The Night of Exception: Understanding Halloween through Schmitt's Political Thought

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This article plumbs the meaning of the Halloween tradition through the writing of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt. Schmitt's unsettling theory emphasizes both the need to confront the 'exception,' when traditional rules and expectations about our social and political relations give way, and the importance of identifying ourselves through opposition, especially by constructing an enemy or foe who is at once alien but essential to our individual and national self-understanding. After developing an account of the enduring relevance of Schmitt's political thought for comprehending the nature and appeal of the Halloween tradition, the essay applies this framework to a cinematic case study, interpreting John Carpenter's 1978 film Halloween.

Key Words: Halloween; political philosophy; Carl Schmitt; friend and enemy; exception

This article plumbs the meaning of the Halloween tradition through a seemingly unlikely source: the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Schmitt's sometimes repugnant body of thought includes the idea that successful societies recognize both 'the exception' (circumstances when traditional rules and expectations about our social and political relations give way) and that our most important identities are formed through opposition, especially by distinguishing friends from 'enemies' at odds with our self-conception and preferred way of life.

Schmitt's wider 'positive' or constructive political project—seeking to empower an autocratic sovereign who can both identify the exception and marshal a nation against its enemies—is somewhat distant from the concerns of Halloween in its historic and contemporary forms. But Schmitt's basic claims, and his unstinting critique of the status quo, point us to dynamics that have coursed through the Halloween tradition from its early history to the present. Stated differently, his arguments about the inevitable breakdown of liberal orders help us better comprehend the anxieties at the beating heart of the holiday.

More specifically, in both its ancient cognates and contemporary forms Halloween combines two signature and closely intertwined elements that run parallel to Schmitt's approach. First, the day marks a suspension of the ordinary, exploring the end of seasons and the boundaries between the conventional and fantastic, the living and the dead.

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Many of Halloween's rituals and symbols probe this uneasy divide: we light bonfires to push back the gathering winter darkness and cold, don costumes to deter ghosts, and ask for food or other gifts in return for keeping the peace. While these observances are often celebratory, they are also inflected with a sense of dread or menace.

Halloween's recognition of the 'exception' leads us to Schmitt's second tenet: the centrality of the friend and enemy distinction for our politics and national identity. Viewed in this light, we can describe the Halloween holiday as an annual reflection on (dis)embodied threats and potential adversaries, especially via representatives of the dead and the monstrous. The deep roots of Halloween include lighting candles and sacrificing animals to ward off dangerous spirits. Similarly, the enduring masking tradition is both a way to trick or drive away malevolent forces and, more recently, an exercise in playing with (and perhaps symbolically defanging) sinister figures like devils, ghosts, and vampires.

The remainder of this article explores the interplay between these aspects of our Halloween celebrations and the central beliefs in Carl Schmitt's political thought. I do not claim that the Halloween tradition is somehow systematically modelled upon Schmitt's philosophy. The holiday's complex history and diverse forms do not support such a position. Indeed, as discussed further below, in a number of ways our Halloween celebrations depart from and even cut against elements of Schmitt's thinking. But Schmitt's account provides a framework for understanding the longstanding power and distinctive features of our most protean holiday, helping us identify a basic through line that connects ancient celebrations with the popularity of Halloween in the twenty-first century.

After setting out the broad strokes of Schmitt's theory, I link his ideas to an encompassing 'Halloween tradition,' understood to include a 'colorful patchwork' of folk beliefs, autumnal and religious celebrations, and cultural practices that eventually became a 'a new, quintessentially American celebration' (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 47). I then test my claims about the links between Schmitt and Halloween with a case study based on John Carpenter's now-classic horror film, *Halloween* (1978). Finally, I conclude this essay by discussing the broader implications of my argument and what it teaches us about the ongoing, dark allure of October 31st.

