

Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior in *The Green Inferno*

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“I wanted to make a movie about these types of kids: these kids that aren’t really interested in the cause. They want the shortcut. I am so sick of all them, so I’m taking these people and I am baking them and I’m chopping them up and I’m eating them, and I’m laughing at them.”

– Eli Roth, director of *The Green Inferno* (“Eli Roth explains ‘The Green Inferno’”)

“The skeptic, detached and estranged, with no sense of the other, sits alone in an echo-chamber of his own making, with only the sound of his own scoffing laughter ringing in his ears.”

– Dwight Conquergood (“Performing as a Moral Act” 9)

In his essay “Horror Films Face Political Evils in Everyday Life,” John S. Nelson suggests “the genius of horror is subtext: symbolism that creeps beneath surface meanings to assault our dreams and awaken our minds” (382). If genius and subtext are thus intertwined, few will mistake *The Green Inferno*, splatter cinema auteur Eli Roth’s 2013¹ incantation of the notorious Italian cannibal film wave of the 1970s and ‘80s, as a work of horror genius, for it leaves very little of its symbolism beneath the surface.

The Green Inferno is the story of a dozen New York college activists who travel to Peru to protest encroaching corporate-colonial encroachment on the uncontacted Yajes village, only to be captured, tortured, and consumed by the cannibalistic Yajes. The film assaults its audience with the on-screen violence and

¹ *The Green Inferno* debuted at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival but did not receive a wide theatrical release until 2015. The majority of discourse considered in this essay centered upon the film’s 2015 release.

abject human misery fans and critics expect from both Roth and the films from which he deliberately borrows, most conspicuously Ruggero Deodato's notorious, oft-censored and banned *Cannibal Holocaust*, from whose film-within-a-film Roth's film borrows its title. But the violence *The Green Inferno* inflicts upon its fictional eco-activists is intended, gleefully and unambiguously so, as an act of symbolic violence against a nonfictional target: so-called *social justice warriors*, or *slacktivists*, or *clicktivists*. Defined as a pejorative in Oxford Dictionaries, *social justice warrior (SJW)* has become shorthand for an unacceptable ethos of progressive or liberal activism characterized by embrace of computer-mediated organizational techniques (e.g., participating in online awareness campaigns and hashtag activism) and affinity for confrontational discursive tactics when engaging others.

Demonized as a fascistic mob obsessed with political correctness, microaggressions, and safe spaces to the detriment of free speech, SJWs draw criticism across political affiliations for being both overly aggressive with their rhetoric and insufficiently dedicated to their causes. "Are they doing it because they believe in it? Or do they just want to look like good people?" Roth lamented to the *Los Angeles Times* (Woerner) prior to *The Green Inferno*'s 2015 theatrical release, suggesting that SJW activism has become sufficiently "out of control" to require symbolic evisceration via feature film.

Critical reception to *The Green Inferno*, though generally lukewarm, reveals a curious dynamic that warrants inspection. Virtually every critic who reviewed *The Green Inferno* recognized its anti-SJW agenda, and most rejected the film's artistic merits in the form of a negative review. Yet, it would not be accurate to conclude that reviewers rejected *The Green Inferno* because of its anti-SJW crusade. On the contrary, there was significant support for the film's agenda from both critics who liked the film and those who did not. David Edelstein ("In Green Inferno") applauded its representation of "Leaders of supposedly grassroots movements [who] are shown to be more devious and self-serving than the companies whose voraciousness they protest." ScreenCrush (Hayes) deemed the film "a blunt indictment of armchair activism, showing us the thick, obnoxious line between naivete and ignorance, and how so very few selfless acts are actually driven by selflessness." Flavorwire (Bailey) concluded, "[Roth's] movie's not against the kind of race and gender activists he's knocking in his promotional campaign; it's just against poseurs who are merely 'acting like they care,' which is something everyone, on either side of these provocative

issues, can get behind.” In sum, it seems critics were receptive if not enthusiastic for the project to symbolically destroy the activists Roth dismisses as slacktivist SJWs but were merely unsatisfied with the (pun unintended) execution.

In periods of cultural anxiety, audiences and critics have long turned to horror cinema to “express in accessible and entertaining popular cultural terms the characteristic fears of their time” (Tudor 458). *The Green Inferno* arrived in theaters during a period of intensifying debate over what constitutes acceptable and effective praxis for public participation. Following high-profile hashtag activism and social media awareness campaigns (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls, #icebucketchallenge, #NotOneMore), the millennial generation entering the public arena in waves, and anxiety over safe spaces, identity politics and political correctness, *The Green Inferno* hails its audience during a period in which activists, scholars, and critics are experiencing consternation over spatial, interpersonal, and corporeal tactics for occupying public space and advocating for political change amidst cultural and technological shifts. The film’s 2013 festival debut followed peak public awareness of the Occupy movement and debate over the social media-propelled Kony2012 awareness campaign. Its 2015 theatrical release followed the dawn of the Ferguson demonstrations against police violence that helped popularize the Black Lives Matter movement. It should come as no surprise that this debate would manifest in the arena of horror, which is at its most potent “in times of gradual cultural shifts when people need some ‘object’ toward which they can direct their anxieties” (Twitchell 41). The SJW serves as that “object”; to recall the Flavorwire (Bailey) review, it indeed seems lashing out at SJWs is something everyone can get behind.

The threat of the SJW may be new, but the marginalization and demonization of social actors through horror cinema is anything but. By creating and devouring a group of doomed activists who embody perceived transgressions and emergent trends driven by young and left-leaning activists, *The Green Inferno* participates in what Michael Rogin terms *political demonology*: the “inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes” (xiii). Beneath its brutalized bodies and sensational exploitation of ritual exophagy, *The Green Inferno* is significant as the first noteworthy U.S. horror film—and one of, if not the, first U.S. theatrical films of any genre—to directly address cultural anxieties over what constitutes acceptable activism. Within *The Green Inferno*’s articulation, the SJW looms as a monstrous threat embodying shifting norms over the future of public participation, encompassing collective anxieties over eschewing traditional

models of participation (voting, petitioning, marching, philanthropy, private group affiliation) and the encroachment of progressive and marginalized voices into discursive spaces typified by conservative white masculine cis-hetero hegemony. A close reading of *The Green Inferno* through the lens of extant anti-SJW discourses provides insight into the nature of those cultural trends and attitudes made flesh in the monstrous figure of the SJW.

Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui suggest that articulations of monstrosity “represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change in the twenty-first century. They can be read as a response to a rapidly changing cultural, social, political, economic, and moral landscape” (1-2). Bernadette Calafell advocates for “the necessity of understanding the various layers of monstrosity as another formation for unpacking representations of Otherness” (118). This essay seeks to serve as a prism refracting *The Green Inferno*’s distorted imagery to explore how it works to, in Rogin’s terminology, inflate, stigmatize, and dehumanize activists who defy orthodox conceptions of acceptable activism. By suggesting its monstrous SJWs invite their own destruction through their approach to activism, *The Green Inferno* symbolically demonizes tactics associated with SJWs and bestows purifying redemption upon its surviving protagonist, Justine (Lorenza Izzo) for renouncing social justice for a disengaged post-activist existence.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (5). To explore the ways in which *The Green Inferno* renders monstrous and symbolically destroys the SJW, I begin by contextualizing the film’s peculiar combination of two distinct horror genres: the Italian cannibal cycle and the torture porn cycle of the early 2000s. This generic hybridity is significant because it simultaneously frames the narrative that powers the film’s anti-SJW message while revealing its contradictions. I then identify three distinct articulations of the monstrous SJW on which *The Green Inferno* draws—(1) the narcissistic, ill-informed SJW; (2) the authoritarian, confrontational SJW; and (3) the decentralized, leaderless SJW—to construct its doomed activists as necessitating their own destruction.

#NotAllFlesheaters: Cannibal Cinema, Torture Porn, and the Politics of Exophagy

“Movies are not produced in creative or cultural isolation, nor are they consumed that way,” notes Thomas Schatz (vii). It is clear from sampling critical discourse on *The Green Inferno* that critics interpreted the film through a lens of two horror genres, each of distinct time, place, and ideological undergirdings: the Italian cannibal films of the late 1970s and early ‘80s and the U.S. torture porn films of the mid-2000s. It is poetic that *The Green Inferno*’s monstrous SJWs are given life in an appropriately stitched-together generic crucible, but the genres’ mutual reliance on cultural insensitivity and brutal depictions of human suffering does not mean their ideologies are similarly compatible.

The Green Inferno’s evocation of the Italian cannibal cycle is unmistakably intended as homage but also appropriation: an act of artistic cannibalism through which its filmmakers repurpose the genre’s setting and recurring beats and scenarios but leave its politics behind. Italian cannibal films have historically served as “dilemma tales indicative of some form of conflict in the social code, highlighting areas in which a society is not as clear as it might be about what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour” (Brottman 237). Though it would be a great stretch to call films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* or *Cannibal Ferox* progressive texts—plagued by retrograde racism, sexual violence, and horribly real animal mutilation as they are—their narrative arcs do gesture toward critiques of colonialism and capitalism by depicting the White Westerners falling prey to indigenous cannibals as provoking their fates through their performances of dehumanizing exploitation. These films explicitly implore their audiences to ponder *who are the real savages?* with the answer implied to be White Western colonialism—the savage civilized—rather than the indigenous peoples—the civilized savages. The *who are the real savages?* trope gains its rhetorical power when audience members become aware of their complicity in unreflexively accepting the abstraction of civilization as colonialism when colonialism is ultimately revealed to be the more savage.

Critics simultaneously approached *The Green Inferno* through the lens of Roth’s existing body of work, which is often included in the *torture porn* subgenre of horror. *The Green Inferno*, along with genre forerunners *The Human Centipede*, *Turistas*, *Wolf Creek*, and Roth’s own *Cabin Fever*, *Hostel*, and *Hostel: Part II*, all feature a variation on the theme of attractive, privileged light-

skinned young adults traveling to a remote terrible place and being subjected to torture and death for transgressions ranging from cultural ignorance to exploitation of locals.

The Italian cannibal cycle's gestures toward humanist moralization are largely absent in the 21st century work of Roth and other storytellers operating in the torture porn genre. *Torture porn*, the term popularized by Edelstein in 2006 ("Now Playing") shortly after the box-office success of *Hostel* amidst a wave of "viciously nihilistic" horror films, shocked audiences and scandalized critics with grim scenes of protracted torture and murder. Torture porn is often interpreted as an expression of the U.S.'s conflicted post-September 11 attitudes toward torture and its place in a post-9/11 global world. Written off as gratuitous trash in the press, torture porn's Foucauldian troubling of "the lines between torture, victim, villain, and hero" (Wester 389) found more acceptance among academics, some of whom applauded films such as *Saw* and *Hostel* "for their exploration of morality, social interdependency, and witnessing violence" (Jones 7). Gabrielle Murray observed in a critique of Roth's *Hostel: Part II*: "these films bring us face to face with what is routinely denied in the process of military, state and government sanctioned 'torture': the event is reduced to a cruel, clear dynamic of power relations."

Other scholars noted a distinct conservative slant in torture porn's misanthropic worldview. Christopher Sharrett deemed torture porn a "regressive" moment in horror and lamented the genre's "sense of the worthlessness of human beings, and the horror film's embrace of dominant ideas about power and repression" (37). Films such as *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Green Inferno* suggest that those characters who survive their brutal trials (in *The Green Inferno*, Justine) will emerge with eyes wide open to the way the world *really works*, unshackled from the banal hyperrealities of repressive society. But as Mark Bernard observes in his analysis of the *Saw* films, the terms of these virtual becomings, and who is worthy of surviving to experience them, are in fact dictated by powerful, disgruntled white men who prey on women, people of color, and others underprivileged populations. Existing power structures are never threatened.

