



PHOTO BY JUAN JOSÉ CASTAÑO-MÁRQUEZ

## Spooky Evenings: A “Blueprint for Engaged Humanities”

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Matthew Jarvis, Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History at Nebraska Wesleyan University, has built on his overlapping areas of interest—English, Theatre, Art, and horror—to co-create a variety of virtual and in-person projects, including a summer reading series, an innovative art show, and a month-long e-series of speakers, interviews, readings, and film screenings. Each of the projects—all of which have been developed since August 2020—extend their reach outside of academia to pull together diverse participants interacting around a central theme of horror.

### Horror as Cultural Reflection

As Jarvis points out, “You can study anything through the lens of horror.” Kendall Phillips, co-director of the Lender Center for Social Justice at Syracuse University, agrees, adding that the study of horror can also reveal cultural preoccupations, exposing the reasons why particular types of horror become prominent at particular times. Juan Castaño-Márquez, assistant Professor of Digital Media in Nebraska Wesleyan’s Department of Art—and Jarvis’ collaborator—says that, in critically engaging with and analyzing horror films and movies, scholars can examine interesting cultural dynamics; these texts can provide ways to deal with social and political issues both visually and conceptually. Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez point out that the horror genre is expansive and often differs from many people’s pre-conceived ideas.

Having begun watching horror movies at the age of six and with a “deep, abiding love

for Halloween,” Jarvis says that horror movies did not disturb him when he watched them as a teen. He is now re-visiting that material critically, finalizing a book titled *Millennial Monstrosities: The Horrors of a 90s Kid*, which, he reports, “explores the nature of intersectionality not only from a personal perspective but also how themes in 90s horror—sexism / sexual assault, gender inequality, sexuality, inequality, and racism—foretold the culture we are now experiencing.” He points out that “Cultural nostalgia is currently moving the 1990s forward in popular culture after about two and a half decades of focus on the 1980s. This book is a timely examination of American culture in the 1990s.” The decade of 90s horror films is bookended by *Silence of the Lambs* at the beginning and *Scream* at the end, and Jarvis says that many of these films have not yet been examined in academic settings. Jarvis, however, goes further than academic examination limited to the 90s; he also clearly

ties concerns revealed in 90s horror books and films to pressing social issues of the present day.

### Collaboration

When he joined the Nebraska Wesleyan faculty in fall of 2020, Jarvis met Castaño-Márquez, who says that he and Jarvis were “trying to figure out how to do programming and bring interesting speakers to the students” at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester. With Covid restrictions in place, it was harder to bring people to school, but the situation opened opportunities for virtual forums. As their conversations continued, they created a vision for an e-conference—a virtual space to address social and cultural issues through the lens of horror. They also placed particular emphasis on diversity, aiming to ensure that more than 50% of the speakers were people of color, women, and/ or queer. The timing was breathtakingly tight—having met in August of 2020, the pair had only six weeks to create the show from



the ground up—fund a budget, secure speakers, locate a camera, develop a website, promote the event, learn how to stream live productions—everything. They each also concurrently taught full course loads.

For 2020's inaugural event, titled *Nights of Horror*, Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez had originally aimed for thirteen nights but ended up gaining enough interest to fill every night in October. Castaño-Márquez says that they “kept getting yesses from cool people, and then from major people.” To assemble presenters, Jarvis cold-called people whose work he knew well. Castaño-Márquez says that they “just didn’t have the time to feel daunted or intimidated or second guess” themselves. The pandemic worked in their favor; a large in-person gathering of top people across so many fields would be prohibitively expensive. But in a virtual setting and during the pandemic, people were willing to speak—at

no charge—for the love of horror. Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez were “blown away” by the response from potential presenters last year, with top scholars, artists, film makers, make-up artists, and more agreeing to participate. According to Jarvis, the most popular guest speaker in 2020 was S. T. Joshi, the foremost H. P. Lovecraft scholar in the world; his session had hundreds of live viewers.

Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez have received support for their project from their department chair, the Provost, and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The University President introduced many of the 2020 speakers, and—as an entomologist by training—the *Wasp Woman* movie, too.

