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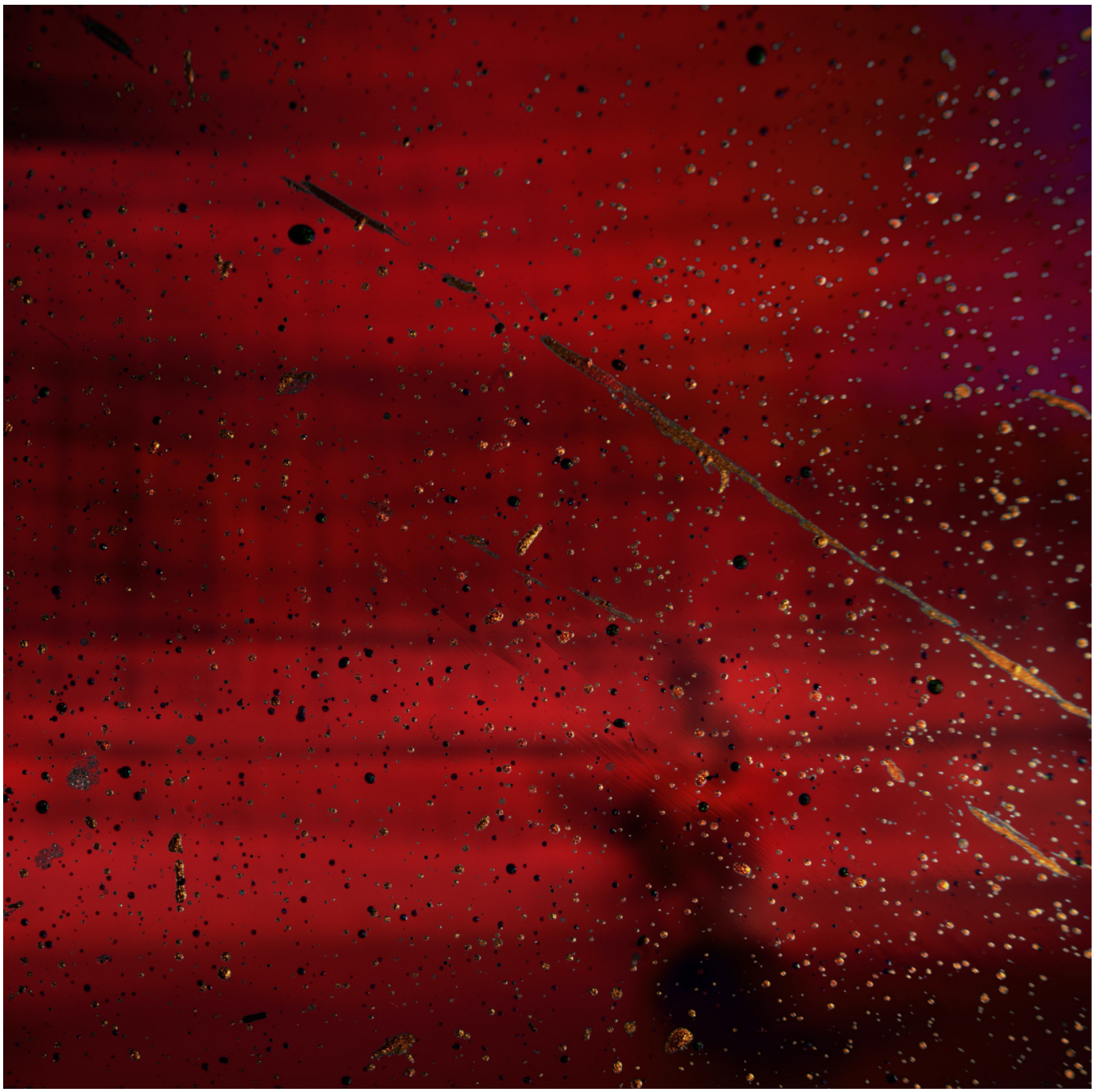

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Spectralvania:

Monsters, Transgression, and Religion in Netflix's Castlevania

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Abstract

In 2017, Adi Shankar produced the Netflix adaptation of the video game *Castlevania*. The game and the Netflix series revolve around Dracula and his horde of monsters battling the Belmont family's legendary monster hunters. The series is one of the few critically acclaimed video game adaptation created for a major audience. The series was renewed for a second season the day the first season released, and it has since been renewed for a third season. Producer Adi Shankar has a history of transgressive media stemming from his "Bootleg Universe"—high end fan films that have stirred up controversy related to copyrights. He has also claimed that fandom constitutes a new religion that draws on elements of traditional religion. *Castlevania*'s monster mashup reflects this transgressive new religion of fandom, not only in its form, but in the series' religious themes. This article explores the popularity of the *Castlevania*'s monsters through the elements of spectrality, monster theory, and Adi Shankar's claim that fandom constitutes a new religion. It argues that trauma haunts the monsters in *Castlevania* and the series represents a type of transgressive religious narrative that employs occult symbols to off a progressive critique hegemonic/traditional religion.

Keywords: Castlevania, fandom, spectrality, monster theory, religion.

