# A Detroit Landscape with Figures: The Subtractive Horror of *It Follows*


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# A Detroit Landscape with Figures: The Subtractive Horror of *It Follows*

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"Filmed on location in and around Detroit, Michigan."

This announcement appears near the end of the final credits for David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), one of the most excitingly inventive horror films of recent years. On the one hand, the announcement is hardly necessary: the film has made such skillful, strategic, and explicit use of its setting that we have little doubt as to where the film was shot. On the other hand, the announcement is telling in its insistence: it signals just how much the landscape in this film matters, how its background is actually the foreground. *It Follows* testifies to what we can learn about cinematic horror by focusing on landscape, an element that is usually considered secondary at best, rather than the monsters, killings, and gore that are most often deemed primary. I will contend that *It Follows* teaches us valuable things about horror's relative investments not so much in a body count that adds up but in a landscape where human presence is subtracted.

*It Follows* concerns a group of teenage friends who stumble across a supernatural phenomenon that is difficult to believe at first. Jay (Maika Monroe), the group's most sexually confident member, is told by her boyfriend Hugh (Jake Weary) that he has passed on a curse to her. When he had sex with her, he transferred what had been passed on to him by another woman when they had

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sex: a creature dedicated to killing her will follow her wherever she goes, forever, until she passes along the curse to someone else. The creature can take on any number of human forms and is visible only to the persons being followed. Outrunning the creature is relatively easy, since it moves only by walking at a deliberate pace. But any escape is temporary, since what the creature lacks in speed it compensates for in determination. It will always follow, no matter where you run, and it cannot be stopped.

Jay and her friends, who include her sister Kelly (Lili Sepe), the brainy Yara (Olivia Luccardi), the smitten Paul (Keir Gilchrist), and Jay's older friend Greg (Daniel Zovatto), veer from wishing to comfort Jay about what seem to be her paranoid and delusional beliefs to working actively with her to discover the nature of the curse and create a solution to it. Nothing works. Even the ostensible fix, having sex and passing on the curse to someone else, is just another temporary breather. Once the creature kills the newest victim, it pursues the previous one. The film ends with Jay and Paul holding hands and walking the streets of their placid suburban neighborhood. Paul and Jay have had sex in order to share the curse, but what comes next? What will follow?

*It Follows* is an extraordinary variation on the slasher film, one of horror's most tried-and-true subgenres. The slasher film traces its roots to *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), but its most influential model has been *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). That film is the crystallization of the slasher formula, what Carol J. Clover, in her brilliant study of gender and the modern horror film, calls "the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived."[1] Many key elements of the slasher film are, as Clover notes, already present in *Psycho,* and *Halloween*'s knowing nods to *Psycho* include characters with identical names and the casting of Janet Leigh's daughter, Jamie Lee Curtis, as the killer's featured prey/antagonist. But it is *Halloween* and its most lucrative imitators, *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), that have spawned the remarkably durable series of sequels, remakes, and even parodies that have continued to make the slasher film very much a part of the cinematic present tense. Although Clover's claims about the presumed audience, spectator identifications, and dominant Americanness of the slasher film have been challenged,[2] her account of the slasher film's essential ingredients remains invaluable: "the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active

woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness."[3] Clover also draws attention to the slasher film's reliance on the active, resourceful woman who senses the killer's presence; survives his attacks; and outwits or sometimes even kills him herself. Clover calls her the "Final Girl," and she has been at the heart of slasher cinema at least since *Halloween*.[4]

Turning to *It Follows* with Clover in mind highlights just how much Mitchell revises the standard slasher formula. Although *Halloween* hangs at least as heavily over *It Follows* as *Psycho* did over *Halloween,* Mitchell refigures Carpenter in even more striking ways than Carpenter departs from Hitchcock. The creature of *It Follows* is, as the film's title suggests, an "It" rather than a human being. Despite its ability to take on human appearances, this creature is more in line with its inhuman brethren in 1950s science fiction and horror movies such as *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (Edward L. Cahn, 1958) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) than *Psycho*'s Norman Bates or even *Halloween*'s Michael Myers (who comes from a recognizable family context despite his superhuman indestructibility). Indeed, the teens of *It Follows* watch 1950s-era science fiction and horror movies on television as avidly as the children of *Halloween* tune in to *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956); in both cases, the prevalence of images from the 1950s (and in *It Follows,* on black-and-white TV sets) in films set during the present suggest a sort of unstuck-in-time quality that I will return to when considering issues of space and landscape. Another revision centers on the role of Jay, who goes from prime victim (beautiful and sexually active) to Final Girl (resourceful survivor). Jay defies the virginal/sexual splitting apparent in both *Psycho* (Vera Miles/Janet Leigh) and *Halloween* (Jamie Lee Curtis/her female friends). Again, this shift in characterization will matter in terms of the landscapes that Jay inhabits and her relation to those spaces. Finally, Clover's Terrible Place, which is emblematized by the "Victorian decrepitude" of the Bates mansion and the decaying, "unsellable" Myers house, becomes something quite different in *It Follows:* the city of Detroit itself.[5]

