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## **Activist Horror Film: The Genre as Tool for Change**

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# Activist Horror Film: The Genre as Tool for Change

## Abstract

It is increasingly common for scholars and journalists to make claims of horror cinema's potential to engage with socio-political realities and, in so doing, identify grave social injustices. This article argues that, if one is to make a true assessment of the extent to which horror films might effect social change, one needs to look towards activist communities within which filmmakers are using the genre as part of a broader effort to do precisely that. In so doing, the article theorizes 'Activist Horror Film' in relation to a British short film, *The Herd*, a work cultivated as part of the vegan-feminist protest movement. The article begins by situating *The Herd* within the context of scholarship about socially-charged horror films, before considering the film's broader activist context and that of its production, the crowd-funding campaign that led to its completion, the film's content, its presence at festivals and online, and its afterlife within circles of vegan/animal welfare activism. This article contends that *The Herd* is easily distinguished from other socially-aware horror films of the contemporary moment, for the activism of its makers is what drives it, and is the context that birthed it and within which it continues to be shown.

## Key words

- Activism;
- British horror cinema;
- Veganism;
- Feminism;
- Short film

## Introduction

It has become increasingly commonplace for scholars and journalists to make claims of horror cinema's potential to engage with socio-political realities and, in so doing, identify grave social injustices. Writing in a recent article for CNN, Brandon Tensley (2019) argues that, in the wake of a recent spate of 'political horror' movies, 'horror films emerge as [the] best political commentary of our times.' One film Tensley cites, *Ready or Not* (Matt

Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, 2019), is said to echo the disgruntlement of US citizens who, according to recent polling, ‘think that those in power don’t care about them’. The film, which sees a woman hunted by her wealthy in-laws on the grounds of their private estate, ‘uses satire, allegory, and heaps of gore to rebuke capricious ruling elites who will do anything to hold onto their power’ (Tensley 2019). Tensley also names *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017)—‘which takes aim at white limousine liberals’—and the Korean-made *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019)—‘which offers a chilling and at times devastating portrait of class conflict’—as further examples of a growing trend of horror films that ‘rebuke’ power structures (see, for example, McCollum 2019).

If the genre is proving itself—now more than ever, if some commentators are to be believed—as a fertile site for progressive critiques of global power dynamics, one is often left wondering what the filmmakers’ sociopolitical and/or sociocultural endgame is (should they have one at all). There are many horror films that, historically, filmmakers and case-makers have claimed are damning critiques of specific cultural moments or political administrations, from, for example, America’s controversial involvement in the Vietnam War (Simon 2000), to the mistreatment of civilians during the War in Iraq (Lowenstein 2011), to spikes in far right violence during the Trump era (McCollum 2019). But the vast majority of films said to be about such (and other) things—if one agrees that they are in actuality about what commentators or their makers claim—do not push in any meaningful way towards the antidote of said issues. While such works can ‘provide opportunities to find collective comfort in truly bewildering, chaotic times,’ they ultimately ‘don’t offer actual solutions’ (Tensley 2019). Their makers are artists, not activists.

If one is to make a true assessment of the extent to which horror films might lead to social change, one needs to look towards activist communities within which filmmakers are using the genre as part of a broader effort to do precisely that. The present article thus

considers early stirrings in what I am calling ‘Activist Horror Film’, a type of horror film cultivated as part of widespread protest movements and produced beyond formal industry parameters. Activist Horror Film, this article maintains, relies on explicit (as opposed to implicit or abstract) engagement with the cultural moment, is anchored to discrete sociopolitical and sociocultural causes, and is intentionally situated by its makers within the parameters of activist circles, driven by grass-roots-level resources, with a clear view to influence and then alter the behavior of individuals.

The article takes as its case study *The Herd* (2014), a crowd-funded British short, directed by vegan-feminist and street activist Melanie Light. Described by case-makers and a prominent animal welfare charity as ‘the first vegan-feminist horror film’ (Viva!, ‘The Herd’), *The Herd* is a condemnation of the practices of what Critical Animal Studies scholars refer to as the Animal Industrial Complex (AIC): specifically the factory farming of cows, and the routine exploitation they endure throughout the processes of industrialized dairy production (Stephens-Griffin 2017, pp. 8-11). The film aims to generate empathy in the non-vegan (meat-eating, milk-drinking, animal product-consuming) viewer, enlightening them to the plight of dairy cattle by depicting *women* being farmed *en masse* for their breast milk. Human females, in other words, are used in the film to allegorize real-world suffering endured by non-human females. The film confronts the viewer with imagery designed to shock, aligns the exploitative practices of factory farming with abuses of patriarchy, and thereby seeks to challenge the viewers’ morality and sustenance choices. In adopting these tactics, the goal—as per activist video, documentaries and media campaign strategies—is to help the viewer realize their ‘speciesist’ ways and to convert them to a vegan lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Speciesism’ is a term used by vegans/activists to refer to what they see as human discrimination towards non-human animals, through entrapment, butchery and so on, in the same way that ‘racism’ is used to characterise the actions of those who discriminate against those of a different cultural heritage (Singer 2002, pp.1-23).

This article begins by situating *The Herd* within the context of scholarship about socially-charged horror films, before moving on to consider the film's broader activist and production contexts, the crowd-funding campaign that led to its completion, the film's content, its presence at film festivals and online, and its afterlife within circles of vegan/animal welfare activism. I contend that *The Herd*, as an Activist Horror Film, is easily distinguished from other socially-aware horror films of the contemporary moment, for the activism of its makers is what drives it, and is the context that birthed it and within which it continues to be shown.

### **Horror film and the potential for activism**

Claims to the horror genre's penchant for reflecting global trauma remain at the forefront of much scholarly analysis. The so-called 'reflectionist' approach to analysing horror movies (Hills 2011), however, is not without its critics. For example, Steve Jones (2013, p. 64-5), in his discussion of the mid-2000s 'torture porn' cycle, makes the point that, when critics—and, at times, filmmakers—anchor emblematic films such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) solely to 'immediate political events' such as the Iraq War, they overlook that 'violence and cruelty are not only contemporary politico-historical concerns' but are, in fact, among 'horror's staple themes', and have been since the genre's inception. It's easy to empathise with Jones's position given that, in recent scholarship, political readings within horror studies are at times dished out in a rather fast and loose manner, from Douglas Kellner's (2011 cited in Jones 2013, p. 65) reading of the *Saw* films as reflectors of post-9/11 America because (among other factors) the series' antagonist allegedly resembles former Vice President Dick Cheney, to Kevin J. Wetmore's (2012, p. 3) bold assertion that films made after 11 September 2001 are 'about' the War on Terror because they address themes

such as ‘nihilism, despair, random violence and death’. That films exist in a post-9/11 context does not (or should not) presuppose engagement with post 9/11 issues. Besides, in making these bold claims, one ignores the legions of ‘paranoid horror’ films produced since the 1960s, the majority of which, as Andrew Tudor argued in 1989, lack closure or any sense of hope come their bleak conclusions (see also Tudor 2002, pp. 106-16). As Matt Hills (2011, p. 109) recognises, horror films are oftentimes multiply ‘coded’, and thus can be interpreted in numerous ways. As a consequence, one should ‘refrain from attempting to arrive at, or force into place, any univocal “message”’ (see also Bernard 2014, pp. 27-47).

