



Violating the Threshold: Home Invasion Cinema and Xenophobic Anxiety in the U. S.

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Abstract:

This paper analyses two Hollywood movies released in 2016: *Hush*, directed by Mike Flanagan, and *Don't Breathe*, directed by Fede Alvarez. The year 2016 saw the release of several horror films and home-invasion movies that pointed to the growing xenophobia in American minds. These movies, along with the standard tropes of horror and fear, also feature xenophobia and home-invasion motifs, reflecting their outward manifestations of submerged fears across the political, cultural, and artistic spheres. While films like *Wailing* dealt explicitly with the topic, others like *The Witch*, *The Purge: Election Year*, and *10 Cloverfield Lane* dealt with issues such as the global rise of nationalist politics and paranoia bred by religious frenzy, though more subtly. This paper attempts to establish how the two home-invasion movies selected for study – *Hush* and *Don't Breathe* – are representative of the political and cultural temper of post 9/11 America, the simmering racial prejudices, xenophobia and cultural paranoia.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Home Invasion, Horror, 9/11 attacks.

Introduction: What is Xenophobia?

“Xenophobia,” which originates from Greek, points to the unreasonable fear (phobia) or distrust towards strangers (“xeno”) or foreigners. It has also been used to describe the fear towards difference or change. It also refers to the hostility or fear towards people of other cultures and countries. Xenophobia manifests in many ways, including discomfort and intolerance towards people who look, dress, speak and behave differently. It can be described as a sense of fright towards outsiders. In modern multicultural societies, xenophobia entails the rejection or non-acceptance of a different lifestyle and its cultural/religious belief systems and values. It also hints at the fear of “society being flooded with immigrants.” It can be compared to feelings of ethnocentrism, racial prejudice and anti-foreigner sentiments, which are rooted in an intense dislike for “otherness” or “outsiders.” Evolutionary psychologists link behavioural traits that are universal across cultures to evolutionary adaptations, including the abilities to infer others’ emotions, distinguish kin from non-kin, identify and prefer healthier mates, and co-operate with others. “Traditional evolutionary approaches to human history assume that in the process of adapting to the natural environment for survival, humans developed psychological mechanisms to secure kinship bonding and ethnic boundaries,” observes Marina A. Adler in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society* (1419-20). Causes for xenophobia in contemporary societies include economic, cultural, and socio-psychological factors that differentiate or demarcate between the insiders and the outsiders. The growing competition for limited resources and wealth in modern capitalist societies increases or contributes to the fear of outsiders or immigrants as threats. Xenophobia also increases in times of social change and instability, when feelings of frustration, disappointment and anxieties about the future are heightened. In such a climate of instability and insecurity, those facing fewer opportunities and resources to cope with social change tend to feel

threatened and foster anti-foreigner sentiment. The lower the self-esteem, the greater the perceived threat posed by foreign elements. At such a time, various expressions for increasing self-worth and pride are sought, resulting in the devaluation of the foreign or the foreigner. The political conditions and the media also contribute to such feelings, increasing the perceived threat towards the large number of immigrants who “steal” their share of resources.

Xenophobia and the US

The United States has a long history of xenophobic attitudes, starting from the treatment of Indigenous populations and enslaved Africans to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. These waves follow a similar pattern: an out-group is cast as a threat to the country's culture and safety during a period of economic or social strain, and hostility towards that group becomes a way to reassert a threatened national identity. The U.S., which considers itself a “melting pot” of cultures, has been receiving rampant criticism lately because of the country's anti-immigration policies. The country's exclusionary and hostile attitude towards Muslims, Mexicans and other communities has been a source of criticism. The advent of globalisation and the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre brought about a new form of xenophobia, which perceives and equates Islam with terrorism. This fear of terrorism has increased the intolerance towards people from Middle Eastern countries in the U.S.

Xenophobia in Cinema

Art has long served as a mirror and a challenge to feelings of xenophobia, giving a platform to fears that are largely unnoticed. The figure of the outsider has been used across multiple art forms to externalise collective fears of cultural contamination and the loss of identity and territory.

Art has repeatedly turned the trope on itself as well, with horror and home invasion movies casting the intruder as monstrous to reveal the household's own violence or moral rot. Here, one sees that art functions as a space where conflicting fears are simultaneously staged and critiqued. American films have channelled the nation's xenophobic anxieties into the home invasion genre following the September 11 attacks. A notable cluster of films followed the attacks, dramatising the fears surrounding unknown forces breaching the nation's sanctity. Films like *Hush* and *Don't Breathe*, both released in 2016, exemplify this trend of masked or faceless intruders invading the household, serving as a microcosm for the rising xenophobic fears in the country.