The Wolf at the Door: The Exception and Liberalism's 'Anarchy and Chaos'

Schmitt's political theory begins with a series of critiques about the supposed shortcomings of constitutional liberalism, the political tradition that seeks to protect the

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'individual's autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source' through a simultaneous embrace of individual liberty and the rule of law (Zakaria 1997, pp. 25-26). According to Schmitt, these precepts are irreconcilable and misconstrue the true basis of politics and what binds communities together. Among other deficiencies, constitutional liberalism is bedevilled by irreconcilable tensions between its commitments to political tolerance and pluralism, the consistent application of the rule of law, and 'its need to defeat its enemies' (Brown, 2022).

All organized states have the ultimate responsibility 'in assuring total peace,' that is, to 'create tranquility, security, and order' within and between regimes (Schmitt 1996, p. 46). Modern states, especially liberal ones, try to maintain this order and defuse national differences by developing and applying legal norms—general rules and laws that apply to everyone. Liberals claim that politics takes place within (and is therefore subsumed by) neutral and fairly administered constitutions, statutes, and public policy guidelines, which deliver benefits to all parties and constrains leaders and subjects alike from acting solely through caprice.

But, as Schmitt sees it, this approach is both philosophically unsound and dangerous in practice. In tethering a regime's legitimacy to the promise that stable and fairly administered rules will both regulate conflicts between diverse groups and address the dynamic needs of a polity, the rule of law constantly threatens to collapse. Our legal and political system can operate sufficiently well during normal times and in facing routine or 'tame problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 169), but they founder amidst the idiosyncrasies and urgency of crises, jeopardizing Schmitt's preeminent values: 'tranquility, security, and order.' As he puts it, 'there exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist' (Schmitt 1985, p. 13). Abnormal circumstances such as emergencies contain unforeseen variables and dangers that existing laws cannot anticipate or address.

Thus, the rule of law and our established institutions serve us up to a point. But in a world beset with economic and social upheaval, and frequent and sometimes violent conflict between political parties, citizens, and nations, the promise of the rule of law is subordinate to confronting what Schmitt calls 'the exception:' phenomena 'which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like. But it cannot be circumscribed factually and made to conform to a preformed law' (Schmitt, 1985, p. 6).

Schmitt's solution to the problem of the exception is the 'sovereign'—a figure who is personally empowered to decide when the rule of law and normal politics has given way, when it can be restored, and how the state should respond to 'abnormal' conditions to restore public order and security. In order to forestall 'anarchy and chaos' the sovereign

ISSN: 2057-2301

must have 'principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order' (Schmitt, 1985, p. 10). Schmitt's sovereign exists as a kind of 'borderland' figure —straddling between the normal and the exception—since he both 'stands outside the normally valid legal system, [but] nevertheless belongs to it' insofar as he must decide if the rule of law is operating effectively or 'needs to be suspended in its entirety.'

With respect to *who* is the sovereign, Schmitt looks to whomever can engage in effective political action when the normal order falters. As George Schwab puts it, the 'one who has authority can demand obedience—and it is not always the legitimate sovereign who possesses this authority' (Schmitt, 1985, p. xii). Whoever is sovereign has the 'monopoly to decide' that the exception is at hand and what path we should chart through the crisis (Schmitt, 1985, pp. 6-7).

Friends, Enemies, and Community

In determining whether we are experiencing 'the exception' or whether the 'normal situation actually exists,' the sovereign must decide whether our collective conception of 'public order and security' has been disrupted. This, in turn, requires a judgment about 'what constitutes the public interest' and, consequently, whose conception of the good is included in the polity and whose are opposed.[1]

This leads us to a second idea critical to Schmitt's philosophy. He contends that what demarcates politics from other endeavors is a distinction 'to which political actions and motives can be reduced…that between friend and enemy' (Schmitt, 1996, p. 26). A political community is formed and maintained through its recognition of an enemy, understood as 'the *other*, the stranger'—someone whose nature 'is existentially different and foreign in a particularly intense way, so that in extreme cases conflicts with him are possible' if not unavoidable (Schmitt, 2020, p. 63).

