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A Cinema of Hopelessness

The Rhetoric of Rage in 21st Century Popular Culture

Kendall R. Phillips

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Popular Culture

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Communication & Rhetorical Studies
Syracuse University
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Dedicated to Catherine Thomas, who always brings me hope

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Echoes of Refusal

Abstract The Introduction outlines the feelings of frustration and anger that have circulated in American political and popular culture during the first decades of the 2000s. This chapter argues that these feelings have formed a constellation of emotions revolving around a fantasy of refusing the entirety of the political and economic systems. The successful presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump is shown as exploiting these feelings. This chapter suggests the need to explore the way these feelings have circulated throughout popular cinema by tracing the affective echo of deep-seated political and cultural frustrations.

Keywords Affect • Cinema • Distrust • Horror • Rhetoric • Trump

How did we get here? That is the key question that animates this book. By “here,” I mean the current state of political discord and rancor that has become the new normal in the United States and, indeed, much of the world. As I assembled this manuscript, the United States was wracked with protests from both the political left and right. Some protesters have rallied around a cry of “Black Lives Matter” and spoken out against the on-going tide of anti-Black violence and death visited upon Black, indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) citizens by police agencies. The 2018 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, who suffocated him for 8

minutes and 46 seconds, renewed the anger that had been simmering at least since the deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012, Eric Garner in 2014, Atatiana Jefferson in 2018, and far too many others. On the other end of the political spectrum, right-wing protestors have also voiced outrage at the current state of the world. In 2017, many assembled in Charlottesville, Virginia, for a “Unite the Right” rally aimed at protesting plans to remove Confederate memorials. The protests in Charlottesville erupted in violence leading to one death, Heather Heyer, a counter-protestor who was murdered by James Fields when he rammed into protestors with his car.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept around the globe in 2020, right leaning protestors again took to the streets to protest public health restrictions, including wearing masks to prevent spread of the virus. At times, these dueling groups—one protesting police violence and the other protesting public health restrictions—came into contact and violent clashes erupted. The crisis of the pandemic, far from bringing citizens of the nation together, became another partisan point of dispute as virtually any public gesture became fodder for an increasingly divisive conflict. It would be reprehensible to try to equate these protest movements and, to be clear, I have no intention of doing so. For me, the Black Lives Matter movement is a necessary statement rejecting systemic racism and anti-Black state violence. Protests against mask mandates or temporary business restrictions are ridiculous and petulant expressions of unearned and unwarranted privilege. So, here I want to be particularly careful not to echo the misguided argument of those who felt there are “very fine people on both sides,” a position I reject wholeheartedly. To even entertain this kind of stance would be to suggest a moral and political equivalence where none exists. But, while the moral and ethical grounds of these various protests are wildly different, it is notable that they do share one overarching feeling: the government has failed. More than just pinpointing failed policies or administrations, these protests seem to share a broader sense that the government itself is not only incompetent but openly corrupt and wicked.

One might say that both ends of the political spectrum see not merely the government as failed but the “system” as a whole as corrupt. It might be easy to dismiss the critiques from protest movements, which are, after all, defined by their roles as critic, but there is some evidence that these sentiments are widely shared. Recent polls of Americans have consistently found levels of trust in government and other institutions in decline. In 2020, the Pew Research Center declared “For years, public trust in the

federal government has hovered at near-record lows. That remains the case today.”¹ Big business and big technology companies are viewed with similar skepticism by many Americans.² Even in the midst of a global pandemic when many Americans have put their faith in medical experts like the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s top infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci, significant portions of the population view him and his agency with skepticism and disdain.³ As new vaccines are, at the time of this writing, being given to the first Americans, there are still 44% who say they will wait to see whether the vaccine can be trusted and another 15% who say they will refuse the vaccine altogether.⁴ American mythology has long held that in the midst of a crisis, Americans would band together. This is the reason the stories of the “Greatest Generation,” those living during the Second World War, are so often repeated during difficult times. In 2020, that myth seems to have lost its luster.

When later historians give this era a name, they will undoubtedly follow the lead of many contemporaries in calling it the era of Trump. And, this name is probably fitting. The election of Donald J. Trump to serve as the 45th US President constituted a significant jolt to the political and cultural norms of the nation. Shortly after the surprise loss of Hillary Clinton in electoral college votes (it is worth recalling that she won the popular vote by more than 2 million votes), documentary filmmaker Michael Moore characterized Trump’s victory as people “throwing a Molotov cocktail” into the US system. Trump supporter and former Bush administration official, Catherine Austin Fitts, embraced Moore’s language, arguing that the federal government had failed the taxpayers and that “if you believe you can never fix that, then throwing a Molotov cocktail into the middle of that is the most intelligent thing you can do.”⁵

Whatever the “intelligence” of this decision, the 2016 presidential election seemed to represent a new era, one in which the nation’s chief executive was openly hostile to the workings of government. The Trump administration’s rhetoric has been characterized not just by an emphasis on deregulation, but by claims that the federal government and many states were rife with a “deep state” conspiracy designed to drag the country into a vague nightmare scenario of authoritarian socialism. Trump’s claim that he would “drain the swamp” was followed by removing many professional civil servants and either filling leadership roles with business professionals, often with little or no background in their new areas of responsibility, or simply not filling them at all. Where previous presidents have sought to calm social crisis and unify divided groups, Trump has