**“A Nation Reborn”: Right to Law and Right to Life in *The Purge* Franchise**

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**Abstract:** Popular culture matters for helping make sense of our political lives. This article addresses the value of dystopian horror films in challenging narratives about the state. It is situated within broader understandings of popular culture and politics, and specifically within narrative understandings of the state as a performative body. It presents *The Purge* film franchise as an example of such a challenge to state narratives, and argues that through its distortion of dominant state narratives, the franchise reveals and challenges the intersections of economic and racial inequality in the neoliberal United States. It examines in particular the emergency broadcast featured in all four films, which positions citizens in a relationship with law and life where the right to law conflates the right to life, and argues that the films present an understanding of vulnerability and abandonment that are in some ways already present in the state. It concludes by questioning what, if any, the capacities are for resistance.

**Keywords:** horror film; neoliberalism; popular culture; state of exception; state narrative

**Introduction**

“Tonight allows people a release from all the hatred and the violence that they keep up inside them.”

James Sandin (*The Purge 2013)*

Since 2013, cinema audiences have been offered a frightening possibility for the near future of the United States. In this new America, on one night, twelve hours, from 7pm to 7am, there is no law. Crime, including assault and murder, is allowed, but on this night there is no protection, no rescue, and no one to call for help. Citizens have the choice of barricading themselves in their homes, or taking to the streets to harm or be harmed. As the drama unfolds onscreen, audiences wonder: what would I do? Where would I hide? Could this really happen?

This article addresses the question of how and in what ways popular culture can critique and resist narratives that support and reproduce the identity of the state, and claims that dystopian and horror films have an important role in how the understanding of the state is negotiated. I argue that *The Purge* film franchise presents a dystopian picture of the United States that conceptualises and challenges the intersections of structural economic inequality and racism in the neoliberal state[[1]](#footnote-1), and as it develops, a warning about the dangers inherent in the rise of reactionary politics in times of perceived crisis. The franchise sheds light on the ongoing project of building the American state through a fictionalized interpretation of existent exclusion and violence that coalesces around economic and racial injustice. Through a quite literal materialisation of Agamben’s (2005) state of exception as the suspension of law, the Purge itself creates a temporally bound lawlessness in which all Americans are at least vulnerable, but this vulnerability is neither felt nor intended to be felt equally by all citizens. Economic privilege and exclusion, with its intimate connection to racialised privilege and exclusion, determines the boundaries between full citizens and marginalized Others, though these boundaries are always permeable.

In what follows, I discuss the importance of dystopian horror film by situating it in a broader discussion of the value of popular culture and popular entertainment in international relations. Specifically, popular culture and popular entertainment such as horror films play a role in how the identity of the state is produced, understood, and at times resisted through their narratives. As cultural artefacts, horror and dystopian films in particular reflect and help to articulate ongoing narratives of the projects of state-building, particularly around state identity, and the exclusions within these narratives. By presenting a distortion of state narratives, horror dystopian films can constitute a site of contestation in the ongoing process of narrative statebuilding. I then introduce *The Purge* franchise, providing a synopsis of the four instalments. Working through an interpretative analysis of the franchise, I suggest it as a valuable artefact in articulating, exploring, and resisting narratives that erase the particular marginalisations and exclusions of some citizens of the neoliberal state, and for opening up a discussion as to how these fictional representations shape responses to these narratives.

*The Purge* films were not critically acclaimed[[2]](#footnote-2), but for all its lack of critical reception, the franchise has moments of clear self-awareness as well as political interest, and performed reasonably well in gross income[[3]](#footnote-3). Across the films, there is a marked descent into the spectacle of violence typical of a B-movie horror film after the political and social messages of the films have been communicated. There is no attempt at subtlety or dawning realisations of the real horror on the part of the viewer, and as the franchise evolves, the already-present nature of these horrors becomes more apparent.

**Narrating the state: Popular culture and state identity**

Cinema has a place in politics. Popular culture and popularly consumable forms of art, of which film is one medium, allow for expressions and representations of contemporary social and political climates. There has been significant work in the study of popular culture in international relations (Nexon and Neumann 2006, Stimmer 2017, Dyson 2015) and in security studies (Hanksa 2014) Importantly, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott (2009, 159), and Clapton and Shepherd (2017, 8), pose and address questions of what we can see when we take popular culture seriously in international relations. What can be considered entertainment can also be a means by which audiences engage with and understand broader political and social contexts. Popular culture does more than represent the external world, but rather is active in its constitution of that world (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 6). Popular culture and popular entertainment shape, synthesize, and digest what audiences understand about the world around them. Nexon and Neumann (2006, 7) argue that entertainment often “takes the form of *second-order representation,* in that its narratives re-present elements of social and political life through a layer of fictional representation.” These second-order representations may not only help audiences to make sense of their political world, but can also shape their actions within that world.

Popular culture makes up and feeds into a “terrain of ‘exchange’, ‘negotiation’, ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’” where the political can be constituted (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 156). Popular culture here not only reflects the political, but shapes what may be political (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009). It can provide a means by which people can consider and understand the socio-political everyday through second-order representations of the socio-political that “are often more significant sources of knowledge about politics and society” (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 8). In other words, popular culture matters for the study of politics, not only because it represents the political, but because it can shape what may be political in the minds of audiences, provide a comfortable and familiar terrain of engagement, and shape how the idea of the political can be synthesized, and accepted or resisted.

