

The Affective Contours and Configurations of Dread: Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*

Marcus Prasad

Volume 6, Number 1, June 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101389ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101389ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Prasad, M. (2023). The Affective Contours and Configurations of Dread: Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. *Monstrum*, 6(1), 76–94.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1101389ar>

© Marcus Prasad, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**The Affective Contours and Configurations of Dread:
Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Killing of a Sacred Deer***

Marcus Prasad

In the opening of *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that movement and psychic processes are related parts of the same machine: “Movement, as physical reality in the external world, and the image, as psychic reality in consciousness, could no longer be opposed” (1986, xiv). As such, the experience of film not as thousands of still images creating an illusion of movement, but as a prosthesis for real movement in the world, endows the medium with an affective weight and preoccupation.¹ Cinema creates embodied experience *with* viewers and does not simply mirror it on screen. Of course, this lends itself to Deleuze’s overarching aim to taxonomize film, to classify it as a set of images and signs that uniquely qualify movement and time (1986, 2). Working within this phenomenological chasm, this essay seeks to explore film as an affective medium, a machine through which an embodiment of affect can be represented and consequently experienced across image and sound. While a sociological analysis of narrative is in many ways inextricable from how image and sound in film resonate with audiences, my exploration will focus on the specificities of movement and temporality, the logics of their cinematic representations, and their affective relations between characters and the film’s narrative arc, not to standardize manifestations of affect within an ideal viewer, but to explore how an affective bend reveals itself alongside the various temporal registers engaged in a film-viewing experience.

This attempt to index affect through an analysis of movement and time is in service of two particular sensations I would like to unravel; suspense and dread. An analysis as such can provide insight into the cultivation of what might be deemed horrific through specific technical arrangements and their

¹Deleuze’s qualification of “prosthesis” is in regard to his argument that technologies can be extensions of the body and human sensorium. My use of it here relates to the camera extending the ocular capacity which in turn influences how a viewing subject understands and affectively resonates with representations of movement in the visual field. This does not take into account the context of disability, which exceeds the scope of this essay. For further exploration on the relationship between Deleuze’s work and disability, see Margrit Schildrick’s (2009) “Prosthetic Performativity: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities,” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 115-133).

interconnections, beyond genre and sociological inquiry. Through Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), I will outline the horror film's temporal construction of dread as a particular figuration of affect, against what I argue to be a competing temporality inherent to the cultivation of suspense. Referring to specific camera movements and sonic landscapes that enhance the film's representation of objects, spaces, and characters (also known as atmosphere), this essay suggests that Lanthimos' film puts into visual form the systematicity of dread as predicated upon affective practice—reliant on a logic of repetition and patterning to form its mode of expression.

Suspense and dread might colloquially be understood as those sensational impulses shared amongst films in genres like horror, action, or thrillers, which cast viewers into a space of heightened anticipation of what comes next. They enact a kind of mixture between pleasure and aversion in service of narrative linear progress. Though they incite particular and oftentimes varied reactions that might be coded as fear, excitement, anxiety, or depression, suspense and dread cannot be located as emotional expressions themselves—they are rather indicative of affective processes that stimulate a range of embodied responses. How, then, can we begin to identify and qualify the formation of these processes? Along which filmic, narrative, and experiential lines are we thrown into suspension or bogged down by dread? To think through these questions, I frame my analysis of suspense and dread as mobilizations of affective dimensions that are interrelated yet grounded by different temporal mechanisms yielding contesting forms of affective expressions. Though they appear to serve similar ends by virtue of the related genres they proliferate within, their respective domains of affect reveal complicated networks of feeling that variegate the expression of fear on film.

This paper ultimately aims to intervene in horror scholarship on affect by delving into its temporal constitution residing beyond the film's representational surface. Catherine Spooner suggests that much work on horror and affect has attempted to identify the contours of a collective experience or shared secret fears through the casting of certain monstrous figures on screen as metaphors of otherness (2007, 8). These antagonistic characters are often associated with threats to the heteropatriarchal order that viewers subconsciously hope to be quelled. Scholars like Isabel Pinedo have therefore entrusted the horror film with the capacity to give its audiences a space in which threatening feelings can be mastered outside of conscious articulation (1996, 2). Conceiving of a film viewing experience as a container in which unfavourable feelings like fear and disgust can be reconciled vicariously, other horror scholarship in relation to affect has grappled with the notion of such “negative