Hitchcock's Fairvale, California, and Carpenter's Haddonfield, Illinois, are both fictional suburban towns. Mitchell's Detroit is not only a real city rather than an imaginary suburb but is also one of the most famous, infamous, and American of American cities. Home to both the manufacturing base of the U.S. automobile industry and the world-renowned Motown sound of the African

American music label Motown Records, Detroit fell on extraordinarily hard times in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With its industrial base lost to global competitors as the U.S. manufacturing economy eroded, its population nosedived, crime escalated, and basic city services deteriorated. The auto industry went bankrupt, and then so did the city. A revival of sorts is now under way, but when Mitchell filmed *It Follows,* Detroit was understood to be a Terrible Place in the literal sense, not the metaphorical sense.[6]

What does it mean to move from metaphorical to literal registers in this way when *It Follows* insists on Detroit as its landscape? Late in the film, Jay and her friends lure the creature to an empty city pool at night with the plan of drowning and/or electrocuting it. On their way to the pool they speak about the geography of the city that is their home, particularly the lines that divide the modest but neatly coiffed suburbs (where they live) from the ramshackle, often largely abandoned neighborhoods of the city (where the pool is located). None of them have visited this pool in years, and Yara explains why: "When I was a little girl, my parents wouldn't allow me to go south of 8 Mile. And I didn't even know what that meant until I got a little older and I started realizing that was where the city started and the suburbs ended. And I used to think about how shitty and weird that was. I mean, I had to ask permission to go to the state fair with my best friend and her parents only because it was a few blocks past the border." Jay, responding for the rest of the group, says, "My Mom said the same thing."

This conversation highlights the organizing principle behind the film's visual logic: the landscape is the point of *It Follows,* not a mere backdrop beside the point. The human desire to map the landscape as a series of boundaries separating racial and class differences is the film's substance and the wellspring for its horror. At the core of what is frightening about this creature and the entire concept of how it follows its prey is that it has no respect for the borders that have given meaning to the spaces inhabited by the film's characters. Their sense of what is safe and unsafe, inside and outside, "our" placid suburbs and "their" violent city, crumbles as the creature follows them. The creature remaps these borders and, as a consequence, so do Jay and her friends. They cross the line of 8 Mile Road to get to the pool, just as they do earlier in the film to find the ruinous hideout (not the home) of Jay's boyfriend Hugh, whose real name turns out to be Jeff (the double name underlining the city/suburb divide between his home and his hideout).[7] In fact, what we see of Hugh/Jeff's courtship of Jay is split primarily between two distinct locales: a quaint suburban theater replete

with lovingly restored movie palace retro detail (the featured film is the aptly titled *Charade* [Stanley Donen, 1963]) and the desolate, empty lot in the shadow of a hulking abandoned building characteristic of the city's dilapidation.[8] This is where Hugh/Jeff parks his car so he and Jay can have sex. Afterward, he takes her inside the wrecked building to explain and then reveal the curse to her as the creature follows them inside. Notable landscape details in this sequence include the lot's proximity to a large body of water and Jay's dreamy attention to a plant growing in the underbrush outside the building.

Both of these details develop into recurring visual motifs as the film unfolds, suggesting that the lines between the city and the suburbs (or the suburbs and the country for that matter, as key sequences also take place north of Detroit in rural lakefront vacation settings) are not as natural or definitive as they might appear. In the visual logic of landscape in *It Follows* water is always infiltrating the land, and plant life is always repossessing urban space. The film constantly gravitates toward pools and lakes, just as it presents images of urban desolation that convey abandonment through the return of vegetation and emptiness to formerly domesticated and populated spaces (Figures 1 and 2). The effect is a profound rattling of our sense of what belongs where as well as what belongs when.