Popular culture, then, matters for politics because stories matter, for meaning-making and for identity coherence. Here state-building is understood as an ongoing process of the negotiation and narration of the identity, and indeed the ontological security and sovereignty, of the state. The nature of the state, its sovereignty and security, is continuously reiterated through performances that make up the terrain of international politics. The state is, as Buzan (1991, 63) argues, “more an idea held in common by a group of people than it is a physical organism.” This is not, either here or in Buzan’s (1991) work, to suggest that territoriality is unimportant to the state, but to suggest rather that identity matters for states and to place popular culture within the matrices of how those identities are produced and understood.

Campbell (1998) reads the United States as in particular need of its narrative in articulating itself as a state. While he argues that “[n]o state possesses a prediscursive, stable identity,” this project is paramount to the United States in particular because of its particular history (Campbell 1998, 91). Drawing on the work on performativity, gender, and the body (Butler 1990), Campbell (1998) reads the state as similarly performatively constituted, its identity always unstable and permeable, and its legitimacy contingent on the (re)production of its “imagined political community” (Anderson 1991 in Campbell 1998). His work compellingly traces a historicised narrative of the United States and the particular ways in which these narratives make possible the role of the United States in international politics.

Viewing the state as a being that exists extant to any narrative attempt to understand or shape it speaks to a commitment to what Campbell (1998, 4) calls an epistemic realism, which he defines as an understanding that “the world comprises objects whose existence is independent of ideas or beliefs about them.” In contrast to this epistemic realism, here popular culture is situated within the dynamics of how the state is discursively produced and sustained through certain narratives, and challenged or disrupted through others. This is line not only with Campbell (1998) but also with Weber’s argument “that sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but subjects in progress” (Weber 1998, 78). Weber reads the notion of state sovereignty through a performative lens, drawn from Butler (1990). Read in this way, there is no necessary “doer behind the deed” (Butler 1990, 195) in the question of how the state comes into being, but that the identity and sovereignty of the state comes about through performances of that sovereignty (Weber 1998). Both Campbell (1998) and Weber (1998, 2006) highlight foundational concerns of American identity that circulate in these narratives – a combination of “nationalism, eschatology, chauvinism” (Campbell 1998, 133), and a sense of moral agency and authority (Weber 2006).

If the identity of the state is determined by the practices of the state and the stories the state tells about itself, then these stories can be considered important parts of the process that is state-building and state-being. Popular culture, then, can be a useful tool for understanding state narratives, as artefacts of popular culture can be both complicit in and resistant to these narratives. Weber (2006), for examples, examines the production of a kind of “Americanness” related to morality in a series of film depictions of war in ways that support and challenge certain narratives. This ongoing state-building project produces an effect of both the state and its sovereignty as fixed and determined – in other words, as an ontological certainty; however, this project is productive of the state that “it claims merely to represent” (Butler 1990, 3). In other words, the state (in this case the United States) is viewed as a stable concept within international relations, but its nature is continuously being reiterated, and in some cases, challenged.

*The (horror) stories states tell*

With an understanding of the importance of popular culture for international relations, particularly in investigating the stories that states tell about themselves, I turn to possible sites of opposition – spaces where resistance, confusion, and fear around the state narrative take their own narrative form. Horror and dystopian entertainment provide interesting and compelling spaces for negotiating and engaging with these ongoing political narratives. As genres, horror and dystopian fictions reflect broader social anxieties (Cherry 2009) and present a frightening future based on the contemporary (Weldes 2003). Horror and dystopia are not always the same, and dystopia can also fall into categories such as fantasy and science fiction, as well as stand as a discrete category.

Nelson (2005, 382) argues that the power of horror film is in the subtext and the confrontation it forces with the horrors of everyday life. There is particular power in horror films to make sense of, or to attempt to make sense of, the horror of the everyday in films following 9/11. Trauma, and specifically historic and national trauma, features centrally in discussions of horror films post 9/11 as attempts to understand these traumas (Lowenstein 2005, Blake 2013). Briefel and Miller (2011, 3) argue that post-9/11, horror “emerged as a rare protected space in which to critique the tone and content of public discourse.” This is not to suggest that horror only provided social critique and exploration of the taboo following 9/11, as Creed (1993) illustrates, but rather that the ability of horror to discuss the undiscussable became important in the “you’re with us or against us” context of American politics in the aftermath (Briefel and Miller 2011, 2-3). Unlike the films discussed across Briefel and Miller’s (2011) volume, *The Purge* franchise is better understood as a post-post-9/11 than a post-9/11 artefact, taking on the horrors of the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of resistance to neoliberal economic policies, and the considerable social impact of movements such as Black Lives Matter. The franchise is less about the fear of invasion or an otherwise external threat, rather focussing on internal crises and the potential dangers of reactionary political responses.