This is not to say that there are not any instances where contemporary horror film is overtly socially-charged and can therefore be more credibly analysed as reflectionist works. The makers of *Get Out*, for instance, position the film as a social commentary, the action playing out against the backdrop of Trump-era—or at the very least, post-Obama-era—America.<sup>2</sup> For example, in one key (and much discussed) scene, a white, middle-class man expresses how he ‘would have voted for Obama for a third term if [he] could’. For Alison Landsberg (2018, p. 633), such direct engagement with the contemporary political moment is evidence of how *Get Out* ‘uses ... the horror genre ... to expose actually existing racism’, rendering ‘newly visible the very real but often masked racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America’. Simply put: the social context within which the film is set is not ‘veiled or coded’ as scholars have argued of other horror films (Hutchings 1993, p. 65). In the case of *Get Out*, the social context—and, indeed, the anti-racism stance of its makers—is surface-level and unambiguous.

However, while it is irrefutable that *Get Out* is politically-engaged, and despite Landsberg (2018, p. 632) identifying in it qualities akin to that of politicised documentary

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<sup>2</sup> Trump is not referred to by name, yet the film takes place *after* Obama’s second term and thus, one can logically conclude, during Trump’s first term in office.

cinema, one would be pushed to describe the film as an example of *activism* (per se). Just as *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) is said to be reflective of concerns during the Civil Rights struggle, *Last House on The Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) to allegorise the horrors of the Vietnam war, *Hostel* to critique the torture methods deployed by US soldiers on Iraqi terror suspects during the War on Terror and so on, *Get Out* is another in a long history of horror movies that scholars claim to address ‘the terrifying nightmare [of] everyday reality’ (Landsberg 2018, p. 632). Moreover, what Landsberg (2018, p. 632) sees as *Get Out*’s principal aim—to ‘reveal the “truth” of a particular situation, a truth that might otherwise remain elusive’—is not a new idea either. Iconic horror filmmaker David Cronenberg (quoted in Lowenstein 2005, p. 145), for one, once famously declared that his films ‘show the unshowable [and] speak the unspeakable’: a sentiment that is echoed endlessly across academic and popular writing on horror film. *Get Out* is therefore not as innovative in its dealing with ‘truth’ as Landsberg seems to suggest. In fact, the socially-aware aspect of the film is said to have been the reason why its production company, Blumhouse, green-lit it in the first place: that is to say, because films of this sort are proving so popular at the moment. Peele (cited in Mendelson 2016), while admitting to never having set out to write a political horror film, suggested that Blumhouse ‘caught wind’ of the script during the writing process, as the company already had a string of commercially successful, politically-aware films with ‘social appeal’, in its *Purge* (Various, 2013-) franchise. In other words, *Get Out* was at least in part developed because of its broad similarities to a lucrative commercial property that, fortuitously for Peele, was socially and politically engaged. The film is not ‘the uninvited guest, the gatecrasher (sic.)’ of activism, ‘who can be loud, impolite and down right (sic.) troublesome’ (Young 2015, p. 472). On the contrary, *Get Out*, in regard to it being a reflective horror film and product of the filmic mainstream, is unexceptional



Melanie Light's *The Herd*, however, was *devised as activism*, designed to elicit change in a manner akin to street protest, activist video, and media campaigning. As with pro-vegan documentaries such as *Earthlings* (Shaun Monson, 2005), the film looks 'to convey important knowledge and effect personal and social change' (Middleton 2017), in part through mobilising 'a mode of spectatorial discipline' associated with 'the horror film experience' (Middleton 2015, p. 287). However, *The Herd*, as a work of narrative fiction, does not appear 'naked' (288) in the way that *Earthlings*, as a 'compendium of brutally indexical footage of cruelty to animals', appears (287). It lifts its formal and aesthetic properties from elsewhere. As with the campaigns of animal rights organisations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the film relies on the deployment of grisly—and explicitly gendered—imagery, using tropes commonly associated with violent horror film and media as a tool through which to present and critique the AIC. PETA's broad oeuvre features numerous instances of humans—oftentimes women—appearing 'as animals' within the AIC, shackled, caged, displaying bruises or bleeding, as those of circuses, factory farms and so on (Atkins-Sayre 2010, p. 320). Such imagery is resonant with numerous horror films of the last fifteen years, namely those in the 'torture porn' cycle and its antecedents, for which 'narratives are primarily based around protagonists being imprisoned in confined spaces and subjected to physical and/or psychological suffering' (Jones 2013, p. 16). One notable PETA campaign presents a woman as butchered meat, her torso and remaining limbs hanging from chain-hooks as though a carcass in a slaughterhouse (PETA, 'Hooked on Meat'). In adopting such tactics, PETA's campaigns 'effectively blur the distinction between human and nonhuman animals, inviting viewers to rethink their own identities and, thus, their beliefs about animal rights', and thereby 'emphasize the similarities to the Other, visualize the Other's world, and break down visual differences between the two groups' (Atkins-Sayre 2010, p. 311). *The Herd* does something similar, by riffing on PETA's campaign methods

which are, even if indirectly, indebted in varying capacities to images of horror in popular culture, presenting these within the context of a horror film anchored to imagery associated with the torture porn cycle and the films that followed in its wake. The film is a work of Activist Horror Filmmaking for which the impetus behind it, and the political activist context that birthed it, are as significant as the film itself. These two facets are inseparable from the ‘message’ of the film, and the desires of its makers to realise this message in actuality.