Though *The Green Inferno* wears the skin of the Italian cannibal genre, its heart and soul are born from the exploitation era of the late 1960s and '70s. Iconic films such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* introduced moviegoers to a nihilistic, perpetually and recursively violent postmodern universe in which, "The boundaries between living and dead,

normal and abnormal, human and alien, and good and evil are blurred and sometimes indistinguishable” (Pinedo 20). Whereas *Cannibal Holocaust* and its ilk posed audiences the enthymeme *who are the real savages?* as a crude condemnation of Western capitalism and colonialism, *The Green Inferno* channels the conservative, nihilistic ideology of torture porn to suggest it is the allegedly progressive SJW who has become the true savage, intruding upon civilized savages who reject or are disinterested in pursuing social justice yet are victimized by “dangerous pseudo-progressive authoritarianism” and “speech and culture policing directed at victimless crimes that violate their moral taboos” (Young, “Totalitarian”).

Stephen T. Asma notes, “One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility. An action or a person or a thing is monstrous when it can’t be processed by our rationality” (10). Similarly, Noel Carroll suggests that the essence of monstrosity lies in the monster’s transgressions of cultural boundaries and natural categories: monsters “do not fit the scheme; they violate it” (34). Unintelligibility is the linchpin to SJWs’ monstrous threat to cultural norms of public participation because they confound not only conservatives with divergent worldviews but also those who understand themselves to be liberal or libertarian who support or claim to support combating racial injustice, income inequality, LGBTQ-plus rights, etc. yet despise the SJW’s organizational or rhetorical tactics.

As musician Billy Corgan lamented in an interview with *InfoWars*’s Alex Jones, it is SJWs’ “weaponized anti-free speech” and embrace of peer pressure, shaming and mocking that renders them monstrous rather than their politics (Lartey). This dual shunning of those branded SJW defies left-versus-right, Republican-versus-Democrat binary antagonism and serves two distinct *countersubversive* (Rogin) functions. First, it empowers critics to dismiss the SJW’s calls for progressive change without the optics of declaring themselves opposed to progressive change itself; for example, one may dismiss as an SJW an activist calling for anti-racist reform without declaring a pro-racism stance. Second, shunning those branded as SJWs from the arena of public participation works to suppress political dissent through policing of “prepolitical institutional settings that have excluded some Americans from politics and influenced the terms on which others entered the political arena” (Rogin 44). To bar or marginalize those bearing the mark of SJW from the public sphere empowers the status quo and reserves cultural capital for those who already possess it, which

aptly summarizes the conclusion of Justine's journey through the stages of SJW consciousness to the film's ultimate endorsed stance of post-activist disengagement.

The Green Inferno: Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior

Roth's *Hostel* films, which center on the shadowy Slovakian Elite Hunting organization through which the rich and powerful purchase disposable youths to torture and kill, are often viewed as the "most self-consciously political phase of torture porn" (Sharrett 36). The *Hostel* films don't ask *who the real savages* (or *victims*) are because they position their doomed youths and the Elite Hunters as both/and. But despite its Foucauldian gesturing, not everyone embraced *Hostel's* moral equivalencies. Sharrett argues, Roth "wants to show how the young, thoughtless predators become the prey, but the young people, although self-involved and obnoxious, aren't particularly predatory" (36).

This curious lack of malevolence is again at play in *The Green Inferno* in the most glaring contradiction between its anti-SJW articulation and the generic conventions of the Italian cannibal cycle. For representing lazy, uncommitted slacktivist who (to quote Roth) "aren't really interested in the cause" and "just want to look like good people," the film's doomed activists take extraordinary measures to advance a cause that the film seems to accept as worthwhile. In the events leading to their capture by the Yajes, they cross oceans and rivers to trek deep into the Peruvian Amazon, chain themselves to construction equipment at great personal peril, and confront an armed militia with only their mobile phones to protect them from summary execution. In order to partake of the Italian cannibal genre's ironic construction of civilized savagery, *The Green Inferno's* doomed characters venture to the most remote of terrible places, but discourses essentializing SJWs as motivated not by genuine sacrifice but "to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice" (Gladwell) are palpably undermined by the characters travelling to the terrible place in the first place.

In their discussion of critical counter-framing of online activism in Kony2012 memes, Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson note, "the holy grail of good citizenship is 'doing your research'" (2001). If we can't loathe *The Green Inferno's* activists for

their inactivity, the fallback would seem to be loathing them for their grotesque ignorance of the danger of venturing to dark places they don't belong. This is both a familiar horror trope and consistent with the stereotype of the authoritarian SJW who invades public forums to spout leftist dogma without nuance or concern for the communities into which they encroach. But this also fails dramatically, for the movie explicitly states that the Yajes' village is uncontacted. What accessible research could the group consult to warn them of the danger? Even if such literature were to exist and be readily accessible to college undergraduates—the film's dénouement implies even the United Nations have not confirmed the Yajes were cannibalistic—the activists only encounter the Yajes when their plane crashes (implied through sabotage) on the way home. Had their plane gone down over the Gulf of Mexico, it would be ludicrous to suggest they should have known better than to swim with tiger sharks.

With generic conventions and its own plot working against its anti-SJW agenda, *The Green Inferno*'s capacity as a disciplinary message hinges on its doomed activists being coded in such a way that they deserve their grim fates. They must “by their own horrific actions, abdicat[e] their humanity” (Asma 8). To achieve this, its activist characters are rendered monstrous by “exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration” (Cohen 7). *The Green Inferno* relies on three distinct characterizations of monstrosity, each representing one anxious articulation over the current and future state of public participation: (1) the SJW as narcissistic and superficially dedicated, (2) the SJW as reckless and abrasively confrontational, and (3) the SJW as easily manipulated by powerful actors with malevolent intentions. By encoding its doomed activists with these traits that render them unintelligible and loathsome—civilized savages who understand themselves to be good but inflict evil—*The Green Inferno* positions its monstrous SJWs as inviting destruction for their transgressions, demonizing their ethic of public participation accordingly.

“You must be a freshman. Because only a freshman would speak with such insolence.”

In a review excoriating *The Green Inferno* for racist² depictions of indigenous persons, *The Wrap* (Kang) conceded that the film’s script “is at least on point about the superficiality of most campus-based do-gooding.” Narcissism and superficiality are key features of anti-SJW rhetoric. Unequipped to engage any social issue in any but the most cursory and self-obsessed fashion, the SJW is more concerned with optics and self-image than *the cause*, settling for “easy, symbolic online acts over tried and true forms of collective action” (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 1994).