In the next section, I turn to the films of the franchise themselves, providing a summary of each before moving into an interpretive analysis of the franchise as a whole. This article positions *The Purge* franchise as a lens through which to examine, interrogate, and experience the questions of law, security, and inequality in the ongoing narrative project of statecraft in the United States. I understand *The Purge* franchise as a “vernacular theorisation” (Grayson 2013, see also Randall 2010) of neoliberalism and the structural violence of inequality in the United States that presents a dystopic view of governance and the possibilities for resistance therein. The intertextual relationship, or the extent to which the films rely on other texts in order to be read (Weldes 2001, Van Veeren 2009), between the United States in and out of the film and the particular distortions of familiar scenes and narratives open up the spaces for the contestation of dominant state narratives.

***The Purge* Franchise**

To understand the value of *The Purge* films in interrogating the narratives of the United States, I turn now to a summary of the franchise itself that draws out certain narrative themes of economic, and later racial injustice. This discussion presents the films in the order of their cinematic release, in order to highlight the extent to which the franchise moves back and forth across time, and to which they pick up events that are contemporary or otherwise salient at the time of their release. The films themselves are more the product of the time in which they premiered than the time upon which they reflect, even in cases where, as in the third instalment, they are purported to be reasonably far in the future, or in the fourth, which occurs in the (albeit recent) past.

Set in 2022, *The Purge* (2013) opens with text describing the “new America”: crime and unemployment are both at all-time lows, with unemployment specifically named as being less than 1 percent of the population. We are told that these low crime rates and high employment are because of an annual event known as the Purge, where for twelve hours on one night of the year (from 7pm 21 March to 7 am 22 March), all crime (and explicitly we are told that this includes murder) is permitted. We are introduced to this “America, a nation reborn” through a series of short scenes from security cameras that span annual Purge nights from 2017-2021. We learn that the Purge was introduced and then enshrined in law by an emerging right-wing, reactionary political party known as the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA), and that the leadership of the NFFA and the introduction of the Purge have signified the “rebirth” of the United States.

*The Purge* (2013) is set in an affluent neighbourhood that has secured itself for the event while at the same time not anticipating that it will be impacted. The protagonists, Mary and James Sandin and their two children, Zoe and Charlie, anticipate a quiet, even a dull night in upper class bliss. We watch with them the emergency broadcast announcing the start of the Purge and listen to the sirens signalling commencement. The family separates to their own activities, and the cinematic drama of the film begins when Charlie takes pity on a homeless man who is being pursued by Purgers, known as The Stranger, and lets him into their home. The Purgers besiege the Sandins, who are rescued by their neighbours, who immediately turn on them because they are resentful of the family’s economic success that year. James is fatally shot by one his neighbours, who then threaten Mary and the children until they are rescued by the Stranger, who assists Mary in holding the assailants hostage at her dining room table until the end of the Purge. The film ends with Mary thanking the Stranger, who wishes her luck before leaving the house. The surviving Sandins stand at their open front door and stare out into their street as we hear sirens and breaking news reports informing us of the success of the Purge.

*The Purge: Anarchy* (2014) gives us a broader view of the events of Purge Night by bringing us into the streets of Los Angeles. *Anarchy* (2014) opens with vignettes of the protagonists’ lives hours before Commencement: we meet Eva and her daughter Cali, and the financial difficulties that haunt them, Liz and Shane, a young married couple arguing about their impending separation, and the redemptive hero, Leo Barnes. There are early indications of resistance, as with Cali we watch a video of anti-Purge activist Carmelo Johns who decries the “redistribution of wealth upward through killing” that defines the Purge. We follow them as they attempt to navigate the city in search of safety after Eva and Cali are forced from their home by a quasi-military operation that invades their apartment complex, led by the main antagonist Big Daddy, and Liz and Shane are stranded. All four converge on Leo, who postpones his revenge mission against the man who killed his son to get the four to safety. All five are captured and auctioned off to wealthy elites who wish to safely “hunt” kidnapped members of the lower classes. Events turn in the hunting ground, as the group are rescued by Carmelo’s anti-purge activists (which includes The Stranger) just moments after Shane is killed. Liz joins the resistance fighters to avenge Shane, and Eva and Cali follow Leo to the house of the man responsible for his son’s death. Leo ultimately spares the man after breaking into his home, only to be shot by Big Daddy upon exiting the house, who is in turn killed. The film ends as Eva and Cali rush Leo to a nearby hospital as the Purge concludes.

*The Purge: Election Year* (2016), is set years later and follows Presidential candidate Senator Charlie Roan, an outspoken opponent of the Purge and a threat to the ruling NFFA Party, and the head of her security team, Leo Barnes. In an attempt to remove Senator Roan and the threat she poses, the NFFA announces that the rules protecting certain government officials are suspended. On Purge Night, through Roan, Leo, and three other protagonists (Laney, Marcos, and Joe), audiences hide from NFFA mercenaries and are introduced to underground triage and ambulance services that provide emergency medical care to the injured during Purge Night. Upon leaving a makeshift hospital, Roan is kidnapped and held hostage as a sacrifice for the NFFA’s Midnight Purge Mass, before being rescued by a group led by Leo and Dante Bishop, who we know as The Stranger. The group is involved in a shootout with NFFA loyalists in which nearly every character is killed apart from Roan, Leo, Laney, and Marcos. The film ends with the election two months later, which Roan wins in a landslide and declares a suspension of the Purge.