Using horror film *as* activism is different to what Landsberg (2018, p. 632) theorizes in relation to *Get Out* as ‘horror vérité’: when films use ‘conventions of horror ... in the context of very real and historical circumstances’ to reveal ‘everyday’ social-political and socio-cultural ills. The desired impact of *The Herd* is not restricted simply to ‘revelation’ as per its content, as Landsberg maintains of horror vérité. Of course, as mentioned in this article’s introduction, revelation is important to *The Herd*’s ultimate effect. Yet, the effect of the film’s revelatory/reflective content is inseparable from many extra-textual factors, not least the visibility of its makers as activists within vegan-feminist circles, and the contexts within which the film is promoted and seen within and beyond these circles. As with other forms of activism, the film exists to ‘take action ... in a way that impacts on organisations and institutions in a way that reflects the values of potential and actual supporters’ (Young 2015, p. 472). Its *directness* is bolstered by Melanie Light’s engagement with street activism (as both protester and campaign leader), her position as a female filmmaker challenging gender stereotypes, and her affiliation with the punk rock community: a subculture in which feminism and animal rights are integral for many members. These factors contribute to *The Herd* being more than merely a social reflector: the film itself is but one factor born of a more intricate web, the components of which abound in the crowdfunding campaign that led to the film’s development, to which I now turn.

## **Crowdfunding *The Herd***

*The Herd* was funded by £5000 in donations accrued through a campaign launched by its makers via the online crowd-funding platform Kickstarter in 2014. Crowd-funding has become a central means through which independent films are made, offering, as Chuck Tryon (2016, p. 433) has it, a viable way for ‘aspiring and even long time professional filmmakers’ to generate a budget in lieu of ‘other [financial] alternatives’. The same ‘democratizing’ principles that characterize crowdfunding also permeate political activist campaigns in the twenty-first century, whereby individuals come together and fund, or deploy through their own labour, campaigns, effecting social change or in the process enhancing their social capital (Ramos Diaz *et al.* 2016). Crowdfunding in the latter context becomes a ‘political instrument in the hands of advocacy movements’ (*ibid.*). *The Herd* bridges these two camps: it is at once an independent short film within a popular genre, while simultaneously (and primarily) being ‘activist art’ aiming to challenge and then change power relations (Duncombe 2016, p. 117). It is, as the film’s Facebook page declares, a ‘short horror film with a purpose’. Its potential to mobilize activists and ultimately alter engrained social behaviours (i.e. non-human animal consumption and exploitation) hinges on the effectiveness of the film to appeal to a) a pre-existing audience for horror cinema (the majority of which is presumably non-vegan) and b) the animal welfare activist community (who can share the film online and promote it via social media channels and through word-of-mouth).

The initial video used on the Kickstarter (2014) page pledging for monies, featuring the filmmaker, its screenwriter, some of its cast, and score composer, sets up the political and ethical impetus behind the film’s creation, establishing it as an activist work in two ways: first, through allusion to Light’s legacy as a radical figure within independent short form filmmaking, as well as her position within horror fandom and punk subcultures traditionally

sympathetic to the film's thematic concerns; and second, through discussion of the film's content and ultimate political message.

Light's status as an independent, female filmmaker is presented as one of *The Herd's* driving radical credentials. Shelley Cobb, Linda Ruth Williams and Natalie Wreyford (2016) have explored the stark gender imbalances within the British film industry, writing that, 'in 2015, women constituted 20% of all directors, writers, producers, exec-producers, cinematographers and editors on 203 UK films in production'. Addressing horror specifically, Alison Peirse (2017; 2020) recognizes how women filmmakers working within the genre are habitually marginalized (in terms of securing funding for their work, for instance), or are at least not held up to the same standard by audiences as those of their male counterparts. Light's presence at the beginning of the Kickstarter (2014) video destabilizes these established norms, as she outlines her professional experience as one of the reasons why one might consider donating to the project.

She begins by discussing her previous shorts, *Switch* (2010) and *Escape* (2012). The former, one learns, was screened at Fright Fest—'the largest British [horror] genre film festival' (Hunter 2018, p. 94)—and at a 'Bloody Women' film festival hosted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The latter work, Light explains, was self-funded and shot by a small crew in Nevada. The presentation of both films in these ways serve as indicators of Light's competency as a working creative. The identified screenings of *Switch* elicit prestige and place value on her art, suggesting the film was selected by festival programming committees ahead of other submissions and, in the case of the 'Bloody Women' festival, perhaps curated to reflect Light's status as a noteworthy, up and coming, (female) horror filmmaker. The context of *Escape*—leading a team, self-financing the production, shooting on location—shows Light realising her authorial vision in a frugal, and likely complex, production context. However, it is the reference to the ICA that carries the most weight for

the present discussion. Based in London, and the hub to numerous satellite institutes throughout the world, the ICA is described on its official website as a ‘progressive’ outlet for ‘radical art and culture’ (ICA, ‘About’). In addition to exhibitions, installations, roundtable discussions and so on, the ICA also plays host to numerous screening events and director Q&A sessions. Light, by anchoring *Switch*—and by extension, herself as an artist—to the ICA, is making a political statement. She is here providing proof of a changing landscape and of opportunities women are creating for themselves in lieu of them elsewhere. To this end, her presence at the beginning of the Kickstarter video, as the film’s director and leading creative force, on a subject that foregrounds key issues within contemporary feminism, indicates her prominence, control and role in altering the landscape of her industry.

Another significant aspect of the video to consider is Light’s professing her love of the horror genre: she describes herself as a ‘big horror fan’. While the identities that characterize contemporary fandom are diverse, it remains commonplace for women and girls to be treated as ‘interlopers’ within fan communities (Scott 2019). Light, through positioning herself as both a fan and filmmaker and thus the main authorial voice of *The Herd*, challenges the kind of male posturing oftentimes aligned with horror fandom (Egan 2007, p. 128-53) by asserting the wealth of her enthusiasm (‘big’), and squaring this with a film about the subjugation of women, of which she is the primary authorial voice. In the process she presents herself as an authority and, thus, a challenge to the gender-biases that persistently characterize fandom. The aforementioned reference to Fright Fest works to further this, using the accolade as a marker of her subcultural capital, as emblematic of position ‘within’ horror fan communities as both avid consumer *and* producer who appreciates the genre while also catering to the needs of its most dedicated audience (horror fans attending genre film festivals). As a director of horror working within these circles, she proves antithetical to countless lists of ‘great’ horror filmmakers that Alison Peirse (2020) explores, which, in the