In their research on college students encountering the privilege of whiteness in the classroom, John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten compare such a stance to that of Plato’s torpedo fish and describe students in a torpedified state as “the ultimate ‘deer in the headlights’—the persona of individuals who realize they oppress (and have oppressed their whole lives) and find themselves without the agency to think through that oppression in order to change” (325). *The Green Inferno* depicts the torpedified SJW early in the film when we first meet freshman Justine, privileged daughter of a United Nations lawyer, as she falls in with campus activist group Activist Change Team (ACT), whose doomed straw-activists openly espouse the slogan, “Don’t think: ACT!”

We are introduced to Justine as she is literally awakening to activism: she is stirred from her bed on a Sunday morning by the sounds of students demonstrating outside her window in favor of health insurance for the university’s janitors. Peering out her window, wearing gray in her dimly lit room, she is betwixt and between, politically naïve but desperate to belong, seducible. In stage one of her political awakening, Justine’s engagement is portrayed as superficial

² Indigenous rights groups Survivor International, (Gell) Amazon Watch, and AIDSESEP (Paz y Miño) criticized *The Green Inferno* for its racist portrayal of its fictional Yajes tribe as bloodthirsty cannibal savages. Film critics also took notice: Flavorwire (Bailey) describes the Yajes as “jungle savages out of a Hope and Crosby movie, their skin painted blood red, screaming and pawing at our white heroines.” *The Wrap* (Kang) criticized the film’s portrayal of the Yajes as “just another echo of dehumanizing depictions of native peoples previously used to justify colonialism and genocide.”

and self-indulgent. She joins ACT's hunger strike for the janitors' insurance (which they obtain) but is shown drinking Starbucks coffee, reminiscent of Bush-era peace protestor Cindy Sheehan's Jamba Juice-fueled hunger strike. The film strongly implies Justine's commitment to ACT is influenced by her unrequited attraction to Alejandro, the group's "Che Guevara wannabe" (Hayes) leader. "Are you sure you're here for the right reasons?" asks Kara, Alejandro's top lieutenant who relishes in flaunting her romantic partnership with him in Justine's presence.

Initial depictions of ACT borrow heavily from the iconography of the Occupy movement. The group's protest signs include the slogans "Janitors are the 99%" and "Janitors clean up after the one percent." Protestors don the traditional garb of the liberal hippie Occupier: stubbly beards and wool caps, acoustic guitars and hand drums in tow. For their direct action in the Amazon, ACT members wear expressionless full-face masks akin to the Guy Fawkes masks associated with Occupy and Anonymous. The audience is cued to dislike and distrust such groups through the dialogue of Justine's roommate Kaycee (Sky Ferreira), who declares "activism's so fucking gay," taunts hunger-striking demonstrators with her breakfast bagel, and wishes them tear-gassed for protesting on a Sunday morning: "None of those girls give a fuck about the janitors. They just don't want to appear anorexic. It's just some weird demonstration to appease their fucking white stupid suburban Jewish guilt." Kaycee, the audience may surmise, is the *raisonneur* through which the filmmakers most directly articulate the film's anti-SJW message. On *The Green Inferno's* DVD commentary, Roth states, "I love how Sky just cuts down everything that everyone believes in. She's kind of the only—the voice of realism." By implication, we may surmise that progressive politics and ethic of direct action embraced by ACT are rooted in unreality. Unlike Justine who exists in liminality, Kaycee is introduced to the audience as impervious to activist seduction, literally in bed with the film's director (Roth voices her unnamed lover), uninterested in politics and interested only in that which impacts her directly.

Roth traces his skepticism of the Occupy movement to a personal anecdote in which he draws a distinction between justifiably dedicated activism and torpefied, narcissistic slacktivism:

[T]here was a relative of mine that had graduated college and wasn't working because he was occupying. I was thinking, "I don't know how the banks fucked him over, and maybe he feels strongly," but I got the sense

that he was going there because his friends were doing it and they were meeting girls and it was fun to occupy. (Juzwiak)

Here, we see two points of consternation over acceptable activism: dismissal of partial commitment and the notion that personal prosperity must be at the root of public participation. The notion that one can participate against institutional injustice without being personally victimized is framed as incomprehensible, replaced by familiar appeals to youthful self-interest. Monstrosity manifests itself as both a lack of rational self-interest and repugnant narcissism: style without substance. When Justine is confronted by Kara over her unrequited attraction to Alejandro, Justine insists she is motivated by ACT's cause but cannot help but glance at Alejandro as he interacts with the other ACT members, hinting at a monstrous id running amuck. In monster cinema, Harvey Greenberg notes, "even the gentlest of [humans] may bare fangs and bay at the moon when [their] passions are kindled" (199). The monstrous SJW, then, "represents the destructive forces unleashed when reason and civilized morality are overthrown by our unruly instincts" (199). As Justine longs for love and acceptance from Alejandro, SJWs pile onto hashtag activism campaigns in pursuit of love and acceptance from their Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Through this construction of Justine's awakening as a well-intentioned but ignorant SJW, Roth taps into the stereotype of SJWs as motivated by guilt (e.g., white, masculine) and unable or unwilling to grasp the complexities of politics and world affairs. Cathy Young, *Observer* contributor and prolific castigator of SJWs, conflates social justice activism with the anathemas of identity politics, fixation on privilege, and white guilt: "Working to correct inequities is a noble goal.... But the movement in its current form is not about that.... It encourages wallowing in anger and guilt. It promotes intolerance and the politicization of everything" ("Pecking Disorder"). Even when armed with noble goals and justified anger, SJWs are woefully unequipped to do anything beyond click, shout, and swarm. Yale professor and author Stephen L. Carter writes in an article both critical and sympathetic to Occupy Wall Street: "I am not suggesting that the demonstrators have nothing to be angry about, only that their anger is misplaced.... One of the hardest truths to accept is that complex failures generally have complex causes—and require nuanced solutions." By introducing the audience to Justine in her torpedied state, *The Green Inferno* suggests that SJWs

are lashing out not at the true systemic injustice beyond their comprehension but rather their own monstrous egos and feelings of shock, guilt, and complicity.