feelings” and why spectators choose to engage with them deliberately. Inherently centered on audience reaction and reception, Aaron Smuts argues that the draw toward a felt quality of badness, or rather what he calls a negative hedonic tone, is the result of a hedonic compensatory solution (2014, 7). In this affective operation, fear and disgust (negative affects) are compensated for by the pleasure of watching horror film over its perceived displeasure. Pleasure can be qualified by a variety of means, including the social and contextual conditions under which a viewer chooses to watch a film—with friends, with a partner, during a night out at a theatre, for example—but drawing back to Pinedo’s claims, Smuts suggests that the hedonic compensatory solution is a means to control and convert negative affects into more positive ones within the boundaries of the film viewing experience (2014, 7).

Rather than examine audience reception to suggest a unified and universal affective engagement amongst viewers of horror film, I redirect attention back to the screen and examine the temporal constituents of the affects of suspense and dread to reflect upon their unique compositions expressed through camera movement, framing, sound, and their contributions to the cultivation of atmosphere, specifically through *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. This of course bears relation to audience engagement, but my focus lies in how the medium of film as inherently temporal can reveal the constitutive contours of certain affects. The following will provide an account of suspense through affect and temporality in order to be compared and contrasted with dread, which will then be explored in relation to Lanthimos’ film. I will begin with an analysis of how these two affects are used in horror studies, then introduce a temporal framing which will become the prevailing analytical framework for the following scene analyses of movement and sound.

Maria Anastasova provides a general psychological account of suspense as a dual operation provoking fear and pleasure around the outcome of a situation, which results in a cleansing effect of purgation after exposure to a nervous expectation (2019, 7). Reliant on a sense of *what happens next*, this definition reveals an inherent temporal structure to the cultivation of suspense—a paradoxical build-up of pleasure and fear that weaves in and out of narrative progression until some kind of release is achieved. More specific to horror film, Pinedo suggests that terror, cultivated through an amassing of suspense, is a bounded experience formed through the “temporally and spatially finite nature of the film” (1996, 26). As an inherently bound form, cinema offers a contained experience that points to a sense of closure due to its durational frame (Pinedo 1996, 26). While Pinedo presents this understanding of temporal binding as a means for audiences to engage in a momentary fantasy, her

delineation of terror as proliferating between the film's beginning and end is important for a working definition of suspense through affect. Guided by narrative progression, suspense is linked to such a temporal confine. It works with the temporalities inside the film's boundaries to build pleasure, fear, and terror, culminating in a sensation of closure due to loose ends that inevitably become tied.

Pushing this definition further, what bolsters suspense outside of the linear frame of a narrative arc? Can its temporality be expressed or represented without reference to an overarching story line? Alanna Thain provokingly traces a theory of suspense that deviates from narrative logic by directing attention toward the "incorporated effects of living time at the movies" (2017, 4). Through temporality, she explains that the body's affective capacity to *live* suspense emerges from its ability to sense its own relation to time. Confronted with filmic representations of time that manifest at odds with that of our own bodily sensorium provides an experience of our own *anotherness*—feeling the making of difference, to Thain, is the experience of suspense vis-à-vis temporality (2017, 4). The affective dimension of suspense is therefore located in the confrontation of temporalities that brush up against each other between the screen and the viewer.

This argument provides a sequestering of temporality that is key to my explorations of suspense and dread. There are several temporal figurations at play within the cultivation of suspense as an affective mechanism, including the duration or timespan of the film's narrative arc (whether it takes place over several days, weeks, months), cinematic techniques of expanding or minimizing senses of time within scenes to enhance dramatic impact (cutting, shot transitions, close-ups), and their relationship to the body's own experience of time. In this matrix of relations, the body's connection to time becomes indeterminate; pressed against the existence of several unique but interrelated durations and temporalities, the consistency of the self becomes other. Thain terms this process immediation or suspended (re)animation (2017, 12). In this way, the awareness of varying registers of temporality against the grain of our own temporal experience leads to aberrant sensations, but these sensations are not equated with alienation per se. Instead, they are a space of potential and reanimation—a felt field of relationality in which time is *suspended* and searching for somewhere new to land.