That inaugural event has led to other projects, as well, and each of the two collaborators fills the role most suited to their strengths. As a video artist, Castaño-Márquez focuses on all aspects of the

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Juan Castaño-Márquez, assistant Professor of Digital Media in Nebraska Wesleyan's Department of Art, Jarvis' collaborator.

media production side of their projects, such as organizing the program, producing and streaming the show, staging the set, and creating the graphic designs. Jarvis, as the horror scholar, does the research and preparation for the interviews. He conducts the interviews for all of the projects in his office, which the two have staged appropriately for the horror-themed events. In the area behind him, viewers can see a dimly-lit scene: a dark red curtain behind a skull, a jack-o-lantern, and a Frankenstein's monster mask on the left and a row of horror books to the right. Other elements of the scene are less obvious, such as a prosthetic leg from the 1920s and an old radio.

### Spooky Evenings

This year's October event, *Spooky Evenings*, is a "multidisciplinary academic e-event that seeks to engage academics, students, and professionals in the field of horror," as the promotional information states. Interspersed with scholarly presentations are film screenings and interviews conducted by Jarvis. This year, the event runs from September 26 through October 31, with an extensive lineup



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to speak on this year’s supernaturally-oriented themes: subjects such as vampires, witches, ghosts, necromancy, voodoo, demons, the devil, and black magic. Presenters reflect the far-flung nature of the field and include religion scholars—such as Columbia’s Dr. Esther Hamori, who studies demonology—and professors in many

disciplines—such as Dr. Henry Ansgar Kelly, author of *Satan: A Biography*. Additionally, the event includes popular authors—such as Richard Chizmar, who has written in collaboration with Stephen King—and top film makers—such as Anna Biller, who directed *The Love Witch*. *Spooky Evenings* will host a few

movie screenings, including *The Love Witch*; additionally, Rachel Harrison, author of *Cackle*, will give an exclusive pre-sale reading one day before the book’s general release to the public.

### Sunscream and Other Projects

After creating the successful and remarkable production of *Nights of Horror*, Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez have continued to develop related projects. *Sunscream*, their 2021 summer reading series for adults, includes interviews with twelve well-known horror fiction writers. As Phillips notes, “summer is not generally a time for academic work,” so this reading series—which “taps into an interesting mix of horror writers”—provides a fun way to stay connected to the genre between spring and fall terms.

Another collaborative project, *Posters that Go Bump in the Night*, is an art exhibition in conjunction with Mad Duck Posters that features thirty-five art prints based on classic horror movie posters. The show opened Friday, August 13 and will run through October 31. Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez have produced interviews with about ten artists involved in the show, and they are planning a book which will include the art along with the interviews.

They are also looking ahead to the 2022 *Spooky Evenings* program, organized around contemporary “Satanic panics,” as the basis for a future anthology. While Castaño-Márquez had lost interest in the horror genre after his teen years, he has found that being involved in the various projects he and Jarvis have co-created—and meeting all the people who have participated—has led him to be more interested in the genre, albeit from a more scholarly point of view.

### Spooky Evenings as a Model

Even though a variety of pop-culture texts and productions provide the focus of the event, the emphasis is firmly academic, with a “critical goal of addressing diversity issues,” according to Jarvis. Phillips goes further, calling *Spooky Evenings* a “blueprint for engaged humanities.” As Phillips explains, the e-conference provides a model of “how to engage a wider audience and get them super-excited.”

Jarvis asked Phillips, who includes horror studies among his academic interests, to be a speaker for *Nights of Horror*. Phillips found the event to be an “amazing project” because it brought together many discrete populations who had not previously had a platform

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to address each other and discuss common ideas and interests. These groups include horror studies academics, film industry creators, fiction writers, and popular critics on blogs, podcasts, and social media. According to Phillips, each of these groups has committed fans and attendant fan cultures, but there had previously been no bridges between the various fandoms. *Nights of Horror*, now *Spooky Evenings*, has begun to create those ties.

Phillips sees the *Spooky Evenings* model created by Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez as easily transferrable to other areas of inquiry—for example, a similar event could bring together games studies scholars, game makers, gamers, and fans. The importance lies, Phillips says, in “creating a space for conversations.” So often, he points out, academics either study a popular culture artifact or bring in a popular speaker, but they do not have actual dialogues with people outside of the academy. By contrast, in Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez’s model, the stakeholders are listening to each other; as Phillips says, it provides a “brilliant example of curating different voices,” and he believes the 2020 event is already having an impact.