As Hytten and Warren note, the process of “reconciling feelings about self may be an important developmental step toward changing both ideas about, and actions toward, others” (73). *The Green Inferno*’s portrayal of torpedied Justine suggests this process should remain private, silent, and shameful. SJWs are instead to be locked in the cellar of “doing their research” *ad infinitum*, lest they be allowed out to do real damage to their surroundings.

“That’s the only way people change their behavior: the threat of embarrassment. You must shame them.”

In a scene shortly after her awakening to activism, Justine takes in a classroom lecture on female genital mutilation. Wincing at slides depicting FGM in a crowded auditorium, Justine incredulously declares they “should be doing something about this” and impotently marks her privilege as the daughter of a UN lawyer to boost her feminist credibility. Her instructor scoffs, informing her that FGM “is a global problem” and “You’d need every lawyer in the UN to stop it.” We then cut to Justine having lunch with her father in an upscale restaurant and cynically stating that the UN doesn’t care about FGM because oil isn’t involved. “Were it so simple,” her father, amused by her rudimentary knowledge, chides her while eating rare steak and sipping red wine, a hyper-globalized doppelgänger to the flesh consumption to come. “There are procedures. We can’t just go invade a country because we think what they’re doing is illegal or immoral.”

The Green Inferno’s second articulation of Justine’s monstrous transformation frames SJWs as reckless, abrasive zealots who rush headlong into confrontation without regard for decorum or civility. The monstrous SJW stalks from forum to forum, motivated only to antagonize and police political correctness, adopting a more-political-than-thou stance instead of pursuing change through respectable, socially sanctioned avenues. SJWs naively insist the world can be saved with a smartphone and have no time for committing to an adequate incubation period of assimilating to the amorphous cause because their default mode of engagement is to rush into combat without adequate knowledge or regard for those they confront, harass, and shame.

The SJW’s delusions of grandeur are exploited by Alejandro in a scene in which he draws Justine and other ACT members into a shared fantasy of colonial

saviordom: “Have you ever had fantasies of saving a dying tribe, of protecting them from encroaching civilization? An opportunity has come up to turn that fantasy into a reality.” As Alejandro sermonizes, the camera cuts to various ACT members hanging on their leader’s every word, eyes glazed over, fully indoctrinated. Only Justine maintains a semblance of rebellion, flippantly asking, “So what’s the plan? March through the jungle and starve yourselves?” When she speaks out of turn, the camera cuts between disgusted glares, creating a feeling of the mob ganging up on her. “You must be a freshman,” Alejandro chastises. “Because only a freshman would speak with such insolence. You can leave now.” Apologies intolerantly rebuffed, Justine is expelled from the meeting in shame.

Driven to insomnia after Alejandro’s rejection, Justine pursues him the next day, declaring her day-old dedication to women’s rights in Africa as her social justice *raison d’être*. Alejandro seduces her by promising her power through social media shaming: “Right or wrong, you need cameras on them. That’s the only way people change their behavior. The threat of embarrassment. You must shame them.” Despite warnings from her realist roommate and affluent father, Justine is easily deluded into believing a “white girl from the suburbs [can] go to Africa and tell a village that FGM is wrong.” Justine settles instead for Peru and the Yajes.

This exchange represents concerns over the monstrous SJW’s intolerance for opposing viewpoints and predilection for abrasive confrontation, particularly through social media. Twitter shaming seems deeply engrained in *The Green Inferno*’s genesis, as in pre-release press Roth offers as inspiration several examples of online awareness campaigns—Kony2012, Free Pussy Riot, Bring Back Our Girls, the Ice Bucket Challenge—and denounces them as at once aggravating and ineffective. On Kony2012, Roth recalls: “my Twitter timeline was filled with people going, ‘How come you haven’t tweeted the YouTube video? Don’t you care about child soldiers? What’s wrong with you?’ Everyone had this very self-righteous attitude” (Juzwiak). The SJW’s reckless dedication to counter-productive confrontation is illustrated in ACT members’ instantly metastasized conviction that injustice can be solved immediately if someone would take action. Upon arriving in Peru, ACT member Amy recoils in disgust at the site of a family riding on a scooter with a small child, deeming it “child abuse” without knowledge of Peruvian culture or its helmet laws. The implication: SJWs not only lack understanding of the phenomena they protest but actively forego pursuit of understanding, instead animalistically lashing out,

spoiling worthy causes and alienating potential allies who would join their cause if they'd only ask the right way.

This construction of the SJW as an abrasive zealot is reproduced regularly in anti-SJW rhetoric. The monstrous SJW is “Fueled by a mix of intolerance and entitlement” (Kaufman), fascistically demanding safe spaces while barring dissent from friend or foe and politicizing everything under the sun. “It’s almost as though they [SJWs] wake up every morning with ‘ruin everyone’s day’ as the first thing on their agendas,” an article on *The Odyssey* (Vesco) laments.

In *The Green Inferno*, smartphones are literally weaponized with public shame as their bullets. Upon arriving in Peru, Alejandro reminds his crew that their self-defense against an armed militia is to shame them before a global audience: “Tomorrow, no matter what, keep streaming. Those cameras are our only defense.” When one ACT member expresses shock that they could be shot and another suggests they, too, should get guns, Alejandro holds up his phone and reminds them, “These are our guns.”

Critical discourse on SJWs is heavily peppered with references to mob-like shaming, anti-free speech, and puritanical obsession with identity politics—all of which are framed as antagonistic harassment or self-sabotaging obstacles to true progress. “Ever the wet-blankets,” *The Federalist* (De Pasquale) chides, “social justice warriors will take any opportunity to demonstrate their virtue and accuse others with tiresome, baseless epithets like racism, sexism, and cultural appropriation.” “Like most fanatics, these enforcers of purity lack self-awareness of the motivations for their own actions,” *Areo Magazine* (Pallardy) argues. “There are real, profound problems visible through the murky rhetoric purporting to solve them. . . . But the gleefully self-righteous tone to some of the mandates issued by these self-styled experts in racial, class, gender, and identity politics betrays a baser motive.” In this characterization, we see the SJW at its most transparently destructive, stalking from encounter to encounter with the intent to harass and harm anyone not sufficiently liberal or anyone who defies their puritanical standards. Embodying a dangerous mix of ignorance and intolerance and roaming free to seek victims, the monstrous SJW lacks malice yet must be destroyed to both extinguish the political correctness that offends the right and the more-liberal-than-thou purity that offends the orthodox left.