We identify our enemies through emotional, cultural, or anthropological impressions rather than sober analyses of military or commercial threats: 'the political enemy need not be morally evil; he need not be aesthetically ugly; he need not be an economic competitor — it may even seem advantageous to do business with him (Schmitt, 2020, p. 63). But these foes reflect or give vent to 'the most intense and extreme antagonism' in a community and are, therefore, essential to our identity (Schmitt, 1996, pp. 37-8). This, in turn, makes the friend and enemy distinction the root of political life, social cohesion, and leadership. As Roberta Adams puts it, 'Maintaining the distinction between the people on our side—friends—and those on the other side—enemies—is the

[1] As Schmitt puts it, the sovereign 'decides in a situation of conflict what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order' (1985, p. 6).

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primary function of the state on which all other functions either rely or depend according to Schmitt' (Adams, 2024).

More ominously, since 'the enemy' is perceived to be an existential threat to a community, its leaders can wield 'enormous power' against this group, trying to expel them and even directing its people to destroy these foes.[2] Indeed, the ultimate test of whether we have properly identified our enemy is whether we are willing to die against them. Explicit or latent violence is, therefore, an essential part of our relationship with the enemy: 'The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing' (Schmitt, 2020, p. 68).

While identifying the exception (and how to respond to it) is left to the personal authority and judgment of the sovereign, ascertaining a community's friends and enemies is a more collective, cultural, and objective process. If our leaders misidentify enemies, they will fail to capture the people's anxieties, energy, and imagination. The animus that drives the friend and enemy distinction must be decided by the political community and publicly expressed. Thus, the political enemy is necessarily a 'public enemy' and can't be determined by 'the judgment of a disinterested and neutral party.' And once we have fixed upon our foe, we tend to foist a whole range of negative associations upon them: 'Emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of the distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support' (Schmitt, 2020, p. 68).

The friend and enemy opposition is the most important part of political life because it is fundamental to our self-conception. As Schmitt elaborates, 'the entire life of a human being is a struggle [against our foes] and every human being symbolically a combatant' (Schmitt 2020, p. 68). Finding our enemies is not only about survival but articulating what values or way of life is most important to us as people. The opposition and even enmity at the heart of a community's life is not to be lamented or suppressed. Vibrant, healthy political orders persist because of the potentially violent hostility at their core; this gives a nation energy, cohesion, and a clear path to protecting itself. States that fail to confront their foes, ideologically and physically, are vulnerable.

Just as the exception undermines constitutional liberalism's faith in the rule of law, so the friend-enemy distinction serves as a kind of reproach to liberal pluralism—the belief that nations with diverse populations and divergent conceptions of the good can

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[2] In Schmitt's words

> The state as the authoritative political entity contains an enormous power concentrated in itself: the possibility of waging war and thus openly having human lives at its disposal. The *jus belli* contains such a disposition; it indicates a double possibility: that of demanding from members of one's own people readiness to kill and die, and that of killing people standing on the enemy side. (2020, p. 81).

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flourish harmoniously through their commitment to agreed upon procedures, compromises that balance competing interests, and what Schmitt calls a "ventilating system" of representative institutions that allegedly express our differing identities (Schmitt, 1996, p. 70). In this view, we subordinate our dislike or mistrust of others to common norms and rules that protect everyone.

But Schmitt counters that this is a kind of fiction that only superficially covers the rivalries, fear, and even hatred core to our politics and humanity. According to Peter Gratton, for Schmitt the 'state is not simply a facilitator of open discussions among disparate groups or an administrator of economic goods for society; it is primarily a means for internal order such that a proper relation of enmity with other people is constituted' (2012, p. 14). Schmitt insists that humanity will never be at true peace; even in periods of seeming harmony or détente, communities have a simmering animosity at their core. As an alternative to the liberal vision of achieving liberty through diversity, tolerance, and shared institutions and norms, Schmitt insists that the only way communities can achieve meaningful solidarity is by owning up to their deep-seated divisions and fears.

