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# Violence, crime dystopia and the dialectics of (dis)order in *The Purge* films

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## Abstract

Crime dystopia is the cultural site where some of the most gripping fears around the failure to order, civilise and make life secure are expressed. In *The Purge* film franchise, crime becomes legal in America for a night each year, when violence and destructive impulses are freely discharged and actively encouraged by the US government. This article proposes a critical discussion of some of the criminological themes in the films, reading the institutionalised carnage of Purge night as a metaphor for the systemic violence of the market and further on for liberal governance as a philosophy of war, scarred by the horror of hidden monsters. It then argues that dystopian aesthetics can obscure the failures and antagonisms of the social order in the present, as well as punctuate anti-utopian fears of the future.

## Keywords

Carnival, dystopia, film, liberalism, monsters, order, police, Purge, security, violence

## Introduction

Among the popular culture narratives that populate the abundant dystopian imaginary of contemporary times, the universe of *The Purge* franchise (developed into 4 feature films and a 20-episode television series, at the time of writing) confronts us with a particularly terrifying vision of human decay. Stories of social collapse and catastrophe that spell the end of the world we know and inhabit have always sat close to ancient and modern mythologies, 'dramatising the tensions, conflicts, fears and contradictions' (Yar, 2015: 3) through which human societies hurdle. But while in many instances the 'world after' is brought about by disruptive external events (natural cataclysms, plagues, malign nonhuman forces, etc.), here evil proceeds and metastasises from within, from the collective 'Us'.

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In *The Purge*, violent crime becomes sanctioned by the United States government for one night each year when police and emergency services stand down. The ritual that for 12 hours (starting from 7 pm on each 21st of March) allows all citizens to express their rage (i.e. 'purge') by hurting, torturing or killing others is imposed by a new political party (the New Founding Fathers of America – NFFA) supported by the powerful political lobby of the National Rifle Association and elected on a platform of 'renewal' (see Crucchiola, 2018). This is suggested to have occurred as an extreme, right-wing populist reaction to the criminality, poverty and social unrest that the moderate politics of the traditional two-party system had proved unequipped to respond to.

A distillation and release of aggressive impulses into a narrow yearly window of ritualised time helps in turn tame the exploding crime rates, bring down unemployment and reduce the misery plaguing pre-Purge society. An annual institutionalised outburst of violence is meant to provide a level playing field for all, but it becomes evident that it is mainly the rich preying on the poor, with the government itself engaging in the elimination of its economically marginal populations, in a set of policies that amount to a Malthusian culling of the lumpen poor.

The film instalments and series touch on America's class and racial tensions, as well as its controversial gun culture, and are therefore very much worthy of criminological attention. This paper sketches a broadly cultural criminological analysis of *The Purge* and discusses some of its insights on the (dis)order and (in)security dialectics that frame the workings of liberal democracy. It is argued here that violence from above (of the powerful) and violence below (of the powerless) appear as constitutive of the inner conflicts that seep through the foundational spectrum of contemporary capitalism. If *The Purge* has been seen by film critics and commentators primarily as an indictment of ultra-conservative politics and its obsessions over race, guns or antiwelfare cruelty (Berardinelli, 2018; Gardner, 2018; Phipps, 2018; Smith, 2016), this paper considers that it equally functions outside the American context as an exploration of liberalism more generally as a 'philosophy of war' (Neocleous, 2014), where the ethical void of hyper-individualism that frames the ideal of personal freedom is filled by the mantra of competition and the affirmation of egotistic drives.

Here, the films are discussed through the lens of the carnivalesque (Presdee, 2000), where the ritual of Purge night is read as the blurring of boundaries between the institutionalised violence of the market and the repressed interpersonal violence that it displaces in the civilising process (Elias, 1978). The paper then moves to the essence of liberal thought and its underlying tension between the violent excesses of self-interested individuals and those of the state that is meant to pacify them. The police appear as the mediating force that upholds the 'thin blue line' (Wall, 2020) between civilisation and barbarism – in the universe of *The Purge*, entirely present by its absence.

The themes touched on in the franchise have previously been explored through the vantage point of control theory, positing that it would predominantly be individuals with low capacity for self-control and psychopathic traits who would choose to 'Purge' in a real-life scenario resembling the films' premise (Meldrum et al., 2021). Other contributions have focused on anomie and strain perspectives, pointing to the hyper-competitive drives that surround the vision of the American Dream emulated in the films and the incapacity of disadvantaged groups reduced to the state of bare survival to adapt to the structural imperatives of dominant socio-economic structures (Borrego, 2021). The reading proposed here sits closer to a critical criminology that also addresses the underlying political economy of cultural scripts which imagine alternative worlds resonating with the present. It intimates that crime dystopian aesthetics articulate visions of the present that

destabilise visions of the future in the reassurance of the technocratic stability of the contemporary liberal world, with its fears of hidden monsters that roam the body politic in the absence of state and police power.