“You knew the risks.” ... “Yeah. I just didn’t know the biggest one was you.”

Though Justine and the rank and file of ACT represent the self-obsessed and stridently aggressive faces of the SJW, there is no denying their earnestness and willingness to risk their lives for their convictions, which contradicts characterizations that SJWs are not authentically committed to their causes. Creating further disharmony in *The Green Inferno*’s anti-SJW mission is the fact that ACT’s tactical strike, in which they chain themselves to deforestation machinery and use their phones to expose the violent corporate-sponsored militia via mobile satellite technology, appears to be successful. The protest temporarily halts the deforesters’ encroachment on the Yajes’ territory and gains international exposure when their guerrilla broadcast goes viral, appearing on the front page of Reddit and being retweeted by CNN. With the enormous caveat of what happens next (their plane crashes, initiating their capture by the Yajes), it seems reasonable to chalk up an enormous victory for a dozen students with scarce resources and a lot of bravery.

The Green Inferno robs its activists of their triumph through its construction of Alejandro and Kara as grotesquely heartless manipulators of their ill-informed flock. Though Alejandro and Kara both corporeally participate in ACT’s direct action, the film’s second act reveals that they are corrupt and cynical to the point that the action is robbed of its virtue and serves to symbolically warn against falling in with grassroots activists who will inevitably reveal ulterior motives.

Though Alejandro is ACT’s lead organizer and tactician, the audience is cued to distrust him immediately: as Justine and Kaycee watch Alejandro lead the demonstration for the university’s janitors, Kaycee deems him “creepy and charismatic: the kind of guy you’ve got to look out for.” Though Justine’s pre-indoctrination encounters with Alejandro are filmed in warmer tones, he is later shown drawing up tactics in a dark, grim corner, a portrait of Che Guevara looming over his shoulder. As ACT members board their plane to Peru, Justine hesitates to board, glancing uneasily at Alejandro, Kara, and their benefactor and funder, Carlos. Though Alejandro vouches for Carlos (“He’s the man: one of us”), Carlos is later shown accepting money from an implied military strongman.

Of course, the audience’s mistrust of Alejandro, Kara, and Carlos is fully affirmed. Alejandro not only sets off a violent explosion at the construction site, but all traces of charisma and courage evaporate after his capture. Alejandro is revealed to have foreknowledge that the action would be futile: “We didn’t stop

anything. We just delayed it by a day or two.” When pressed, he explains that the action was in reality a public relations stunt orchestrated by Carlos (killed in the crash), who was hired by a competing company to stop its competition from reaching the natural gas beneath the Yajes. “Wake up,” Alejandro lectures the surviving ACT members. “These people never really had a chance. There’s too much money in the ground here. The second company’s already on the way. They picked up where the others left off, probably with the same guards.” When Justine lashes out at him for endangering their lives for “a fucking photo shoot,” he digs in: “Justine, I hate to break it to you, but this is how the real world works. Everything is connected. The good guys and the bad guys. You think the U.S. government didn’t allow 9/11 to happen? You think the War on Drugs is something real? You think our plane wasn’t sabotaged? They probably crashed it to kill Carlos.”

When Justine is identified as a virgin and selected by the tribe’s shamanistic leader to be ritualistically mutilated, Alejandro shows no compassion: “More days for us.” When sympathetic ACT member Jonah is brutally tortured and killed, Alejandro expresses relief that Jonah’s fat body will feed the Yajes for days. At last, when the surviving members plot their escape by stuffing Amy’s corpse with “very strong” Peruvian marijuana to intoxicate the cannibals who will consume her, Alejandro masturbates openly, to the horror of the group, to “release stress”; when the pathetic pariah is strangled by de facto leader Daniel, he masturbates more fervently.

Kara is revealed to be as loathsome and manipulative as her partner. When ACT members are chaining themselves to equipment, Kara slips Justine a defective padlock. As black-clad guards rush the scene, they attempt to capture the protesters but move on when they find them to be securely chained. But vulnerable Justine is seized, unmasked, and threatened with a gun against her head. Though Alejandro exploits Justine by taunting her captors with her father’s status with the UN—“You begged me to join, so I created a role for you,” he tells her dismissively afterward—he at least urges ACT to continue filming lest Justine be killed. Kara actively works to have Justine executed: “Kill her and see what happens,” she urges the militiaman.

In isolation, characterizations of the SJW as narcissistic, ineffective or overly confrontational are comprehensible, if exaggerated. The efficacy of clicktivism as an avenue for change is a point of debate on the political left (e.g., Fuchs; Gladwell; Morozov) as well as the right, and destructive conflict is virtually

synonymous with political discourse in the 21st century. But *The Green Inferno*'s suggestion that SJWs are a front for shadowy manipulators is curious. A review of contemporary grassroots activist organizations reveals no SJW pariahs remotely as evil and manipulative as *The Green Inferno*'s deplorable duo. ACT's SJWs may be monsters, but they are not naturally occurring; they are created and set in motion by self-motivated actors, more akin to Frankenstein's monster than irredeemable devils such as Freddy Kruger or Michael Myers.

Who or what social phenomena do Alejandro and Kara represent? Turning to Roth's pre-release interviews for clues, the most likely inspiration for Alejandro and Kara seems to be Jason Russell of Kony2012 fame. Roth cites the Kony2012 campaign, a forerunner of hashtag activism, as a prime example of ineffective slacktivism (Juzwiak), and as explained by Roth on DVD commentary, Alejandro's public masturbation is an homage to Russell, who in the midst of an apparent breakdown was arrested in San Diego for erratic behavior, cursing and ranting while naked and allegedly masturbating. Otherwise, a survey of contemporary social justice or clicktivism campaigns is short on figureheads, manipulative or otherwise. The suggestion that Kony2012 was counterproductive is a supportable thesis and is affirmed in ethnographic research by Finnegan, who criticizes Kony2012 as "a noncontentious form of activism for privileged young Americans that is unlikely to lead to sustainable social change in Africa or the United States" (138). Though critics accuse Russell's Invisible Children NGO of ineffectiveness and white saviordom (Cole), there seems to be no documented malice or premeditated corruption on the part of Russell. Joseph Kony remains at large and Invisible Children's legacy is complicated, but if Russell is an inspiration for Alejandro and Kara, the latter duo has been imbued with sinister motivations that appear to be pure fantasy. This particular fantasy is consistent with Ryan and Kellner's observation of conservative monster cinema, which tends to "demonstrate that in the jungle world of conservative psychopathology no one can be trusted, everyone potentially is a monster" (185).

