

Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
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The Evolution of Historical Mask Symbolism in the 21st Century Western Masked Horror Cinema

Saoirse O'hUadhaigh

N00201463

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i) Declaration of Originality page

STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY/ DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: _____



O'HUADHUAIGH

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iii) Abstract

This thesis explores the evolution of historical mask symbolism in Western masked horror cinema through an in-depth analysis of key films. My study delves into the historical, animal, grouped and shame masks, examining their symbolic significance and their contributions to the evolution and endurance of masked horror cinema. Films such as *Creep*, *Saw II*, *The Purge*, *Haunt*, *The Boy* and *The Black Phone* serve as case studies, revealing how masks are utilised to portray various themes ranging from existentialism and psychological trauma to anthropomorphism and shame. My studies combine cultural, philosophical and psychological perspectives to aid the understanding of the meanings behind these cinematic masks, displaying their transformations in the 21st-century horror iconography

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Introduction

The 21st-century Western cinema has repopularised the repurposing usage of masks in horror, allowing contemporary and historical themes through the symbolism of masks. From religious beliefs of anthropomorphism in *Creep* (Patrick Brice, 2014), they showcase a character's demeanour altering after putting on a wolf mask to the masked cults in *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013), highlighting the anxieties of contemporary society through smiling masks in a dystopian America. The masks have adapted a new significance of symbolising terror while also revolving around understanding of masks in general history.

This thesis examines the history of masks, exploring how they have evolved in 21st-century horror cinema. It delves into the symbolism of masks, with a few examples acknowledging the revolutionary adaptations they have undergone in the genre. Additionally, this dissects the cultural and psychological significance of these masks.

Masks are integral in our general visual history; they have been present in various cultures and civilisations across different parts of the world, such as Africa, Asia, Indigenous America, Europe and Oceania. Masks carry many traditions and symbols that aid in our understanding of their purposes through religious ceremonies, theatrical performances, rituals, spiritual practices, and social events. Their symbolism and designs reflect their beliefs, with some having a common theme in each community regardless of being in separate parts of the world. Masks are significant for understanding human history and cultural expression. Exploring the different symbolisms masks offer can aid the understanding of the endurance of the masked genre, seeing various influences stretched across time to the 21st-century genre.

The way masks have adapted into cinema is transformative; one of the earliest adaptations of masks into horror cinema utilised as a disguise and as a critical element is *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), directed by Rupert Julian, where the antagonist wears a mask to conceal his disfigured face. While it is not the first film to ever

feature a mask for their character, *The Phantom of the Opera* popularised the theme of a masked antagonist across horror cinema.

Reverting to the context of the 21st century, masks are not only used as physical disguises but to symbolically inform the background or beliefs of a character.

In *Phantom of the Opera*, the mask made of porcelain is used to conceal a disfigured face, which is similar to the understanding of hiding the imperfections with a porcelain mask in *The Boy* (William B. Bell, 2016). However, the mask's significance goes beyond concealing Brahms, the antagonist, face to commenting on the fragility of his mental health and the cracks of the deception throughout the movie. This example expresses the evolution of how horror masks adapt to a more profound sense of symbolism.

In the first chapter, this thesis will investigate the ways historical masks influence through cultural and symbolic effects, shaping the creation and interpretational impacts of masks in contemporary horror narratives through reflecting the past within the present, including research of shamanism, philosophy and present rites of passage to acknowledge their inclusion to the enduring nature of masks as story-telling devices.

The historical exploration of masks will be reflecting scholarly works, such as, Bourgeois (1982), Castle (1984) and Burke (1996) showcasing cultural symbolism and ritualistic significance. From the study of Yaka mask rituals to the transformative role of masquerade carnivals, these artifacts serve as an example of the various roles of masks, shaping them into societal roles which then expands into the theatrical elements of masks seen in Noh theatre expressed by Lee (1975).

In the following chapters, the primary focus is analysing the symbolism and visualisation in historical masks and how they apply to the masks in 21st-century horror. Explore the cultural and psychological connections between past and present and see how their symbolic meanings continue to evoke fear and suspense.

I will be focusing my discussion on modern, familiar tropes of the horror-masked genre: Animal masks, Grouped masks, and Shame masks.

The second chapter will examine animal masks, specifically in *Creep* (Patrick Brice, 2013) and *Saw II* (Darren L. Bousman, 2005).

Creep presents a documentary-style horror film where a videographer, Aaron, responds to a mysterious job in a remote mountain town. The film explores the unsettling dynamics between Aaron and his bizarre client, Josef. As the narrative takes unexpected turns, introducing the mask, known as 'Peachfuzz', becomes more of a role than a mere disguise. Instead, it becomes a focal point for delving into the psychological horror that permeates the evolution of masked symbolism in 21st-century cinema.

Moving onto *Saw II*, the narrative revolves around a deadly moral game horror orchestrated by Jigsaw, where a group of strangers finds themselves trapped in a house filled with deadly traps. A central point in the film's narrative is an iconic pig mask, symbolising Jigsaw's gruesome ceremonies. This film serves as a crucial exploration point in understanding the evolution of masked symbolism, delving into the psychological and symbolic dimensions embedded in the use of masks within the narrative.

The third chapter will examine group masks, specifically *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013) and *Haunt* (Scott Beck, Bryan Woods, 2019).

The Purge portrays a dystopian society in the near future, introducing an annual event known as 'The Purge', where all crime, including murder, is legal for 12 hours. The film follows a wealthy family forced to confront the dark realities of the event when their home security system fails, exposing them to the outside chaos. The symbolic use of the masks, called 'The Polite Strangers', adds a layer of psychological horror as the individuals hide their identities to commit heinous acts. The film serves as an essential case study in exploring the symbolic implications of grouped masks within the context of contemporary horror cinema.

Moving on to *Haunt* follows a group of friends seeking a scary Halloween experience when they discover an extreme haunted house, which is revealed to be more sinister than anticipated. As the night unfolds, the characters encounter masked

figures with disturbing facial modifications, revealing a connection between the masks and the initiation rituals of a secretive cult. The film delves into the cultural and psychological implications of facial modifications as part of a rite of passage within the cult, further expanding the understanding of the evolution of masks in 21st-century horror.

Finally, the fourth chapter will examine shame masks, specifically *The Boy* (William B. Bell, 2015) and *The Black Phone* (Scott Derrickson, 2022).

In *The Boy*, it follows a young American, Greta, who takes a job as a nanny in a secluded English village. When she arrives, she discovers that the child she is supposed to care for is a life-sized porcelain doll, which she is ordered to treat as if it were alive by the elderly couple who employs her. The film utilises the concept of a doll as a symbolic mask, delving into the themes of deception, manipulation, and the troubling consequences of a broken psyche. *The Boy* is a significant exploration point for understanding symbolic dimensions in the use of masks and material within the horror genre of the 21st century.