Schmitt and the Halloween Tradition

How does Schmitt's unsettling political philosophy shed light on our most unsettling holiday? We might first note that there are, of course, *many* Halloweens, making it difficult to identify the core characteristics of All Hallows' Eve, at least as a historical matter. As Nicholas Rogers notes, 'Some folklorists have detected its origins in the Roman feast of Pomona, the goddess of fruits and seeds, or in the festival of the dead called Parentalia' (2003, p. 23). More often, scholars anchor the holiday to the Celtic Samhain, a harvest festival that helped communities brace for the cold months to come and coincided with a period when the 'ancestral dead' supposedly drew closer to the world of the living (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 58; Santino 1983). The celebrations of All Saints' and All Souls' Days offered Christian variations of this latter idea, emphasizing a religious directive to honor departed souls. In the nineteenth century United States, Halloween practices drew heavily on Irish immigrant traditions including 'divination games' and the use of lanterns and 'corpse candles… thought to be the souls of the dead, wandering interminably and leading men astray' (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 78). In the early twentieth century, the holiday became more closely associated with themed costumed celebrations and tricks and pranks (Skal, 2002, pp. 42-44).

Thus, Halloween is undoubtedly a 'patchwork holiday…stitched together quite recently from a number of traditions' and there is, consequently, 'little consensus as to

ISSN: 2057-2301

what it means' (Skal, 2002, p. 20), especially in its amalgamated, broadly accessible, contemporary form.

Recognizing Threats to the Status Quo

Nevertheless, Schmitt's theory captures three recurring ideas that help bridge the ancient foundations of the holiday with its most important manifestations today. First, both Schmitt's account and Halloween's venerable traditions are premised on teasing out threats to the status quo—unresolved tensions and persistent fears allegedly underlying 'normal' conditions.

For Schmitt, this challenge takes the form of liberalism's purported dysfunctions coursing just under society's surface, ready to erupt during constitutional crises or when a liberal regime fails to recognize its true ideological enemies. Halloween's suggestion of social and political fragility is expressed more indirectly, but is still a persistent current transmitted through the holiday's evolving forms. For example, Samhain's celebrations occurred at the end of summer, drawing the community's attention to the encroaching winter, a season linked to privation and even mortality. As Lesley Bannatyne puts it, 'Samhain marked the start of the season that rightly belonged to evil spirits—a time when nights were long and dark fell early. It was a frightening time for a people who were entirely subject to the forces of nature, and who were superstitious about the unknown' (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 4). These natural forces, and the dark spirits accompanying them, threatened crops, children, and the elderly, serving as an implicit reminder of the fragility of life and the social order that makes it possible.

More generally, David Skal contends that the holiday, throughout its history, has been a touchstone for fears about contemporaneous social and political dangers, leading to the conclusion that it is 'an intrinsically dangerous holiday' (2002, p. 149). Rogers, too, notes that our Halloween celebrations have come to reflect the 'shifting social and political anxieties of late twentieth-century America' (2003, p. 21). Thus, the holiday has periodically triggered the attention of religious groups who object to its pagan sources and association with dark forces (Poole, 2019). In the 1970s and 1980s worries about childhood safety and lapsing national morality ushered in an era where the holiday was inflected with fears about candy that had been weaponized with razor blades, poison, or drugs (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 145). In a similar vein, Skal documents how the city of Detroit's 'Devil's Night' tradition (occurring on Oct. 30) was a 'perversely destructive variation on ancient Halloween bonfire rituals' involving vandalism and arson, and again linking the holiday to underlying social maladies and mayhem (2002, p. 151). At times,

ISSN: 2057-2301

Halloween costumes give direct expression to symbols of disorder or injustice—consider the popularity of O.J. Simpson masks during Halloween in 1994 or the appearance of zombie bankers at the height of the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011.