This line of thought directs Thain toward the role of affect in the temporal construction of suspense, which she argues is mapped in a similar space of indeterminacy. She argues that affect is a spreading out of feeling into nextness or emergence, as well as a means of tapping into durations above and

below our own (Thain 2017, 56). Against what we might call identifiable emotions, affect is more closely associated with a suspension of knowledge, a hesitation of action, or, perhaps in line with a more conventional view of suspense, “a visceral thrilling of the body” (Thain 2017, 67). Mapping affect as lodged between a layering of temporalities frames it as a sensation that does not always correlate to a definite emotion but retains a notion of ambivalence toward its future expression. I am specifically interested in the space of potential afforded by these competing temporalities in a film viewing experience, and where this sense of emergence can be directed dependent on the qualities of the heterogeneous temporalities at play. With the understanding that suspense does not follow a discreet trajectory toward a specific feeling but rather maintains and proliferates an indeterminate intensity, what other areas of feeling can this precarity bring us to?

Dread, as I would like to suggest, consists of a similarly indeterminate intensity that builds itself along a logic close to suspense. As a sensation that seemingly evades tangibility but remains omnipresent in many horror films, dread, I argue, can also be framed as a layering of competing temporalities against our own bodily rhythms that creates a suspended space of ambivalence. How dread differs from suspense however is in the length of these temporalities, the patterns they create, and the absence of what Anastasova calls the “cleansing effect” of purgation after exposure to nervous expectation (Anastasova 2019, 7). At this point, I will expand upon the specific uses of temporality in the cultivation of suspense compared to dread through different approaches to affect. As Thain squares affect with the space of indeterminacy afforded by the temporalities involved in creating suspense, I suggest that affect, too, can be read alongside the precarity of dread, its own temporalities, and the space of tension against linear narrative that emerges from their confrontations.

In the context of horror film, David Church constructs his definition of dread around Thomas Ligotti’s (2018 [2010]) assertion that humans are the only species to have a consciousness of our own mortality. Because of this, Ligotti argues that we need to delude ourselves from the knowledge of our imminent death through exercises of future-oriented thought, such as aligning oneself with political causes like environmentalism (in Church 2021, 224). Church connects this awareness of inevitable demise to the construction of dread-filled atmospheres in horror film, where tension arises from a reminder of this terminal notion through characters’ proximity to certain death (2021, 225). While this definition, like Anastasova’s on suspense, relies on narrative to create a sense of atmosphere, there is an underlying temporality to Church’s claim—that dread is contingent on our knowledge of death as imminent and always on

its way. By this logic, dread differs from suspense in its navigation and layering of temporalities by necessarily including one that denotes a certainty that is inescapable and irresolvable. A temporality of death not only refers to a tragic fate undergone by characters on screen, but also extends to viewers' own grappling with such an absolute fact. This in turn suggests that dread mobilizes temporality at a scale much larger than suspense; its state of indeterminacy that is later determined by a meeting of narrative expectation is not afforded in the same way. Dread has no resolution or determination within the suspended space it creates except death itself—on screen and in embodied reality.

Robert Spadoni (2014) further defines dread in horror film as expressed through a sense of atmosphere, which takes into consideration the spatiality of a film construed by several formal elements (153). Aspects like off-screen noises, smudges of movements, and blurry figures in unknown depths constitute a background of dread that primes a sense of anticipation unique from suspense (Spadoni 2014, 159). This background is ultimately indeterminate, a suspended space of ambivalence creating a landscape of anxious waiting that is unlocatable through a particular object; it is instead diffuse and spread out into what is known as atmosphere. Matt Hills further argues that anxiety and by extension dread is an “objectless affect” that creates affective residues rather than concrete affective responses like fear and disgust (2005, 28). These expressions are slow-building and persistent yet ephemeral—coalescing into a landscape of trepidation that washes over the film. Spadoni continues that atmospheres as such can “leak out of a film” (2014, 158), which I take to have a twofold meaning. First, he positions dread as an atmosphere in order to qualify its diffusiveness, its ambivalent character, and its ability to permeate through the screen by affective means towards audiences; and second, which I move forward with in my working definition of dread, the capacity to “leak out” suggests that dread extends beyond the durational borders of a film and consists of deeper and elongated temporalities, ones that bleed into the space of spectatorship. This conception of dread counters suspense primarily by its lack of closure brought forth by narrative logic. Instead, dread remains irresolute—informed partially by narrative and character action but ultimately existing as an untenable force that bleeds into and beyond the fabric of the film.