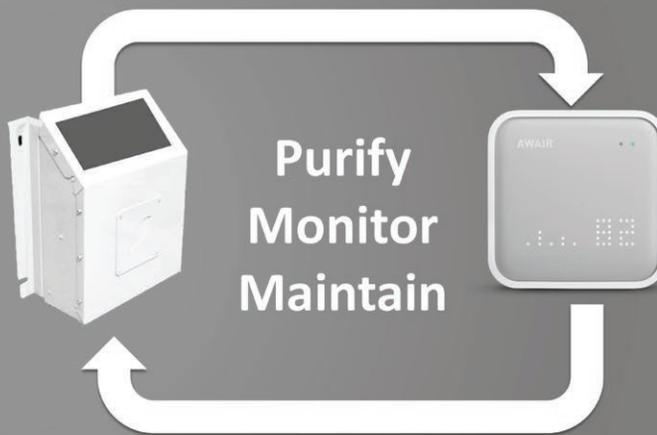


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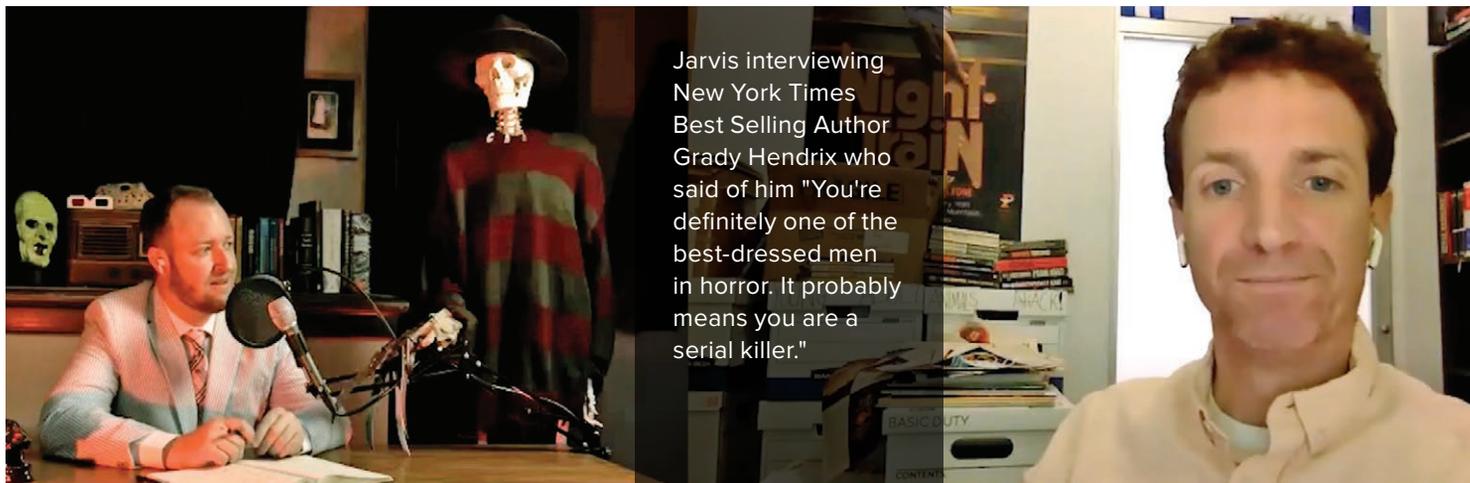
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Jarvis interviewing New York Times Best Selling Author Grady Hendrix who said of him "You're definitely one of the best-dressed men in horror. It probably means you are a serial killer."

For instance, Robin Means Coleman, author of *Horror Noire*—which inspired a documentary of the same name—was featured in *Nights of Horror*. Since that presentation, Phillips has seen that Coleman has been mentioned more in film blogs, with people discussing both her work and Black representation in the horror genre. Phillips credits Jarvis

and Castaño-Márquez with providing a space for “synergy” to flourish, “creating a forum for these conversations to expand.”

### Join the Fun

According to Phillips, Jarvis and Castaño-Márquez have done “another impressive job” assembling this year’s “monumental project.”

*Spooky Evenings* can be followed on both *Instagram* and *Twitter* at @spookyevening (no “s” on the end), and the event will run live on *YouTube*’s subscription channel, *Spooky Evenings*. ■



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