To the contrary, ACT owes much of its presentation to groups such as Occupy New York and its offspring, which along with Black Lives Matter are known for their collectivist, decentralized approaches to decision-making. Such groups' eschewing of icons and traditional avenues to power (e.g., running for public office, electing formal leadership) is an enduring source of consternation among both conservatives and liberals such as Oprah Winfrey (Somashekhar) and in moderate-left articles on CNN (Linsky) and Huffington Post (Ostroy).

The lack of centralized leadership and an established party platform is a key factor in the SJW's monstrous incomprehensibility: there is no single head that can be cut off to kill this monster or keep it reined in. Conversely and consistent with the civilized savage/savage civilized trope, the Yajes are portrayed as embodying a more traditional communal hierarchy, if not full-blown Reagan-era Family Values. The village is led by two parental figures, identified as The Village Elder (feminine) and The Bald Headhunter (masculine) in the credits, who are portrayed as elite in status: elaborately adorned and painted orange where the rest of the village is painted red, they initiate and carry out the rite of killing Jonah to feed the village while everyone else helps or watches. The village's women season and cook the body, later washing and adorning Justine for public mutilation, while the children watch and obey. When a problem arises or the village is threatened, the alpha male headhunter protects the flock. Whereas the surviving ACT members attempt one ludicrous escape plan after another and get themselves killed one by one, the Yajes are paternally united and can only be defeated by a more violent, united organization: an armed militia.

Returning to Asma's assertion that the breakdown of intelligibility is a key characteristic of monstrosity, the sinister malevolence of Alejandro and Kara seems to function to placate anxiety and confusion over activists' turn away from traditional modernist leadership and hierarchy and toward a decentralized model of organization. Not unlike the conspiracy theorist who insists the 2017 Women's March was bankrolled by George Soros (Bondarenko) and the teenagers protesting the NRA in the wake of the Parkland High School rampage were paid "crisis actors" (Chavez), *The Green Inferno* cannot comprehend the possibility that Justine, ensconced in privilege, would renounce affluence and the comforts of college to risk her life in Peru when her family possesses the cultural capital to participate in more traditional avenues for change.

The Green Inferno forecloses on the possibility of genuine engagement without centralized leadership or personal gain by depicting Justine systematically singled out, seduced, and manipulated by an organization rotten to its core with deceit and ulterior motives. Much like Frankenstein's monster or Romero's living dead, the SJW exists not in nature but is created and cast into the world to wreak havoc by masters seen or unseen, loathsome and ultimately doomed by their creators' sins. And like certain among the ranks of Romero's living dead such as Bub from *Day of the Dead* or Big Daddy from *Land of the Dead*, the repentant SJW can also be redeemed by reclaiming that which marked its humanity before

descending into monstrosity. The SJW can be purified by abandoning that by which it once abdicated its humanity: political consciousness.

Conclusion: *The Green Inferno*'s Copout

By splicing the conservative-nihilist politics of the torture porn genre with an inversion of the Italian cannibal genre's *who are the real savages?* trope, *The Green Inferno* constructs a grotesque, tragically flawed image of the social justice warrior: loathsomely myopic, uninformed, and inauthentic; grotesquely overzealous, narcissistic, and manipulative; and tragically unaware of the consequences of its actions and its own doomed monstrosity. By erecting and destroying its monstrous SJWs, *The Green Inferno* works to demonize direct action, particularly that which is left-leaning and features decentralized leadership, by appealing to social anxieties over the future of public participation. As Ryan and Kellner correctly observe, "Even conservative films ... can yield socially critical insights, for what they designate in a sort of inverse negative is the presence of forces that make conservative reactions necessary" (14). Read generously, *The Green Inferno* highlights three potentially problematic stances that, though exaggerated in the film, are counterproductive when engaging with Others with the goal of enacting social change. To enter into public participation superficially, or stridently, or unaware of the implications of one's actions are all extreme stances that aren't likely to win allies or contribute to lasting change.

Generosity, vulnerability, and reflexivity are recurring themes in scholarship that interrogates engaging with Others. For example, in recognizing the urgency of understanding our own positions within systems of power, Warren and Hytten advocate the stance of *the Critical Democrat*, a liminal position in which we carefully balance commitment to action with self-reflexivity, of speaking out with active listening, of understanding how we are implicated in systems of power with the belief that change is possible through collaboration (331-32). Dwight Conquergood, too, advocates for the liminal occupation between extreme stances when engaging with others. Theorizing along intersecting axes of Identity and Difference and Detachment and Commitment, Conquergood advocates a stance of *dialogic performance*, bringing "self and other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another" in open-ended, ongoing mutual engagement (9). Though the notion of taking action is by definition at the heart of activism,

both the critical democrat and the dialogic performer embrace self-reflexivity and the spirit of earnest, vulnerable engagement, both qualities that sampled anti-SJW critiques suggest are perceived to be absent from forums in which social justice is discussed. Too often, critics of SJWs suggest, the shaming and confrontation they perceive lacks the essential dialogic nature that divides attempts to teach from *praxis*: “the action and *reflection* [my emphasis] of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 79).

This leaves the audience to ponder: if, as so many critiques of SJWs emphasize, social justice itself is an admirable goal, what non-SJW stance ought one adopt when advocating for change? Unfortunately, any potential pedagogical value from *The Green Inferno* is severely undermined by the alternative stance its conclusion advocates: post-activist non-engagement.

