bird, Bert and Ernie, and Oscar the Grouch.[46]

Much of the ridicule of this sketch comes from simply stating some of the absurd racist, misogynistic, and anti-government positions that Cruz and/or other alt-right groups have aligned themselves with. Bryant's Cruz begins by claiming the necessity of Cruz Street for keeping "kids safe from the woke government." This highlights the reactionary, anti-government position Cruz and other alt-right adherents take. Further, an actor portraying Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) comes out carrying a large gun and offers that gun to one of the adult actors portraying a child. When Greene says, "Here kid, you want to hold an AR-15?" the child responds, "I don't think I should," to which Greene calls him a "pussy" and steps away. Here, we can already see the mimetic illusion of the *Sesame Street* setting beginning to deteriorate as one of the kids voices their discomfort with the situation and the fictional Greene insults him. Further, this mimetic breakdown highlights the alt-right's use of misogyny and gun culture through the gendered insult that Greene's actor hurls at the child for refusing a large weapon. Issues of racism are also addressed throughout, as the sketch opens with an advert for "White Power Rangers." The fictional portrayal of Cruz later says, "There's also three terrible letters: C, R, and

T. Critical race theory. And I think it stands for Caucasian rights trampled."[47] These instances speak to the absurdity of the disinformative positions Cruz and the alt-right take.

Additionally, this whole sketch is an allusion to how the real-life Cruz attempts to redefine popular culture narratives to fit with his own world view. The Twitter exchange with Mark Hamill represents one such example from the actual Cruz. An example from the sketch is when the fictional Cruz brings out Bert and Ernie as members of the "Proud Boys." Bryant's Cruz claims they are fighting "to keep CRT out of our classrooms." However, it quickly becomes apparent that Bert and Ernie are "proud" in the sense that they are now an openly gay couple, with Bert exclaiming, "Yeah, we are out and proud!" Bryant's Cruz tries to spin this, saying, "They are out there every day proudly fighting the progressive agenda." Here, the audience is confronted with an example of how Cruz uses his narrative spin to reinterpret popular culture texts to fit his own agenda, even if such interpretations are blatantly disinformative. Bert and Ernie further announce that they got engaged and show their engagement rings. Bryant's Cruz again spins this saying they are "engaged in a battle against the tyranny of wokeness" before they walk off to take a bath together. The fictious Cruz says, "Their girlfriends are very lucky."[48] This portion of the performance once again breaks down the mimicry of the *Sesame Street* themed sketch, as fictional Cruz's control of the narrative falters and the real Cruz's strategies of disinformatively reinterpreting popular culture is laid bare for the audience.

Further, the sketch ridicules Cruz and other alt-right rhetors' uses of dog whistles, conspiracies, and horror strategies. Oscar the Grouch is brought out as Oscar

the Slouch. Oscar the Slouch is played by Black actor Chris Redd and is a caricature of the "welfare queen" conservative dog whistle. As Ian Haney López notes, the "mythical welfare queen" is often portrayed as "the stereotypical image of a lazy, larcenous black woman ripping off society's generosity without remorse."[49] We see just such a caricaturized portrayal from Oscar the Slouch, who Bryant's Cruz claims "has been trained by the Democrats to suck off the teat of the government." Oscar then replies, "That's right, Papa Joe Biden gave me so many stimmys, I decided to quit working and live in this trash can. Now you all work hard and Biden gives me your money." Bryant's Cruz finishes this exchange by saying, "At least he admitted it. All Democrats are him."[50] This highlights the absurdity of this dog whistled position, which suggests that all Democrats (and, all Black people) are lazy and addicted to government welfare. Within the context of this satirical performance, such a position is shown as hollow and laughable.

The sketch also tackles Cruz's use of conspiracy, revealing the absurdity of some of the positions he and others in the alt-right align with. There are references to Q-Anon, COVID-19 conspiracies, as well as 2020 election fraud claims with the introduction of the Recount Count. All of these are laughed at and mocked, with the COVID-19 conspiracies again being ridiculed by the "children" cast. One of the children exclaims, "Oh my god, isn't this for kids?" after Pete Davidson's portrayal of Joe Rogan suggests he can "S my own D" after taking horse medications. This further lends itself to a breakdown of the genre trappings of this sketch, slowly degrading a faithful interpretation of the *Sesame Street* world through the ideological incompatibility of the alt-right worldview.