*The First Purge* (2018) prefaces the franchise. We are introduced to a familiar landscape, a United States in economic crisis and in the grips of an opioid epidemic. Out of this emerges a new political party, the NFFA, who introduce the “social experiment” we come to know as the Purge on Staten Island. The main story centres around Nya, an activist, her younger brother Isaiah, and Dmitri, a local drug lord, as they navigate the streets of Staten Island during the Purge, while in a control centre the Experiment is witnessed by NFFA members and staff associated with Dr. May Updale, a behavioural scientist who designed the experiment. Dmitri discovers that some of the gangs participating in the Purge are actually mercenaries, and the night becomes about survival in the face of government-sanctioned extermination. That the NFFA have organised the Purge to eliminate the poor is revealed, Dr. Updale is killed for uncovering this, and NFFA mercenaries invade the apartment tower where Nya and her brother are hiding. Dmitri storms the tower and defeats the militarised force, and the film ends with survivors emerging from the tower blocks, as Dmitiri declares that they will fight back.

**“No one is coming to help us”: Vulnerability and abandonment in (the new) America**

As it evolves, the franchiseadopts more of a dystopian orientation from its beginning as a horror film, from a claustrophobic home-invasion slasher in *The Purge* (2013) to a scathing political indictment by *The First Purge* (2018). Certain themes of violence, vulnerability, and struggle in the neoliberal state emerge consistently across the franchise, the most central of which is economic inequality and class conflict. The second central conflict is structural racism, which gathers prominence as the films evolve but remains relatively side-lined until *The First Purge* (2018). Underscoring both forms of structural violence is the already present spectre of physical violence, particularly gun violence, in the United States. These form “quilting points” (Shepherd 2012, 119) that hold the multi-dimensional narratives of each of the four films together, and importantly for this article provide the basis for engagement.

There are multiple ways in which *the Purge* franchise can be read – as a commentary on class warfare, the vulnerability of racialised and lower-income communities in terms of violence, protection, and access to medical care, or the violence within American society. There are also multiple ways of theorising the Purge – as an understanding of regulatory and bio-power (Foucault 1977), as producing precarity (Butler 2006, Butler 2009), and as a form of a state of exception (Agamben 2005). *The Purge* franchise functions as a narrative that articulates the already-present states of vulnerability and marginalisation through economic exclusion and its intersections with structural racism. It suggests not only the complicity of the state but the dystopian possibility of the reliance of the state upon these exclusions for its very survival. *The Purge* franchise provides a view of vulnerabilities already present in the United States and distorts them into a dystopian landscape, but one that still feels quite familiar in neoliberal times.

There is a peculiar correlation between the right to law and the right to life in the violence and death of the Purge. We see this quickly in the parameters of the Purge itself; namely, that the Purge is formally introduced to viewers in an emergency broadcast that warns citizens of the suspension not only of law and criminality but the suspension of emergency services, including (and especially important) emergency medical. We are invited to watch and listen to the commencement of the Purge through an emergency television broadcast with the protagonists of each film. The broadcast concludes with six blasts of a siren before silence falls over deserted streets and apprehensive citizens. The text changes slightly over the years, but fundamentally as follows:

This is your emergency broadcast system announcing the commencement of the Annual Purge sanctioned by the U.S. Government. Weapons of class 4 and lower have been authorized for use during the Purge. All other weapons are restricted. Government officials of ranking 10 have been granted immunity from the Purge and shall not be harmed. Commencing at the siren, any and all crime, including murder, will be legal for 12 continuous hours. Police, fire, and emergency medical services will be unavailable until tomorrow morning at 7 a.m., when the Purge concludes. Blessed be our New Founding Fathers and America, a nation reborn. May God be with you all.(*The Purge,* 2013*)*

The broadcast makes explicit two things: first, this night of legalized violence includes a suspension of emergency services, and second, murder is specifically named. In some respects, the suspension of emergency services makes sense given the main trope of the film is the temporary legalisation of any and all violence – the police cannot be called. But there is no real justification for the suspension of emergency medical services, which is taken for granted as a logical extension of the suspension of law and access to law enforcement, or a general desertion of public spaces, including hospitals. We have glimpses of the latter being at least potentially untrue in *Election Year* (2016), where we see an underground triage service staffed by volunteer medical personnel[[4]](#footnote-4). We also see that sanitation is not suspended, as *Election Year* (2016) features clean-up crews for the disposal of bodies. Access to healthcare has been a consistent concern in the United States, and articulations around the right to healthcare have formed a considerable part of the political conversation.

That the suspension of medical services is not as straightforward as it may appear is further, albeit briefly, exposed in *Anarchy* (2014), when Big Daddy chastises Leo for saving a mother and daughter: “There’s an unwritten Purge rule, sergeant. Don’t save lives. Tonight we take lives. We make things manageable, for us.” The interaction is brief, but ruptures the common-sense nature of the suspension of emergency medical services by bluntly expressing the need for the destruction of life embedded in the suspension of law. There is thus an immediate, and undiscussed, conflation between the right to the protections of law and the right to life outside of those protections. Where law is suspended, so too are life-saving interventions, and this suspension is revealed as a move to secure the power and control of the state. This is also taken up in accusations against the NFFA in *Election Year* (2016), where protestors make the link between depopulation and less spending on healthcare and other social needs.