The saturation of popular culture with stories and depictions of crime is a measure of the commodification of crime as a cultural product, where the visual spectacle of violence not only stimulates the pleasures and thrills of its audience, but equally affects grids of meaning 'within the very fibres of the spectatorial body' (Young, 2009: 17; see also Ferrell et al., 2015; Rafter, 2006). This paper follows an increasing interest in scholarship that explores crime culture, the space of cultural production that allows us to glance into the very heart of (post)modernity, with its inherent contradictions where criminality comes to symbolise the very failings to civilise, rationalise and order (Nicol et al., 2012). Following Yar's (2010: 77) advice, 'rather than attempting to classify particular films as either conservative-traditional or liberal-critical, we should instead unpack the dissonance within any given film text as a reflection of the ambivalent meanings of crime that circulate in society as a whole'.

## 'The Purge' as crime dystopia

Crime films occupy a significant terrain within the popular culture landscape. As such, they mirror the social contexts they are viewed in (Rafter, 2006, 2007; Tzanelli et al., 2005; Young, 2009). As Rafter and Brown (2011) suggest, criminological theory itself is not the sole domain of academic research but is often made and transpires through movies and other mass-cultural vehicles that shape much of what societies understand and frame criminality to be. Popular criminology aims to survey the visual, textual, phonic, performative, etc. sites of popular culture where meanings of crime and transgression are made and remade (Deflem, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2005; Rafter, 2007). Within this larger project, the visual occupies a special place in allowing us to experience the cathartic thrills of violence; to get ever closer and keep safe at a distance from the spectre of the monstrous, at the same time (Young, 2009).

It has been observed that criminological analyses of screen fiction generally gravitate around either ideology or contingency (Yar, 2010). On the ideological (Marxist-inspired) front, popular cultural representations of crime are understood as fortifying hegemonic understandings of crime and control that serve the interests of powerful social actors and cultural-political elites, whereas on the contingency front, postmodernist interpretations emphasise the more fluid and unpredictable reception of meaning among audiences. Yar (2010) further identifies and employs a 'synthetic and critical' framework that cuts across the two, where films work both to affirm and reimagine conventional meanings surrounding laws, norms and their transgressions. This theoretical lens is used, for example, by Wakeman (2014) to show how the television series *The Wire* (2002–2008) quite vividly depicts the criminal violence associated with the illicit drugs trade that legitimates prohibitionist law enforcement responses, but also challenge the effectiveness of the latter within the larger political framework of neoliberal governance.

In a similar vein, this paper avoids the reductionist temptation of reading crime cinema culture in a one-sided manner, as either conservative or progressive text. In its arguably grotesque depiction of state and elite violence, *The Purge* proposes a critique of power disparities and (neo)conservative ideology, in line with a more progressive map of interpretation. But its rather bleak visions of the destructive impulses that lie within human nature in the absence of social controls

make it seem equally pessimistic in relation to the emancipatory possibilities of progressive politics, in tune with a more conservative line of ideological thought. The analytical exercise put forward here similarly aims to offer a critical unpacking of *The Purge* as a criminologically relevant text that in its varied layers of meaning can afford theoretical insights into the larger cultural context it is produced and consumed in.

Alongside the many subgenres that would find their place under the larger rubric of crime fiction, dystopian films (and series) that employ bleak scenarios referencing the disintegration or dramatic transformation of the existing social order have been some of the most daring in imagining the futures of crime and/or (the absence of) criminal justice (see Yar, 2015). Cult classics such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Mad Max* (1979), *Brazil* (1985), etc. to post-millennium productions such as *Minority Report* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Children of Men* (2006), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Road* (2009) or *The Hunger Games* (2012) chime with the deeply ingrained pessimism of a lived present that in the impending grip of global threats dispels the ontological security of collective projections into the future. Films and more extended television series that deal in similar themes such as *The Walking Dead* (2010–) seem to provide passive resignation rather than any optimistic prospect for change or critical interrogation of the excesses of the late capitalist order that enables the destruction of ecosystems, immense socio-economic inequalities and other global harms (Raymen, 2018).

What is then the place of dystopia within the popular imagination? As pointed out by scholars of utopian studies, utopias are expressions of desire that prompt reflection upon the conditions that generate them and that essentially leave desire unfulfilled (Levitas, 2011). As a political horizon, utopia sits in the liminal zones between the space of comfort, of what we know with certainty when things remain the same and the ambivalent terrain of future and otherness, the source of anxiety but also of promise and potential renewal; in a world of calculation and quantification driven by value extraction, such zones considerably diminish, alternative worlds for the better impossible to imagine, dystopian scripts ringing more consonant with the present (Featherstone, 2017). Dystopia, as another type of 'history of the present', is not the full opposite of utopia (an unplanned but brutal society or a society planned by design to be entirely terrifying for its inhabitants) but reveals itself as 'a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society' (Gordin et al., 2010: 1). Dystopia is imbued with the flavour of reality, its visions of the future truly an indictment of the here and now.