majority of cases, comprise solely men. Beyond this, the film's female actors are also foregrounded, as means of underscoring the film's feminist credentials, but also its makers' cultural capital, sufficient to produce a film with recognisable horror stars. Here, Light is a woman showing solidarity to other women in a typically 'male' genre. Thus, Light lists Pollyanna McIntosh who, at the time of production, was known for playing the lead role in the widely popular independent horror film *The Woman* (Lucky McKee, 2011), and Victoria Broom, an actress known to British horror fans for roles in festival films such as *Zombie Women of Satan* (Warren Speed and Steve O'Brien, 2009), *Dead Cert* (Steve Lawson, 2010) and *The ABCs of Death 2* (Various, 2014). These women are listed first, ahead of recognisable male talent including John Campling of *Apocalypse Z* (Luca Boni and Marco Ristori, 2013), and Craig Conway, perhaps the most recognisable actor of all, known for roles in British hits *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall, 2002) and *Doomsday* (Neil Marshall, 2008). Light's ability to assemble a cast of known talent, coupled with her knowledge and affection for the genre, are used to assure donors that her fandom (as much as her experience as a filmmaker) ensures that *The Herd* will be an e/affective horror film made by someone who, through their fandom and filmmaking experience, appreciates and understands the genre, but also by someone who, on account of their gender, is in a better position to understand the subjugation of women and thus, by extension of the film's vegan-feminist sentiment, the plight of non-human females within the AIC.

Philip Young (2013, pp. 473-4) claims that the communication strategies of activists often adopt 'us versus them framing'. Activists, Young maintains, will, either in their campaigns or through their own individual appearance and speech, position themselves in opposition to, say, corporate businesses founded upon and fuelled by worker exploitation. Part of how one presents oneself, in terms of how one dresses, is significant here. Melanie Light's oppositional qualities ranging, as discussed above, from her gender, her chosen genre,

and her fandom, implicitly situates her against the gloss of, say, the corporatism of the mainstream British film industry: a system she is working outside of and challenging through her practice. But her ‘image’ within the Kickstarter video is also important. With dyed black hair, white face make-up and tattoos, she presents as ‘alternative’. She is coded as a punk, and, within punk subcultures, activism, feminism and animal rights remain ideological lynchpins for many of the scene’s participants (Stephens-Griffin 2017, pp. 82-4; Clark 2004, pp. 24-5). The recruitment of Laurent Barnard, guitarist for the punk rock band Gallows, to score the film is therefore telling of the centrality of a punk sensibility to the film’s radical outlook. Light, through adopting a punk rock aesthetic herself, and through recruiting a punk rock musician to provide *The Herd* with its soundscape, is hereby squaring her feminist project with other movements within feminist punk subculture, namely the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, which sought, with its ‘girls to the front’ mantra, to reclaim male-dominated punk scenes for female musicians and fans (Marcus 2010). In the Kickstarter video Light embodies this ethos, as the girl (woman) at the front of Activist Horror Filmmaking, to which her own cultural identity is a key component of the film’s progressive agenda.

Presenting Light as a director with filmmaking chops and knowledge of the genre, with a track record of challenging gendered stereotypes through her practice, and who embodies the look and ethos of contemporary punk rock, is the first step through which the Kickstarter video establishes the radical potential of *The Herd* as an Activist Horror Film. Ed Pope, the screenwriter, more overtly sets up the film’s politics. Its vegan-feminist sentiment, he makes clear, is the film’s core purpose, implicitly beyond that of entertaining an audience. He establishes this by explaining he wrote the script to:

transpose the horror experienced by dairy cows every day into a film that’s designed to disgust and disturb and portray images in a way that people can relate to, by subjecting human females to the same horrors and tortures that

people subject dairy cows to when they buy milk and dairy products without even thinking.

In placing vegan-feminism at film's centre, and by using women's bodies to reflect the suffering of dairy cows, Pope here announces aims beyond that of genre or commerciality, underscoring its qualities as activism and its capacity (as Light earlier claims) to 'stop and make you think'. Indeed, that vegan-feminist politics feature so prominently within the initial funding call as they do here, makes clear that the makers are appealing to vegan-feminists—or, at least, individuals sympathetic to the vegan-feminist cause—for donations. Rather than reaching out to non-vegans and attempting to get them onside, the makers target those who already abstain from, or are in the process of questioning, such practices: in other words, those amenable to helping the team behind *The Herd* make their film and effect change.

The address to vegan-feminists does not waver. During the aforementioned cast rundown, the actor and then-children's television presenter Sarah Jane Honeywell is described as being 'known for work' done for PETA. In another context, one might expect Honeywell's television experience as a presenter on the BBC's children's network, CBeebies, to be drawn on for publicity. However, any mention of this is avoided. Instead, Honeywell's presence as a real-live campaigner for the animal welfare's largest charitable bodies—she posed semi-nude for PETA's widely controversial 'Relate to Who's on Your Plate' campaign in 2011—is foregrounded to resonate with those who will know what this is and support its mission (Sherrow 2011). Pope's characterisation of meat and dairy consumers supports this reading. He implies that humans who buy milk are thoughtless ('without even thinking') and that they, ultimately, do not care about, or are ignorant of, the suffering of farmed animals ('most people find themselves unable to sympathize or relate to the suffering of animals'). The risk here, of course, is that Pope will appear aggressive or 'morally judgemental' and thus alienate those whose behaviours he wishes would change (Parkinson *et al.* 2019). This may be true, though Pope, in saying such things, seeks to foreground truth, and kick against



the normalisation of animal consumption. The ultimate effect will come when non-vegans view the finished film, compute the allegory, and (hopefully) modify their ways. As Pope goes on to say, using ‘human females’ is the means through which people will feel ‘disgust’, be ‘disturb[ed]’ and, ultimately, ‘relate’ to the film. Within the context of the Kickstarter video, however, there is no need to refrain from denigrating non-vegans, but rather to home in on their ignorance and moral double standards. The film, thus, looks to complicate the rhetoric of evasiveness that surrounds the consumption of animals and animal products, whereby consumers use words such as ‘beef, pork, veal or poultry’ instead of naming the animal from which such ‘products’ are taken (Adams 2018, p. 17). These examples serve only to alleviate the guilt of the consumer: ‘They make gruesomeness palatable’ (McCarthy cited in Adams 2018, p. 17). *The Herd*’s Kickstarter video, comparatively, foregrounds gruesomeness as normative within the industries it attacks, thereby appealing to the knowledge of those already familiar with these contexts. By supporting the campaign for *The Herd*, and allowing its makers to, as Light has it, ‘get our [its makers’] voice [sic] heard’, one might help educate individuals and thereby alter engrained societal practices. This is Activist Horror Film in its embryonic stage. The funding call addresses the activist community explicitly, to secure resources to produce the film, as the first step in helping its makers work towards enabling the changes both parties seek.