Thus far, I have suggested that both suspense and dread grapple with different sets of temporalities that interact amongst themselves and against the body to produce varied responses. As such, they also adhere to different processes of affective production. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* primarily mobilizes the elongated temporality of dread, for example, as Barry Keoghan's character inflicts a curse on the Murphy family beyond comprehension or rational

explanation, resulting in certain death. To elucidate expanded temporality further before working more closely with Lanthimos's film, I turn to Margaret Wetherell's notion of affective practice to describe the temporal composition of dread, and the affective event to describe the temporal composition of suspense. Wetherell brings both affective practice and the affective event into her analysis of overall affective textures and activities of everyday life, but for the purposes of distinguishing between suspense and dread, I will separate the two, beginning with the affective event.

The event is framed as one of the differing durations that can figure affect, characterized by bursts or relatively short episodes that result in intense bodily pushes. While these shorter moments are components of a broader affective pattern, they signal trouble and disturbance within existing patterns (Wetherell 2012, 10-12). Framing the affective event as a disruption also resonates with Brian Massumi's (1995) delineation of affect, where its intensity is argued to be associated with nonlinear processes. Affective resonance and feedback, to Massumi, momentarily suspends the linear progress of past to future, throwing the experience of time into a state of suspense, potentially of disruption (1995, 86). As a suspension of linear temporality, the affective event is a form of disruption that aligns with suspense in film. Returning to Thain's work on suspense, there is resonance between her explanation of the technics of cinematic suspense and its "manner of event." In its figural form, suspense wavers between movement and stasis as its manner, deploying multiple disruptions to the continuity of linear temporality (Thain 2017, 52-53). Considering these analyses, suspense may be defined in temporal terms as momentary destabilizations to a linear sense of time, launching the felt or affective experience into suspension until an expectation is met. Its temporal durations are therefore short, and its affective resonance quelled by a meeting of expectation, reconnecting suspension back to linear temporality. As Massumi suggests, suspense is both distinguished from and interlinked with expectation, as superlinear and linear dimensions of the same image-event (1995, 87).

By contrast, affective practice, which I argue categorizes the formation of dread against suspense, engages with temporalities at a much larger and longer scale. Understanding affect through practice denies seeking out lines of causation, character types, and neat emotional categories in order to see affect as produced through activity, flow, assemblage, and relationality (Wetherell 2012, 4). Wetherell argues that affect is always "turned on and simmering" (2012, 12), that it can come in and out of focus, and its figurations have different durations. Through repetition, affective practice denotes the organization of those intensities that are in focus into particular rhythms and patterns that

persist (Wetherell 2012, 10). The notion of creating a pattern that consists of varying temporal durations into an expansive system provides a framework for thinking through how dread engages with time and affect. Patterning and repetition, as Wetherell further suggests, are types of affective practice that involve a semi-continuous set of background feelings that are long-lasting, moving in and out of focus and into more intense phases dominated by the body (2012, 10). I suggest that dread can be located in these long-lasting background feelings which are brought to the fore through a patterning and repetition of actions that crystallize affect and bring it into focus. This sense of foregrounding affect through repetition is visually evoked in Lanthimos's film by consistent shots of characters walking stoically from vantage points that are unusual for humans to hold—either impossibly high or uncomfortably low, denying the spectator any opportunity for an eyeline match. These alien moments are interspersed evenly across the overall sequence to create and perpetuate a particular formal pattern. Affective practice, then, as a process where routines become entangled with meaning-making in an ongoing capacity, also characterizes the cultivation of dread and its visual expression as reliant on consistent repetition.

The difference between suspense and dread can therefore be attributed to their engagement with temporalities at different scales and competing affective modalities. Suspense, put simply, mobilizes temporalities that are short-lived and relegated to the time frame of the film. They operate within these borders as an affective event that prods at and disturbs the temporalities of our bodies and of the film's dominant narrative arc. A sensation of suspension emerges from this disruption, as well as a production of an affective intensity that is later resolved by a meeting of expectation somewhere along the trajectory of the film's linear progression. Dread, by contrast, engages a sense of an expanded temporality through affective patterns that persist and repeat, extending to the world outside of the film's duration. Its primary preoccupation is a temporality of death—dread in terms of affect and temporality can therefore be partially defined as an awareness of one's own relation to death made possible by a character's inevitable demise, acting as an index or double of a long-lasting background feeling put in relief by affective practice.