In 2017, Adi Shankar, along with a group of artists, resurrected an old (and now dead, due to Konami's lack of support for new titles) video game franchise in the form of a Netflix original series. The game, *Castlevania*, is a decades old monster mashup involving the Belmont family's never-ending quest to vanquish Dracula and his evil horde. The Netflix series combines the narrative from

Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse and the art from *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*—the most successful game in the franchise—into a new creature that has found a home in contemporary culture.[1]

Film adaptations of video games have a long history of critical and commercial failure. Recent films such as *Tomb Raider* (2001, 2003 and 2018), *Doom* (2005), and *Assassin's Creed* (2016), have failed to gain critical approval, even if some have achieved financial success. However, as Rotten Tomatoes' contributor Alex Vo pointed out, "It's always a horrible night to have a curse in Dracula country, but in real life, Netflix's *Castlevania* just lifted another curse: It's the first video game adaptation to get a 'Fresh' rating on Rotten Tomatoes."[2]

This alleged "lifting of the curse" by Castlevania's bestiary caught the attention of numerous critics. Ben Gilbert writes, "Somehow, against all expectations and logic, the first Netflix original show derived from a video game is very, very good. More impressive: The show is based on the *Castlevania* game series, a long-dormant game franchise" that has a reputation of being "immensely difficult to play."[3] Furthermore, Nathalie Medina points out that one of the voice actors, Richard Armitage, "has confirmed that Netflix's unexpectedly delightful, dark medieval fantasy *Castlevania* show will be getting a third season — and the second season, announced almost immediately after season 1's debut, hasn't even launched yet."[4]

While there have been successful video game adaptations into other mediums, such as board games and comic books, and at least one financially successful and critically acclaimed film adaptation (*The Angry Birds Movie 2*, 2019), *Castlevania* stands out as unique. First, it is produced by Netflix, which allows the creators more flexibility in terms of niche marketing (it is not a show marketed for general audiences). Second, its mature

content has not hampered its success. Despite its genesis as a child's Nintendo game, it has now contributed to the growing phenomena of popular R-rated film adaptations such as *Deadpool* and *Joker*. However, unlike other R-rated adaptions, *Castlevania* is animated. Finally, since Konami abandoned the series years ago, it has gained an audience with people not familiar with the series' long history as a game.

Due to the relative lack of engagement in academia with this franchise a cultural artefact, and its newfound popularity among a general audience, it is a good time to explore *Castlevania* and its contribution to transgressive media that both entertains and challenges viewers. This article explores *Castlevania* through three lenses—Derridean hauntology/spectrality, monster theory, and series producer Adi Shankar's claim that fandom represents a new religion. I argue *Castlevania* not only reflects hauntological spectral dynamics that haunt the audience and illustrate the function of monsters in society; but also that Shankar's claim of fandom as religion is valid. Castlevania reflects an appropriation of occult symbols to challenge dominant faith narratives, without being antagonistic towards faith in general.

Synopsis of the Night

The series opens with a human woman, Lisa of Lupu village, venturing to Dracula's castle to seek wisdom. After a short argument, Dracula welcomes her into his home to share his knowledge and study the various sciences to help people develop real medicine. She encourages him to end his self-imposed exile and travel the world to see the good in humanity. Eventually they marry, and Dracula decides to travel while Lisa studies science. During his travels, Lisa is accused of witchcraft by the Catholic Church and burned at the stake. Dracula

comes home too late to save her, and he appears as a terrifying vision in the flames of the pyre and warns the people of Târgoviște to make peace with their God within one year. In the meantime, Dracula plots his revenge on humanity, but his son, Alucard, approaches him and tells him to call off his plan to exterminate humans—appealing to the memory of his mother. Dracula attacks his son, grievously wounding, but not killing him.

A year passes, the Church is unrepentant, even boastful about killing Lisa. Dracula unleashes his night horde which begin slaughtering people. Trevor Belmont, the last of a legendary monster hunting family, now excommunicated by the Church for allegedly practicing "black magic," reluctantly takes up his family legacy again after saving Sypha. Sypha is a female Speaker, a group of oral historians with magical abilities, who are currently blamed as the cause for Dracula's army destroying people—along with the remaining Belmont who has resurfaced. After demons in Dracula's service overrun the town cathedral, Trevor and Sypha launch a resistance by rallying the townsfolk. During the battle, Trevor and Sypha fall into an underground chamber where Alucard rests—recovering from his wounds. After testing them in combat, Alucard joins them in their quest to stop Dracula.

Season two continues the chronicle of their journey, as well as Dracula's war council seeking to stop humanity. Dracula withdraws further into himself, creating confusion in his ranks. His grief leads to a loss of authority among his vampire generals, who begin making plans of their own—including where Dracula's traveling castle should appear next. A vampire aristocrat, Carmilla, turns some of Dracula's forces against him, and ultimately survives the final conflict (escaping to, presumably, become the villain for season three). Trevor, Sypha, and Alucard confront Dracula, and in a moment of

lucidity when fighting his son, Dracula realizes the monster he has truly become and welcomes death. Dracula is dead, at least for now. Season two ends with Alucard remaining in his family castle, while Trevor and Sypha travel on to continue their fight against Carmilla and other villains in Dracula's army.

Spectralvania

In this section I will apply the lens of spectrality to the characters in the Castlevania series to reveal the traumas haunting them. The figure of the specter[5] as a critical and culture idiom is entomed in Jacque Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. The book is derived from a series of lectures Derrida gave at a symposium at the University of California in response to Fukuyama's "hasty postmortem" of Marxism.[6] He cites Hamlet's statement that the "time is out of joint."[7] This inspires Derrida's concept of "hauntology" which suggests "no time is contemporary with itself."[8] Time is transgressive, particularly when it is haunted by past trauma/injustice—which leads to the figure of the specter.