Moreover, the decentralized and "liminal" (Turner, 1975) aspects of Halloween contribute to its 'essential unruliness' (Skal, 2002, 150). Unlike other national holidays, Halloween is not officially recognized (through time off from school or work or in the rhetoric of elected officials). It is, instead, the byproduct of millions of uncoordinated private actions. As Rogers puts it, 'Halloween grew outside the canon of state-sanctioned commemorative holidays. It was a rite without a patron, eluding institutional or corporate appropriation, a holiday of transgression whose subversive laughter struck against the orthodoxies of the day' (2003, p. 212).

As a result, Halloween's core traditions (bonfires, parades, and in more recent years trick or treating, home décor, and haunted houses) regularly rupture the boundaries between public and private spaces and resist an orderly chronology, a predictable starting and ending time. In contrast, other holidays are centered around essentially private locations such as the home (Thanksgiving) or religious sites (Christmas and Easter), or occur in circumscribed public venues with discrete locations and relatively fixed periods of celebration (Fourth of July fireworks and parades).

Halloween also invites unconventional and even lawless behavior through costumes, pranks, and vandalism, and depends upon symbols and rituals in which 'death and life are related to each other' (Santino, 1994, p. xii). These aspects of the holiday represent at least an implied challenge to the prevailing social order, especially in cultures where the populace is 'terrified…[of its] own mortality' and where death and dying are taboo (Doughty, 2014, p. 224).

The Night of Exception

In recognizing (and arguably celebrating) these threats to the status quo, Halloween and Schmitt share a second common thread: they both fix our attention on the dangerous moment where we own up to our social fragility. For Schmitt, this is the exception—those periods when the existing constitutional and political order breaks down and leaves us uncertain how to proceed, that is, what rules should govern our behavior.

With respect to Halloween, its practices and rituals have long been based on marking transitions and acknowledging a point of disequilibrium or rupture with respect to normal routines. As noted, Samhain commemorated the end of summer and the harvest season, and the start of a long span of shorter days and harsher weather. This made Samhain a 'borderline festival' that 'marked the boundary between summer and winter,

ISSN: 2057-2301

light and darkness' (Rogers, 2003, p. 21). According to Rogers it 'was a moment of ritual transition and altered states. It represented a time out of time, a brief interval "when the normal order of the universe is suspended" and "charged with a peculiar preternatural energy,'" qualities that endured when Halloween coalesced into its own holiday (Rogers, 2003, p. 34; see also Cana, 1970, p. 127).

While the claim is disputed (see, e.g., Hutton, 1996), Mike Nichols associates the holiday with the Celtic new year, and says it therefore 'represents a point outside of time, when the natural order of the universe dissolves back into primordial chaos, preparatory to reestablishing itself in a new order. Thus, Samhain is a night that exists outside of time.' (Nichols, 2024).

Halloween is also a celebration of the exception insofar as it eases the normal divide between the familiar and the fantastic, the living and the dead. As Bannatyne tells us the first Halloweens were tied:

> […] to the quickening dark, to seasonal change, to death, to the movement of mythical beings—fairies, witches, dead souls—through the night. Halloween was once imagined as a rift in reality where time slipped by without the traveler knowing he'd gone missing (2004, p. 15).

Over the years, in literature and poetry about Halloween 'the otherworld is always and uniquely present' (Bannatyne, 2004, p. 15). At the end of the nineteenth century, *Harper's Weekly* concluded that 'Halloween was the one night of the year when the dead trafficked with the living' (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 58). This association has continued as the holiday assumed its more modern forms.