Xenophobia in Select Work

The prevailing mood of distrust of strangers and cultural paranoia in present-day America is explored by director Mike Flanagan in his movie *Hush*. The movie incorporates elements of a home-invasion film, with a masked villain breaking into the protagonist's home. The villain wants to kill Maddie, the homeowner, and seems to derive sadistic pleasure from her fear. The plot is driven by the universal fear of domestic violation. This theme is used in the movie, with the hero trying to defend her personal territory against an unknown enemy. This theme can be compared to the fear in Americans' minds of unknown forces infiltrating their homeland. It can also be compared to the average American's xenophobic feelings, like the aversion to Muslims, immigrants and foreigners. In the movie, the masked invader personifies the horror of the unknown, threatening the house's safety and security. The fears of an audience witnessing a home invasion film, in fact, reflect the fears of the American citizens who feel that "their" country has been or could be invaded by any random outsiders, ranging from militant radical Islamists, refugees and job-stealing immigrants.

The movie is centred on stalking and murder sequences, with the masked villain stalking and murdering people. The villain pursues his victims relentlessly and does not give up until he succeeds in murdering them. The film induces feelings of catharsis in the minds of the people as they are exposed to a violent kill or get-killed scenario. As indicated by the title “Hush,” the hero, Maddie, is deaf and mute in the movie. Silence becomes a sign of Maddie’s ignorance of the actual situation around her. The hero’s disability, her deafness, can be considered as the white American’s passive stance towards seemingly threatening forces. It also hints at the citizens’ obliviousness to the rise of foreign forces, who seem to corrupt American culture and tradition.

Maddie’s deafness, initially shown in the movie as a sign of vulnerability, becomes her strength in the latter part of the film. Her deafness is initially presented as a symbol of her disadvantage. But later, we find that the hero uses her extrasensory perception, arising from this disability, to overpower the villain. Maddie rises to the occasion by fighting back and saving herself from the invader. Despite her natural disadvantages, she uses heightened senses and overcomes her opponent in an incredibly intelligent way. Through Maddie’s portrayal, Flanagan seems to point to the Americans’ resilient attitude towards external forces that threaten their sense of safety and security. The hero is portrayed as a weak character who can be easily overpowered, but this illusion is shattered when she attacks the villain and overpowers him. It may be argued that American society’s innocent and gullible nature, which the foreigners and immigrants exploit, is shown through Maddie’s vulnerable condition.

The villain is masked at the start of the film, making his identity seem vague and unimportant. It also masks the villain's emotional complexity and personality from the audience. The mask serves as a shield, allowing the villain to commit his carnage without repercussions. However, at the end of the movie, the villain, unmindful of the need to protect his identity, reveals

his face to the hero. By doing so, the man disregards the fear of the consequences of his actions and also the society at large. The mask represents Americans' fear of the faceless "other." It deals with the people's fear of the unknown and anonymous death. It also dehumanises the killer, who is stripped of his personality. This extra fear factor underscores the trope of the masked villain as a metaphor for xenophobia: fear of a faceless Other; a literal foreign element entering your self-contained domain.

The killer is shown to enjoy sadistic pleasure in torturing his victims. He continually toys with his victims and derives pleasure from their fear. The masked man enjoys killing Sarah by stabbing her multiple times, even after she dies. There is voyeurism, as he continues to watch his victims for a long time before killing them. When Maddie asks him to kill her, to escape from the stress and mental agony, he replies that he would kill her only when she loses all hope and will to live. He threatens and terrorises her by attempting to get inside her house multiple times. As she desperately tries to protect her home, he seems to enjoy this cat-and-mouse game immensely. The home invader in the film is motivated by violence for the sake of violence. This sadistic stalking can be associated with the terror incidents that have struck the United States repeatedly in recent decades. To the average citizen, the terrorist activities were inflicted upon the country without any motive or rationale. The killer's sadistic pleasure is on the same level as that of the terrorists, who carry out these random attacks.

The theme of fighting back is employed judiciously in the movie. Maddie, who was showcased as a weak opponent, rises to the occasion and becomes a formidable opponent at the end of the movie. The film conveys the message that the key to survival is to go on the offensive. Maddie builds her courage and begins to resist, even to counter, by embracing the same violence the invaders brought into the house. The movie *Hush* paints the invasion as a wake-up call,

reaching the same conclusion about attacks on local turf: the best way out is to fight back. The home invasion movie warns Americans to realise the dangers they are surrounded by and to resist these attacks.