Discussing the ideological function of the utopia-dystopia binary, the science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson projects dystopia as 'a kind of surrealism' or exaggeration of the present, along the same terms. Not to depict futures that are necessarily plausible but to express the cultural fears of our days; to also offer comfort in the realisation of how much worse things could be, as suffered by the heroically resisting and tortured fictional characters trapped within dystopian worlds – a call for action to avoid their fate by our inaction but also a form of resignation that it is not happening to us, 'part of our all-encompassing hopelessness' (Robinson, 2018). Further on, such texts drift towards anti-utopia, the notion that there is no better alternative world and that pursuing one might inevitably lead into the horrors of the Gulags, Nazi concentration camps and the other failed experiments of recent modernity (Moylan, 2000). As the sci-fi author details:

For every concept there is both a *not-concept* and an *anti-concept*. So utopia is the idea that the political order could be run better. Dystopia is the *not*, being the idea that the political order

could get worse. Anti-utopias are the *anti*, saying that the idea of utopia itself is wrong and bad, and that any attempt to try to make things better is sure to wind up making things worse, creating an intended or unintended totalitarian state, or some other such political disaster. (Robinson, 2018)

We are then left with a vision of dystopia as an ideological normalisation of the world that is, in the anticipation of the world that could be. Dystopia is then possibly where aesthetics and politics meet not to destabilise the present, but to reaffirm it, to reimagine visions of possible worlds only to take us back to the renewed and reassuring certainty of ours.

As the historian Rutger Bregman (2017) observes in his *Utopia for Realists*, 'all that remains is a technocracy' – political visions reduced to problem management, governments invested by resigned voters to 'patch up life in the present'; and framing it all a shallow ideal of freedom reduced to the smallest denominator of the market and its shy ideological guardian, liberalism; their imperative of individual expression and happiness tempered by the compulsive fear of grand, moral visions. In what follows, the paper will briefly offer a summary of the storylines linking the Purge films together, to then surface some of the relevant themes pertaining to the violence of markets and the role of the police as guardians of liberal freedom, that also touch on crime dystopia's artistic and ideological function of normalising the present and discrediting the possible future.

## Synopsis and themes

*The Purge* franchise (written in its entirety by filmmaker James DeMonaco, who also directs three of the four films) does not shy away from offering a gloomy fantasy of the future. For one night a year, all crime becomes legal. In the first instalment (*The Purge*, 2013), a well-off middle-class family tries to survive the invasion of their suburb home by a group of (elite university student) intruders trailing a homeless man seeking refuge on Purge night. *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014) then zooms out into the streets of downtown Los Angeles. Here, Leo – an off-duty police officer on a mission to avenge the death of his son in a drink-driving accident followed by a failed legal prosecution – ends up trying to protect a mother and her daughter fleeing their social housing tenement targeted by a government-employed kill squad, and a motorist couple chased by a street gang kidnapping people to supply Purge parties (where affluent clientele hunt unarmed defenceless victims).

The third instalment, *The Purge: Election Year* (2016), observes the same character, Leo, in a future where he is now providing a security detail for a female senator running for the presidency and campaigning to abolish Purge night, whom the governing party (the NFFA) are trying to eliminate to avoid losing their grip on power. Finally, *The First Purge* (2018) explores the origins of the new political order, which we find out began as a 'scientific' experiment on Staten Island where the freshly elected NFFA offered money to poor residents to release their anger by engaging in punishment-free violence. When that failed to happen and the experiment did not attract the predicted participation levels, mercenary troops were sent into the streets to kill and encourage others to engage. A fifth instalment (*The Forever Purge*) is set to premiere in 2021 and two 10-episode seasons of a spinoff series also written by James DeMonaco have been released in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Throughout the films, the premise and justification of the NFFA's grip on power is that the Purge contributes to stabilise and reduce unemployment, as well as almost do away with violent crime by compressing it into a synchronised collective release. James Sandin, the father of the affluent family living in the suburbs (played by Ethan Hawke) who makes his fortune selling anti-Purge home security systems explains this to his son, who struggles to make sense of the night: 'Look, I know that this is difficult to understand at your age but tonight allows people a release for all the hatred, and violence, and aggression that they keep up inside them'. When the boy later opens the door to provide shelter to a homeless man fleeing for his life, Sandin answers the assailants giving him an ultimatum to hand over the fugitive (now hiding in his house) that he would never deny their right to 'purge'. 'You don't know how bad it was, Charlie, the poverty, all the crime. This night saved our country', he had previously remarked to his conflicted son.

'Purging' becomes not only a right, but a creed and cleansing ritual with its own prayer for those taking part. Beyond the purifying discharge of rage, its social function is explained by the systematic elimination of large swathes of destitute, economically superfluous populations. These prey on themselves in wanton nihilistic violence (the rich can afford protection and safety, the poor are open targets); get preyed upon by either the upper classes, who take joy in hedonistic killing; or the government itself, who takes them out silently but efficiently – unmarked trucks carrying military troops sweep the poorest urban areas to target their residents. In *The Purge: Anarchy*, when the commander of one of these squads tracks down Leo (played by Frank Grillo), the circumstantial hero defending the innocent from their executioners, he explains their mission:

The unwritten Purge rule: don't save lives. Tonight, we take lives. We make things manageable. Unfortunately, the citizens aren't killing enough. So, we supplement it all to keep things balanced.