Halloween's ontological disruption, its blending of the living and the dead, the fantastic and the ordinary, carries with it sense that ordinary natural and positive laws do not fully apply. As Skal puts it, 'Halloween is a holiday that refuses to play by anyone's rules' (2002, p. 153). The holiday is 'when all is overturned, when the natural order reverses itself…The dead walk…the ordinary become extraordinary. Children rebel' (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 158).

We can point to numerous examples that reflect this idea of Halloween as a distinctive day of norm-shattering. The Celtic and medieval customs of impersonating the dead through masks and costumes was a way to trick or ward off evil spirits but could also be used to harness their powers. Anthropologist Margaret Mead contended that in early American communities the folk belief was 'that Halloween was the one occasion when people could safely evoke the help of the devil in some enterprise' (1975, p. 31).

ISSN: 2057-2301

Samhain and its offshoots encouraged festive consumption on the cusp of a period of food scarcity. Historian W. Scott Poole concludes that today 'Americans, of all ages, see Halloween as an opportunity to celebrate excess, a kind of a dark Mardi Gras' (Poole, 2019).

The tradition of Halloween mischief and pranks, which Skal associates with Irish and Scottish immigrants who modeled the practices on the 'antics of pixies and hobgoblins' also captures this idea that the normal civic rules are suspended or at least relaxed (2002, p. 33). Bannatyne goes so far as to say by the late nineteenth century, 'Halloween, being the night the spirits were out, was a time for anarchy' (Bannatyne, 2004) and celebratory mischief. Johnathan Zimmerman contends that by the early twentieth century, Halloween in the U.S. 'had become an occasion for young men—of every ethnicity—to flout the rules of polite society' (2013).

Finally, Halloween's status as a day of exception, where conventional norms lapse and community decorum is challenged, can be found in the variety of ways the holiday permits and even revels in experimental new social roles. For as long as the Halloween tradition has been associated with death and a spirit world hovering close at hand, it has allowed for 'a degree of license and liberty unimaginable—or simply unattainable—the rest of the year' (Skal 2002, 17). Victor Turner argues that during Halloween children 'exercise ritual authority over their superiors' (Turner, 1975, p. 167) by demanding relative independence from parents and 'treats' from adult neighbors. Moreover, in wearing masks, they enjoy anonymity 'for purposes of aggression,' endowing them 'with the powers of feral, criminal autochthonous and supernatural beings' (Turner, 1975, p. 172). Author Randy Shilts (among others) makes a related point with respect to how gay men in San Francisco were awarded ritual freedom during Halloween by law enforcement authorities, even as they were treated as socially inferior and legally compromised at all other times. 'One evening a year, like a chapter from a Cinderella story, the police would bestow a free night' when gay men and lesbians were safe from the usual harassment and prosecution (Shilts, 1982, p. 54).

Finding Friends and Enemies In the Dark

Schmitt contends that our political identity comes most alive when we recognize a foe as an existential threat to our values and way of life. This relationship is so charged and adversarial that it carries an undercurrent of violence. At the same time, our identification of the enemy, the other, reinforces our political 'friendships' and our status as a member of a unified, ongoing political community.

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Some of these ideas about the nature of social solidarity course through our Halloween traditions as well. In focusing on the dead, 'Samhain was ultimately for the living, who needed plenty of help of their own when transitioning to the new year… Everyone came together for one last bash to break bread, share stories and stand tall against the dead, strengthening community ties at the time they were needed most' (Owens, 2022). Bannatyne reports that during Samhain, **'**Tribes gathered at the central seats of Ireland: at Tara, warriors convened to fend off annual attacks from the Otherworld' (Bannatyne, 2004, p. 18). Skal concludes, more generally, that 'Halloween has its essential roots in the terrors of the primitive mind' which identified both the coming winter and the proximity of dead spirits as threatening the 'potential extinction of the self' (Skal, 2002, p. 17). To the extent Halloween festivities in the United Kingdom and American colonies incorporated the celebrations of Guy Fawkes Day, they reflected lingering anxieties about both religious schisms and political schemers who threatened, quite literally, to destroy a nation's longstanding governing institutions (Skal, 2004, pp. 23-4). The actual Fawkes, who sought to destroy Parliament by igniting thirty-six barrels of gunpowder, is still ritually burned in public celebrations to this day.