Through repetition of a cycle in which this background feeling of death is made present and palpable, the affect of dread permeates the screen as an all-encompassing atmosphere of inescapability. Echoed and repeated throughout *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, not only along narrative lines, but through strategic techniques of spatial representation, tracking and framing character movement, and diegetic and non-diegetic sound, audiences are forcefully dragged along the

film's dread- and death-filled sequence that foregrounds this salient atmosphere. Returning to Church's idea of a "certain" temporality integral to the cultivation of dread across a narrative, I will now explore how the affective dimension of dread is created and represented in Lanthimos' film through a cyclical visual language of determination based on repetition. This process ultimately sustains a patterned system of affective practice that unearths and crystalizes the long-lasting and ever-present feeling of inevitable death.

Categorized as a psychological thriller and horror film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* follows Steven (Colin Farrell), a successful surgeon, who takes a teenage boy, Martin (Barry Keoghan), under his wing for an unknown reason. It is later revealed that Martin is the son of a previous patient of Steven's who died due to negligence during a surgical operation. This inspires Martin to seek quiet revenge by enacting an inexplicable curse on Steven's family—his son Bob (Sunny Suljic), daughter Kim (Raffey Cassidy), and wife Anna (Nicole Kidman) will each begin to slowly die under this prerogative, first by paralysis, then refusal to eat, and finally bleeding of the eyes unless Steven chooses one of them to kill. Martin believes that familial sacrifice is the only way for Steven to make things right after allegedly killing Martin's father. Skeptical at first, Steven rejects Martin's cruel deal for justice, failing to relinquish his pride and acknowledge his fatal shortcomings. As symptoms begin to manifest within his children however, he spends the course of the film trying to find a way out to save his family. With no other options in sight and the tragic fate of his family along the horizon, he resorts to killing one of his family members at random to lift the curse.

Three aspects of this film are of particular interest for the following scene analyses and their representations of dread as an affective pattern. First is the narrative which follows the strict plotting of a Greek tragedy, making its audience aware of the fact that a main character's death is imminent and inescapable. Lanthimos's screenplay was in fact inspired by *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides, in which Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter in order to appease Artemis after offending her (Wilkinson 2017). Second is the unique space-making of the film through unusual camera angles framing movement as forced, and third is the use of disjointed voiceover that carries viewers forward into new scenes. Accordingly, I will focus on select scenes in the film that employ visceral and strange camera techniques to track character movement and create an affective sense of dread through atmosphere, as well as a scene in which a voiceover of a phone conversation between Steven and Martin confuses linear temporality to force viewers into a more direct confrontation with dread.

Lanthimos pays close attention to the steady and structured movement of bodies through slow zooms, pans, and unusual camera angles to bolster a sense of feeling trapped, which I argue exposes a temporality indicative of an affective patterning of dread. The film begins with a jarring two-minute scene of a human chest held open by surgical clamps, revealing a beating heart. As the camera slowly zooms out, gloved hands poke and prod at the organ until the screen fades to black, showing the film's title in white text. The following scene reveals the surgeons taking off their surgical gloves and gown, disposing of them into the garbage in slow motion with a classical score echoing in the background, linking these three moments together. We then enter the film's first sequence of dialogue and character movement—a conversation between Steven and his anesthesiologist, Dr. Matthew Williams (Bill Camp) presumably after having left the operation room. They walk slowly and steadily down the hospital hallway at an exact matching pace, footwork mirrored uncannily to produce a sense of robotic, controlled movement. Centered in the frame, the camera dollies backward matching their pace and sits at the chest level as they speak—the audience is consequently dissuaded from forming a relationship with these characters, always kept at an awkward distance and height. They continue to walk slowly down the hallway, the lines of the wall receding into the background as the patterning of fluorescent lights and ceiling create a kind of tracking pace alongside their strides. They engage in a mundane conversation about watches, their preferred wrist straps, and water resistance—a starkly benign conversation following an open-heart surgery (figure 1).



Figure 1: Steven and Matthew walking down a hospital hallway.

A second hospital scene enforces this unusual framing of movement, when Steven walks along a similar corridor to discover that Martin has come to see him at work. This time, the camera follows him from behind with a high vantage point, emphasizing his arms swaying to the pace of his stoic walk. The viewer is offered an impossible perspective here, tracking his speed at a sightline of around two feet above his head as if we are forced to look down on him (figure 2).