The idea that the Purge would be good for the economy or help reduce inequality has been challenged on theoretical and practical grounds (Ewing, 2018). But the predatory nature of the Purge world extends outside of the one night when crime is legal. America's cutthroat capitalism and the brutality of its class relations are reflected here. Apart from the looting and property crimes that come with it, the yearly event generates plenty of other opportunities. A shop owner is forced to put himself on the line to defend his deli when an insurance company raises his premium just before the night of the Purge. James Sandin himself, the middle-class father who takes up arms to defend his family from intruders, pays for his lush suburban lifestyle by selling unreliable security systems just like the one failing to keep invaders from entering his own home. His success and visible wealth attract the envy of his neighbours who eventually come after him and his family.

Despite it promising a level playing field, the Purge augments existing injustices. It is in this context that we get to see various types of resistance forming against it. There is organised armed resistance – a revolutionary movement led by Carmelo John (played by Michael K Williams, who also portrayed the Baltimore vigilante Omar Little in *The Wire* series) and later by Dante Bishop (played by Edwin Hodge), the man hiding in the Sandins' house from the entitled youths wanting to 'purge' him. The movement sabotages the Purge parties of the powerful, but also ends up supporting the political resistance and protecting the reformist presidential candidate senator Charlie Roan (played by Elizabeth Mitchell) who is hunted down by NFFA-mandated hitmen in *The Purge*:

*Election Year*. There is also moral resistance. Leo, who helps the others survive the night, finds the exonerated killer of his son he had set out to murder just before dawn, but chooses to spare his life. The same choice is made by Dante Bishop when he finds himself holding a high-ranking NFFA member at gun point. 'The concept is so nihilistic, we have to go for hope, to say it's never good to pull that trigger', director and scriptwriter James DeMonaco (as cited in Prigge, 2018) is quoted explaining.

## Violence and the ambivalence of boundaries

The grim atmosphere of the films resonates strongly with the growing sense of despair around the ever-deepening contemporary politics of division in the global sphere and within the US domestic landscape under the Trump administration in recent years. But it is from the nihilistic violence of *The Purge* where some wider points on violence as an underlying structural condition that moulds interpersonal subjectivities of harm and draws the political contours of liberal capitalism can be raised (see also Raymen, 2018).

A sociological lens extends understandings of violence from individuals and interpersonal relations to social processes and institutions; but also situates cultural texts within webs of meaning that capture existing power asymmetries, 'challenging assumptions that the disadvantaged are more violent than the powerful' (Walby, 2013: 95). Indeed, social theory itself has imagined modernity as a civilising process (Elias, 1978) that through increased centralised and efficient diffusion of power (Foucault, 1979; Weber, 1979) alongside risk management and extensive control as governance principles (Garland, 2001; Tilly, 2003) progressively tames the warring impulses of individuals, groups and states in an ongoing process of pacification that follows the Enlightenment and its now dominant values of universalism, order, empathy and cultural sensibility (Pinker, 2011).

Counter to this orthodoxy sustained by the observation of historically declining crime rates, some contributions have placed violence from above (administered by the state in the name of ruling groups and classes) at the very heart of the modern condition (Bauman, 1989; Collins and Rothe, 2019; Wacquant, 2009; Watts, 2016). More specifically, various strands of critical criminology and social theory have also explored the links between violence and the exclusionary base of market societies (see Hall and McLean, 2009; Ray, 2018; Reiner, 2018; Young, 1999; Žizek, 2009). Currie (1997, 2018), for example, sees policy choices that deepen material inequalities and thin down the provision of welfare, eroding the stability of livelihoods as being arguably more destructive and socially corrosive than ordinary street crime. For Hall (2012), big business interests are given the 'special liberty' of inflicting economic, psychological or ecological harms on individuals, communities and environments to enforce the logic of corporate-driven economic growth.

Further on, Žizek (2009) distinguishes between the subjective violence perpetrated by identifiable agents (terror networks, criminals or states) and the objective violence embedded within the systemic imperatives of global capital accumulation, along with the economic exploitation and mass poverty these justify. In this reading, the immediacy of the former type of violence obscures and emanates from the latter, which remains silent and anonymous, not perceived as disruptive but part of the regular order of things. Subjective violence can prop up objective violence, such as in the use of armed violence mobilised by states to guard land enclosures, private property and drive off communities into low wage jobs and destitution. But objective violence is also



internalised in struggles between and among labourers or the destitute for scarce resources, or within the hyper-competitive drives of markets that cascade into social life itself (and which the subjective violence of criminal economies replicates).