The specter is a "non-present present," an "almost unnamable thing […] between something and someone" which seeks to "defy semantics as much as ontology."[9] Buse and Stott suggest that "anachronism might well be the defining feature of ghosts, now and in the past, because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality: there may be no proper time for ghosts."[10] They also point out that "Ghosts haunt borders."[11] The specter is a metaphor for the "other" haunting the edges of our experience and disrupting our hegemonies—shifting ontology into hauntology.

Haunting and the specter are figures related to past trauma calling for just action in the present for a hopeful future. Blanco and Pereen's *Spectralities Reader* contains

a legion of essays unpacking what they dub "the spectral turn" based on Derrida's work. "The renewed conceptual interest in ghosts and haunting that characterized the 1990s has also been linked to a broader (and somewhat earlier) turn to history and memory, concentrating in particular on dealing with personal and collective trauma."[12] Gordon's oft-cited *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* suggests that, "What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely."[13]

In *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, Betcher suggests that physical wounds inflicted on bodies through terrorist action "may carry a species specter" that creates an "affective cloud" that "socially marginalizes people with impairments…"[14] The specter is the apparition of trauma transgressing time, operating with a felt absence, or an "virtual agency of the virtual"[15] seeking justice for the "other" from the living. In sum, the spectral deals with past traumas/lost futures transgressing the present, liminality or in-between spaces, and "others" transgressing the borders of power structures. As Derrida points out, "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony."[16] From past traumas motivating characters, or the transgressive nature of the characters themselves, *Castlevania* is loaded with haunted hegemonies.

Castlevania foregrounds vampires, demons, and other monsters; but the background is haunted by trauma. While each character has their own traumatic pasts to deal with, it is Dracula's trauma that unites them all and provides the impetus for the action in the series. The loss of his wife sends Dracula into genocidal mania, losing himself in the process. The series portrays this through his irrational level of violence, his lack of fulfillment when his plans are carried out, and through the nature of his

castle—dubbed a "creature of chaos" by Dracula's son in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. The specter of trauma is the motivating force of the plot.

In the first episode, after Lisa is unjustly burned at the stake as a witch for using science to create medicine for ailing villages, Dracula declares war on the human race and gives them one year to make peace before raining horrors upon them. Alucard, the son of Dracula and Lisa, half-human and half-vampire, appeals to his father to stop his war plans. Dracula, incredulous at his son's request, replies, "There are no innocents!" Dracula yells. "Not anymore! Any one of them could have stood up and said, 'No, we won't behave like animals anymore.'"[17] Humanity is a monster in the eyes of the vampire. This transgressive trope of making humans out to be the real monsters is a staple of the genre and illustrated in other works such as the *Monster Blood Tattoo* series and *The Witcher* novels (also being adapted by Netflix for a December 2019 release).

A year later, the Arch-Bishop has a crowd of the faithful gathered outside the Târgoviște Cathedral. The clergyman brags about how he justly condemned a witch and the vision of doom Dracula gave them all was a lie from the devil. Suddenly the clouds darken, blood rains from the sky, and the church windows explode—impaling the Arch-bishop and his associates with glass. The face of Dracula materializes in the sky and says:

> One year. I gave you one year to make your peace with your God. And what do you do? Celebrate the day you killed my wife. One year I gave you, while I assembled my armies. And now I bring your death. You had your chance.[18]

Public traumas such as persecutions or executions often result in acts of terror that seek to re-inscribe that terror and humiliation on the bodies of the ones deemed

responsible. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo note that, "disfigurement is used to permanently register the pain of one's own indignity in the flesh of another.[19] The hegemonic society that burns the flesh of "witches" will have its flesh permanently disfigured.

Dracula calls on his demonic army to kill everyone present. No one is to be spared, whether infant or grandparent. But the death to all in the immediate vicinity isn't enough. Dracula says:

> And once Târgoviște has been made into a graveyard for my love, go forth into the country. Go now. Go to all the cities of Wallachia. Arges, Severin, Gresit, Chilia, Enisara! Go now and kill! Kill for my love. Kill for the only true love I ever knew. Kill for the endless lifetime of hate before me.[20]

This is the trauma that moves on the characters and sets the plot in motion for the series. Dracula's use of the graveyard metaphor fits within spectrality since graveyards act as a transgressive "heterotopia"/ "heterochony" that hold the past, present, and (depending on a faith tradition's view of the resurrection) future in one place.[21] The world will remain a haunted place even if Dracula succeeds—a monument to the memory of his pain.

By season two all is not well within Dracula's ranks. The first episode opens with a flashback on the night Lisa was arrested for "witchcraft" and burned. Then the episode shows the gathering of Dracula's War Council before the throne as Dracula walks down to meet them, declaring "We prosecute a good war… in killing my wife proven to me they don't deserve Wallachia."[22] The plan is to continue to use "all the creatures of terror that humanity once drove away" and then give Wallachia to the "night hordes" which will "perhaps that will be

better."[23] What the religious hegemony of humanity has suppressed comes back as a tool of trauma to torment and overtake them. In light of ongoing discussions regarding the place of non-binary persons within the Christian community, particularly the Roman Catholic Church's statement that anything outside of male/female is "fictitious,"[24] and Shankar's comment on fandom as being a new religion, Dracula's statement about a "good war" is instructive as to the transgressive ideology of the series. The monsters fight a holy war against the hegemonic persecuting religious power that falsely accused his wife of witchcraft and took her life.