When the creature of *It Follows* demolishes our orientation to the boundaries between the city and the suburbs, it also recalibrates our sense of time's presence in space. Can spaces that time forgot economically somehow become unstuck historically? This is a question that *It Follows* poses again and again through its mise-en-scène. When Jay and her friends commandeer all the household appliances they can in order to electrocute the creature, the inventory is more in line with the black-and-white television sets and 1950s-era programming they watch than common consumer items of the present day: old lamps, radios, crock pots, and electric typewriters. Hugh/Jeff and Greg both drive old cars. The movie theater, mentioned earlier, is a 1930s-style revival house playing a film from the 1960s. Jay's class studies T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1920). Evidence of the Internet and computer screens of any kind is kept to a bare minimum; even Yara's clamshell mobile device is used most of the time to read Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869). In short, the landscape of *It Follows* disorients our sense of spatial order to a degree that undermines our sense of temporal order. We know where we are but not how to navigate that space; we know when we are but not how this particular spatially located present fits with other presents, the past, or the future.

Figures 1 and 2. Frame compositions that emphasize human absence and the landscape's presence in *It Follows*.

*It Follows* accentuates this disorientation cinematically by making repeated use of an unusual formal mechanism: the 360-degree camera movement. In the film's opening sequence, for example, we watch a teenage girl flee from the creature we cannot see. Her movements (out of her house, down the street, back into her house, out to the car, driving away in the opposite direction) form a 360-degree arc that is, even with momentary pauses in the camera's rotation, extraordinarily jarring to our spatial sensibilities. Later, the film ups the ante by performing continuous 360-degree loops. When Jay and her friends arrive at Hugh/Jeff's high school to track down more information about him, the camera rotates a full 360 degrees without stopping and then continues into a second loop before settling on Jay and Greg as the figures of interest worth focusing on within the shot.

These 360-degree loops are not point-of-view shots in any traditional sense. They are not motivated by the killer or the victim's perceptual vantage point, as is common practice in slasher films. Instead, they make the camera an accomplice in what the film's presentation of landscape has already established: our

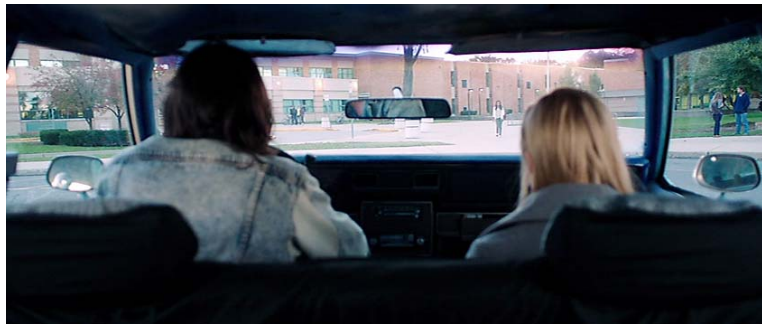

Figure 3. Even though they appear to be looking directly at her, Greg and Jay do not see the lone girl in the distance whom we are now painfully aware of in *It Follows*.

conventional ways of processing spatial boundaries do not apply here, and perhaps those conventions themselves are not as solid as we once thought. When the camera rotates in such a flamboyantly disorienting manner without the searching gaze of the killer or the victim to anchor it, we are forced to wrestle with our own unsettled perceptions. How do I map this space? What am I looking at and why? Where is the threat here? What is being threatened here?[9]

Oftentimes, we must recalculate our answers to such questions. In the high school fact-finding sequence, for instance, a lone girl walking slowly in the distance seems to pose no more or less of a threat than the other figures in the landscape who fall in and out of our vision as the camera spins. But when we see her for the second time, getting closer, we are more alarmed. The third time, after the loop concludes, we are truly upset, even though (and precisely because) the characters within the frame do not see her themselves—a distinction that Mitchell highlights through the use of racking focus (Figure 3). We see in ways the characters do not, which heightens our awareness of and watchfulness about how landscape functions in the film as a whole. This foregrounding of landscape dovetails with Mitchell's desire to "let the frame breathe," to leave "room on the edges of the image to create an environment where the audience could watch the characters exist, but also have the freedom to look around and imagine what might be lurking in the distance, on the peripheral."[10]