How are we then to read the spectacle of carnage in *The Purge*? On the one hand, the violence of the state unfolds in either direct action (actively eliminating the most vulnerable) or in the absence of its law-and-order function (allowing its citizens to 'purge' freely) which effectively returns society to a Hobbesian state of nature that resembles the market. In the first instance, we witness state-sponsored homicide and purging (class, race, ideological adversaries, etc.) as a political act – some of the armed forces deployed on a genocidal spree by the government to wipe out those in the lower economic strata are even equipped with what resemble Nazi SS uniforms and insignia. In the second, a much subtler device is that of pitting citizens against each other under the apparently 'democratic' guise of the Purge, where everyone is in theory fair game (the only ones exempted are high-status government officials). Participation is encouraged to the tune of civic duty, as the eerie public announcement blasting through street speakers, radios and television sets to mark the beginning of Purge night alludes.

This is your Emergency Broadcast System announcing the commencement of the Annual Purge. At the siren, all crime, including murder, will be legal for 12 hours. All emergency services will be suspended. Your government thanks you for your participation.

For 12 hours then, the night provides a state where the regular order and rule of law are suspended for the 'common good' and the renewal of the social body that effectively permits the amputation or evisceration of some of its parts. The catharsis of the inside spilling onto the outside, the timed discharging of toxic urges residing in the individual and collective is also what in principle allows the pacification of the Purge society for the rest of the year; though this premise is challenged in the only part of the franchise that follows its key-characters outside of Purge night (the second season of the television series), where it is suggested that for some of those choosing to 'purge', violence is turning into a strong compulsion that sees them kill outside the accepted boundaries, a residual effect that is then covered up by the NFFA establishment.

The night also takes on a celebratory dimension. In its festive dramaturgy, it sees a procession of cold and fire weapons (the only ones forbidden are explosives) on the streets, raiding parties on the hunt and characters wearing carnivalesque garments (stars and stripes suits, white masks showing 'GOD' scribbled on the forehead) as they head out to take part in the ritual. The Purge then reveals itself as a night of carnival, a window of time out of time when order is affirmed by its very negation and suspension (Presdee, 2000). Carnival is the site of excess, excretion, deformity, mockery, malice, rage and destructive euphoria. With the permission of authority, the sanctioned thrills of carnivalesque transgression only contribute to strengthen the moral boundaries of the ordered everyday once the celebration is over and regular life resumes, as the literary theorist Bakhtin (1994) observes. To ban carnival would be to unleash its destabilising spectre of transgression onto the everyday (Jenks, 2003).

Similarly, following Georges Bataille's incursion into the philosophy of the sacred, transgression involves the very containment of violence that otherwise sits at the foundation of the law. The taboo, for Bataille (1986: 64), is contained within the very act of prohibition: 'The taboo is there to be violated' or put another way, for there to be a prohibition, the prohibited object requires the

possibility of its realisation. Civilisation is that which is contrary to nature and the taboo is meant to enforce it, but in certain situations such as war, the drive to homicidal violence marks an accepted breaking of the taboo on killing and an entry point into the excess of atrocities; this way, 'what is at stake, then, is more than simply breaking a rule – it is the replaying of the fact of having rules, and of there being an outside to them' (Hegarty, 2000: 109). That also applies to the sacrificial as a reaffirmation of the line between taboo and transgression, where the lifting of the killing taboo allows a glimpse into the sacred – 'in a basic sense, what is sacred is precisely what is prohibited' (Bataille, 1997: 250). It is thus revealing that in some cases innocent victims 'purged' in the films are understood to offer themselves up for sacrifice and thanked for it – as if their (unwilling) demise affirms the unity and sacredness of the communal being.

In the Bakhtinian sense, however, the time of carnival is meant to bring about a total upturning of the extended order (the rich become the poor, the jester becomes king), but here the two appear not too far apart. The outburst of widespread violence afforded by the state of exception bracketed into Purge night is just another instantiation of the regular violence of the market and its essential Darwinian core of conflict, competition and domination of the fittest (or best positioned) over the weakest. Purgation itself – understood as the elimination of that which harms and taints, that which is the domain of disgust, pollution and the abject (such as individuals' or societies' inner destructive rage and death drives) – can be boundary affirming. On the other hand, it can also be boundary shattering – the confrontation of that which destabilises meaning and ontological firmness (the sight of vomit or faeces reminds one of bodily perishability, for instance) (Miller, 1997). It can also be that which amalgamates the spectres of right and wrong, annulling the possibility to establish what is corrupt and what is not. Further on, 'abjection is the difficulty, or even impossibility, of determining where sincerity ends and corruption begins' (Lechte, 2012: 55). Criminals who collaborate with the police or police who become criminal might be an example of this, but the larger question is that surrounding the very possibility of affirming that the very notions of police and criminal can mark set boundaries of good and evil.