Moving onto *The Black Phone*, the film focuses on a young boy, Finney, becoming captive of a sinister child serial killer. Confined in a soundproof basement with only a mattress and a black phone, Finney discovers he can communicate with the killer's previous victims. As the narrative continues, the film delves into the psychological aspect of the serial killer, known as 'The Grabber.' It explores the concept of the mask as a tool for concealing his shame and manipulation. This film mainly represents a symbolic mask while referring to the intersection of technology from Noh theatre and horror in the 21st century.

The histories of masks will be discussed prior to the films in the first chapter to give a general background to the studies of the films in order to give a deeper understanding of the importance of masks and help modern horror story-telling. Throughout this process, it is notable that I will be referencing the relevance of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), which creates an insight into how masked films have adapted since their time.

Thus, the second chapter will focus on animal-masked horror films, discussing anthropomorphism techniques in *Creep* and the religious moral adaptations in *Saw II*. The third chapter delves into grouped masks and their associated techniques, similar to ritual and cultism in *The Purge* and *Haunt*. However, a deeper assessment of Karl Marx's philosophy will be acquainted with the study of *The Purge* to reveal an understanding of the socio-economic dynamic that the film counteracts. The final chapter provides insight into the human psyche when hiding shame from the protagonists' actions in *The Boy* and *The Black Phone* while discussing more profound symbolism and theatrical techniques to portray different emotions.

Although my study is to recognise the influences of historical masks in contemporary horror films, there is a disclosure of the limitations to this thesis as its primary focus is analysing Western cinema due to its popularity. Recognising other cultures' masked horror films may offer other insights and unique perspectives that this thesis will not cover.

In the following chapters, I will explore the past significances of masks, seeing their adaptations into cinema and how they continue to enlighten elements of horror masks in the 21st century, continuing their longevity and analysing the symbolism in each film, allowing more profound interpretations of their plots through their visual veil.

Chapter One: Histories

Masks have appeared in various regions of the world's history and cultures, being used to change one's identity and become a new persona. Masks throughout have been utilised in gathered settings; as Nunley and McCarty's book *Masks: faces of Cultures* (1999) states: "putting on a mask has never been a singular activity; for masking to have meaning or relevance, it needs an audience, a minimum of one observer" (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, p.15). The mask's power may not be directly from the object but as a symbol to be interpreted or transitioned by the people around it, for example, how masks have been seen in theatrical performances. In Noh theatre, actors can change their appearance by switching their masks, allowing the audience to shift their perspective of a new character, similarly similar to how the antagonist in *The Black Phone* changes his mask to portray a new emotion or in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, portraying a new identity.

It can also be seen in rituals and ceremonies, using them for the rites of passage of adulthood, comparable to boys in the Congo wearing a mask to signify their transition from boy to man in the presence of their elders of their community. Likewise, how in the cultism horror film *Haunt*, it is revealed that masked antagonists wear masks in order to engage in a deadly rite of passage where they must kill a victim in order to proceed to the next level in their cult structure.

Nunley and McCarty also state that the history of masks "have been created to satisfy the desires and challenges to which societies must respond to survive and prosper, to maintain or reinvent identity. Masks symbolise our ability to change, to transform, to go to the other worlds, to appease the spirits" (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, p.15).

The observation made by Nunley and McCarty coincides with shamanistic teachings on the roles of a community and how a person can transition into the spiritual world to communicate and appease the divine or ancestors, helping their community flourish. The Dogon people of Mali showcase these rituals in their agriculture, fertility and ancestral worship ceremonies.

Although it is not used to appease a divine being, *Saw II* deploys a similar archetype where the pig mask is not connected to a ceremonial way of worship but to connect

the character to their leader, Jigsaw. The wearer is meant to aid Jigsaw's vision of cleansing individuals of their sins, removing the rot of their society to appease him.

In films that employ masks as a tool for transformation, the masked antagonist covers their faces with a visually impacting mask, as witnessed by both the audience and the victims, as they reinvent their antagonistic identities. In some cases, applying the mask is a ritual to disguise themselves for the moment of a crime.

The importance of studying how historical masks were used for ritualistic and ceremonial purposes to spiritual connection and theatrical expression is how they have left a lasting impact on horror film masks.

Although masks in horror cinema surged in the uprising genre of slasher films from the 1970s to the 1990s, they started reinventing themselves, focusing on social commentary or psychological symbolism in the 21st century, which was not as prominent previously.

The 21st century exhibits a broader range of horror subgenres within masked horror cinema. However, this would not have evolved if masked horror had not been introduced and popularised during the slasher era. The evolution of masked horror has been influenced by audience preferences, societal changes and how historic mask symbolism has been employed in broader contexts.

1.1 Origins

Masks have been used in the evolution of human society and culture, amplifying its importance as part of the human experience. Focusing on how masks have been used explicitly in Europe, Australasia, North and South America, Africa, and Asia within the context of shamanism beliefs and their connection to contemporary masked horror cinema.

It is essential to understand shamanism to comprehend the spiritual world of masks; according to Nunley and McCarty (1999), the shaman people most likely began to give personifications to living and non-living things in their environments to

understand them. Unknowing the forces of nature itself with growth, decay, gravity and other chemical reactions of our planet, it made the most sense to believe there were invisible spirits controlling it all (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, p.17).

Shamanism plays a significant role in how masks were utilised in world history across various cultures. In shamanistic practices, masks were powerful tools to exhibit spiritual connections, healing practices and cultural expressions.

The historic significance of spiritual connection represents a passage between the physical and spiritual realms. They serve as a way to communicate with spirits, ancestors or deities. This includes the concept of the power of transformation, making someone become the 'other' or assuming a new identity (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, p.16). Transformation is influenced by the visuals of horror films, allowing a mask to become a transformative tool. A character's actions can resemble a symbolic entity or an embodiment of an archetypal fear, as shown in *Creep* through the representation of Josef's wolf mask.

Rituals and ceremonies represent a cultural symbolism, often depicting animals, spirits or mythological creatures and deities to embody their culture's beliefs. Cultural references can add layers of symbolism within a horror narrative, focusing on primal and cultural fears. Cultural symbolism as a ceremony is witnessed in *The Purge* through the uncanny employment of 'The Polite Strangers' mask, focusing on the dystopian societies' beliefs and fears. The Purge's ideology links masks to preserving their community's tradition, similar to how shamanic masks have withstood and transmitted across generations and cultures.

Rituals also include the element of rites of passage; in horror cinema, a mask can be a part of a ritualistic activity to be accepted into a society or a group of people, as seen in *Haunt*, which displays the levels of cultist acceptance and recruitment.

Masks have been associated with therapeutic powers, where a mask combined with a shamanic ritual could aid someone's physical, emotional or spiritual healing process. Although *The Boy* does not necessarily follow this archetype strictly, Brahm's mask should be considered as a coping mechanism, used more as a reflection of processing

healthy healing but allowing him to aid in his acceptance of himself and avoid insights into his nature.