### **The film**

*The Herd* is not, of course, the first film to equate the diegetic suffering of humans with that of animals in real life, nor is it the first horror film to use said comparison to illuminate key tenets of animal rights philosophy. Jason Middleton (2017) compellingly argues that ‘The form of the violence’ enacted upon a group of teens by a family of cannibalistic slaughterhouse workers in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) ‘can be seen

to visualize the very logic of [Peter] Singer's argument [against speciesism], whose force depends upon its rhetorical figuration of the substitutability of humans and animals in relations of exploitation'. The killing scenes 'are horrific', Middleton continues, 'not just because we see people being treated like cattle, but also because we are insistently reminded of how cattle are, always, being treated like cattle' (see also Middleton 2015, p. 287). Yet, while the film 'confronts viewers with these imbricated forms of disavowal surrounding slaughter and meat,' ultimately it 'offers no possibility for resolution or means of working through these contradictions' (Middleton 2017). As with films such as *Cannibal Holocaust*, wherein the genuine suffering of animals is used as a means through which to allegorise the barbarism of humanity, *Texas Chain Saw* has its cake and eats it (Jackson 2002). *The Herd* stands as a corrective to horror cinema's historical empty gesturing to the plight of farmed animals, conveying, as per activist documentaries such as *Earthlings*, 'important knowledge' to 'effect personal and social change' (Middleton 2017). Unlike *Texas Chain Saw*, *The Herd* does work through such contradictions and provides a clear resolution: alter your dietary and life choices.

*The Herd's* distinctiveness as an Activist Horror Film owes much to its deployment of imagery similar to that featured in, first, PR campaigns of the chief animal welfare charity, PETA, and second, contemporary horror films. The film bridges the tropes of PETA's posters and placards with the themes of human (predominantly female) entrapment and violence characteristic of the widely-condemned 'torture porn' cycle, by systematically identifying, and then playing out, the 'horrors' of the dairy industry on women's bodies.

In the film, women are caged, beaten, and sexually assaulted by factory farm workers; their bodies exploited for their milk. Women are never referred to *as* women or, indeed, as human. They are merely parts of a 'herd': 'livestock'. The comparison between women/cows is used not simply to argue—as some feminist literature has—that, in patriarchal society,

women are treated *like animals* (that is to say, badly) and that, by extension, society under patriarchy is for human females akin to a ‘meat market’ (Penny 2011). In such discourse, non-human animals are used as metaphors for the *oppression of women*. It is the notion of women being treated *as* animals (not as human beings)—i.e. touched as one would stroke a dog, consumed as one would food—that is being condemned in such discourse, not the broader issue that, under patriarchal capitalism, both women *and* non-human females endure gendered subjugation and abuse (Adams 2010, pp. 64-91). The latter issue is one foundational to vegan feminism and is the main concern of *The Herd*.

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams (2010, p. 66) coins the term ‘absent referent’ to describe animals butchered for meat:

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals’ lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal.

In a later reflective piece, Adams (2015) goes on to say that:

Today my concern is the aspect of patriarchal ethics that keeps living beings as absent referents. The female beings who are kept in reproductive slavery to produce eggs and milk for human beings. Ovransky famously talked about how for animals, their bodies are the means of production. And for female animals, their bodies are the means for production and reproduction.

*The Herd*’s agenda is to encourage audiences to make the connection between human and non-human animal exploitation, and in the process negate speciesism and generate empathy for dairy cows within the AIC. The film makes the ‘absent referent’ of the AIC present.

The first shot of the film is a woman, dressed in hospital scrubs, lying on her back, her legs straddled. Between her legs, another woman—wearing scrubs and arm-length veterinary gloves—reaches for a bottle of lubricant, before pouring some on her hands, and then on a plastic syringe of white fluid. The gloved-figure injects the woman with the fluid, which turns out to be semen, thus, artificially inseminating her. Following the procedure, the woman calls

for a man who enters the room ('Ready!'), clips a pole to a clasp around the prisoner's neck, and drags her into a cage, alongside others in the same garb, all women, some of whom are attached to machines expressing their breast milk. 'It'll be your turn again, soon enough,' the man bellows to the group, before his (also male) colleague repeats the same force on another prisoner: 'Arses out, herd! You know the drill'. Shortly, one prisoner goes into labour. A group of workers deliver the baby, immediately disposing of the foetus into a waste bin, on account of its sex: 'it's a boy', the veterinarian claims, signalling to her colleagues the child's fate. Collectively, the foregoing sequences last little more than five minutes, but are brimming with imagery and dialogue resonant with reported-on dairy farm practices, allusions to which ripple throughout the film.

First, within factory farming it is commonplace for cows (and other farm animals) to be shackled by the neck (or legs) and forced into holding pens by workers who are often on performance-related pay and under pressure to accelerate production. Such workers, upon developing 'desensitization to killing in order to survive,' will often mistreat animals (push them, beat them, kick them, shout at them) to help expedite the grim proceedings: 'an unfortunate but inevitable result of the structure of subordination that the workers are locked into' (Spangher 2014). In many instances, animals in such conditions are also subject to intentional, sadistic abuse, by farm workers (Hosie 2017). That two of the male workers in *The Herd* take pleasure in hurting and holding the women against their will resonates with this truth. An instance when one woman is electrocuted with a cattle prod, for example, and referred to as a 'daft cunt', echoes countless undercover videos obtained by leading animal rights organisations which seek, as the mantra for one has it, to 'expose and then end the abuse' (Mercy for Animals, 'Undercover Investigations'; see also Rao, undated). Beyond this, such actions also point to the gendered dynamics of the dairy industry, and the entrapment and control of female sentient beings: a concept redolent of patriarchy writ large.

Within dairy farms, as in broader society, sexual abuse is rife. The makers of *The Herd* are asking: why condemn one instance of abuse, but support another, on account of species alone?

