Marlo Scholten’s FURSCA End of Summer Report

My aim throughout this project was to study the way the horror genre has changed and fluctuated over the past 80 years in response to the disasters and social anxieties that this country has witnessed in that time. I hoped to find a correlation between the fact that xenophobia tends to breed monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein, while disillusionment with the white picket fence lifestyle invited killers like Michael Myers and Freddy Krueger into our idyllic suburban lives. I wrote synthesis essays on the films, historical background, and scholarly context for the films (3 from each decade, starting with Dracula [1931] and ending with Halloween [2018]), and planned to use said information to empirically inform a novel that I would write that would be the horror story for my generation, or the 2020s. If I found a “horror movie equation,” I could formulaically write a story that would scare a group of people who don’t tend to get scared.

I had originally planned on devoting one week to each decade, but I quickly grew worried that I was missing important texts in the hustle (I know even now that there’s no way I covered everything), so I ended up taking closer to 1.5-2 weeks for each decade, which means I have not yet gone through my methodology for the 2000s and the 2010s. Nonetheless, the essay writing and research grew easier with practice, and I feel that my big stack of notes and essays makes some important strides toward my final goal of a novel.

I spent the most time in the 60s and the 80s, because I found those particular decades in American history to share many similarities with the current age I live in, and I didn’t expect those similarities to be so glaringly apparent. Roman Polanski’s film *Rosemary’s Baby* is so relevant today it hurts, as more and more states roll back heartbeat bills that set women’s rights back decades. The fear-mongering used in advertisements in the 80s and the language used in President Reagan’s speeches carries the same alarmingly hostile undertones heard on today’s newcasts. This was interesting (I heard people say that all things are cyclical, but I had no idea just *how* true it was), frightening (we as humans have a difficult time learning from our mistakes), and strangely hopeful (perhaps the world won’t end in 2050 like all the biologists are saying it will, if we’ve been here before and pulled through).

Another interesting aspect that I hadn’t considered was the amount of film research I would be undertaking in order to construct the roundest picture of historical context possible. I found it strange that the first movie on my list that was in color was *Rosemary’s Baby* from 1968, but the director’s reasoning for using black and white footage varied from situation to situation (sometimes it was financial, sometimes it was artistic, sometimes it was regional). I also spent a lot of time reading early audience reactions to films (people ran out of the theater after seeing *The Exorcist* and vomited in the streets). It got me thinking about all the different choices that go into a creative project, and how great the piece of fiction will be if all of those decisions are made deliberately and fluidly (point of view? setting? soundtrack?).

As previously stated, this research was to inform a novel that I want to write, and I plan to turn in the completed novel as my undergraduate thesis. I hope that completing a piece of work as lengthy as a novel will not only prepare me for the workload of graduate school, but aid me in developing the time management skills that are required to succeed in graduate school. Though writing a novel is a creative endeavor primarily, I hope it’s something I can put on my resume and take pride in in my personal life as well. I’ve had stories swirling in my head since I was small, but lack(ed) the ability to commit to such a long and arduous project. Perhaps if you accomplish it once, it’s easier the second time? I should hope so. I also presented my work in the form of a poster at MSU and found that to be rewarding, so I plan to present my research at Elkin Isaac. Not only was it fulfilling to talk to other undergraduate researchers, it was great to have real-life practice presenting an idea to a group of people and getting people on board with you while anticipating and answering questions. I would like to extend this work into another FURSCA next summer if possible, where I could focus my energies on editing the rough draft of the novel and bringing the rough draft to more presentations and conferences. This work also helped prepare me for a semester abroad at the Newberry Library in Chicago this fall, where I will once again be asked to perform independent research. Doing this research has helped me develop my creativity and time management skills, while also calming my nerves about spending a semester in a rather affluent research institution this fall as an undergrad. I developed a great relationship with my advisor, who continues to help me plan ahead for the next year and a half despite our project being temporarily over. This project has also helped me begin to decide if I want to pursue graduate school in English or in Anthropology, as I am currently skating between the two departments (and picked a project with a lot of overlap).

None of this could have taken place with the grace and ease that it did without the great support of the FURSCA committee here on campus and the FURSCA donors. To be able to do independent research that’s crafted and led by myself at the age of 20 is truly remarkable, and hard to find at just any university. I truly believe this opportunity has helped immensely in preparing for both the rest of my undergraduate career and beyond, and for that I am forever grateful to the generous donors who make this possible. Thank you.