Lastly, shamanic masks were used as a protection tool or guidance. They were believed to shield themselves from hostile forces and to offer a sense of guidance during rituals and ceremonies.

In *The Black Phone*, the ‘Grabber’ mask is used for protection, not for the avoidance of evil attacking him but to shield the antagonist from the shame and the evil of his actions when wearing it. It becomes clear that the mask is integral to the protection of his actions when it is removed, it sets the Grabber into a state of panic, covering his face with his hands as the removal of the mask destroys the barrier he has given himself to perform heinous acts.

Through understanding the context of shamanism beliefs allows insight into the studies on how masks were implemented in the history of the world. These beliefs are divided into three main categories: The human life cycle, renewal of life, and entertainment masquerades.

1.2 The Human Life Cycle

The human life cycle, from birth to death, involves multiple rites of passage, including the transition from adolescence into adulthood, the achievement of a rank and the final passage into the spiritual world. Nunley and McCarty warn that “these traditional moments must be dealt with cautiously and with a proper respect for the spirits” (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, p.16). These masked rituals are performed to reach the next stage of an individual’s life. To do so, they appease the spirits through entertainment and the experiences of masquerades, blood sacrifices and music, all of which reflect elements of horror cinema.

An example of a rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood or society is the Yaka people from the Republic of the Congo, with their masks called the *Kholuka*.

In order to become a man in the Yaka society, a boy must be circumcised and then be instructed to wear their initiation mask. The older leader also wears a mask, slightly different. However, both symbolise a male's confidence and ward off evils and sickness while also portraying the sexual natures of adulthood, which were typically displayed with animal or sexual sculptures affixed to the top of the mask. They had features of an upturned nose and a mouth pushing out to illustrate masculine power and the male fertility of their newly circumcised phallus (Bourgeois, 1982, p. 47-48).



Figure 1&2: *Kholuka* (Bourgeois, 1982)

Similarly, in the film *Haunt*, the antagonists wear Halloween masks related to their cult's rituals. Although it may not be a transitional ceremony of adolescents into men, their masks represent their transition into their cult's shared identity.

The characters in *Haunt* are shown to have body modifications in order to signify their commitment and initiation, similar to the circumcision performed by the Yaka people. However, instead of being a symbol to ward off evil, it invites them to perform evil doings instead of protection.

Men dominated masks, and very few societies allowed women to wear masks. This related to the social roles in societies where men's objective was to hunt. In contrast, women were to gather food from other sources and develop skills like sewing and food preparation.

This leads to the relationship of animal masks between a man and the animal of prey. Men held a more significant amount of admiration for animals perceived as more dangerous and intellectual, such as bears or wolves. This correlation suggests that successfully hunting and killing such animals would promote one's status, gaining a higher achievement of manhood in the community (Nunley, McCarty, 1999, pp.32–33).

Additionally, if a man successfully kills a high-standing animal, a mask could be crafted from its textures and skin to symbolise his rank and accomplishment.

This parallels the initiation test in *Haunt*, where individuals prove themselves by murdering to promote their status and to earn a modification to their face, unifying them into the cult.

Animal masks can be used in hunting rituals. Altaic and Tungusic Shamans in Siberia used them as well to camouflage themselves from their prey; for example, to hunt a deer, they may wear a deer mask from deerskin and antlers and create a deer costume alongside it, making it easier to get closer to attack their prey. In doing so, they believed the hunter transitioned from a man's status into an animal, making them the 'other' (Михайлова, Garfinkel, 2018, p 5-9).



Figure 3: A deer hunting headdress (Tromnau, 1991)

Likewise, in *Creep*, the wolf mask is utilised to imitate an animal's appearance and behavioural changes. The Shamans in Siberia used animal masks for hunting rituals,

where the mask is seen as a symbolic transition from a human status into that of an animal, allowing the hunter to become the ‘other’.

In *Creep*, Josef uses the mask as part of the narrative, symbolising a deliberate alteration of a different identity, allowing him to act out predatory behaviours.

Animal masks do not necessarily depend on honouring a rank or hunting but also on rituals or ceremonies representing various animals with different symbolic meanings.

Some Native American tribes used animal masks for their ceremonial dances. For example, the Hopi people of the southwestern USA used a mask called *Hon*, representing a bear, for their ceremonial dance called the Katsina Ceremonies. The performers wearing these masks were assumed to transform into the spirits and gods symbolically to bless the lands with crops (Maskmuseum.org, n.d.).

Similarly, in *Saw II*, the pig mask symbolises a transformation in one’s identity; however, it reflects Jigsaw’s emphasis on personal transformation and the removal of sins.

Both display an impact on their environments. In Hopi tradition, the bear mask promotes the well-being of their crops, whereas the pig mask represents the help of removing the rot of people in the world in Jigsaw's philosophy.

Rites of passage persist in modern-day societies; for example, practices such as circumcision are still used as a cultural and religious ritual in Judaism. In this context, circumcision serves as a physical representation of initiation into the beliefs of God and acceptance into Jewish society.

Plastic surgery can be seen as a modern form of a rite of passage; in East Asia, notably in South Korea, plastic surgery can be seen as a transition from childhood to womanhood, giving their bodies or faces a desired shape/size. It is famous for teenage plastic surgery as a graduation present for a South Korean woman to get double eyelid surgery or a rhinoplasty (Safire, 2000).

This modern rite of passage is reflected in *Haunt* through the facial modifications of the antagonists.

Plastic surgery in South Korea reflects societal pressures and beauty standards, whereas the facial modifications in *Haunt* comment on a similar desire for conformity in a warped sense of identity within the cult.

Similar to the initiation transitions in America, particularly within the cult-like setting of Hugh Hefner's Play Boy Mansion, where body modifications are involved to align with Hefner's specific ideal of beauty. This connection is explored in-depth in the series *Secrets of Playboy* 'episode 2: The Girl Next Door'¹³ (*Secrets of Playboy*, 2022).

The use of facial modifications for the initiation in *Haunt* can represent a new evolution in how masks are depicted in modern cinema. This shift reflects the horror genre interpreting new concepts of masks, aligning with current societal norms and fears related to body modifications with anxieties around appearances and identity. Controversially, *Haunt* can be reflecting the loss of identity through these transformations, echoing the experiences of Playboy bunnies, the loss being more profound than one just concealing their face with the traditional Halloween masks but to alter the essence of the person's appearance and self-perception. The horror in *Haunt* also comments on the permanent and irreversible nature of plastic surgery alterations.

1.3 Renewal of Life

The renewal of life in the natural world includes the new year celebrations, the new season of freshly planted crops, the incoming rainy season, or the preparation of the dry seasons, which are occasions for rituals and masking to hail good fortune onto the lands and their people.