The landscape's chief function in *It Follows* is a subtractive one. Just as the boundaries between the city and the suburbs as well as the past and the present disappear, so too does the human element decrease in favor of a nonhuman one. I have argued elsewhere that this sort of subtractive logic is an essential if underrecognized

dimension of the slasher film, where most analysis has focused on the body count escalating rather than the human presence diminishing.[11] *It Follows* represents a fascinating variation on this subtractive logic in that the film's body count is remarkably low. We see very few people die over the course of the film. And yet, the sense that the human presence is being methodically subtracted from the landscape remains. The film accomplishes this by having the distressed, depopulated landscape of Detroit constantly remind us of all of the disappearing bodies we cannot see. The empty houses, the vacant lots, the abandoned buildings—these are all markers of absence, of subtraction. In *It Follows,* the deployment of landscape shifts the force of horror from the supernatural to the natural.

This is not to say that the creature of *It Follows* is not supernatural; it most certainly is. But the creature's relation to the surrounding landscape and the space of the frame provides a subtractive charge to the film's horror that transcends the supernatural. When we scan the frame looking for lone figures walking slowly, knowing that the creature can take on any human form (an old man, a nude woman, a tall man, a child, a mother, a friend), suddenly aloneness itself becomes a sign of potential monstrosity. Anyone alone in the landscape or in the frame with whom we are not already acquainted could be the creature. So, we experience perceptually as spectators what Detroit has been through economically and socially: the subtraction of human presence, the loss of community. In a depressed and depopulated Detroit, isolation is more and more the norm; in *It Follows,* the chances of connecting with those fellow human beings with whom one shares the city decrease drastically when these people appear as potential creatures rather than potential neighbors.

The film sharpens the edge of what losing community means by embedding us within a tight-knit group of friends who never let Jay feel truly alone, no matter what her circumstances. Paul, Kelly, Yara, and even Greg look out for her and accompany her through the nightmare of being followed. This is an unusual set of social relations for a slasher film, when even the best of friends often opt for time apart rather than together so the murders can then take place as suspenseful one-on-one encounters with the killer. So here again, *It Follows* departs notably from the slasher formula even if the film honors another axiom of slasher film sociality: parents are either mostly or entirely absent and certainly cannot be counted on for help when it is needed.[12] But it is precisely the film's unconventional emphasis on community that allows *It Follows* to cut deepest when that community is lost.

The film ends on what might at first glance appear to be a happy, romantic note. Jay and Paul, now a couple, hold hands as they walk together through their suburban neighborhood. But the absence of their friends and the possible presence of the creature (who is that man walking alone behind them?) taints the happiness of their couplehood. Yes, they are a couple bonded by "sharing" the curse, but now they are just two rather than a group. Yes, they seem "at home" on these suburban streets, but the creature that follows them has already exploded the boundaries between city and suburb. All that can really protect them is a community, and that is what has gone missing here. The couple has been subtracted from the community, the human element now dwindling to two. Yes, they are together, but it is not hard to imagine one of them disappearing and then the other. All that would remain would be the landscape itself.

Returning to the landscape is what awaits us all, of course. As the literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison argues, it is "impossible to understand the institution of places on the earth independently of the institution of burial."[13] Death rejoins us with the landscape that preceded us and will outlive us. What is unnerving about *It Follows* is its insistence on this fact. We are destined to be buried as part of the landscape that we imagine we have mastered; in truth, it is the landscape that masters us. By weaving together death and landscape so intimately along the axis of subtraction, *It Follows* confronts us with the horror of who we are: figures always on the verge of disappearance in a landscape that will swallow us. The landscape's ultimate absorption of human presence may seem existentially chilling, yet this recognition also invites new ways of thinking about how human beings and institutions make sense of the spaces we inhabit. Our assumptions about such spaces—and indeed about ourselves in relation to them—prove to be far more contingent than given in this horrifically illuminating light.

The genius of *It Follows* is its capacity to pair its existential horror with the spatially and historically specific horror of Detroit's decline. Where the film reveals its limitations is in its failure to convey just how inequitably the impact of Detroit's decline has been felt by its poor, largely African American residents. For the historian Thomas J. Sugrue, the postwar origins of the U.S. "urban crisis" of which Detroit is emblematic must be reckoned with as a matter of racial inequality. "Detroit's journey from urban heyday to urban crisis has been mirrored in other cities across the nation," Sugrue writes. "The faces that appear in the rundown houses, urban shelters, and social agencies of these urban wastelands are predictably familiar. Almost all are people of color."[14] These are the

faces that *It Follows* does not show us. Although the film is not exclusively composed of white characters, all of the main characters are white. Even the guises that the creature takes on are all white. This missed opportunity to hammer home the political stakes underwriting Detroit's landscape of subtractive horror feels like a haunting absence of its own, but placing *It Follows* in conversation with other accounts of Detroit's urban crisis can provide faces for the faceless and voices for the voiceless.