Here the suspension of law operates in tandem with the suspension of help and care, which has a particularly severe impact on vulnerable and marginalized populations, which we see in the *The Purge* (2013) with the introduction of The Stranger, who we come to know as Dante Bishop by *Election Year* (2016). He is targeted by a white, upper-class group dressed in school uniforms and masks, who appeal to the Sandin’s sense of class solidarity to persuade them to hand over “the dirty homeless pig, a grotesque menace to our just society, that had the audacity to fight back.” The Stranger/Bishop’s existence is justifiable to the Purgers only inasmuch as he exists to satisfy their need to Purge. The marginalized are repeatedly constituted as “waste populations” that “intrude at the centre of political life as objects of disgust” (Tyler 2013, 19). The already vulnerable take on particularly explicit vulnerabilities for twelve hours every year in the new America.

The relationship between the power of law and the access to the conditions for life positions the motives of depopulation within the parameters of the Purge. It suggests that the intention behind the suspension of the law is specifically to remove parts of the population, which in turn secures survivors when the law is restored. As such the suspension of law is necessary for the functioning of the law. Agamben’s states of exception (2005) and bare lives (1998) are particularly interesting for making additional theoretical sense of *The Purge* franchise and where it sits in the “terrain of exchange” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009) when considered through its role in neoliberalism (Springer 2016). This is for three reasons, and the first is the parallels between the suspension of law in the Purge and the suspension of law in the state of exception, as the Purge itself reflects a simplistic reinterpretation of what Agamben considers in the state of exception, as the suspension of law.

The second is the link made by scholars such as Brown (2006) and Springer (2016) between neoliberalism and the state of exception. Specifically, this refers to what Brown (2006, 695) argues as an instrumentalization of law, which she argues creates the conditions of possibility for the state of exception. The state of exception in Agamben (2005) defines the boundaries of law through its suspension and determines what, or who, is outside it. The state of exception is itself a requirement of the state itself, and this “dialectic relationship”, according to Springer (216, 209-210) determines that the “ongoing abandonment of the Other” is foundational to the authority of the neoliberal state.

Third is the way in which bare life (Agamben 1998) is produced in *The Purge* franchise*.* According to Agamben's (1998) concept of 'bare life', there is life that is infused with political subjectivity and that which is not. Bare life is “life stripped of form and value” (Diken and Lausten 2005, 291) —bare lives are those without political subjectivity that are reduced to circumstances of survival. Bare life is defined to name and create a state of being where law does not apply, and therefore does not protect. It determines the border of what is included and excluded. Downey (2009, 113) argues that for Agamben “[t]he management of ‘bare life’ is…both a primary function of the state and a predicate to [its] emergence”. In other words, bare lives are essential for the constitution of the state and its citizenry by presenting a boundary beyond which the law does not interfere. The exceptional state of those bare lives, who are outside the protection of law, is productive of those are inside the law – inclusion and exclusion are therefore relational.

While the archetypal materiality of the state of exception and bare life within in it is found in the camp (the concentration camp, the refugee camp, the prison camp), the Purge presents a temporally, rather than spatially, bounded zone, in a twelve-hour period that is set on one night. This is a stark departure from Agamben, as the films position the state of exception as an annual rupture of normal functioning. Additionally, while everyone is theoretically vulnerable for a night, what is highlighted is that some are always already vulnerable. This allows the films present a narrative of that which is already abandoned by law in the United States by presenting those who are already abandoned, and the shock of those who believe they can trust in the protection of the state. The importance of this illustration is that it forms the main horror of the films, which is in their potentiality, and the extent to which the horrors are already present. Furthermore, the suspension of law here is a protection mechanism for the state, and has the effect of legitimising the NFFA regime because of its overall effect of lower unemployment and crime rates.

**The neoliberal subject and/as bare life**

“Your home tells me that you’re good folk, just like us: one of the haves.”

The Polite Leader (*The Purge*, 2013)

The dystopian power of the Purge comes in part because of its distortion of liberal narratives of the American state, such as wealth opportunity and freedoms that are granted and protected by rights. Like so much of the dystopian genre, the real power of any piece is in its ability to raise the spectre of reality regardless of how absurd the conceit may or may not be. Dystopias are intended to present a version of reality marked by “a sinister perfection of order” (Kunkel 2008, 90). We are made aware of some of the “benefits” through the repetition in the opening frames of the films that both crime and unemployment are at record lows as a result of the annual Purge. The sinister nature of this utopian society is revealed as audiences learn that these low crime and unemployment rates are paid for with the lives of the poor, sick, and vulnerable, and is underscored by an ends-justifying-means attitude towards the Purge.