Seasonal masquerades are typically seen in Bulgaria, Switzerland, Sweden, Brazil, China and Japan. An example of one of these masquerades is in China; when celebrating their New Year, their ritual is to appease gods and ancestors through performative dances (including wearing masks of creatures like dragons), giving and receiving red envelopes, decorating with Chun Lian couplets, fireworks and spending time with family. When the ritual first came around it is believed during the Shang

Dynasty (C. 1600-1046 BC), they had sacrificial ceremonies in honour of their gods and ancestors (Loewe, 1976, p. 678-679).

Likewise, *The Purge* is an annual event, serving as a ritualistic cleansing of society, allowing individuals to release their pent-up aggression. The masks 'The Polite Strangers' resemble the masquerades seen in the Chinese New Year celebrations as their symbolism suggests a form of renewal, be it through purging a society's tension or seeking blessings and positive energy for the upcoming year.



Figure 4: Traditional Chinese dragon (Gould, 2018)

1.4 Entertainment

Masquerades are used for important events in societies, which typically play out their culture's memories, myths and legends and as a way to unite group aspirations.

An example of performative story-telling is the Māori masks from New Zealand. Although these masks may not have been intended for practical purposes, they were intricately carved before ancestral wars. The carvings depict lines that resemble facial tattoos associated with specific families or deities. These masks intended to offer a rich narrative tradition used as a remembrance and story-telling devices to their tribes as Māori were known to act out their pasts and legends as they never

wrote them down until the 1800s when the British colonised them. The wooden masked carvings were integral to their culture as they could be used to illustrate their word-of-mouth story-telling (Thomas, 1995, p. 28).

Their Tā moko (Māori facial tattoos) can also be considered conceptualised masks, as they reflect their family whakapapa (ancestry), personal history, role and social status, much like the human life cycle.



Figure 5: Mata Kura ceremonial mask (William Ockleford Oldman, 1992)

Likewise, in *Haunt*, Although their tattoos are unspecified, their facial modifications replicating their Halloween masks could represent their cult's beliefs or a historical influence.

Some masquerades began to develop outside of rituals and ceremonies and began to be used to unite social gatherings in general.

An example is in 16th-century Europe, where masquerade balls became popular. These carnivals required the attendees to wear masks and costumes to conceal their identities from each other. Masquerade masks were primarily used for social and aesthetic purposes, allowing people to interact with others without the influence of social roles.(Castle, 1984, p. 903-904).

However, masquerade carnivals outside of Europe performed differently. An example is during the 19th century in Trinidad, they used masquerade carnivals as a way for social equality, allowing rich and poor individuals to interact with each other without judgement of classes. The masks became a symbol of shared celebration and unity (Burke, 1996, p. 8-9).



Figure 6: Italian Venetian's male masquerade mask (Met Museum, 1912)

Similar to the utilisation of the masks in *The Purge* to temporarily disguise themselves and adopt a different persona, escaping the norms or consequences of their everyday lives. This element of anonymity allows a sense of freedom from societal expectations, whether in the context of the night of *The Purge* or a historical masquerade carnival.

1.5 Theatre

For centuries in Western theatre, performances were only performed by male actors. This meant they often used young, feminine built boys to cross-dress and wear makeup or a mask to represent a female character. However, due to the male dominance of theatre, the representations often reflected the male interpretation of women and their desired attributes, essentially defining a woman within a man's world.

In Walker's book, *The Crone* (Walker, 1988), she explains that the three typical stages of womanhood represented in masked plays were also in conjunction with the three main stages of the moon – new, complete, and waning moon. The categories are A young woman, Mother and Crone (an ugly woman). “The moon was associated with lunacy, magic, evil which were often used to describe the crone” (Walker, 1988, p.23).

This perspective resonates in the iconic masked horror film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974), where a group of friends become victims to a cannibalistic family in rural Texas during the Great Depression. The main antagonist, Leatherface, wears three distinct masks: ‘The Pretty Lady’, ‘The Old Lady’ and ‘The Killing Mask’, each representing a different character and their values. An example of how he portrays each mask is when he wears them during the dinner scene where the final girl, Sally, is forced to join the table with his dysfunctional family. Leatherface is first seen helping out in the kitchen wearing the ‘Old Lady’ mask, portraying the old lady as his late mother doing motherly chores. It continues when Leatherface walks into the dining room wearing his ‘Pretty Lady’ mask, representing himself as what he believes is the most ‘appealing’. When Sally escapes, Leatherface delays his pursuit of her as he feels the compulsion to change out of his feminine mask into his ‘Killing Mask’, showing how his masks have different values and characters and how each mask follows the same three stages of womanhood in Walker’s book.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre significantly contributes to the evolution of masked symbolism in 21st-century Western horror cinema by showcasing Leatherface’s use of masks, creating dramatic transitions between predator and prey roles.

The way *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* uses their interchanging characters, particularly in the context of their iconic masks, draws parallels with the character of the Grabber in *The Black Phone*. Both films use masks as tools for characters to alternate between identities or emotions. *The Black Phone* further defines itself by aligning closely with the stylised conventions of Japanese Noh Theatre, a change from what Walker’s book explores.

In Japanese Noh, masks are used to conceal the wearer’s identity. However, we can also still see cross-dressing characters as the performers interchange their masks during the production to assume a new character. These masks could even represent the same character but with a different emotion portrayed, similar to the mechanics of puppetry, where heads are switched for various facial expressions.

In Sherman Lee’s article, ‘Noh: Masks and Robe’, they state that Noh masks were made initially for religious Buddhist purposes. These masks were first called the

Gigaku mask to provide emotional relief from some of the long, profound religious ceremonies. They then began creating these types of masks outside of religious practice and more for story-telling, which brings us to how Noh theatre is seen today (Lee, 1975, p. 27-30).

As mentioned, *The Black Phone* showcases a parallel as the Grabber uses his interchanging masks to express a range of emotions for his character. His deliberate use of switching the masks aligns with Noh tradition by portraying different emotional states within a performance. This displays the influence of Japanese Noh theatre in contemporary horror cinema, using the manipulation of masks as an insightful way of conveying emotions, reflecting the traditions of the *Gigaku* masks in their evolution from religious ceremonies to story-telling.



Figure 7: Noh Mask Circa 1700 – 1868 (Cleveland Museum of Art, n.d.)

We have distanced ourselves from traditional ritual performances in contemporary theatre and cinema. However, the use of masks continues as a tool for entertainment, aiding transformations from one character to another. Masks for theatre and film have become a way of narrating a story similar to how they were done in ritual to transform into a different identity or entity. This moves away from the limitations of human conditions and societal norms, which allow people to portray different images of themselves. This concept develops the understanding of horror-masked cinema.

Chapter Two: Animal Masks

In horror cinema, animal masks often serve as powerful symbols relating to primitivism. The symbolic transformation of the wearer into a less-than-human, animalistic state permeates an antagonist with predatory instincts, consisting of a form of reverse anthropomorphism.