Figure 2: Steven walking down a hospital hallway.

Scenes of Steven's movement throughout corridor spaces as such are interspersed evenly throughout the sequence of the entire film. Not only relegated to the space of the hospital, he is shown navigating indoor and outdoor spaces with a patterned logic of framing from behind, switching between a low or high vantage point (figures 3, 4, 5 and 6, next page). These scenes work to visually foreground a sense of structured and stilted movement that form a determinate pattern with the temporality of dread by its constant reappearance. Attention is given to rigid, programmatic, and seemingly unnatural forward motion here, plotted across the narrative layout to bolster an awareness of movement and time as forcibly stitched together in a way that does not suggest continuity or ease of progress, but a compulsory push toward an inevitable demise. Steven's movement along stretched paths or corridors are indexical traces of the film's prevailing temporal mechanism of dread—a reiterated representation of forward motion within an abstracted and uneasy sense of space barreling toward Steven's fatal decision.



Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6: Steven walking in various settings with unusual camera tracking.

Gilles Deleuze argues that cinema is generally a system that reproduces movement, which symptomatically creates an impression of continuity through cuts. He calls these instances of reproduced movement “movement-images” to reconceive of a series of still frames as indexing actual movement in the real world, rather than images that have movement merely added to them (Deleuze 1986, 5). Of course, movement is inextricable from temporality, as a qualification of movement in a particular scene entails a set duration. In this way, these scenes of Steven walking throughout space—exemplifying movement toward a dreadful outcome—simultaneously expose a distinct temporal rhythm of dread. Deleuze further teases out the relationship between the movement-image and its relation to the temporal whole of a film. He suggests that the shot, construed by camera angle and vantage point, provides a dual point of view on what it represents—first, a translation of physical parts of a set which spreads out in a given space, and second, its subsequent impact on the whole of the film which is transformed in its given duration (Deleuze 1986, 20). Here, he connects space and duration through movement, both from the camera and the figure within its frame to suggest that movement equally reveals an underlying temporal construction to the film.

Again, the scenes I reference represent Steven walking amongst various settings including the hospital he works at, his children’s school, and the cityscape of Cincinnati, with or without other characters. Their cinematographic framing deliberately dwarfs the figures in a congested composition of orthogonal lines and skewed surfaces, made stranger by camera angles that position the viewer as crawling behind or hovering above ominously. This sense of strangeness in conjunction with the consistent pace at which he walks indicate a repeated and systematic temporality of dread that is carried through the film’s tragic narrative. Isolating movement in this way therefore reveals a temporality of dread that acts as the glue between these chosen movement-images. Their logic of repetition and determination in visually abstracted spaces which themselves are repeated throughout the film’s sequence point to an affective engagement with dread as a pattern. As I have previously qualified the affect of dread through affective practice and repetition, the foregrounding of movement visually exposes a patterned temporality that exacerbates the predetermined and inevitable outcome of the narrative.

Weaving in and out of the film’s sequence, these scenes work alongside the other scenes in the film to create an overall atmosphere of dread that leaks out from scenic and narrative bounds. The formation of an overarching temporal disposition as such can be attributed to how Deleuze conceives of the time-image in his later work on cinema. Integrally linked to the movement-

image, time, he argues, is represented indirectly in film through the piecing together of a series of movement-images (Deleuze 1986, 34). Movement-images are primary, assimilated into the shot, and turned towards objects—they are therefore self-contained. The relationship between movement-images, when they are placed in relation to each other to create a sequence or montage, is what reveals a “flow of time” or a time-image, which cannot be empirically located but exists in an indeterminate space between scenes (Deleuze 1986, 35, 27). In this way, the temporality of dread unique to this film is felt across and between a series of scenes that present a structured and specific form of consistent movement that is itself repeated many times. Deleuze’s spatial analysis of time positions the temporal construction of film as not exclusively located in concrete movement, but as supra-textual—a force that haunts movement and the suturing together of scenes to create a filmic sequence endowed with a sense of atmosphere. Steven’s dreadful walk therefore contributes to a wider atmosphere of dread that permeates not only the surrounding scenes and movement-images, but extends past the surface of the film itself to suggest that this suspended temporality expands beyond a narrative frame.