Here, I analyse the extent to which *The Purge* franchise interrogates the anxieties and compulsions that surround neoliberalism and the positions of citizens within a neoliberal state. Inequality is positioned in particularly interesting ways in neoliberalism, largely as it “is rendered invisible *as social* phenomena to the extent that each individual’s social condition is judged as nothing other than the effect of [their] own choices” (Hamann 2009, 43). Because the individual is valorised in terms of rational self-governance, the neoliberal state is able to wash its hands of individuals that fail to engage with it successfully (Hamann 2009). This also has the effect of erasing, as Hamann (2009) argues, the structural nature of inequalities, shifting the burden from the state to the individual. This has the effect in the Purge of a total abandonment of the individual, and only those who are able to engage successfully can claim minimal protection. Those who are not able to engage with neoliberalism, the Othered of the neoliberal state, are abandoned, and it is through this abandonment that states of exception are produced (Springer 2016).

The extent to which civic-minded and privileged citizens are complicit is highlighted in the discussions surrounding the protection and exercise of rights, and the behaviour of proper neoliberal subjects. One of the earliest scenes of the franchise includes a radio-show host asking the critical question of the Purge and if its true purpose is to eliminate vulnerable populations, but quickly adds “either way, crime *is* down. The economy *is* flourishing.” The main ends of the Purge – a lower crime rate and a thriving economy – are met, and the American people accept, or are forced to accept, the means by which this is achieved. That this is accomplished through the deaths of vulnerable and marginalized populations is implicitly accepted as a worthy sacrifice. Later, in the Sandin home, Charlie becomes visibly unsure of the Purge, and his father reassures him by reminding him of how good for the country the Purge is, and adds that Charlie does not remember “how bad it was before, the poverty, all the crime.” Still apprehensive, Charlie asks if they would kill someone if they felt the need. When James answers affirmatively, the camera focuses on Mary’s thinly disguised horrified expression. James has thoroughly “bought in” to the Purge, and this is in part because the real violence of the Purge is, initially, something that “other people” do, and “other people” experience.

Peculiarly, the Purge itself becomes embedded and sustained in a discourse of rights within the films, something we are reminded of early in the franchise. Rights such as freedom to act and to speak are valorized, and rights to the protections of law and to life are entirely erased. The previously mentioned radio broadcast that introduces us to James in *The Purge* (2013) features a caller expressing his discomfort with the Purge, saying “the poor can’t afford to protect themselves – they’re the victims tonight.” The host responds: “we’ve all got our own opinions – that’s what makes this country great.” The “right” to an opinion becomes the dominant point in the radio exchange, rather than what is being expressed – that people without certain levels of economic privilege are the most vulnerable during the Purge. Indeed the “right to opinion” in the United States stands as a symbol of American greatness.

The radio exchange highlights that the United States presented in the franchise is one of near-fetishized freedom of speech and expression, and of “rights” that are granted by the government. America is a country of rights, of the right to speech, to expression, and now, to kill on one night a year, and these rights are not merely prioritized over but entirely subsume the right to life. The notion of the “right” to Purge is reiterated throughout the films, notably by the “Polite Leader” (*The Purge*, 2013) and Diego (*Anarchy,* 2014), both of whom specifically frame their violence as a right that others, including potential victims, should allow. This is reflected in contemporary discussions outside this dystopian “new America” around rights in the United States, notably around Second Amendment rights and gun violence. The possessed “right” that is granted outweighs, both within and without the franchise, the harm such a right may cause, and this is an early and key indication of the attempt to subvert comfortable assumptions of American identity. These rights come at very real costs to the disenfranchised, and these costs form the narrative spine of the franchise as a whole. This is reminiscent of Springer’s (2016, 209) discussion of the complacency with which neoliberal subjects approach the exclusions of the neoliberal. There is an impossibility of imagination that removes us from the suffering of others, but Spring (2016, 209) provocatively argues that this complacency is built upon our having “not *yet*” been subjected to its horrors.

We also see the powerful compulsion to behave as “good” neoliberal subjects, and importantly see that this behaviour may not guarantee protection or safety in the end. Characters express their support for the Purge, then lock down their houses and prepare to ride out the night. In *The Purge* (2013), the Sandins and their neighbours faithfully anticipating that their financial security, evidenced by their security system, will ensure their physical safety – their buy-in to the regime should yield protection. The Sandin’s incredible wealth is accrued through the sale of high-specification security systems to people that can afford them – and the success of James’s team in particular attracts the ire of his neighbours as the Sandins build a large extension on their house from the profits. The security systems he sells are revealed to be less than impenetrable, and James admits to Mary when their own house is under attack that they are primarily intended to serve as a deterrent – to look impenetrable rather than actually be impenetrable. That James is killed during the Purge is a betrayal, and that he is killed in retribution for his financial success at the literal expense of his neighbours reveals that even good subjects will be sacrificed. Protection is available to those who can afford it in this “new” America, but that protection is largely a façade when tested and easily penetrable, and such is the precarity of the neoliberal state.

This speaks to the films’ position as post-financial crash, reflecting back an anxiety around the relationship between wealth and security. In *Anarchy* (2014), the protagonists stumble upon a group of homeless people hiding in the subway tunnels – Leo reports back to the group that they do not pose a threat a threat to them, as these people are “only trying to survive”, before they are brutally killed as the protagonists escape – or rather, before their murder provides the opportunity for the protagonists to escape. In the same film, viewers learn that the attack on a housing project by a militaristic operation was sanctioned by the government, and that other projects have likewise been targeted. The new forms of security, including economic security, function on exclusions of the poor, and so too are communities that are marginalized on the basis of race as it intersects with economic inequality. Access to the boundary between precarity and security is negotiated according to privileges that are firmly policed along economic lines.