However, humans are not the only ones menaced by transgressors. Within Dracula's War Council two human "devil forgemasters" are employed as generals to reanimate the dead to act as soldiers. This transgression unsettles the vampire Generals—including the Viking Godbrand—who openly question their place as humans among the monsters in a war against humans. This illustrates Derrida's point that *every* hegemony is haunted.

In episode two, the chaotic nature of the war campaign continues to breed strife among the monster generals. When Carmilla, an aristocratic female vampire, enters Dracula's war meeting, she goes for the jugular by asking, in front of his generals, "Why was this new wife of yours never turned?" She continues, "You married, you had a child, and yet you did not make her a vampire, why was that? Were you simply keeping a human pet?"[25] When confronted in Dracula's private quarters, Carmilla defends her actions as only being "intended to unsettle a room full of men" and also uncovering the spectral question "they have all been asking themselves"—giving Dracula a chance to "address it."

Felt absence is a key characteristic of spectrality. Carmilla raises the specter of Dracula's trauma, the felt

absence haunting him, his war, and his minions. In the third episode of season three, Carmilla approaches Hector and observes, "I believe you're actually worried about Dracula."[26] Hector responds in the affirmative and uses a spectral metaphor reminiscent of ashes in Derrida's *Cinders*, to reflect on language and the impossible task of speaking of the horror of the Holocaust. Derrida, describing the cinder, says "a center crumbles and dissolves, it is dispersed in a throw of the die: cinder."[27] A cinder is the de-centered remains of something represented, Dracula has been reduced to a trace. "The fire in him has gone out somehow," says Hector. "It's as if we're looking at the embers of a man."[28]

Carmilla's motives are haunted by her own trauma. She tells the story of being turned and dominated by an old vampire, whom she eventually killed in order to receive her freedom. "I wasn't going to be dictated to by mad old men anymore," she informs Godbrand. "Then I come here to meet with the leader of our nation, and what do I find? A mad, cruel old man."[29] Carmilla's trauma fuels mutinous actions that set her up as the future villain for further seasons. This trauma illustrates how patriarchy is a hegemony haunted by strong women who refuse anything but self-determination.

Before discussing Dracula's final trauma at the end of season two, his castle must be examined as a reflection of its master's pain. Victor Sage observes that within Gothic fiction, the house often acts as an external representation of internal conscience.[30] The labyrinthian qualities of the haunted house reflect the internal struggles of the subject. This leads to personification of the haunted house, or in this case Dracula's castle. This is also illustrated in Netflix's *Haunting of Hill House*, the haunted home (a site of past tragedies) occupied by the Crain family is described in terms mirroring the mental state of Mrs. Crain. While looking at the house's

blueprints she remarks, "This house is schizophrenic." Afterwards her mental breakdowns continue and loss of grip on reality intensify the longer she stays in the "schizophrenic" house.[31]

In the first episode of the series, Lisa enters the castle and marvels at its expansiveness. The design is lifted from *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. In the game Alucard observes, "This castle is a creature of chaos. It may take many incantations." The castle holds the same power of movement and change that Dracula does. However, as the Netflix series opens, it becomes clear the castle hasn't moved in a long time. It stands alone, across a field of human skeletons impaled on pikes, menacing the edges of human society.

> "You don't travel much do you?" asks Lisa.
>
> "I can travel," replies Dracula. "This entire structure is a traveling machine."
>
> "But, you don't. Do you?" says Lisa.[33]

Only after Lisa is executed does the castle and its master begin to move —and its movements are as devastating as the grief that wracks Dracula's heart. Using a combination of magic and machinery, Dracula causes his castle to vanish in a flash and reappear in a new locale with such violent force that the landscape is torn apart. The impact of the castle's arrival sends debris flying, bodies of water splashing into oblivion, and the skin of any living thing nearby to rip itself from the skeleton from which is clings.

"He's moving the castle again," mutters a vampire general in the beginning of season two. The castle's movements increase as Dracula withdraws into his pain. Arguments break out over what strategic military location the castle should arrive at next in the quest to exterminate humanity. As the conflict comes to a climax at the end of season two, Sypha, one of the three heroes,

uses her power to take control of the castle. The castle fights her efforts. This results in a rapid series of flashes with the castle violently appearing and reappearing in numerous locations—mirroring the struggle Dracula to let go of his grief as well as control his army.

As the fight ensues it becomes clear the struggle with the monster has been a struggle with the ghosts of the past. Dracula fights his son Alucard with wild rage. Alucard tells his father that he didn't kill him before and believes he won't do it now. "You want this to end as much as I do," says Alucard, before speaking the trauma out loud, echoing the suspicions of the vampire general earlier in the season. "You died when my mother died, you know you did. This entire catastrophe has been nothing but history's longest suicide note!"[34] Alucard voices the trauma that has haunted the entire plot, forcing Dracula to confront his pain.