The movie's greatest strength is its depiction of Maddie as an innocent, naïve character who gains self-confidence as the movie progresses. The helpless girl is transformed into a self-sufficient hero by the end of the movie. Maddie's ignorance of her surroundings and her impressionable nature drive the events in the movie. She believes in the safety of her home territory and does not think anyone would try to infiltrate her house. So, she leaves all her doors unlocked and keeps one open, even when she feels something strange is going on. This narrative of an innocent victim being invaded by a faceless nihilist points to the innocent and trusting nature of Americans. Critics reviewing the film at the time of its release similarly noted how thoroughly its tension depends on the vulnerability of a woman alone in a supposedly secure home, reinforcing the sense of a domestic space that cannot actually guarantee safety (Berkshire). Furthermore, the community's failure is highlighted here, as Maddie is unable to hear Sarah's cries for help, making the neighbour who came to aid another casualty. The film, as it were, asks Americans to be vigilant and alert to the forces threatening the home territory, turning the theme of home invasion into a broader social commentary. *Hush*, whose villain promises, "I can come in anytime I want, and I can get you anytime I want," reflects the fears that spawned a larger political agenda in the United States to build walls, close borders, and deport a large number of alleged "criminals" from the country (*Hush* 00:26:42-50).

Don't Breathe by Fede Alvarez also gives out an ominous warning to white America to be vigilant of outside forces who try to harm them unawares. The story tells of three thieves who break into the house of an old, blind man. The movie focuses on the theme of home invasion and

a seemingly handicapped victim turning tables on a group of thieves. The movie is set in Detroit, a modern, ravaged capitalist wasteland. The place is barren and lifeless, symbolising an apocalyptic location. The setting points to the present-day U.S., ravaged by economic recession and the exhaustion of a region depleted beyond renewal. The setting also points to the lifeless condition of American citizens who have lost their drive to survive and to the modern societal decay.

The movie centres on a home invasion in which three thieves enter an elderly man's house without his knowledge. The home invasion can be taken as a metaphor for the fear of foreigners experienced by white Americans. The trope is also aimed towards the White audience. But the movie subverts this trope brilliantly by making the audience sympathise with the invaders. The movie challenges the idea that those who are being invaded are innocent. The elderly man becomes aggressive when he learns he is under attack. The hero's shift from a weak old man to a cold monster fighting for sheer survival is brilliantly portrayed by Stephen Lang. The man views the invaders as a threat to his safety and property and treats them as expendable in the service of his own survival. The man represents the Americans who use brute force against people of colour or foreigners who seem to destroy their well-being. Reviewers noted that the film deliberately courts sympathy for the intruders even as it withholds judgment on the older man, setting up the moral reversal that follows (Chang).

The protagonist in the movie is blind. The three invaders think the man is a defenceless, weak victim at the start of the movie. His vulnerability, which is his blindness, is exploited by the invaders at the beginning. But the invaders are in for a huge shock when they learn that the man's blindness has enhanced his compensatory abilities, including heightened senses of hearing, smell, and touch. The man's weakness becomes his greatest power in defeating the victims. The man's

blindness can be compared to the Americans' vulnerability to attacks from outside territories. But even then, the country can protect itself and defend its territory with fierce resolve. The man turns off the lights in the latter parts of the movie, snatching away the invaders' advantage over him. By doing so, he destroys their advantage and makes them subject to his experience of the environment around him.

The house in the movie acts as a powerful image of lawlessness and anarchy. The house in the movie becomes a visual manifestation of societal and economic collapse that struck the United States in recent times. It also portrays the metaphorical America as a capitalist nightmare in the eyes of foreigners. The house is cluttered, and its rooms are filled with mess, symbolising the owner's destitution and moral degradation. The house has a warlike effect, with its claustrophobic rooms, junk, and decay. The idea of the home territory as a symbol of peace and comfort is questioned in the movie, as horror is deeply embedded in the house before the invaders arrive. The house in the story, as in a typical home-invasion story, symbolises the safety and security of America. But, in *Don't Breathe*, this idea is challenged as the house is a physical embodiment of terror and greed, which is held together by the willpower of the gun-wielding, terrifying house owner.

The movie has dehumanised the hero, the older man, by turning him into a violent and angry protector of his home territory. The old man, who seems to be a vulnerable character at the start, becomes relentless in his attack against the invaders. He mercilessly assaults the thieves, as he believes that they posed a threat to his safety and security. The typical homeowner in home-invasion movies is coddled into a placid existence by American capitalism. This idea is also challenged by the portrayal of the man as a retired war veteran who, despite being blind, attacks the invaders ferociously. The game of kill or be killed that takes place inside the hero's house

becomes a commentary on the way U.S. capitalism has had dehumanising effects on the people. The man becomes a symbol of survivor, one who would go to any extent for his own survival. This points to the mindset of many modern Americans who feel that the “corrupting forces” should be kept out of their home territory at whatever cost.