Second, it is common practice for cattle on factory farms to undergo artificial insemination (AI): as with humans, cows must be pregnant in order to lactate. This involves the Inseminator (typically, as in *The Herd*, a veterinarian or sometimes a farmer) inserting their arm into the cow's rectum, locating the cervix, and then, by use of an 'AI gun', inserting the bull semen into the cow's vagina (Short 2015). This is a practice widely campaigned against by animal welfare charities and vegan-feminists. Campaigners such as those for PETA draw on the cow's 'defencelessness' during the AI process, framing AI itself as a sexual violation, which, if it were happening to humans, would be rightly condemned as rape (PETA, 'Is your food a product of rape?', Capps 2013). Indeed, one PETA campaign video with which *The Herd* shares its message is presented as a series of testimonies by human (and alleged) survivors of sexual abuse (PETA, 'Is your food a product of rape?'). 'One man held me down,' one of the women states, 'While another touched me' says another. Several others continue: 'I felt like I was nothing'; 'They got me pregnant'; 'They *use* my body'. The video touches on broader issues surrounding objectification ('To them I'm an object'), sex trafficking ('I make them money'), and the derogatory verbal abuse ('They call me 'bitch''') women endure in the contemporary world. As the short video comes to an end, however, it becomes clear that the women are not speaking of their own experiences (per se), but rather from the perspective of non-human animals—'I am you, only different'—and that the video is taking cues from similar videos used to condemn violence against women (Anon. 'PSA

Campaign’).<sup>3</sup> As with *The Herd*, the video draws stark, cross-species parallels, using established activist communication strategies to promote its activist message.

Third, within the dairy industry, calves are typically separated from their mothers within 24 hours of being born. New-born females will immediately ‘enter the same hellish cycle as their mothers’ (Wilstrup 2012). This practice is hinted at later in *The Herd*, when one of the prisoners finds a young girl, in a room on her own, being held captive until she is biologically mature enough to undergo insemination. The fate of male calves within the AIC is twofold: they are either relocated to holding pens until they are ready to be slaughtered for veal, or killed post-partum for they will not grow to procreate or produce milk (Wilstrup 2012). The immediate separation leads to trauma for both the mother and her calf. For vegan-feminists, these practices are akin to enslavement and abduction and are by extension at odds with foundational feminist values. The casual way with which the male foetus is aborted and then disposed of in the sequence described earlier is resonant of these practices, as is the following scene which depicts the mother in mourning, helpless and suicidal, pleading with a fellow prisoner to kill her, and end her suffering (‘You can do it from there! Give me your hands!’). *The Herd* seeks to generate empathy from the viewer through equating human trauma stemming from child loss with that experienced by their non-human counterparts.

Further parallels to the AIC are made in the film’s second half, as one prisoner, Paula (Victoria Broom), kills two of her oppressors and manages to escape her pen. Moving with haste through the farm, she sees a fellow prisoner being held round the neck and then shot in the head with a ‘bolt gun’: a reference to a practice widely used in Western slaughterhouses to stun cows before slaughter, and the truism that animals routinely witness the slaughter of

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<sup>3</sup> This remains a contentious issue within feminist discourse, where some find the comparisons made between ‘cows’ and (human) ‘rape victims’ abhorrent. See, for example, a damning response to the aforementioned PETA campaign: Shapiro 2016. It should, however, be made clear, that, per vegan philosophy, to distinguish between a ‘rape victim’ and a ‘cow’ is in itself a speciesist (false) dichotomy, in that it implies that a woman’s suffering is of superior importance to that endured by non-human animals (in this context, a cow).

their companions (Figure 1). The practice is, as one may expect, readily dismissed by animal welfare campaigners as barbaric and inhumane. In *The Herd*, the sequence serves as a symbol of gendered exploitation: bolt-gunning is a sedative from which few (non-human) victims of sexual assault ever wake. Paula moves on, peering through another window, seeing tens of women standing in lines, hooked up to huge mechanical breast pumps; again, a reference to industrialized milk production, where the individuality or dignity of the animal is replaced by metrics and profit-generation (Figure 2).

[FIGURES 1 & 2 HERE PLEASE]

Following Paula's escape (and that of another captive) and an extra-diegetic mock-commercial for anti-aging cream produced using milk farmed in the narrative proper, the film concludes with a credit sequence intercut with genuine undercover footage of factory farming practices. The practices in question echo those of the main narrative: artificial insemination; cows being punched and kicked; tens of cows hooked up to breast pumps; cows being cut open; their young cremated alive. Such images give the film 'a charge of the real' in a manner similar to genuine footage of cattle and roadkill in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Middleton 2017). However, the sequence operates as a direct homage to the end credits of the socio-political horror film *par excellence*, *Night of the Living Dead*, in that they both serve to signal the real-world plausibility of their preceding images of horror.<sup>4</sup> As Adam Lowenstein (2005, p. 159) argues, '*Night's* final moments,' which show the dead body of the film's African American leading man, Ben (Duane Jones), 'being dragged outside and

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<sup>4</sup> Romero's film is widely regarded as 'a crucial benchmark in the development of the modern horror film and its engagement with social history' (Lowenstein 2005, p. 154).

hoisted onto a bonfire of zombie corpses, are presented as a series of grainy, newspaper-quality photographs that produce inescapable connotations of lynchings and contemporary civil rights-related violence.’ In the case of *The Herd*, the effect is similar: it supplants the racist imagery of Romero’s film with imagery of speciesism in action. The key difference of course, is that the images of violence *The Herd* are not fabrications. Moreover, the hat-tip to *Night* as a cornerstone work in politically-engaged genre filmmaking is significant. It anchors *The Herd* to a key moment in horror film history and thus positions it as part of a broader tradition in socio-political horror filmmaking. However, while, the impact of Romero’s film depends on the audience being cognisant of the social history to which the film is said to speak, *The Herd* seeks to educate by exposing such injustices. As Robin Wood argues of *Night of the Living Dead*, Ben’s race ‘is nowhere alluded to, even implicitly’ (Wood 2003, p. 103). *The Herd*, comparatively, spells out its symbolism. By using real footage, its makers build the bridge for the audience between the diegesis and actuality, as to not dilute its driving, activist, message.

### ***The Herd* beyond the text**

It is common within film study for scholars to place little value on the *intended meaning* of a film’s makers. The author, as it were, is dead (Barthes 1997, p. 148). However, authorial intent is as integral to Activist Horror Film as it is to all forms of activist campaigning. The broad strokes with which one might analyse contemporary horror cinema (or, indeed, cinema of any cultural moment) are therefore redundant when one takes *The Herd* at face value, for its face value is, ultimately, its very reason for having been made. Ambiguity, political wavering, or multiple readings are not desired aims here. Persuasion—that is to say, *effective communication*—is the order of the day. *The Herd* was therefore promoted first at film festivals and then online in a decidedly unambiguous fashion in reflection of its ‘high



concept’—one poster shows a split-face image of a cow/woman, beneath the bold tagline ‘YOU ARE A PRODUCT’—and then promoted by animal welfare organisations and cultural commentators, in no uncertain terms, as a *vegan-feminist* work.<sup>5</sup> The film’s unequivocal message, and the clarity with which it communicates it, is also why Melanie Light has since accepted invitations to screen the film publicly at various activists’ events. It is embraced *as* activism for these reasons.