As the words hang in the air and the dust clears, the rage in Dracula's eyes fades and lucidity returns. "My boy," says Dracula, "I'm... I'm killing my boy. And Lisa... I'm killing her boy...It's our boy, Lisa. Your greatest gift to me, and I'm killing him...I must already be dead."[35] The battle ends with Alucard staking Dracula through the heart, and both of them acknowledging each other as father and son.

Once Dracula is defeated another haunting scene plays out in the final episode as Alucard is left sitting in the ruins of his family home. As he sits in a chair in his old room, he the phantom of himself as a boy being held by the ghost of his mother. These specters bring him to tears. This reflects Cho's research, drawn from the work of Abraham and Torok, on transgenerational haunting. This type of haunting suggests "unspeakable trauma does not die to with the person who first experienced it." Instead it "takes on a life of its own."[36] Dracula's trauma manifested in violence and self-loathing, and he refused

to talk about it even when directly questioned by Carmilla. Even though Alucard names it at the end, and ends his father's suffering, he is left with phantoms in the hallways of his now empty castle.

The imagery of trauma may appeal to a modern audience due to the public traumas witnesses and experienced each day by the viewing audience. In a chapter entitled, "The Newsroom is No Longer a Safe Zone," media scholar Stephen Jukes outlines the effects of constant exposure to traumatic images/video uploaded by citizen journalists. Studies into secondary traumatic stress reveal symptoms of trauma in journalists due to the affective and "contagious impact" of images they view.[37] These images are not restricted to newsrooms, but also appear on social media.

A few studies suggest that traumatic images displayed on social media affect general audiences. Holman, Garfin, and Silver studied coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings, and found that increased exposure to traumatic events on social media increased viewers acute stress. "Widespread media coverage extends the boundaries of local disasters, transmitting their impact far beyond the directly exposed population and turning them into collective traumas with potentially detrimental health effects."[38] Pam Ramsden found indirect trauma occurred in 20 percent of her research subjects who were exposed to various intense images on social media, and subsequently "scored high on clinical measures of PTSD even though none of the individuals had previous trauma and were not present at the traumatic events…"[39] The graphic violence and trauma in Castlevania mirror the often visceral images uploaded to social media and fulfill a common function of horror genre—confronting the fear of death.

Christine S. Davis and Deborah C. Breede observe that people consume horror as a "coping mechanism."[40]

They note that the horror genre, which *Castlevania* belongs in, "represents a third space in which the living and the dead come together, and provide a way to bring the viewer closer to death in order to develop an acceptance and familiarity with the idea of our own mortality."[41] Horror functions as a "liminal space" (making it spectral) and an "avenue to play with death, examine it, try it out, and experience it, without actually going through with it."[42] *Castlevania*'s imagery and narrative help articulate and confront the affective experience of trauma for viewers exposed to the world's grief online each day.

Transgressylvania

The specter only acts as a metaphor for trauma and past that haunt the present, but also liminal spaces and "in-betweeness."[43] This aspect of spectrality relates will to the concepts discussed in Jerome's classic *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. "The monstrous body is pure culture" that "is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again."[44] The monster "always escapes because it refuses easy categorization."[45] Monsters resist binaries and are "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" acting as a "dialectical Other…an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond."[46] Monsters are "transgressive" of cultural norms, which means "the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed."[47]

Stephen Asma, in *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, suggests that monsters act as an "emotional caricature" in the mind.[48] Monsters represent a corruption of humanity,[49] power relations based on who is "demonized,"[50] and function as a "cultural category" of omen.[51] Building off the work of Noel Carrol, Asma notes

how monsters are a form of "category jamming" which leads to "categorical slippage" that may explain people are both "repelled by and drawn to" figures of horror.[52] Our need to define the mixed reality of monsters in some kind of category creates a mixed feeling.

Another explanation for the simultaneous fascination and revulsion caused by monsters is taken from Freud. The Freudian concept of the "uncanny" and the subconscious leads Asma to suspect that we see a distortion (doppelgänger) of ourselves in monsters.[53] Because the "original desires and cravings of Id and Ego" are suppressed as people age, images of monsters reawaken them by suggesting a transgressive version of ourselves.[54] Monsters, as a cultural category, are liminal "others" that represent alternative versions of the self. The characters and creatures of *Castlevania* function transgressively from their artwork that represents them, to their actions within the plot that move the narrative along.

While the plot follows *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*,[55] the artwork is lifted from arguable most famous of the franchise, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. The artwork on this game was done by Ayami Kojima. While Kojima did not work on the Netflix series, an interview with director Sam Deats reveals that the art team "obviously couldn't help but to reference the shit out of Ayami Kojima's work from Symphony of the Night onward."[56] The artwork may be considered in the *bishonen* style, which translates to "beautiful youth (boy)."[57] Characteristics of this style include males being tall with "slim, feminine faces, long hair and sweet smiles."58 The character design, even among many of the creatures of the night, have a *bishonen* feel. This creates a liminal look which transgresses atypical depictions of feminine and masculine qualities.

While each character has their own transgressive ways, a few examples from the three main heroes will suffice. Trevor Belmont comes from an excommunicated family of monster hunters. Trevor is both outcast and hero, savior and sinner, and the common folk aren't sure what to make of him, similar to Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher* series. Trevor himself is reluctant to engage in any kind of questing, keeping his comments largely sarcastic and dismissive when anyone engages him on a deeper emotional level. Belmont simultaneously makes use of holy relics while condemning the Catholic Church. In season one he calls on a local priest to bless buckets of holy water in order to dispatch demons, only after inciting mob justice against a corrupt priest. He maintains complicated relationships with everyone he encounters, keeping him in a liminal space.