Despite its clear delineation between inside and outside, the ritual of Purge night achieves this same kind of ambivalence, where killing others is meant to achieve the public good and where both those at the administering and receiving ends of lethal violence are to be honoured for the act of purging – some of the helpless victims are thanked for their 'sacrifice' before being 'purged', the government itself expresses its gratitude to its citizens for their participation. Through abjection the ultimate perversion is realised – the Nazi crimes of killing children were executed for the sake and in the name of purity, for example, Lechte (2012). We see this personified in the character of the parish priest officiating the Purge night service for the NFFA elite, who ceremonially kills gagged and tied up victims in the name of God, to allow himself and his parishioners to 'purge and purify': 'Blessed be America for letting us cleanse our souls. Join me as we eliminate evil' (in *The Purge: Election Year*). The performative violence of the Purge, even if policed to the second at its front and tail ends, destabilises any possibility of separation between inside and outside, violence and non-violence. Or of that between the visceral manifestation of physical violence and the institutionalised violence of the market – symbolically, the night allows a temporary glimpse into the latter through the former.

The same applies to the freedom-security binary, where the two are blurred. Citizens of the Purge universe are elicited the duty to participate in the Purge (a freedom they must celebrate) but denied the protection of the state if they choose not to (law enforcement, health care services are

suspended during the night). This echoes the entrepreneurial ethos of the market together with its lack of provision for those who are not successful or who appear unfit to take part. The films double down on this by shifting the polarity of the state from sole non-intervention to the full-on slaughter of its lower classes. The personal liberty that defines the (neo)liberal order, it has been pointed out, is defined between those zones delineated as spaces for freedom (typically imagined as the open arena of the market) and those warranting invasive control for those not unable to be free (Buchan, 2018). The 'war on terror' and 'war on drugs' are examples that illustrate the interventionist logic of invading global and domestic spaces populated by subjects deemed incapable of exerting reason and freedom (Linnemann, 2016). The visual imaginary of these perpetual wars is fed ritualistically to audiences (through film, newsreels, police footage, social media, etc.) along with the persistent dread of violence – 'framing a field of vision in which security becomes inseparable from insecurity' (Buchan, 2018: 134).

## Liberalism and its hidden monsters

The Purge thus first appears as an amalgamation of boundaries, of the inside and outside where we observe the brutality of interpersonal social relations meshing with the brutality of wider market forces at play, that otherwise seep into the sphere of the everyday. The political dimension of the films carries itself into different zones of ambivalence and incoherence. *Purge* creator James DeMonaco observes that (speaking about the second instalment, *The Purge: Anarchy*) 'it's about race, it's about the class divide, and it's about guns' (as cited in Lambie, 2014). But despite the films ultimately claiming the moral high ground (in denying key-characters' urge to 'purge' evil characters or insisting on peaceful means of resistance) amid the bleak world they construct, they fail to offer a convincing critique of racial, class and gun politics on account of some of their own inconsistencies.

For example, the franchise 'delights in images of excessive, cartoonish, aestheticised violence' (Semley, 2016) and comes reasonably close to glorifying the gun culture it purportedly critiques and nudges its audiences to feel guilty about. Critics have also emphasised that it makes use of several clichés that blunt its strength as a left-liberal critique (Khader, 2016). Racialised groups are blatantly associated with violent crime – black Staten Island criminal gangs engaged in local turf wars become community defenders against government-hired mercenaries in *The First Purge*. Black teenage girls become hypersexualised and psychopathic predators that besiege a corner deli after being refused a candy bar they had tried to shoplift, in *The Purge: Election Year*. Also, the resistance finally leads to an envisaged return to the electoral democracy (in the same instalment) of the pre-Purge status quo, appearing to leave the political-economic order (which had arguably led to the Purge) untouched and failing to reimagine the social relations of the world that follows other than by turning to the past. While it is understood that Hollywood film narratives will progress under their own economic logic and commercial constraints of mass-cultural production, a few theoretical incursions can be significant here.

As various thinkers have suggested, it is close to impossible for contemporary capitalism to imagine its own demise or significant transformation, despite an impending sense of terminal crisis (Fisher, 2009; Žižek, 2011). Liberalism itself, in its older and more recent incarnations, is the rejection of all other utopias, where in the combination of market freedom and the minimum levelling ground of security ingrained by the universalisation of human rights, humanity leaves

behind its old ideological baggage but also acknowledges the impossibility of achieving a common ethical foundation, as the philosopher Žižek (2008) retorts. Nevertheless, the underlying fear of (uncivilised and threatening) others then paradoxically acts as the moral substance that binds itself to an atomised world of insecurity and it is through it that some of the excesses that the liberal tradition rejects (coercive state force, interference in the individual sphere) are ultimately justified. If liberalism is a solution to all other horrific social orders, it always contains a kernel of horror within itself, as we are constantly reminded in horror fiction and dystopian pop culture (Anker, 2014: 795–796):

Horror stories often contain monsters that can stand in for the insecurities lurking underneath ostensibly stable social orders, and its storylines frequently conclude by expurgating monsters to restabilise social norms.