The extent to which the film resonates with audiences—specifically non-vegans whom its makers hope, as with other viewers of ‘activist art’, to ‘move’ (Duncombe 2016, p. 131)—is partly dependent on the contexts within which the film is seen. *The Herd* was initially, and is still now, shown as part of short-film strands of horror film festivals. At times, Light is able to be present at such screenings, and through pre-screening introductions and post-screening Q&A sessions is able to ‘educate’ people to the plight of dairy cows. This, for her, remains a priority. The times when Light is unable to be present at screenings, she ensures that the synopsis of the film that appears in the festival programme describes it as ‘vegan feminist’ so that audiences have some context going in (Light, personal correspondence, 7 November 2019).

However, within the context of social media, the film is able to work more fluidly as a piece of activism, not least because video comments on YouTube enable viewers to share their views on the film, while the film’s short-form presentation and high concept lends itself to sharing and circulating among various online communities. Alter—a YouTube channel dedicated to promoting horror shorts to its 784,000 subscribers and beyond—has granted *The Herd* insurmountable exposure: at the time of writing (late 2019), the film remains the

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<sup>5</sup> As Justin Wyatt (1994, p. 13) argues: a ‘high concept’ narrative is ‘striking’ and ‘easily reducible’, and ‘offers a high degree of marketability’ (13). The print marketing for a high concept film, he goes on to explain (112-33), is central to its reducibility in the eyes of consumers.

channel's third most popular short, with 3.8 million views (Alter 2018). The film is also uploaded to several other channels, oftentimes accompanied by written commentaries placed below the video and, in all cases, lengthy comment discussions by (ostensibly) vegans and non-vegans (see Vidsee 2016; McCarpent 2016). Such discussions, anecdotally speaking at least, are indicative of the film's ability to generate discussion and lead to change (Alter 2018), with comments ranging from the dismissive ('You can't all be serious, comparing women to cows?') to the empathetic ('As a mom that really hurt to watch') to the revelatory ('Ah I see, they want to realize us [sic.] that we do the same thing to animals') to the transformational ('This short actually upset me so much it heavily influenced my decision to go from vegetarian to vegan'). In this context *The Herd*, as with most forms of activism, makes some who watch it feel affronted or irritated (Smith *et al.* 2000, p. 297), while others, on account of the film's 'emotionally powerful stimuli', are 'moved' to change their consumption habits (Duncombe 2016, p. 119). In a similar manner to the YouTube reaction videos that greeted the release of *Earthlings*, *The Herd* is able to 'facilitate the conversion of traumatized spectatorship to personal and collective commitment' through its social media presence (Middleton 2015, p. 289).

The forgoing discussion of the film's presence on social media is central to one's understanding of *The Herd* as Activist Horror Filmmaking. So too is the promotion of the film by animal welfare organisations indicative of the film's aims to influence, educate, and change behaviours. In 2015, *The Herd* was featured as part of a lengthy essay about the dairy industry on the website of Animals Deserve Absolute Protection Today and Tomorrow (ADAPTT), a non-profit organization established in 1996 by Gary Yourofosky, who, until his recent retirement, was one of the world's most influential vegan activists. It is believed that Yourofosky, through his numerous lectures at schools, universities and in public forums, created '1000s of vegans a year': his 60 minute lecture 'Best Speech You Will Ever Hear'

has been shared across social media millions of times since he originally delivered it in 2010 (ADAPTT, 'Dairy'). Within this context of global influence, *The Herd* receives validation: it is endorsed by a long-standing, credible organisation responsible for demonstrable change. Moreover, the article's description of the makers of *The Herd* as 'activists' is of significance. That Light, Pope and the other creatives behind the film are recognized for their activism ahead of their artistry reifies the notion that their drive for change exceeds their desire to entertain. Being featured in an essay on a website of such prominence within the animal welfare community affords the film credibility as activism: as a legitimate intervention in the fight against animal cruelty.

The following year, in 2016, *The Herd* received exposure on PETA's website: one that attracts 'more than 45 million people' each year, many which are vegans, many more who are not (PETA, 'Welcome to PETA's New Website'). In an article about the film, it was framed in a manner akin to the organisation's own print campaigns and videos (Ruby 2016). When launching a new campaign, PETA will publish articles that feature images of posters, billboards and so on from the campaign in question, offer a description of it, before explaining how it responds to real world injustices against non-human animals. The organisation promoted *The Herd* in the same way. The article in question states that the film at first appears 'like any other horror movie in which people are hopelessly trapped by a murderer with no chance of escape'. This statement locates the film within horror film culture, indirectly acknowledging its nods to torture porn, while also setting up the coming parallel between humans and nonhumans, explaining the extent to which this seemingly generic fiction in fact echoes real world abuse. The description of a cow's life cycle is employed in echo of the film's narrative, as per numerous other PETA campaigns, 'to encourage viewers to question their views of human and animal identities as being fundamentally separate' (Atkins-Sayre 2010, p. 9):

Cows on dairy farms are repeatedly artificially impregnated so that they'll produce milk. Once their babies are born, they're taken away after as little as one day so that the milk intended for the calves can be consumed by humans. The mothers pine for their babies for weeks, and the fate of their calves isn't a happy one. The males are slaughtered, as they serve no purpose for dairy farmers, and many end up in the veal industry. The females enter the same sad cycle as their mothers: once their bodies are worn out from the constant strain of giving birth and being milked, they're slaughtered and their flesh is sold as cheap meat (Ruby 2016).

PETA, in presenting *The Herd* in a manner similar to that of a PR campaign, further aligns the film with the organisation's numerous communication strategies, symbolising the extent to which the film is an extension of—or at the very least adopts similar tactics to—its media campaigns. The article goes further, bestowing prestige on the film, acknowledging its 'multitude of awards' obtained from international horror film festivals, as evidence of its quality and success in conveying the truths of factory farming: factors that aid the presentation of the work as a credible contribution to activist discourse. Concluding as per other articles on the PETA website, and in echo of copy featured across its campaign portfolio, by advertising 'a free vegan starter kit' and a 'guide to delicious plant-based milks', the article anticipates the film's power to help alter behaviour and encourage people to abstain from animal exploitation (Ruby 2016). *The Herd* is here shown to mobilize changes beyond what one expects of an affecting 'body genre', becoming part of a broader discourse where the effect of the film exceeds the emotional transience of film spectatorship, and extends into one's daily life as a behavioural change (Williams 1991).