2.1 Anthropomorphism and Historical Context

As Stebbins clarifies, anthropomorphism is rooted in primitive religious beliefs and practices (Stebbins, 1993, p. 120-121). Associations are seen in Greek mythology illustrating this concept, portraying gods with human qualities such as greed, jealousy and beauty. A notable example is Zeus, who exhibits good and bad human traits (Versnel, 2011, p.388). This anthropomorphic representation is often connected with animal symbolism, as seen in the association of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, associated with a dolphin, signifying her birth from the sea (The British Museum, 2017).



Figure 8: Aphrodite and Eros with a dolphin swimming alongside. (The British Museum, 2017)

In Egyptian mythology, cats embody the protective and intelligent attributes of the goddess Bastet, becoming demi-deities symbolising good fortune (Visconti, 2020).

The use of anthropomorphism resonates in horror films, where antagonists are often depicted as monstrous entities or ‘the other’, relating to associations with animals.

2.2 Creep

The documentary-style horror film *Creep* (Brice, 2014) illustrates the concept of reverse anthropomorphism and draws connections to shamanistic rituals through the symbolic use of the ‘Peach Fuzz’ mask. The film is from the point of view of Aaron, a cameraman who accepted a job to document a day in the life of Josef, who initially portrays as an introverted and physically ill individual.

Josef introduces the seemingly friendly wolf mask, “Peach Fuzz”, accompanied by a cheerful song. However, as the day progresses, Josef’s behaviour turns sinister, revealing the Peach Fuzz mask as a deceptive and aggressive tool. The mask plays a crucial role in Josef’s unsettling portrayal, allowing a transformation of his identity from a humanistic state to a more animalistic one, a pattern aligned with shamanistic rituals.



Figure 9: Peach fuzz mask (Creep, 2015)

The film’s climax is when Aaron reveals the intensity of Josef’s disturbed nature, peaking in the murder scene where Josef, wears the Peach Fuzz mask, adopts a wolf-like movement. This symbolism extends beyond this act as Josef continues to stalk

Aaron, sending him wolf-themed packages that embody the violence and deception associated with wolves.

The significance of the wolf mask in *Creep* extends to broader cultural and historical references. Negative connotations of wolves are associated with Norse shamanism, as stated by Lindow in his article “Norse Mythology and Northumbria: Methodological Notes”, which connects the concept of werewolves, traditionally associated with themes of destruction and deceit (Lindow, 2016, p. 313-314). Henry Bellows references from ‘The Poetic Edda’ of the pursuit of Sköll and Hati, which reflects apocalyptic events, mirroring Josef’s violent and deceptive tendencies (Bellows, 1936, p.20-21).

In conclusion, *Creep* connects the symbolism of the Peach Fuzz mask, illustrating its role as an unleashing of primal animality. The film reflects historical associations with anthropomorphism and elements of shamanistic rituals and delves into the negative connotations surrounding wolves.

2.3 Saw II

The *Saw* franchise utilises a different approach to the symbolic use of animal masks, particularly the pig mask, delving into religious beliefs and existentialism philosophy, which is evident in *Saw II* (Bousman, 2005). While the pig mask is a recurring element throughout the franchise, it is more defined in this film, adding complex layers to the narratives and the characters' dynamics.

Saw II continues to explore the Jigsaw Killer’s psyche, with Detective Eric Matthews discovering his son, Daniel, among the victims in a deadly game orchestrated by Jigsaw. One of Jigsaw’s apprentices, Amanda, wears a disturbing rotted pig mask, showcasing a visual representation of fear, dehumanisation and Jigsaw’s control. The mask becomes crucial in Amanda’s role, stripping away from her previous identity and symbolising her cleanse into Jigsaw’s philosophy.



Figure 10: *Saw II* Amanda in the Pig Mask (*Saw II*, 2005)

The film's climax reveals a twist where all the victims, except Amanda, are directly connected to Detective Matthews, challenging traditional notions of justice and morality. The twist shapes the dynamic between Matthews and Jigsaw, influencing the franchise's narrative.

The pig mask in *Saw II* becomes a vital symbol which illustrates Jigsaw's philosophy. It forces individuals, particularly Amanda, to confront their humanity and the consequences of their actions. The mask, serving as a tool for Amanda's transformation, is similar to the confessional concept in Catholicism, where confession and confrontation of sins lead to cleaning and forgiveness (The Bible, n.d.). Furthermore, the pig mask draws out fear in the victims, forcing them to confront their sins, is similar to theories of shamanism. The pig mask becomes a symbol of a transformative experience, pushing victims to undergo psychological change during confessions. As the victims navigate the house's terrifying traps, the pig mask contributes to a fear of the unknown, parallel to shamanistic rituals where confronting the unknown is integral to spiritual growth (Park, 1965, p. 1305-1306). However, argumentatively, the use of the Pig mask for Amanda goes against what the victims are experiencing. In Jigsaw's philosophy, Amanda's decision to wear the pig mask interprets a symbolic act of escaping. By hiding behind the mask, Amanda can be attempting to create distance from the consequences of her actions and the

moral challenges presented in Jigsaw's deadly games. In doing so, she 'blocks' her authentic self, creating a psychological barrier that deters her ability to make genuine, human choices. The mask can be a tool for not only a physical disguise but also an emotional and moral concealment.

Jigsaw's philosophy aligns with existentialist concepts, emphasising personal responsibility, struggles and suffering in order for meaning. The pig mask symbolises this philosophy, reflecting the human experience and the moral tests individuals face. Existentialism, referred to René Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*' (Malcolm, 1965, p.315), illustrates the need for individuals to display their true selves and justify their right to exist.

The film also explores how meaning can emerge from struggle and suffering, paralleling Jigsaw's belief that his victims can find redemption through the challenges in his traps. The rotting pig mask symbolises Jigsaw's pessimistic view of humanity, seeing people as morally 'unclean' creatures, similar to religious taboos surrounding pigs in Islam and Judaism (Lobban, 1994, p. 59).

Unlike *Creep*, where the mask transforms the wearer, the Pig mask in *Saw II* symbolises moral corruption with the victims, reflecting vulnerability and Jigsaw's manipulation. Amanda's role is similar to that of a farm animal, carrying out tasks for her master, which aligns with the innocent appearance of a farm animal and contrasts with the sinister intentions behind the mask.

In conclusion, *Saw II's* utilisation of the Pig mask connects with religious, existential and philosophical symbolism in its narrative, contributing to the evolution of historical mask symbolism in 21st-century Western horror cinema.

2.4 Conclusion

Exploring the symbolic use of animal masks in the documentary-style horror film *Creep* and *Saw II* presents distinct approaches, adapting to contemporary rational teachings and making the audience analyse their symbolism. In *Creep*, the

Peach Fuzz mask embodies reverse anthropomorphism and aligns with shamanistic rituals, leading to a transformative experience for the character Josef. The wolf symbolism delves into cultural and historical references, linking negative connotations of wolves in Norse shamanism to Josef's violent tendencies.