In its visions of the end (and reinstatement) of the liberal order, the narrative of *The Purge* seems to circle back to the world of before to close the conflict in the plot. We also hint at the fear of monsters in the films' dialectics of the absence and presence of the state and its policing arm. Authority, here, is a malign spectre that harms by both its absence (failing to protect its citizens) and its presence (in the long observable historical thread of genocidal state crime and violence picked up in the films). It is worth remembering that this duality of (in)security is inscribed within the very nature of the state and that of the modern institution of the police. As Neocleous (2000, 2014) reminds us, liberalism has from its very inception been a political philosophy of war where policing encapsulates considerably more than the now traditional, 19th century conception of law enforcement, but a whole plethora of interventions residing within the modern state that permeate through the economic sphere of regulating free trade, disciplining labour, as well as the biopolitical fields of health, education and beyond; and that are dispersed through the many institutions meant to manage and order the minutia of civil life.

Thus, historically the policing project extends well outside the institutional sphere of the police as an affirmation of bourgeois rule that follows the post-feudal emergence of the unruly industrial lower classes into the later capitalist order, which is meant to civilise the disorderly poor who left to their own means would otherwise recede back into barbarism and savagery – 'those who are most made subject to the police power form the threat to civilisation' (Neocleous, 2014: 134; see also Vitale, 2018). What is at stake in the policing process and further on in the police is the very existence and fabrication of the social order. As Linnemann (2019) observes, crime fiction such as the HBO television series *True Detective* add to pop culture formations that confine the imagination to a world where the police (even in its most corrupt and abusive instantiations) are never beyond redemption. Despite the horrors within its own ranks and those of the liberal capitalist order it protects, a 'world-without-police' is unimaginable, as it would lay bare the horrors of the objective primitive world (of brutality, chaos and anarchy) and disable the order of the subjective world (of market competition, consumer culture, private property and capital).

In this sense, the police constitute 'the thin blue line'. Far than just being an unofficial slogan of US forces (with its own symbolism of flags, conservative-inspired iconography and aesthetics), this affirms a narrative that continues old white settler mythologies and that 'sees savages as launching a perpetual war against cops and the civilisation they claim to defend' (Wall, 2020: 3). The monsters are always on the other side of the thin blue line, the legitimate violence of the

police is thus the prerequisite of defensive action in the face of the beasts (racial/class others or political subversives, communists, anarchists, etc.) that haunt the fragile life of the body politic. The fictional worlds of the post-apocalypse in the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2009) or the social breakdown following the zombie outbreak in *The Walking Dead* series (2010–) present us with just the opposite of the world ordered for us by the civilising mission of the police (see Linnemann, 2019).

It is telling that in *The Walking Dead*, a group of survivors choose to bond around Rick Grimes, a former sheriff deputy shot in the line of duty who awakes from a coma after the outbreak, to survive and seek safety from the zombie hordes. Similarly, in *The Purge: Anarchy*, it is Leo Barnes, an off-duty LAPD sergeant, who guides a group of vulnerable people caught up on the streets on Purge night to safety, relying on the fighting and tactical survival skills acquired through his training within the force. It is also him who finally foregoes the extrajudicial window provided by the night to ultimately choose not to execute the unconvicted killer of his son. His later actions as the private security guard of the progressive senator Charlie Roan appear to lead to the successful abolition of Purge night (in *The Purge: Election Year*). The character references a long running narrative tradition and screen typology of cop figures that 'play dirty' to affirm the good; shady, morally flawed and damaged, flirting with both sides of the blue line but ending up fighting in the name of the just order.

We sympathise and 'identify with a 'good' bad guy who challenges the system' (Rafter, 2006: 3) to deliver justice when ethical, procedural ways fail. We recognise this in Clint Eastwood's Inspector Harry Callahan in the Dirty Harry (1971) films or Harvey Keitel's foul-playing Bad Lieutenant (1992); small screen variations include the boozing, self-destructive detective Jimmy McNulty (played by Dominic West) in *The Wire* (2002–2008), the sociopathic blood-spatter specialist (Michael C. Hall) in *Dexter* (2006–2013) whose code is to serially kill exclusively serial killers, or the troubled, obsessive and at times violent DCI John Luther (Idris Elba) in the *Luther* (2010–2019) series. In the total lawlessness of the Purge, Leo Barnes's goal to avenge his son and spill blood is only overturned when his vindictive instincts are shaken, and his conscience awakened by the impromptu mission of taking on responsibility for the defenceless group who falls under his protection. His mission as a protector ultimately supersedes that as a predator. He nevertheless swiftly administers lethal violence against those who stand in his way; and it is seemingly his cynical ability to see the world and human nature for what they are – 'there are threats everywhere; there is death everywhere' (in *The Purge: Election Year*) – that makes him an efficient protector able to recognise danger.