While exposure from ADAPTT and PETA stand as the most visible—and within animal rights writ large, the most prestigious—examples of *The Herd's* activist credentials, the film has benefitted from exposure through additional online channels, including vegan feminist blogs, social media, high profile horror websites and, of particular significance, as it speaks most clearly to the activist intentions of the film's makers, the website of the prominent vegan charity and campaign group Viva!. Light approached the group to host *The*

*Herd*'s online premiere: a strategy that, Light believed, would not only grant the film exposure, but also drive traffic to the group's website, and in the process expose viewers to relevant campaign literature (Light, personal correspondence, 7 November 2019). Indeed, as well as the video being positioned beneath links promoting 'Campaigns', 'Get Involved' and 'Going Vegan' (Viva!, 'The Herd'), if one clicks the film's poster image, they are redirected to Viva!'s sister site, 'Scary Dairy' (<http://scarydairy.org.uk>), which contains numerous resources (videos, articles, blogs) that reinforce *The Herd*'s message, while also featuring information about nutrition, dairy substitutes, and cooking recipes. In this context, *The Herd* is presented as credible and educational, while Viva!'s accompanying resources offer non-vegans—should the film have the desired impact—accessible routes into veganism.

Exposure of this nature (bridging the horror fan community, the film festival circuit, social media, and animal welfare organisations) is symptomatic of *The Herd* being Activist Horror: articles and interviews on horror websites validate its status as a horror movie, its presence on social media and accompanying viewer comments point towards the film's ability to raise consciousness and potentially change habits, while its endorsements from organisations and charities validate it as an activist work. Such accolades are symptomatic of the 'rapid distribution' and resultant amplification of activist messages that online activism facilitates (Young 2013, p. 481), and of which *The Herd*, as these examples show, is clearly a part. Numerous opportunities for Light to tour the film and feature on panels about veganism, feminism and horror cinema are born of this technological moment, and aid in the facilitation of the film becoming of note within the activist community and beyond.

Light's invitation to speak as part of the 'Activism Bootcamp' programme the 2018 Vegan Camp Out in Nottinghamshire, UK, is one good example. Vegan Camp Out, according to its promotional material, is the 'world's largest vegan camping festival', attracting campers from '30 different countries', and featuring various attractions from music,

celebrity vegans, and numerous workshops dedicated to talks and—most significantly—activism. Established in 2016 when it attracted 400 people, the event has since grown to attract thousands. Activism is couched within a programme of music, fitness workshops, and kids entertainment, though crucially lectures delivered by activists—such as notable commentators Earthling Ed, James Aspey, Erin Janus and Ingrid Newkirk—are oftentimes billed higher than those of, say, musicians or other celebrities (<https://www.vegancampout.co.uk/>). That Light was invited to deliver a talk and participate in a Q&A followed by a screening of *The Herd* is of note, so too is the title of her presentation ‘Filmmaking and Activism’. Here Light is positioned as both a filmmaker and activist, whose genre of choice just happens to be horror. The implication is that fictional filmmaking within a popular mode can indeed be used within the context of activism, to help educate, corroborate the views of like-minded individuals, and aid in a movement’s push for change. It is here that Activist Horror Film truly comes to life; when the film’s *reflection* of real-world issues becomes *action*.

## **Conclusion**

The present article, in giving detailed consideration to *The Herd*, proposes the category of Activist Horror Film to distinguish horror films born of protest and by activists from other works of commercial filmmaking so often celebrated as emblematic of the genre’s ability to offer progressive commentary about troubling social issues. Future research will determine to what extent Activist Horror Filmmaking becomes a discernible trend. Certainly, Melanie Light continues to work in this area: her latest short, *The Skin You’re In* (2017), employs similar tactics to *The Herd*, albeit in critiquing the fur trade, and has, à la *The Herd*, been met with similar exposure and praise from animal welfare bodies (Chiorando 2017).

There are also pressing questions as to the real-world effectiveness of Activist Horror Film. Light (personal correspondence, 7 November 2019) explains how, from her experience at festivals and through her social media profiles, an increasing number of individuals are claiming that *The Herd* played a key role in their transition to a vegan lifestyle. She recalls, for instance, a screening of the film at Etheria Film Night in Los Angeles—an annual event showcasing the work of ‘emerging women directors’ (<http://etheriafilmmight.com>)—in 2016, where a vegetarian audience member allegedly left the auditorium in tears due to feelings of guilt triggered by the film’s anti-dairy themes. While such evidence is anecdotal, it is significant in the absence of quantifiable data; indeed, information regarding the number of individuals who accessed *The Herd* and accompanying activist literature via the Viva! Website, for instance, is presently inaccessible.

One of the key principles of activism is ‘identify[ing] common problems and argu[ing] for resolutions to those problems’ (Smith *et al.* 2000, p. 293). The solution to said problems is the desired outcome, but because ‘the struggle for social change is a long-term [sic.]’, remedies are never immediate, nor guaranteed (Smith *et al.* 2000, p. 295). One thing, however, is for certain: veganism is ‘growing exponentially’ (Vegan Society 2019). Between 2015 (the year of *The Herd*’s initial release) and 2019, the number of vegans in the UK quadrupled; between 2012 and 2017, the number of vegans in the USA expanded by 600%; and, during the same time period, vegan-related Google searches increase fourfold (Vegan Society 2019). To this end, while the full extent of the impact of *The Herd* remains, for now, unknown and although is hard to imagine the film having as great an impact on consumption habits as, for example, the Leonardo DiCaprio-endorsed environmental documentary *Cowspiracy* (Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn, 2014) or the BBC-produced ‘blockbuster documentary’ series *Blue Planet II* (Various, 2017), it is indisputable that the film has played

some role, however minor it may ultimately turn out to be, in the conversations that have led to these dramatic changes.

It is my contention that *The Herd's* potential, and the intention of its makers, to mobilize change is a significant development in both horror film production and activist art. Melanie Light rewrites the history of socially-resonate horror cinema by channelling her activism through her art, and at the same time working beyond the text to eradicate the injustices her work identifies. To this end, *The Herd* provides a blueprint for how activist filmmakers may utilize the horror genre in the future to accompany their protest efforts. While the potential for the film and others it may inspire is for the time being unclear, the film nevertheless illustrates how horror has been, and can continue to be, used as activism and as part of much broader discussions about not simply how the genre might reflect injustices, but also utilized in the quest to resolve them.



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