Race and racism function in particular ways within the logics of neoliberalism, specifically as “neoliberalism reif[ies] racial hierarchies” (Roberts 2016, 266), while simultaneously, ostensibly erasing race and racism. Neoliberalism purportedly creates a “postracial” “level playing field” (Roberts 2016, 262). Importantly within this “post”racial neoliberalism, individual merit is contingent on one’s social contributions and capital (Roberts 2016, 262). This is related to Enck-Wanzer’s (2011) work on racial neoliberalism, and his argument that race and racism become regarded as historical phenomena jettisoned from the present. Attempts to call attention to racial injustices or to solicit state support are “met with resistance, ridicule, and reactionary politics” (Enck-Wanzer 2011, 25).

Enck-Wanzer (2011, 25) holds popular culture specifically responsible for what he calls the “neoliberal fantasy of personal responsibility”, and its erasure of race and racism. *The Purge* franchise, on balance, struggles to break with its complicity in this regard in some respects. The first three instalments allow class exclusions to remain foregrounded while racial injustices remain in the background, which is particularly interesting in terms of the erasure of race and racism in neoliberalism, and in terms of Bonilla-Silva’s (2017) “colour-blind racism”. This changes with *The First Purge* (2018), as what were nods to structural racism in the first three films are bluntly shouted by central characters throughout *The First Purge* (2018). The emphasis in the film is repeatedly upon the disinclination of the Staten Island residents to participate: despite being offered a financial incentive for participation in addition to being paid to stay in Staten Island for the duration of “the Experiment”, the majority of residents do not, at least initially, participate, and instead gather in churches or form block parties, sheltering and protecting in communities. There are some instances of petty crimes such as vandalism, but overall the level of violence is low enough that the NFFA enlists white supremacist militias and (ostensibly Russian) mercenaries to incite violence. In an intentional, jarring interpretation of contemporary events, a white supremacist militia storms a church in which residents are sheltering and massacres nearly all inside. The recall to the June 2015 shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina by a white supremacist grounds the film in present threats to communities of colours. In a protest staged as people are signing up to what will be called the Purge, Nya explicitly highlights the structural racial violence that makes possible events like the Purge, shouting “This is another way to keep the brown and the black people down” (*The First Purge* 2018).

**Conclusions: “What’s your Purge plan?”**

Since, as Nelson (2005, 382) suggests, “the subtexts of horror films push us to penetrate the repressions, face the evils, and undo them,” horror films suggest in some ways a call to political action, or at the very least a recognition of already present social and political evils. Yet unlike other horror films that invite us to stare down the evils embedded in subtexts of vampires or other monsters, and to trust in the authorities of the military, the police, and so on as in the most recent adaptation of *War of the Worlds* (2005), *The Purge* franchise, like other dystopian examples, suggests to us that the evil we must face may be the state itself.

The monsters of *The Purge* franchise are typically not the individual Purgers, but the night itself – the Purgers are simply a product of the Purge.

 Repeatedly, protagonists flee from militarized groups connected with the ruling NFFA in the three later films. In *Anarchy* (2014), the five protagonists come across a retrofitted truck designed for the Purge. When Liz asks who it could belong to after noting that the truck has access to traffic camera footage, which should only be accessible by the government, Cali replies: “maybe you just answered your own question.” The active role of the state in perpetuating and perpetrating violence becomes a recurrent feature of the franchise after its departure from the wealthy neighbourhood featured in *The Purge* (2013). Economic injustice is whispered in overheard radio broadcasts in *The Purge* (2013), but by *The First Purge* (2018) it is shouted verbally into megaphones as intersected with racial injustice, and visually in appearances by groups dressed as the Ku Klux Klan. *The First Purge* (2018) is the least understated in its references to real-world events that draw the viewer in to the visual narrative of the violence to which marginalized communities are differentially vulnerable, both in and out of the narrative universe of the franchise.

This warning certainly plays out in the franchise, though whether we are led to feel optimistic or disheartened in the face of it is not consistently managed across the different films. There is, however, a steady creep towards optimism that emerges chronologically according to release date, which mark the beginning and the end viewed chronologically within the films themselves. That optimism emerges as the new America collides with the existent America, and the films become more in tune with the narratives surrounding them: for instance, Senator Roan (*Election Year* 2016) makes her presidential run against the NFFA in the same year as former Senator and Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton’s campaign. The film predicted the wrong outcome, and returned with *The First Purge* (2018), which offers the most consistent and explicit representation of the pivotal roles of racism and structural violence that underpin the new America, and speaks to campaigns for racial justice such as Black Lives Matter, and Showing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ).