My analysis of these scenes does not seek to privilege them as stand-out moments, but rather as exemplary of the *types* of scenes that saturate the entirety of the film and emerge in consistent patterns. In this way, no scene is unique or more powerful than any other; each of them is subtly and quietly affective in its contribution to a system of increasing dread across the film’s length. These scenes’ constant reappearance reinforces a semblance of practice or patterning; in Wetherell’s terms, they are established reference points and the site at which repetition takes place and cannot help but do so again (2012, 20). This positions the formal construction of the film as a system itself, not only in which narrative is carried forward by character interaction and motive, but as an affective system in which patterns repeat to construct, build upon, and intensify dread.

Another mechanism through which a patterning makes itself present in this film is voiceover across some scenes in the narrative. With little stylistic intervention in the use of non-diegetic sound, most scenes only involve character dialogue, a classical score at the beginning and end of the film, and cacophonous strings at points of conflict and tension. The rest of the sonic landscape remains quiet and atmospheric. As such, moments in which voiceover are present are starkly highlighted and stand out as an unusual form of linkage between scenes. A first instance of voiceover occurs when Martin calls Steven on the phone late at night while he gets ready for bed to invite him over for dinner with his mother. He attempts to get out of it, but feels obliged to say yes when Martin mentions that his mother has not seen Steven since his father was

in the hospital under his care. At this point, an eerie score of strings keys the viewer into a sensation of guilt on behalf of Steven, realizing that he might have had something to do with the death. Their conversation on the phone carries forward into the following scene at daytime, where Steven walks to his car in the parking lot of the hospital. Martin becomes increasingly persistent in his insistence that Steven needs to come to dinner, his voice echoing scratchily from the other end of the phone. In the parking lot as Steven drives away and their phone conversation from the previous night ends, he sees Martin scurrying around parked cars as if to suggest Martin was following him.

The formal complexity of continuous dialogue as such works to connect separate scenes and build up a layering of temporalities, one from the present daytime moment and one from the night before. This confrontation of disjointed sound and image is jarring and at first produces a sense of alienation, but simultaneously creates a unique temporal engagement that viewers are forced to follow. Acting as a bridge between what we might understand as two movement-images, the dialogue between Martin and Steven becomes a conceptual connector outside of the visual index of movement—it positions itself in the realm of the time-image, which contributes to the construction of the temporality of dread. As Martin's presence in Steven's life becomes more suspicious and insidious in the narrative, the construction of the film itself breaks open temporally, allowing Martin to leak through the cracks of the scenic sequence and incorporate into the film's affective patterning. As a representational harbinger of dread itself, Martin comes into increasingly close confrontation with Steven's family by enacting a curse that remains logically unknown, but is hinted at by disruptive formal elements in the film's montage—he does not abide by the rules of the world depicted in the film, nor by the rules of how the film itself is composed.

Returning to the temporal layout of dread, we can recall that dread is engaged with temporalities that expand past the boundaries of the film's duration, unlike suspense which I have argued resolves itself within the length of the film. Of course, both of these affective procedures constitute the wider affective system of *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, but by different means and varying temporal registers. Where suspense can be located in specific moments like the revelation of Martin's curse, Bob suddenly losing mobility in his legs, or Steven shooting one of his children at random, these temporary bursts of excitement or suspension experience closure by completion of the act. While not resolved per se, these short-lived visceral thrillings differ from the temporalities of dread that undergird these more sensational instances. I have explored how particular scenes of movement make themselves *about* time through a collection of

movement-images that constitute an overall time-image. Across varied techniques of cinematographic estrangement and abstraction of space, the temporalities of dread are revealed as an interspersed logic that permeates each surrounding scene and overarching sequence. Forward motion through alienated space therefore indexes a sense of dragging forward, forcefully pulling viewers along a temporality we are required to come to terms with—an inevitable, fatal outcome for the main characters on screen. The sonic landscape of Martin's voiceovers also creates a sense of a dragging effect, in which a given scene is layered with dialogue from the previous. In this moment of temporal layering, we are momentarily thrust out of logical continuity into a complicated sense of time, which I have suggested is also the dislodged and diffuse space of dread. In this way, we are unwillingly pulled forward by these layered dialogues, forced into the next scene that confronts Steven's family with Martin's presence which itself indicates their imminent demise.