Furthermore, *Saw II* delves into the religious and existential aspects of the pig mask, illustrating Jigsaw's philosophy. The Pig mask serves as a tool for transformation and psychological fear, paralleling confessional concepts in Catholicism and appealing to shamanistic theories.

Despite the differences the films apply their animal masks, they contribute to the evolution of historical mask symbolism in 21st-century Western horror cinema by delving into existential, philosophical and cultural dimensions.

Chapter Three: Grouped Masks

This chapter delves into how masks can be used to associate with a group and used in a social context and cultism.

3.1 The Purge

The Purge (DeMonaco, 2013) is set in a dystopian near-future America in 2022. They hold an annual 12-hour period where all crime, including murder, is legalised and emergency services become non-operational. The nation is ruled by the governed “New Founding Fathers of America”, who created this event to maintain low crime and unemployment rates throughout the rest of the year.

The narrative centres on the Sandin family – James, Mary and their children, Charlie and Zoey. The father, James, is a wealthy home security salesman who had supported The Purge to secure his income. The family’s affluent status displays the obscene class inequality, evident in their high-class security systems sold to their neighbours in their gated community, reinforcing capitalistic structures. However, chaos occurs when Charlie makes a compassionate decision to give shelter and security to a wounded homeless man who is being hunted down by masked purgers, which is revealed as wealthy neighbours. The true meaning of The Purge is revealed as an opportunity for the privileged to eliminate the less fortunate, masked under a government-approved event.

When the Sandins survive the night, it prompts the family and the audience to question The Purge event's societal morals and true meanings.

The masks in *The Purge* serve as a way to escape social consequences rather than lawful punishment since the legal system is suspended for the event. They are drawing a parallel to masquerade balls, where masks conceal social status and identity, allowing them to unite equally. However, masquerades typically encouraged

playful social gatherings, *The Purge* utilises masks for the darker side of human nature to commit crimes and inflict pain without consequence.

An example of the events contrast is illuminated through the comparison of *The Purge* to the masquerade carnivals held in Trinidad during the early 19th century. In the Trinidadian carnival, masks served as a way for social equality, allowing rich and poor individuals to interact without judgements of classes. The masks symbolised shared celebrations and unity (Burke, 1996, p. 8-9). Through the parallel of *The Purge* event and Trinidadian carnivals, they share different motivations to create a space where individuals can interact without social consequence. The Trinidadian example showcases the positive potentials of masked gatherings, emphasised in dance and shared celebrations, contrasting the darker motives in *The Purge*. This illustrates the reversal of the usage of how masquerade events can be twisted.



Figure 11: 'The Polite Strangers' Mask (*The Purge*, 2013)

The grouped mask antagonists, 'The Polite Strangers', are wealthy young neighbours who embody the community's wealth. They reflect the film's social commentary of different masked groups, meaning distinct connections and intentions. The group embrace a twisted sense of decorum in their acts of violence, establishing themselves as the upper class, as predators and referring to the lower class as 'less-than' or as

‘pigs’ which they refer to the injured homeless man, which is also reflected in other recent horror films such as *The Hunt* (The Hunt, 2020) and *Ready or Not* (Ready Or Not, 2019).

‘The Polite Strangers’ masks display exaggerated human features which hyper-humanises the wearers. The masks show bright, clean and Caucasian faces with big smiles, creating a visual contrast to the brutal violence of The Purge event. The intentional exaggeration of human features serves as a commentary on Freud’s theory of the inherent violence that humans have that hides beneath the façade of civility (Freud, 1967, pp.5–10). The exaggerated smiles associates sinister happiness in committing heinous acts, emphasising the contradiction of appearing more humane during these violent acts.

The concept of hyper-humanisation through masks in *The Purge* contrasts with the symbolic use of the pig mask in *Saw II*. In *Saw II*, Amanda’s rotting pig mask represents fear, dehumanisation and Jigsaw’s control. The pig mask implicates the dehumanisation of the wearer, making them mere agents of Jigsaw’s philosophy, brainwashing the individual of identity and personal morals, unlike in *The Purge*, where ‘The Polite Strangers’ masks enhance the human face.

Through their visual masks, both films mirror the exploration of the human psyche and the consequences of moral choices in their horror films.

These masks serve as a social commentary on social inequality, violence and the consequences of unchecked capitalism. The masks symbolise a façade of civility and politeness while concealing the brutality, connecting a theory of Marx’s false consciousness. While Marx’s theory does not focus on masking, it adds a broader understanding of the social and political context used in *The Purge*. Marx’s theory, discussed in Plotke’s journal *Marxism, Sociology And Crisis: Lukacs’ Critique Of Weber*, focuses on the diversity of society in different classes based on the control of the means of production. The ruling class have the power to exploit the working class, showcasing ideology and culture to maintain their dominance (Plotke, 1975, pp189-191). The Purge, portrayed as a government tool to reduce crime, is operated as a disguise to ‘cleanse’ society while preserving exploitation and maintaining their existing power structures. This is evident when The Purge event exempts the

president, first family and government officials, allowing them immunity from the chaos.

Furthermore, the topic of capitalism can reflect the moral depravity of the mainstream media, which is a product of a consumerist society, where even the instruments of violence are commodified. In this dystopian, the masks seem to be mass-produced and sold as accessories for Purge Night, similar to Halloween masks, highlighting the commercialisation of violence and moral decay.

The significance of ‘The Polite Strangers’ masks is to showcase the film’s social commentary. Instead of using the masks as a tool to dehumanise the wearers, it hyper-humanises them, creating a contrast within The Purge narrative. The ideology that the masks are mass-produced for The Purge, as all member’s masks are identical, highlights how commercialism and capitalism count on exploiting violence for profit and power.

‘The Polite Strangers’ masks offer a perspective of the complex ideology of human nature, morality and the consequences of unchecked capitalism.

3.2 Haunt

Similarly, in *Haunt* (Beck & Woods, 2019), individuals wear masks to engage in disturbing activities. However, this film reflects more traditional tropes in horror centring around a classic ‘haunted house’ setting, exploring the connections of cultism of the masks.

In examining the thematic elements in *Haunt*, it is essential to acknowledge the cultural and historical contexts of certain ritual practices. When discussing this case study, parallels are acknowledged with the Hittites, a subset group of Indo-European people whose practices between 1700 and 1500 BCE included rituals where blood was considered a means of purification. Recognising that the Hittite rituals were rooted in their spiritual and cultural beliefs, serving a specific purpose in their society is essential.

By exploring these practices, I am not attempting to appropriate the significance of these cultural and spiritual rites. Instead, I am to connect similarities between historical practices and thematic elements depicted in the film.

Haunt follows the narrative of the protagonist, Harper, who is looking for a distraction from her abusive relationship and childhood traumas by joining her friends for an ‘extreme’ haunted house experience on Halloween night. As the night unfolds, the group discover that the masked performers in the haunted house are not just actors but sadistic killers with true murderous horrors intended for them.