Barnes is otherwise the only individuated police figure in the films – his moral compass undeterred when all the other figures of authority appear to recede into the barbarity and sadistic cruelty of the night. His initial mission is to administer justice where the justice system had failed. This is not a pleasurable, celebratory mission but more of an opportunistic one that is meant to be delivered for the reaffirmation of justice. As such, his journey through Purge night intersects accidentally with those who administer violence for practical purposes to reduce the numbers of the destitute in the name of the state (the mandated genocidal military corps – see Watts, 2016 for a larger discussion of state violence); or with those who do it for their own carnivalesque 'juissance' of murderous affects (regular citizens 'purging' for release – see Wiewiorka, 2009, for a discussion of the meaning of excessive libidinal violence). The monster had been hiding in plain sight (on both sides) and the Purge releases it; even though the violence from the bottom of the civil

'purgers' is suggested to be triggered by the baiting actions of the mercenaries deployed on the night of the first experiment (*The First Purge*) and regular citizens are then 'not killing enough', the ritual does eventually take off and establishes itself to consistent levels of civil participation.

Liberal political thought follows this same trajectory, as it reveals itself to be punctuated by the dual fear of civil violence, on one side, and state violence, on the other. As Buchan (2001) contends, if self-interest is written into the fibre of social relations and if the state seizes monopoly of violence to pacify them, then its own capacity for excessive violence needs to be kept within rationally instrumental limits to prevent it degenerating into unnecessary cruelty and torture. At the very core of this tension is the civilising mission of the police to mediate and negotiate the fine line between the two sides and maintain the fragile essence of order without falling into the abyss of its own excesses. But even in its most ethical calling and noble aims, it can only look back to what was before to guard the blue line. It cannot imagine a world beyond the past and present – just as Barnes's journey in pursuit of the good, to re-establish the pre-Purge liberal democracy finally leads to the world that was before. The absence of the police is the domain of dystopia, and its presence is that which enables it.

Or is it that the conspicuous absence of the police here actually spells its ubiquitous and over-abundant presence? That state-sanctioned violence is, if only briefly, extended to everyone? That, indeed, what the films offer is not a vision of a world-without-police, but one of a world-for-police where the mandate to harm and kill is democratised and where the institutional spectrum of police power is temporarily withdrawn only for its shadow to spill over everyone. Is it ultimately that, looking back to Kim Stanley Robinson (2020) and his contention that scripts of truly dystopian worlds need to be 'not plausible, not even logistically possible', *The Purge* is not even a full-blown dystopia that draws out a full collapse of the world as we know it but a world hauntingly close to ours, which feels all-too familiar? Its carnivalesque aesthetics pointing to a universe that is otherwise overwhelmingly ordered and stable, not inherently chaotic. Is it just that dystopia is in plain sight, under the technocratic guise of normalcy, security and behind the anti-utopian fear of monsters, that blinds us to it in our world, just as the residents of *Purge* America are blinded to it, in their own?

## Conclusions

This paper has attempted to discuss some of the dialectical tensions around violence and order in *The Purge* films. It has also raised a few points about the aesthetic and political possibilities of crime dystopia, suggesting that rather than mapping out future alternative worlds, dystopia can very much be a storytelling device that circumscribes the present; or that resides in the present to inhibit the utopian imagination by invoking fears of excesses and horrors. We observe this under the films' own narrative terms, where ritualistic violence is aestheticised as dramaturgical performance through Purge night to establish an order that amalgamates boundaries of security and insecurity; and where boundaries of aesthetics and politics themselves are blurred to hide the ideological core of violence inside Purge society.

Crime films and fiction genres themselves along with the larger newsreel spectacle of policing visible and imagined 'monsters' (threatening cultural aliens in the 'war on terror'; dangerous lower classes and racial minorities in the 'war on drugs' or 'war against crime', etc.) can arguably knit into the aesthetic veil that hides the market and state violence underlying the civilised order

of the real world. Screen fiction imaginaries also intersect with the political imaginaries and possibilities of the present. With protests ensuing the recent global coverage of unlawful US police killings and sparking debates around the repeated brutality unleashed at the hands of the force, visions of a potential world-without-police (as those imagined in the *Purge* films) ring dystopian tones of disorder that echo into current-day anxieties surrounding the possibilities of liberal reform and those of more radical proposals of defunding and abolition (Kaba, 2020; Vitale, 2018).

Past the fictional realm, a couple of reflections on how the political economy of the *Purge* films and the larger crime horror genre, as cultural scripts, reverberate into the zeitgeist of late liberal times were put forward. Mainly, that the filmic imaginary of crime dystopia can bring into form fictional domains that are less-than-perfect in their work of destruction, less-than-total in distorting and confusing the coordinates and elemental familiarity of the world we inhabit. We can think of these worlds that are uncannily close to our own, yet to be born but always close into being and almost within touching distance – a consonant possibility of their realisation – as a prism into the antagonisms of our own social order.

If truly dystopian visions that deal in the true and total disintegration of the world as we know it draw their symbolic potency from anti-utopian phobias of tampering with the risk-adverse technocratic equilibrium of contemporary times, maybe imperfect, ‘almost dystopian’ or ‘close to dystopian’ narratives help to remind that dystopia can equally describe the present of so many today. That understood this way, the less-than-fatalistic pessimism they put on display, is in fact a broken shard from a larger mirror held up to our less-than-utopian thinking.

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