Inevitable fate as such directly engages a longer temporality that extends beyond the film's frame and into the realm of real experience, which identifies an affective engagement that does not resolve within the scope of the film itself. Death and the awareness of its inescapability points to a wider existential contestation. Enforced by Steven's multiple failed attempts to escape Martin's curse on his family, which are visually exacerbated by a skewed and uncomfortable cinematographic and visual language, an atmosphere of dread lingers beyond the striking of tragedy. With no prevailing resolution for characters and a twisted sense of justice awarded to the antagonist, dread leaks out of the film to the audience's own grappling with the imminent arrival of death as an absolute.

The temporalities of dread at play in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* are manifold and complex, creating a system of affect that pulls viewers along several temporal registers. They suspend us above the causal and linear linkage of scenes and drag us into a rhythm of cyclical repetition in which an impending outcome of death is just around the corner. Emerging consistently through a patterning of movement that repeats not only within given scenes but at the structural level of the film's sequence at large, the affective dimension of dread makes itself palpable as first a whisper which slowly grows into an overwhelming swath. In this essay, I have argued that the cultivation of dread in Lanthimos' film fits squarely with the process of affective practice, which privileges the over-determined figurations that emerge through repetition. As such, persistent and consistent camera movements, as well as jarring sonic techniques, over-determine a sense of pure unease in this film, suggesting that the affect of dread is one that requires careful and slow reiteration. Leaning into

dread as embedded in form speaks to Lanthimos' filmic expression of tragic inevitability, building from classical narrative structures based in myth—it is in this way that his film both constructs and performs dread. Though I have gestured toward a sense of a collective affective engagement in this horror film as one that grapples with an existential awareness of death, my focus on the internal mechanisms of movement and temporality and their adjacency to affective production have been primary. Ultimately, an affective approach seeks to intervene into existing scholarship by returning to representation rather than reifying affective experience into discrete categories and vying for a unified experience across diverse audiences. As such, the felt capacity of this affective exchange is open to a range of expressions. Through patterned engagements with movement and temporality, the affect of dread extends itself past the durational boundaries of the film by communicating an inevitable facticity of death. Transcending the screen in this way, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* activates a starting point of existential thought with no resolution—that a tragic fate is not exclusive to the characters we see on screen, but a definite outcome that will perturb our experience to no end.²

Marcus Prasad is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at McGill University, working under the supervision of Dr. Bobby Benedicto. His research uses film philosophy and psychoanalysis to explore queerness, horror, and their intersections. Marcus completed his MA in Art History at the University of British Columbia with funding from the SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship—Master's (CGS-M). Forthcoming publications include a chapter on horror and fine art for the *Routledge Companion to Horror*.

² This essay was awarded the 2023 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Horror SIG Graduate Essay Prize. We are grateful to this year's jurors for their time, and for funding and support from the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture (FRQSC) and the Collective for Research on Epistemologies and Ontologies of Embodied Risk (CORERISC).

References

- Anastasova, Maria. 2019. *The Suspense of Horror and the Horror of Suspense*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Church, David. 2021. *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hills, Matt. 2005. *The Pleasures of Horror*. London: Continuum International Publishing.
- Ligotti, Thomas. 2018 [2010]. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. London and New York: Penguin Books.
- Massumi, Brian. 1995. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique* 31. The Politics of Systems and Environments. (Autumn): 83-109.
- Pinedo, Isabel. 1996. "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film." *Journal of Film and Video* 48, nos. 1/2 (Spring-Summer): 17-31.
- Schildrick, Margrit. 2009. "Prosthetic Performativity: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities." In *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, 115-133. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Spadoni, Robert. 2014. "Carl Dreyer's Corpse: Horror Film Atmosphere and Narrative." In *A Companion to the Horror Film*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff, 151-168. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Spooner, Catherine. 2007. *Contemporary Gothic*. London: Reaktion.
- Smuts, Aaron. 2014. "Cognitive and Philosophical Approaches to Horror," In *A Companion to the Horror Film*, edited by Harry M. Benshoff, 3-21. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.

Thain, Alanna. 2017. *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wetherell, Margaret. 2012. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage Publications.

Wilkinson, Alissa. 2017. "In the Killing of a Sacred Deer, a Greek Myth Becomes a Family's Descent into Hell." *Vox*. (October 20, 2017). <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/31/15676946/killing-of-a-sacred-deer-cannes-review>.

- 2023 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).