A recurring theme in *Haunt* is the concept of ‘unmasking’, where the antagonists consistently quote their victims to let them “take off their mask”. This recurring theme becomes central to the plot as each masked individual reveals their modified face beneath their masks. The film showcases classic Halloween masks such as Devil, Clown, Witch, Zombie, Ghost and Vampire.



Figure 12: Evan's face being ripped off by Ghost (*Haunt*, 2019)

The unmasking concept takes a sinister turn when the killers are revealed to engage in cult-like activities. The film draws parallels with historical rituals, such as the Hittites' practice of using blood for purification, where “they used blood to smear onto the walls of buildings contaminated by bloodshed, and the removal of the new blood took away the contamination of the old” (McCarthy, 1969, p.169). This Hittite

ritual is similar to when the Clown sets fire to the haunted house, burning evidence of the bloodshed done inside, reflected in historical rituals.

Another connection is when the witch brands their victims with a piercing hot metal poke, burning marks into their victims' skin. Similar to the case of the NXIVM cult, led by Keith Raniere, that operates under the guise of self-help, within the cult, there is a subset group called DOS, which women branded with a symbol incorporated with Reniere's initials (Grigoriadis, 2018). The branding ritual used a cauterising pen to burn the symbol into the followers' skin. This concept of branding was to present a form of commitment but to act as a tool of control and dominance of the leader. Not only does this connect with the victims, but it can be reflected in erasing one's past identity and reborn them into a new one, relating to the antagonist's facial scarring.



Figure 13: Clown Mask (Haunt, 2019)



Figure 14: Clown face reveal (Haunt, 2019)

The film explores the killer's extreme physical modifications that replicate their masks, linking it to their initiation process into their sadistic cult. It reflects real-life practices such as Holly Madison's experiences in the Playboy mansion, where body modifications were used to comply with the specific standards of Hugh Hefner in order to be accepted into the Playboy community (Secrets of Playboy, 2022). Through physical modifications, showcasing unity and their ranking parallels cultural practices such as Māori Tā moko tattoos (Thomas, 1995, p.28). This illustrates their shared identity and ranking within the context of their cult; the concept is described by the Vampire character who lacks facial modifications due to his low rank. He explains how they earned their faces to commit a minimum of one act of murder to be officially initiated.

The modifications on the antagonists' faces reflect the haunted house's settings, with rooms decorated with tools like claws, spikes, knives, hooks, barbwire, and razors. The haunted house includes a room full of two-way mirrors, hinting at the sadistic nature of the antagonists obtaining pleasure from watching their victims navigate the horrors. The two-way mirror room reflects how masks in horror are utilised, where the mask wearer can see the emotions displayed on their victim's faces, but the victim cannot see theirs, making this room a mask itself.



Figure 15: Devil Mask (Haunt, 2019)



Figure 16: Devil Face Reveal (Haunt, 2019)

The final room of the haunted house is displayed as an escape room, set as a little girl's bedroom where Harper must 'deface' dolls to collect clues reflecting the symbolism in the film. The action illustrates a symbolic connection to the victims within the haunted house, emphasising the harm done by the antagonists. The choice of using a little girl's bedroom reflects Harper's childhood trauma while simultaneously offering commentary on societal expectations. It implies the perversion of innocence and the violation of what is usually deemed as a safe space, highlighting a broader socio-cultural issue related to violence against women and exploiting vulnerability.

3.3 Conclusion

Through this exploration into grouped masks in horror films, *The Purge* and *Haunt*, they reveal symbolic meanings and critiques of societies. *The Purge* uses a dystopian America to reveal class inequality, moral decay and commodification of violence. 'The Polite Stranger' masks symbolise hyper-humanisation and consumerism, adding layers of notions on human nature and social morals.

Haunt uses more traditional horror tropes, adapting historical rituals into cult-like activities and symbolising how physical modification can be seen as a mask. It implies real-world parallels to accentuate shared identity and hierarchy within their

cult. Their two-way mirror room and escape room reflect how masks are used in a setting and delve into broader socio-cultural issues related to violence and vulnerability.

Similar to the symbolic use of animal masks in *Creep* and *Saw II*, where each mask carries distinct philosophical and cultural layers, the grouped masks in *The Purge* and *Haunt* contribute to the evolution of mask symbolism in 21st-century Western horror cinema.

Chapter Four: Masking Shame

This chapter focuses on how masks hide the character's shame and how that expands the characters' struggles that relate to their complex motivations and emotions.

4.1 The Boy

The Boy (Bell, 2016) follows an American nanny, Greta, who accepted a job in an isolated English village's antique mansion. She discovers that she is minding a life-size porcelain doll called Brahms instead of a child, which an elderly couple adopted after their real son, Brahms, supposedly died in a fire. While nanny-ing, she encounters unsettling events and discovers that Brahms, the doll, seems to move independently when he is not being watched. The plot takes a turn when Greta learns the terrible history of the Brahms family, she is told that the original Brahms was a child who died in a fire twenty years previously after he had killed his friend at eight years old.

The film climaxes when Greta's abusive boyfriend destroys the Brahms doll; when the porcelain shatters, the real Brahms comes from a wall wearing a replica of the doll's porcelain face. This reveals a hidden room where Brahms slept and exposed his disturbing obsession with Greta.

The film's ending reveals Brahms's disfigured face, similar to the wounds of a burn victim, which was concealed behind the porcelain mask.

The significance of the mask in *The Boy* displays deception and an thematic connection between Brahms, the doll, and the real Brahms concealed in the mansion's walls. The mask symbolises the family's attempt to conceal the truth and hide themselves from the shame of Brahms's crime.



Figure 17: Brahms's mask cracked, revealing disfigured face (The Bface2016)

The mask's material is a smooth porcelain surface serving as a contrast with his roughly textured burned skin underneath. Using porcelain as a material for the mask and the doll implicates a certain innocence and youthfulness in their appearances. This choice symbolises Brahms's desire to hide himself from judgment and shame while protecting his self-image. Also, the use of a fragile material such as porcelain reflects Brahms's mental fragility. This symbolism is evident in the scene where Greta confronts Brahms and instructs him to comply with the bedtime rules she has made for the doll.

His reaction is similar to a child being told what to do regardless of being an adult; this portrays his psychological state, suggesting a stunted emotional growth, most likely from being hidden in the walls for so long, connecting his actions likewise to a child's. The porcelain mask represents an arrested development of Brahms's psyche, emphasising his inability to control his emotions and childlike behaviour.

The symbolism of the broken porcelain in both the mask and the doll shows Brahms's internal struggles and emotional turmoil.

Interestingly, the doll becomes a tool for Brahms to adopt a new persona of a young boy through puppeteering the doll, acting as a metaphorical mask for him, which helps create a sense of redemption for the shame from his past actions by making the doll act out as a sweet, innocent boy.