Shepherd (2013, 4-5) discusses the importance of the “happy ending”, or at least the linear narrative that provides closure and some form of catharsis. Unlike *The Purge* (2013)*,* with its resigned survivors facing their unchanged reality at the end of the film, *The First Purge* (2018) ends on note of resistance and resilience – although having been released as a prequel, one that we know is doomed to fail in the short term. *Election Year* (2016) concludes with the election of an anti-Purge presidential candidate who survived a sustained assassination attempt, and the film (together presumably with the franchise as a whole) ends with the suspension of the Purge. Read linearly through its own timeline, it suggests that resistance can achieve its aims through the ballot box. However, read linearly through the viewers’ timeline, it suggests that protest, literally “fighting back”, will save the soul of the country, as the film ends with a growing crowd of Staten Island residents forming behind Dmitri and Nya. This “fighting back” call is similarly echoed in *Anarchy* (2014), but viewers ultimately know that while this resistance may lead to growing disillusionment with the Purge (and certainly by *Election Year* it appears to do just that), but not to its end.

The franchise continuously challenges viewers to ask where their security really comes from, and upon whom they can rely depending on their own position within racial and economic hierarchies in society. It suggests that the state will continue to be the provider of security only to those who can afford it, and those that live somewhere on the margins are not only unprotected, but the targets of the state of exception. For these people, resistance and rebellion are the only options. And resistance does, temporarily and in some respects, succeed: most of the Sandins, those not responsible for selling the not-quite-enough security systems, are saved (*The Purge* 2013), the hunted become the hunters (*Anarchy* 2014), the progressive candidate wins (*Election Year* 2016), the government mercenaries are repelled (*The First Purge* 2018). Protagonists rely on themselves, each other, their money, their personal security details. Time and again, protagonists in the films find themselves running from militarized groups that sympathize with the state, often retreating into spaces held by gangs and paramilitary resistance networks. The message here appears to be that we are safer at the margins than we are with the state.

*The Purge* franchise invites viewers to face and undo the present horrors of the states of exception that surround or engulf us, and functions as a call to action in a time of exception and crisis (albeit a confused call to action, a *do something* rather than a *take this action*). The crises that lead to the rise of the NFFA and the instalment of the Purge are present and real: the films take place in an America where a second economic crisis in 2014 propel a right-wing, populist party to power, where racism and class fears are riled, and crime appears as an all-encompassing threat. Importantly none of these are beyond the realm of possibility in contemporary politics. Reading the Purge itself as a state of exception allows us to see the possibilities in an ongoing time of crisis and a desperate call to action, wherein a state that views itself besieged by violence, crime, and scarcity ensures that the law is upheld by its temporary but regular suspension. In effect, it shows, as does much of dystopia, that the conditions of possibility for this kind of state are already present, and the premise not so far-fetched. Importantly it suggests that for some, the Purge is omnipresent.

How, then, can the functions of the state of exception be resisted: through the ballot or through the march? The call to action in *The Purge* franchise is anything but clear, which can be understood as part of the difficulties of imagining possibilities outside of what seems particularly enduring. Together, the endings of the four films suggest that there are multiple possibilities to end the Purge, but as the franchise continues on, these possibilities appear increasingly distant. We can see throughout the franchise the clarity of the parallels between what begins as a decidedly B-movie home invasion story and the universe it then creates, and the tumultuous political moment(s) from which it emerges. What the franchise suggests is that already present in the United States are bare livesand that in such presence, there is no guarantee of security, and it charges us to contest the valorisation of the individual over the community; to, as Senator Roan implores (*Election Year* 2016), call upon the better angels of our nature.

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*The Purge: Anarchy,* filmproduced by Michael Bay, Jason Blum, Phillip Dawe, Luc Etienne, Andrew Form, Bradley Fuller, Sebastien Lemercier, Jeanette Volturno (distributed by Universal Pictures International, 2014), 35 mm, 103 min.

*The Purge: Election Year,* film produced by Michael Bay, Jason Blum, Phillip Dawe, Luc Etienne, Andrew Form, Bradley Fuller, Sebastien Lemercier, Couper Samuelson, Jeanette Volturno (distributed by Universal Pictures International, 2014), D-Cinema, 108 min.

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1. Neoliberalism and the neoliberal state are complex and contested concepts, and are here understood in line with Hamann (2009) and MacLeavy, Birch, and Springer (2016). Neoliberalism applies a competitive market relationship to broader social relations and valorises the individual and the responsibility of the individual for themselves (see MacLeavy, Birch, and Springer 2016, 28), what Hamann (2009, 47) refers to as an “economization of society and responsibilization of individuals”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Individually, *The Purge* (2013) received an average critics’ score of 38% out of 146 reviews counted, *Anarchy* (2014) a score of 56% out of 131 reviews counted, *Election Year* (2016) a score of 54% out of 147 reviews counted, and *The First Purge* a score of 53% out of 174 reviews counted on the website Rotten Tomatoes. All four films preformed worse or on par in audience scores on the same site. I chose Rotten Tomatoes for this information specifically because of its aggregation of reviews and its juxtaposition against audience reactions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The First Purge* (2018) performed best overall, grossing $136,236, 795 in total ($69,086, 325 in the US). *The Purge* (2013) grossed $89, 328, 627 in total ($64, 473, 115 din the US). (IMDb, n.d.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While not discussed in this article, as it is outside the film franchise, the recently released Amazon series *The Purge* addresses this by naming hospitals as safe zones that are off-limits to Purge activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)