For example, one of the unforgettable people profiled in the documentary *Detropia* (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2012) is Tommy Stephens, the heroically persevering African American owner of a music lounge in one of Detroit's ravaged neighborhoods. When he shares his thoughts about what the rest of the country might learn from Detroit's plight, he says, "When you see your neighbor going down, you have to think about yourself. And if you don't go over there and put that fire out, help your neighbor put that fire out, that fire is coming to you. No matter what the problems are. What happened in Detroit is now spreading throughout. This is coming to you."

I hope that in the context of this essay, Stephens's words read like an epigraph that might have been for *It Follows:* a way of accentuating the implicit political stakes attached to the film's aesthetic presentation of the Detroit landscape. By placing landscape first, I have sought to place the film, the slasher subgenre, and, by extension, horror itself in an aesthetic and political light that it too rarely attracts. One price of this particular approach is that I have largely passed over the questions of sex and gender, whose significance for *It Follows* are undeniable; these are questions that have been pursued thoroughly and productively in previous scholarship on the horror film.[15] My turn to landscape is not intended as a rejection of such scholarship but an invitation to broaden the scope of what cinematic horror means and why it matters. By promoting rather than demoting landscape from this set of concerns, the spatiality of horror takes on new importance, and horror's value for what has been called "a spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences" emerges.[16] In my study of *It Follows,* horror's subtractive relation to space comes into sharp relief when landscape drives the discussion. Without it, this insight's implications for the cinematic imagination of Detroit and spaces like it risks fading into a background that we might fail to see altogether.

## Notes

1. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21.

2. See Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Adam Lowenstein, "A Reintroduction to the American Horror Film," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film,* Vol. 4, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, 154–76 (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Adam Lowenstein, "The *Giallo*/Slasher Landscape: *Ecologia del delitto, Friday the 13th,* and Subtractive Spectatorship," in *Italian Horror Cinema,* ed. Stefano Baschiera and Russ Hunter, 127–44 (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

3. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws,* 23–24.

4. Ibid., 35–41.

5. Ibid., 30.

6. For more on this period in the history of Detroit, see Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (New York: Penguin, 2013); Nathan Bomey, *Detroit Resurrected: To Bankruptcy and Back* (New York: Norton, 2016).

7. The 8 Mile line is itself a notable reference point in the American popular culture imaginary due in part to the film *8 Mile* (Curtis Hanson, 2002) and its star, the rapper Eminem, one of Detroit's most well-known contemporary music artists. Among the other films that have mobilized the decaying Detroit landscape, Jim Jarmusch's masterful vampire tale *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and Fede Âlvarez's fascinating home invasion horror film *Don't Breathe* (2016) are worth noting in the context of this discussion but deserve more attention than I can provide here.

8. Both of these locations, the Redford Theatre and the Packard Automotive Plant, are recognizable Detroit landmarks.

9. These questions, along with the 360-degree camera movement itself (which calls to mind the techniques of Jean-Luc Godard, Werner Herzog, and others), evoke art cinema at least as much as horror-genre cinema. I can only note in passing that *It Follows* is yet one more reminder among many others that the line between the art film and the horror film, usually imagined as stark and self-evident, is often blurry or illusory.

10. David Robert Mitchell, interviewed by Chris Alexander, "Follow You Down," *Fangoria,* no. 341 (2015): 45.

11. Lowenstein, "The *Giallo*/Slasher Landscape," 127–44.

12. The fact that the creature takes on the form of Jay's absent father late in the film emphasizes the unreliability of parents throughout *It Follows.*

13. Robert Pogue Harrison, "Hic Jacet," in *Landscape and Power,* 2nd ed., ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 353.

14. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

15. For a valuable sampling of this scholarship, see Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film,* 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

16. Julia Hallam and Les Roberts, "Film and Spatiality: Outline of a New Empiricism," in *Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place,* ed. Julia Hallam and Les Roberts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 2.