Sypha, the heroine, belongs to an order called The Speakers—a group of wandering scholars falsely accused by the Church for instigating Dracula's hordes due to their use of magic. According to Sypha, they also consider themselves "the enemy of God" and don't write their stories down so God "cannot strike them down in jealousy."[59] Yet they seek to aid the people and defeat the forces of darkness. Making them a liminal group, like the Belmonts, as good as monsters to the Church which seeks to exterminate them. Even the townspeople label Sypha a "witch" upon seeing her display magic powers, which she promptly denies. She also tells Trevor, "I did not ask you to fight for me. I fight for myself."[60]

Sypha's education in folk wisdom and magic represents both a threatening self-determination over against a hegemonic patriarchal system. She is a transgressor and an outcast, but also a hero whose education will lead to freedom from evil. Even an official online Twitter poll revealed that fans believe Sypha to have the "most badass finishing move" over against her

male counterparts in the final battle.[61] Sypha pushes against traditional roles, at times embodying both, contributing to her transgressive character.

Arguably the most transgressive character is Dracula and Lisa's son, Alucard. He is the product of two different races, torn between two different impulses, and friend of those who would kill his kind. In the first episode of season two, Alucard reflects on his identity while drawing pictures of his parents in the sand. He says:

> Alucard they called me, the opposite of you. Mother never liked that. Did you know that? She hated the idea that I might define myself by you, even in opposition to you. She loved us both. enough that she wanted us to be our own people…so here I am choosing to honor my mother by killing my father. No longer Adrian Tepes. Choosing to be Alucard of Wallachia the name of my mother's people.[62]

Despite being caught between multiple worlds, Sypha observes Alucard's loneliness, calling him a "cold spot in the room."[63] Alucard is always "other."

The transgressive nature of *Castlevania*'s characters fit well within a culture that questions binaries. White privilege, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are but a few of the traditional constructs questioned in contemporary culture and in *Castlevania*. The mixed races, monsters, unconventional roles, and even Carmilla's allusion to a fluid sexual orientation[64] resonate with the zeitgeist of a contemporary audiences. This transgressive theme is also present in discussions related to fandom's connection with religious experience.

Liturgy of Monsters

During an interview at Power Morphicon (a gathering for fans of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*) about fandom and the second season of his Netflix Castlevania series, Adi Shankar claimed that the brands of pop culture constitute "our new religion."[65] Shankar claims, "It's our mythology. And I really think, all the high art today, no one's going to remember that shit in 200 years. They're gonna remember franchises and video games."[66] Film and journalism critic Eric Francisco points out that *Castlevania* is "fueled by Shankar's faith to the kind of generational pop culture."[67] This grows out of Shankar's childhood experience of living in the United States for "two short years" which "impressed upon him mythology that lasted a lifetime."[68] The American idea of changing the world so it can be different tomorrow than it is today is the transgressive mythology that spoke to Shankar in his formative years. This resembles Smith's concept of "secular liturgy" which act as "ritual forces" in culture that operate by "capturing our imaginations."[69]

Fandom has often been compared to religion, with mixed reactions. Andrew Crome writes that religion is often framed as "emotional rather than rational" and is "used to justify bizarre, irrational behavior that makes no sense outside of the religious worldview."[70] Crome notes that sometimes religion deserves this criticism, but "more often than not the religious comparison aims to 'other' both religion and fandom."[71] Interestingly, this comparison is rooted in the "Enlightenment dualistic division of reason and emotion."[72] Those within fandoms, such as the "bronies"[73] of *My Little Pony*, push back by pointing out that fandoms have their own internal logics and rationality, demonstrating "they were on the 'right' side of the rational/emotional binary."[74]

Fandoms represent a kind of cultural monster that not only challenges the hegemony of traditional religion, but

the hegemony of Enlightenment dualism that separates reason from emotion, and the rational from the imaginative. In light of several past discussions about whether fandom and religion belong together, and the wariness of some to embrace that comparison, what makes Castlevania unique is its producer's brazen declaration that it is in fact a religion.

The interviewer notes how "Shankar has weaponized his religion" to cover a wide range of high production tributes to the classics of popular culture in what is known as his "Bootleg Universe."[75] Shankar says, "What we do is we take mythology and we adapt it in a cool way while still preserving the mythology…It's by fans for fans, versus by no one for a corporation."[76] In the article fandom is considered the "new religion," the "internet is a recruitment tool" and "information about them [fandoms] is disseminated infinitely faster than Gutenberg could print the Bible."[77] Shankar believes that brands "be looked at as religions than consumer products" in that they are "as powerful as religion."[78] Fandoms make up "a personal relationship with an entity, a universe" with a "sense of ownership."[79] Shankar concludes by stating that "good entertainment" is "spectacle and truth."[80] *Castlevania*'s success reflects Shankar's religious devotion to his subject matter, as well as other fans of the series.