Figure 18: Brahms, the porcelain doll (*The Boy*, 2016)

The Boy contributes to the evolution of masks in Western horror cinema by using the same material, creating a symbolic connection to the iconic mask from *The Phantom of the Opera* (Julian, 1925). In *The Phantom of the Opera*, the disfigured Phantom wears a mask, to hide his deformity, a theme mirrored in *The Boy*. The choice of porcelain for both masks creates an illusion of normalcy and contrasts their textured skin underneath.

The significance of the mask is represented by the various symbols, representing deception, shame, and Brahms's mental fragility.

4.2 The Black Phone

The Black Phone (Derrickson, 2022), centres around a young boy, Finney, being abducted by a child serial killer known as 'The Grabber'. The narrative follows Finney's imprisonment in a soundproof basement with a non-functioning black phone. Despite the phone being disconnected, Finney discovers he can communicate

with the spirits of The Grabber's previous victims, which help guide his escape.

Simultaneously, the police are searching for The Grabber.

The story takes a turn when it is revealed that The Grabber is staying in his brother Max's house, using the basement for his abductions without Max knowing. Max, becoming obsessed with the case, realises his house is central to the murders, investigates his basement and discovers Finney.

In the climax, The Grabber kills his brother and attempts to murder Finney; however, with Finney's knowledge from his previous victims, he's able to outsmart and kill The Grabber. Finney escapes with the police across the road to continue his ordinary life.



Figure 19: The Grabber Mask, smiling (The Black Phone, 2022)

The Grabber's mask adds elements of theatrical layers to his sinister character. The Grabber has three distinct masks, each representing a different emotion- an exaggerated smile, a deep frown and a completely mouthless expression. The masks allow the Grabber to switch between different emotions and moods, relating to the technique in Noh theatre, where actors use masks to switch to different roles or emotions (Lee, 1975, p. 27-28), adding theatrical layers to his character. The purpose of the masks is to emphasise different levels of his violent tendencies. This is evident when he wears the smiling mask to converse with Finney and feeding him in a calm

demeanour but transitions the frowning mask when he expects to violently punish him. The masks become a tool for him to perform different roles within his criminal acts, emphasising the theatricals of his actions.

Evidently, the masks signify the Grabber's need to hide from the shame of his actions. Officially displayed during the climax scene, when his mask is forcibly removed during his struggle with Finney, he panics. He instinctively covers his face with his hands, screaming for Finney not to look at his face, revealing a vulnerability to his scary façade. The scene showcases that the mask is not only a tool to create fear in his victims but to create a psychological barrier that hides him from the shame of his actions.

Furthermore, allowing the masks to be interchangeable, with the bottom pieces becoming unattachable, humanises him, similar to the portrayal of human violence in *The Purge*. Reinforcing the concept that regardless of his heinous acts, the Grabber is not considered as the 'other' but reflects a form of humanistic violence.

4.3 Conclusion

The analysis of *The Boy* and *The Black Phone* reveals the evolution of historical mask symbolism within 21st-century Western masked horror cinema. These films move from traditional uses of masks to explore deeper themes of shame, fragility and the duality of human nature. *The Boy* portrays the psychological complexities surrounding Brahm and his porcelain mask, symbolising the attempt to conceal his past. Meanwhile, *The Black Phone* introduces an evolution of The Grabber's masks reflecting Noh Theatre, serving as a theatrical tool and psychological barrier. Both films showcase different perspectives on the enduring power of masks in the horror genre.

Conclusion

In conclusion, exploring historical mask symbolism in 21st-century Western masked horror cinema has revealed various themes and narratives. The journey through tracing masks from their traditional ceremonial roles to their transformation in contemporary cinema showcases the enduring power of these symbolic artefacts.

Masks transitioned from their conventional roles as a tool for shock and concealment to an evolving powerful tool for storytelling that displays insights into psychology, cultures and societal commentaries. Considering shamanistic rituals, anthropomorphic traditions, philosophy and masquerade events, the general history of masks has developed a new layer within the horror genre.

The films *Creep* and *Saw II* explore the subgenre of animal masks, reflecting aspects of anthropomorphism, religious connotations and philosophy. *Creep's* unsettling 'Peach Fuzz' mask introduces reverse anthropomorphism, transforming Josef into a primal state of mind. The film connects shamanistic rituals and historical associations with negative wolf connotations; similar to Norse mythology, these elements offer a perspective of the darker aspects of human nature. Similarly, *Saw II* uses the Pig mask as a tool for transformation, aligning with religious, existentialism and philosophical symbolism. The mask becomes a link of moral exploration, allowing Amanda to hide from her sins while forcing other participants to confess their sins and portray herself as a tool and a victim under Jigsaw's control.

The films *The Purge* and *Haunt* introduce the subgenre of grouped masks, offering broad societal critiques. *The Purge's* 'Polite Strangers' masks hyper-humanise their wearers with exaggerated human features and big smiling faces, creating a significant contrast of the violence during the evening, reflecting studies of Freud of the human psyche. The night continues to reflect social inequality and unchecked capitalism, emphasising consumerism tendencies, similar to the theories of Marx. *Haunt* connects to historical rituals and cult-like behaviours while simultaneously exploring extreme physical modifications as a form of masking,

acknowledging parallels with real-world practices with a reflection on the shared identity within the context of their sadistic cult.

The Boy and *The Black Phone* explores the subgenre of masking shame, reflecting through porcelain and interchangeable masks to symbolise psychological fragility and the antagonist's need to hide from the consequences of their actions. *The Boy*, drawing inspiration from *The Phantom of The Opera*, creates a symbolic link between innocence and shame through the mask's material, contrasting the texture of their deformities underneath, which is a constant reminder of their diabolical actions. *The Black Phone* pays homage to Japanese Noh Theatre, exploring the theatrical elements of the antagonists using multiple masks as a tool for performance and as a psychological barrier.

Collectively, each film showcases the contributions to the evolution of masks in horror, expanding the genre with layers of symbolic meaning. Through incorporating historical, cultural, and philosophical elements, it adds depth to these narratives, allowing audiences to engage with their symbolic meanings. Whether reflecting shamanistic rituals, symbolic animals or hyper-human masked figures, each film contributes to the broader discussion of the evolving language of horror cinema.

While my study primarily focuses on recognising the influences of symbolism from historical masks in contemporary Western horror films, acknowledging other cultures' masked horror films may offer expanded insights into symbolic elements that have evolved differently from Western cinema.

In conclusion, the 21st century has experienced a transformation in the way masks are portrayed in Western horror cinema. From being used as a simple device for creating visual fear, it has evolved into a tool for storytelling. The masks in these films act as symbolic links, connecting historical, cultural and psychological elements to create narratives of character developments, cultural critique and thematic explorations within cinema. As these developments continue, we can anticipate the expansion of meanings and symbolism in masked horror cinema that future films will be able to portray.

These elements have established their enduring relevance as a visual and narrative tool that reshapes horror storytelling in the 21st century.

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