The apparent heroic nature of the elderly man's actions, however, becomes radically complicated due to a revelation toward the end of the movie: the old man had kidnapped the woman he blamed for his daughter's death and had been keeping her locked in the basement while trying to make her pregnant in order to have a replacement for his lost daughter. It puts a completely new perspective on all the preceding events. While the film invites its audience to interpret the actions of the old man as those of a wrongly treated but still a righteous protector of his own territory, a sympathetic character representing the national defence against any invasion, in the end, he turns out to be a real monster that reveals all the potential violence in the stance of self-protection. The old man can be viewed as a character whose true vindictiveness is revealed only at the end of the film, destroying the sympathy the film had tried to build for him. (Chang; Phillips).

A Comparative Reading of *Hush* and *Don't Breathe*

The movies *Hush* and *Don't Breathe* reveal how gender shapes the allegorical weight each film assigns to disability. In *Hush*, Maddie's deafness is initially presented as a liability the villain expects to exploit. It becomes her source of power as she learns to read the house through touch and sound. Her strengths are discovered later in the film, reflecting her struggle from innocence to resilience. In *Don't Breathe*, the man's blindness is portrayed differently. His heightened senses are not discovered later; they are presented as a dormant capacity honed by his military

background. While Maddie learns how to fight, he already has the skills. This points to how vulnerability is imagined between genders, the female victim has to transform into a survivor, while the male victim's vulnerability was a disguise for latent aggression. Maddie's quest for survival and resistance remains an act of self-defence while the old man's arc takes ambiguous paths. He begins as a sympathetic figure, but the revelation of the captive in the basement transforms him into the movie's true villain. *Hush* therefore preserves its home-invasion allegory in a relatively stable form: the threatened American is innocent, and her violence is redemptive. *Don't Breathe* instead stages the collapse of that allegory from within, suggesting that the posture of righteous self-defence against the "foreign" intruder can itself curdle into something monstrous once its own violence goes unchecked. The two films offer not a single, unified statement about xenophobic anxiety in post-9/11 America, but two competing versions of it: one that vindicates the fear of invasion, and one that turns that fear back on itself.

Conclusion

Since 9/11, there has been a body of Hollywood films that feature home invasions. The home-invasion thriller is one of the most terrifying subgenres in film. Paula Marantz Cohen says, "Such films reflect an increased fear of the erosion of distinctions between private and public space. These films also reflect a sense that the outside world is more dangerous and unpredictable than ever before" (Cohen 136). It turns the home territory into a battleground and average citizens into both victims and heroes. In these movies, the villains seek out people in their homes to rattle them in a place where they feel safe. The anxieties, fuelled by fake news and a web of scandalous conspiracy theories, seem to have shaped the country's political climate to unprecedented degrees. It may be concluded that most 2016 Hollywood films, home-invasion movies especially, offer a telling glimpse into a long-brewing pot of cultural anxieties that seemed to have boiled over

(Romano) – an ironic twist on the “melting pot” trope of America. This shift in the cultural trope is a strong social indicator; it points to the increasing social unease, xenophobia and cultural paranoia of white America. The two films – *Hush* and *Don’t Breathe* – follow the same home-invasion-movie trope. The protagonists have definite disabilities, which make them all the more vulnerable to outside threats. Both movies, produced in 2016, follow a similar plot line. *Hush* features a female hero, while *Don’t Breathe* has a male protagonist. Despite the differences, their lives follow a similar trajectory. But both of them emerge triumphant at the end. What might seem like physical infirmities to others is gathered and turned into a means of resistance. The outside world seems ignorant of their struggles, yet they reclaim their inner strength to fight back and survive. They become symbols of modern white Americans, who fear that they are the targets of an unknown source of terror. They do feel helpless and vulnerable, but they overcome the trying times. The two home invasion movies selected for study point to this trend of xenophobia in American society post 9/11, and the attendant insecurity and fear of the “other.” Contemporary Hollywood horror movies, home invasion movies in particular, focus on societal traumas and tensions of the average American, the greatest source being the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The home invasion movies selected for study in the paper, *Hush* and *Don’t Breathe*, may be viewed as representational works that voice the concerns of American citizens: their fear of societal collapse, the degradation of culture, and the threat of an enemy from within.

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