Within *Castlevania* itself, there exists a complicated relationship with religion. In many of the games the protagonist uses the cross, the Bible, and holy water as sub-weapons to fight the forces of darkness. Additionally, many of the games feature a level based on a chapel with baroque organ music playing in the background. The game *Symphony of the Night* opens with a religious dialogue between Richter Belmont and Dracula:

> "You steal men's souls," cries Belmont, "and make them your slaves."
>
> "Perhaps the same could be said of all religions," replies Dracula.[81]

The game also features a confessional that Alucard, the main character, can sit in. He either sits in the place of a priest, where a ghostly confessor attends the booth (and shoves knives through the confessional wall to the detriment of the player); or Alucard can confess to a ghostly priest who appears to absolve him of his sins.

In *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, the player takes on the acolytes of Satan, as well as the Devil, while maintaining a critique of God's workings. This back and forth with religious imagery, religious critique, and use of religious artifacts finds its way into Shankar's *Castlevania*. Some believe the series contains a "brazen anti-religiosity"[82] due to the depiction of the Catholic Church, it's banishment and blaming of the Belmont family, and the brutal execution of Dracula's wife as a witch. However, as in the games, the relationship is more nuanced.

First, there is undeniably a criticism of traditional religion. This occurs in the portrayal of the Church as a monster that demonizes anyone outside its strict orthodox. It also occurs in an exchange inside a cathedral between a demonic monster named Blue Fangs who speaks to the Archbishop responsible for Lisa's death:

> "You cannot enter the house of God," declares the bishop.
>
> "God is not here," replies the demon. "This is an empty box."
>
> "God is in all His churches," protests the bishop.

> "Your God's love is not unconditional," the demon informs the
>
> increasingly agitated bishop. "He does not love us. And He does not love you."[83]

Blue Fangs continues to inform the bishop that the work of the clergyman makes God "puke" and "Your God knows that we wouldn't be here without you. This is all your fault." The demon ends his exchange by "kissing" the bishop with its maw of razor-sharp teeth.[84]

Yet, within this exchange God himself is not portrayed negatively. This dynamic is picked up by Alejandra Reynoso who voices the character of Sypha. She is a practicing Christian and gave an interview to Mithical Entertainment about her faith as it relates to her work on Castlevania. She shares how she sees the series revealing the historical reality that the church was not always following Jesus. She even let her conservative evangelical mother watch it who loved the series and agreed that it isn't anti-God, it is anti-religious abuse.[85] This demonstrates how the depiction and criticism of religion in *Castlevania* resonates with some believers.

Other pro-religious elements include the acknowledgement of weaponry, such as Trevor's whip, that has been consecrated in a church in order to give it power. While Sypha acknowledges that her people, The Speakers, are "enemies of God" (due to a fear He would repeat the incident at the Tower of Babel), she also refers casually to concepts like the Garden of Eden when researching a solution to Dracula's Castle's ability to move. Additionally, Sypha practices folk religion that uses magic feared by the Church but praised by the ones she saves. Her blend of biblical knowledge and magic create a unique religious creature within the series.

Even the treacherous vampire Carmilla utilizes the power of faith. Towards the end of season two, she uses a

dead priest, resurrected by Hector, to "bless" the waters of a river, making the lethal to the vampire war council.[86] Religion takes on an instrumental quality in the series, something to be used for good or evil. In this respect Shankar uses his "new religion" of fandom to critique the perceived monstrosities of an old one.

In an insightful article on contemporary religion, Tara Isabella Burton observes that for many "left-leaning millennials" the occult has become a "metaphysical canvas for the American culture wars in the post-Trump era: pitting the self-identified Davids of seemingly secular progressivism against the Goliath of nationalist evangelical Christianity."[87] Burton suggests that the aesthetic of "contemporary millennial 'witch culture' defines itself as the cosmic counterbalance to Trumpian evangelicalism. It's at once progressive and transgressive, using the language of the chaotic, the spiritually dangerous, and (at times) the diabolical to chip at the edifices of what it sees as a white, patriarchal Christianity that has become a *de facto* state religion."[88] Millennials take the symbols of occult practice and fuse them with "the worldly ethos of modern social justice."[89] As people experiment with new religious expressions, they may find the eclectic spiritual mix of *Castlevania*'s fandom appealing, inspiring, or even empowering.

Conclusion

This article has explored the monsters of Netflix's *Castlevania* series through the lens of spectrality as it relates to trauma, monster theory, and the new religion of fandom. The series is fueled by Dracula's trauma at losing his human wife to the monstrous actions of the Catholic Church. It is portrayed through his actions in the narrative as well as the manic and destructive movements of his castle. Given the constant presence of

trauma exposed in the media, viewers may be drawn to the imagery and personification of trauma in the series.

Spectrality deals with liminality and transgression, something that coincides with monster theory. Monsters are thought by some to be transgressive versions of ourselves, which is why we are both drawn to and repelled by them. *Castlevania*'s characters are all transgressive. In an age where binaries are protested, the transgressive nature of the characters may strike a chord with online audiences. Even the form of the show, in addition to the content, transgresses in ways that fit within hauntological remix culture.

Shankar's religious approach to fandom makes use of various mythic tropes and imagery in the series, while being radically devoted to presenting the *Castlevania* material in ways that resonate with long time fans. Traditional religion is critiqued within the form of Shankar's "new religion" of fandom. It's employment of occult religious symbols and dialogue, blended with traditional religion, fit within contemporary millennial progressive occult critique of religious hegemonies.