This sketch's rejection of disinformative horror is a little more oblique, but it does come through in some of the language and fear appeals that Bryant's Cruz uses to describe the issues being discussed. For instance, the satirical Cruz suggests that the original *Sesame Street* "taught our children *dangerous* ideas, like numbers and kindness."[51] Bryant's Cruz also hints at the fear those who adhere to a alt-right ideology feel, describing Cruz Street as "a gated community where kids are safe from the woke government."[52] This speaks directly to the crime and home-invasion based horror discussed in Chapter Three that has been rampant in conservative political advertising during the long Trump era.[53] The portion where Bryant's Cruz brings out Big Bird also emphasizes the fears that alt-right horror tends to prey upon. When Bryant's Cruz asks Big Bird about the bad things that happened to him after getting the COVID-19 vaccination, Big Bird says, "I don't feel too good . . . My feathers fell out, my nuts got huge, and my doink don't work. It's real bad, man." Indeed, such fears of impotence and castration are a common theme of horror and fear for conservative men.[54]

This *Saturday Night Live* sketch functions a strong exemplar of how satire can function at multiple levels to break apart alt-right disinformation. Thomas A. Salek argues that comedic satire can "foster a critical sense of awareness in audience members by asking them to reflect on this social world in a frame of maximum consciousness."[55] Such maximum consciousness is at play here, as this sketch rejects Cruz's disinformation on face while also ridiculing the strategies (dog whistles, conspiracy, and horror), reactionary logics (racism, misogyny, and anti-governance), and popular culture trappings of such appeals.

In his response to Hamill, Cruz tweeted, "Rather than insults, try civil discussion of facts."[56] As someone who believes in the promises of democratic deliberation, this is a sentiment I typically agree with. However, this project compels us to ask what we do when one side is seemingly acting in bad faith and promulgating disinformation through insidious connections between popular and political culture? In this case of disinformation, I reject Cruz's call toward civil discussion of "fact" and affirm the move by Mark Hamill and others toward satiric ridicule. Use the satire, Luke.

Notes

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[12] Note, the original video Gosar posted has since been deleted off of Twitter for violating the platform's then policies. The following link contains a copy of the video, but is not the original source: criminalminded, "GOP Rep Paul Gosar Attack on Titan based ad," YouTube, November 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orcQjYvrQ8Q. For more on this video and when it was released, see Benjamin Leatherman, "Paul Gosar Posted a Bizarre *Attack on Titan*-Themed Anime Video to Twitter," *Phoenix New Times*, November 9, 2021, https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/paul-gosar-posted-a-bizarre-attack-on-titan-themed-anime-video-to-twitter-12378594#:~:text=Phoenix%20New%20Times-,Paul%20Gosar%20Posted%20a%20Bizarre%20Attack%20on,Themed%20Anime%20Video%20to%20Twitter&text=As%20further%20proof%20that%20we,account%20on%20Sunday%2C%20November%207.

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[14] *A Quiet Place*, Krasinski.

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[25] *13 Hours*, Bay.

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[41] Dennis Lichtenstein, Cordula Nitsch, and Anna J. M. Wagner, "Jokers or Journalists? A Study of Satirists' Motivations, Role Orientations, and Understanding of Satire," *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 13 (2021): 1757.
[42] Fox and Steinberg, "News You Can't Use"; Hart and Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart."
[43] Lichtenstein, Nitsch, and Wagner, "Jokers or Journalists?"
[44] Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons, "Satirists as Opinion Leaders," 179.
[45] Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons, "Satirists as Opinion Leaders," 179.
[46] Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open – SNL," YouTube, November 14, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAZKwuNvt8c
[47] Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open."
[48] Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open."
[49] López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 58.
[50] Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open."
[51] Emphasis added. Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open."
[52] Saturday Night Live, "Ted Cruz Sesame Street Cold Open."
[53] For more on the Republican strategy to exploit fear of crime amongst constituents, see Masood Farivar, "As Midterms Near, Political Ads Seize on Voters' Fears about Crime," *VOA News*, October

31, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/as-midterms-near-political-ads-seize-on-voters-fears-about-crime/6813968.html; Chris Cillizza, "Why Republican Attacks on Crime Have Been So Devastating for Democrats," *CNN*, October 29, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/29/politics/republicans-midterms-crime-ads/index.html.

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[56] Cruz, "(2/2) Rather than insults, try civil discussion of facts."

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