In the film’s dénouement, Justine has returned to New York after escaping her Yajes captors. All her friends are killed,³ and as is customary in torture porn horror, she escapes by inflicting violence on her captor, obliterating the line between the civilized and the savage. Sitting in a sterile, dimly lit library, Justine dispassionately recounts her terrifying ordeal for her father and two officious men investigating the incident. In an homage to *Cannibal Ferox*, Justine lies about her experiences, denying that the Yajes (who were slaughtered by the previously thwarted militia, under new employment) were cannibalistic:

JUSTINE: All the other students were killed in the crash. I stayed by the fire as long as I could. But by the next day it had burned out. If it weren’t for those natives, I’d be dead, too. They heard the crash, and eventually they found me. They fed me and guided me out of the jungle. They knew I was lost, that I accidentally landed in their back yard. I never experienced any anger or hostility. It was the opposite. I never felt afraid even when I was with them. Until the bulldozers showed up and slaughtered them like cattle.”

³ Save for Alejandro, whom Justine abandons as retribution. In the film’s post-credit sequence, Alejandro is shown by satellite video as having survived and apparently having gone native, setting up the possibility of a sequel.

DAD: “We’re all very proud of you, baby. You saved that village.”

DETECTIVE: These natives ...

JUSTINE: The Yajes.

DETECTIVE: ... allegedly headhunters, cannibals. Did you ever see any of that sort while you were there?

JUSTINE: Never once.

Both *Cannibal Ferox* and *The Green Inferno* feature college students in the role of the imperiled. *Ferox* sends anthropologist Gloria and company into the Paraguayan jungle to prove Gloria’s thesis that cannibalism is a myth. They fall in with fugitive American drug dealer/addict Mike Logan, whose psychotic aggression incites the cannibalistic natives to retributive violence. Upon returning home, Gloria lies about her experiences and publishes a book that fraudulently purports that cannibalism is fictional. Unlike Gloria’s shell-shocked cynicism, *The Green Inferno* leaves Justine’s motivation for lying about the Yajes comparatively ambiguous. Her testimony is filmed, and as the scene ends, Justine meets the audience’s gaze through a screen-within-our-screen, which then shuts off, suggesting that her engagement with the incident is officially over.

Though Justine earns sympathy as a survivor, the final stage of her activist awakening is disturbing. Having traveled from self-absorption to reckless saviordom, Justine is depicted as increasingly cynical on the plane ride home—one may argue justifiably so after her cruel manipulation by Alejandro and Kara. But by the end of the film, Justine’s cynicism gives way to complete detachment and discontinued engagement with the people and issues that once attracted her to the conflict over the Yajes village. As she once abdicated her humanity to become an SJW, she abdicates the willingness to engage in that which made her monstrous. The hero’s journey ends in disengagement and acceptance of the status quo in exchange for the privilege of invisibility.

The Green Inferno ultimately advocates for a stance reminiscent of Conquergood’s *skeptic’s cop-out*: the “easy bail-out into the no man’s land of paralyzing skepticism” (8):

“The Skeptic’s Cop-Out” is the most morally reprehensible corner of the map because it forecloses dialogue. The enthusiast [characterized by “too facile identification with the other coupled with enthusiastic commitment, 6], one can always hope, may move beyond infatuation to love.... The skeptic, however, shuts down the very idea of entering into conversation with the other before the attempt, however problematic, begins. (8)

The Green Inferno’s ideal agent ultimately proves to be not Justine nor Alejandro or any ACT member but rather cynical, sneering anti-activist Kaycee, who immediately forecloses upon the possibility of earnest engagement with others and ridicules others who do attempt to engage.

The Green Inferno expends its creative force disciplining activists who are too eager to engage or engage for incomprehensible reasons, saying little about whom, then, is allowed to change the world. Roth asserts that SJWs want “shortcuts” from traditional avenues for change; his ACT members “don’t want to go through the process and the law” (Juzwiak). Justine’s father embodies this privileging of bureaucracy over direct action, but though Justine’s father is presented in a positive light, the film itself admits that such prescribed mechanisms often fail those they are intended to help. Direct action may be futile in *The Green Inferno*, but bureaucratic action is just as impotent. The Yajes were always going to be bulldozed.

In the end, Roth’s own words and actions provide the greatest clue into *The Green Inferno*’s conclusion on what constitutes acceptable activism: not critical democracy, not dialogic performance, but economic privilege. In his attempts to defuse accusations of racism and exploitation through *The Green Inferno*’s retrograde portrayal of the Yajes, Roth points to the fact that he hired native farmers from Peru’s Callanayacu village, compensating them in money and home and community improvements. Roth recalls that communication was limited and the Callanayacu farmers had “never seen a movie before.” To prepare the Callanayacu for their roles, they were shown *Cannibal Holocaust*, a film which itself has been often criticized for its own racist depictions of indigenous peoples. Roth recalls: “So if you talk to the 5-year-old [Callanayacu] kids and say, ‘What is a movie?’ they go, ‘Oh that’s when you get painted red and eat people’” (Juzwiak).

Roth’s rhetoric works to reaffirm the notion of the “false generosity” (Freire) of the philanthropically inclined elite as the kind of activism that, unlike

slacktivism or clicktivism, *actually does something*. But its accompanying demonization of direct action and the everyday performance of struggling for change also serves as a reminder that, in Freire's words, "An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source" (44). If the ability to control who and what are worthy of being lifted belongs to the economically privileged, it is no wonder that the SJW poses a monstrous threat to be controlled, a subversive force that must be demonized.

The Green Inferno identifies social justice warriors as threats, and the symbolic violence it inflicts on them is impossible to misinterpret. But it also fails to make sense of the activists it finds so unintelligible. Its SJWs exist to assuage concerns that today's activists aren't motivated or informed, yet they make sacrifices unfathomable to much of its audience; they lack information that is also lacking to administrators and diplomats. Its SJWs are symbolically destroyed as an exorcism for anyone whose actions or language have faced unwanted scrutiny from left of the political spectrum, yet their encounters with Others are either justified and successful (versus genocidal corporate colonizers) or unintentional and non-malicious (the Yajes). Channeling critics from the political left and right, *The Green Inferno's* contribution to debates over the future of public participation cannot fathom progress without hierarchy and centralized leadership, or generosity without getting more back in return. It has no idea who the real savages are and doesn't wish to be bothered with the matter any further, hoping the monsters will just quiet down, log off and go away.

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