The trailer for season two of *Castlevania* markets the series with the line, "It takes a monster to fight a monster."[90] Monsters of all kinds terrify other monsters in the show. Whether it is literal monsters, mixed races like Alucard, monster hunters terrorizing creatures of the night, a smart woman threatening church authority, or a medium of entertainment presenting itself as a new religion to attack an old one, monsters abound in *Castlevania*. Perhaps that is the show's major cultural commentary that warrants attention: we are all monsters to someone.

Notes

1. The *Castlevania* series revolves around the Belmont Family and their never-ending quest to stop Dracula and his evil hordes. Each game features a member of the Belmont clan, which varies depending on the historical setting of each game. The player, as a Belmont, fights their way through Dracula's monstrous and massive castle. As players work through each part of the castle, they meet a classic mash up of monsters from Medusa to Frankenstein to the Grim Reaper to do battle with. In the third installment, Dracula's son, Alucard, became a playable character alongside members of the Belmont clan, helping to put a stop to his father. In the series' most acclaimed installment, *Symphony of the Night*, Alucard is the main character attempting to stop his father Dracula's latest return to power.
2. A "fresh rating" means an aggregate score of positive film reviews that is at least 60%. *Castlevania* currently holds a 90% rating.
3. Ben Gilbert, "Netflix Somehow Managed to Make a Great TV Show Based on a Video Game," *Business Insider*, 13 July 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/castlevania-netflix-review-2017-7.
4. Nathalie Medina, "Netflix's Awesome 'Castlevania' Show Has Been Confirmed For Season 3," *Newsweek*, 9 June 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/netflix-castlevania-show-season-3-confirmed-968414.
5. Simply put, a specter is a ghostly presence that manifests as a felt absence, a liminal thing, or an unresolved pain from the past that breaks into the present.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), viii.
7. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 1.
8. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 139.
9. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 139.
10. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, "Introduction: A Future for Haunting," in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and History,* eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), 1-20.
11. Roger Luckhurst, "'Something Tremendous, Something Elemental': On the Ghostly Origins of Psychoanalysis," in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and History,* eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), 50-71.
12. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, eds. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1-28.

13. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
14. Sharon V. Betcher, "Running the Gauntlet of Humiliation: Disablement in/as Trauma," in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, eds. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66.
15. Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.
16. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 46.
17. Sam Deats, dir., "Witchbottle," *Castlevania,* season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 2017.
18. Deats, "Witchbottle."
19. Betcher, "Running the Gauntlet of Humiliation," 64.
20. Deats, "Witchbottle."
21. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16:4 (Spring 1986): 24.
22. Sam Deats, dir., "War Council," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 1, Netflix, 2018.
23. Deats, "War Council."
24. "'Male and Female He Created Them': Towards a Path of Dialogue On the Question of Gender Theory in Education," *Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions),* Vatican City, 2 February 2019, http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19_0997_INGLESE.pdf
25. Sam Deats and Spencer Wan, dirs., "Old Homes," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 2, Netflix, 2018.
26. Sam Deats and Adam Deats, dirs., "Shadow Battles," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 3, Netflix, 2018.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 51.
28. Deats and Deats, "Shadow Battles."
29. Sam Deats, dir., "Broken Mast," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 4, Netflix, 2018.
30. Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 18.
31. Mike Flanagan, dir., "Witness Marks," *The Haunting of Hill House*, season 1, episode 7, Netflix, 2018.
32. *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, written by Toru Hagihara and Koji Igarashi, developed by Konami, 1997, Disc.
33. Deats, "Witchbottle."
34. Sam Deats, dir., "For Love," *Castlevania,* season 2, episode 7, Netflix, 2018.
35. Sam Deats, dir., "End Times," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 8, Netflix, 2018.
36. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6.

37. Stephen Jukes, 'The Newsroom is No Longer Safe,' in *Affect and Social Media: Emotion, Mediation, Anxiety, and Contagion*, eds. Tony D. Sampson, Stephen Maddison, and Darren Ellis (New York: Rowman & Littlefield), 170 and 175.
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39. Pam Ramsden, "Vicarious Trauma, PTSD, and Social Media: Does Watching Graphic Videos Cause Trauma?" *Journal of Depression and Anxiety* 6:3 (2017): 54.
40. Christine S. Davis and Deborah C. Breede, *Talking Through Death: Communicating about Death in Interpersonal, Mediated, and Cultural Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 20.
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42. David and Breede, *Talking Throughout Death,* 23.
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46. Cohen, "Monster Culture", 7.
47. Cohen, "Monster Culture", 16.
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49. Asma, *On Monsters*, 9.
50. Asma, *On Monsters*, 10.
51. Asma, *On Monsters*, 13.
52. Asma, *On Monsters,* 184.
53. Asma, *On Monsters*, 188.
54. Asma, *On Monsters*, 189-190.
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58. Jung, "The Shared Imagination," 16.
59. Sam Deats, dir., "Last Spell," *Castlevania*, season 2, episode 5, Netflix, 2018.
60. Sam Deats, dir., "Monument," *Castlevania,* season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 2017.
61. Adrian Fahrenheit Tepes, tweet on November 23, 2018: https://twitter.com/Castlevania/status/1066106140793040896
62. Deats, "War Council."
63. Deats, "Broken Mast."
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67. Francisco, "Fandom Is Our New Religion."
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70. Andrew Crome, "Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom: Religion, Reason, and Controversy in *My Little Pony* Fandom," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:2 (2015): 130-147.
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77. Francisco, "Fandom Is Our New Religion."
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