As the American Halloween started to assume its own, distinctive form, it became associated with a wider array of monstrous threats, sweeping in the witches and devils that preoccupied Puritan New England as well as a wider array of monstrous figures from folklore, literature, and, eventually, a wider vein of popular culture. Over time, the holiday increasingly abandoned the solemn, respectful, and spiritual recognition of the dead captured in Christian traditions such as All Soul's Day, in favor of exploring terror. As Rogers explains, 'Halloween is interested in the afterlife only…as a means of probing and coming to terms with modern-day fears and anxieties' about 'the repressed Other, our collective nightmares' (2003, p. 204).

The contemporary Halloween masking tradition also highlights our interest in identifying enemies. To begin with, it offers a kind of rogue's gallery, showcasing the range of spooky entities that prick a community's collective conscience. In addition to perennial favorites like vampires and ghosts, the 1970s saw the deployment of Richard Nixon masks as the Watergate scandal unfolded and revealed the commander in chief as a national menace (Skal, 2002, pp. 140-1). In presenting these figures in dramatic, often exaggerated fashion, the holiday perpetuates the idea that our foes can be readily found. As Carolyn Jabs put it, Halloween satisfies our 'fantasy that evil is obvious and monsters are easily recognized' (2001, p. 14). Paradoxically, however, masking also makes it *harder* to identify friends and foes, an idea reflected in both the ancient notion that disguises help trick the dead into bypassing the living, and the separate tradition through which

ISSN: 2057-2301

pranksters, sometimes with destructive and dangerous intentions, conceal themselves from the public.

A Cinematic Case Study: Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978)

In this next section, I evaluate the interplay between Schmitt's philosophy and the Halloween tradition through a case study of the iconic film *Halloween* (1978). In general, cinematic horror is an apt medium for evaluating this essay's theory for a number of reasons: it has a longstanding association with implicit political themes, is likely to tap into specifically adult interest in the holiday, and, like other popular genres, it serves an especially revealing vehicle for 'mass sentiments and mass desires' including the persistent 'rebellion against human existence as it has been given' (Arendt, 1958, pp. 2-3). Studying films intended for mature audiences helps us tap into adult anxieties as opposed to focusing on the holiday as an occasion for identity exploration or consumption. In addition, horror has a long tradition of criticizing and challenging social norms, and making audiences reconsider their ideological commitments. As Noël Carroll has argued, monsters and other horrific entities 'breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story' and thereby 'challenge the foundations of a culture's way of thinking,' including our assumptions about rationality, organized politics, and our potential for orderly flourishing under the rule of law (Carroll, 1990, pp. 16, 34).

Carpenter's *Halloween*, specifically, is a seminal reference point for Halloween films for a variety of reasons. Murray Leeder and others attribute it with being the 'key element in reclaiming the holiday for adults' given its dark themes, explicit violence, and overt depictions of (teenage) sexuality (2015, p. 69; see also Morton, 2012, p. 97). This influence was, undoubtedly, creative, but also economic: some analyses conclude it was the most profitable independent film ever produced, 'grossing $70 million against a $300,000-$325,000 budget' and producing not only a dozen subsequent franchise films, but comic books, novels, and a video game, not to mention countless commercially (if not always critically) successful slasher imitations (CIMA Law Group, 2022).

The film opens with the murder of a teenage girl by her six-year-old brother Michael Myers (played, in different scenes, by Will Sandin, Nick Castle, and Tony Moran). Myers is confined to a mental institution, but escapes fifteen years later, returning to his hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois, where he sets on murdering Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) for unknown reasons (in *Halloween II* we discover that Laurie is his sister, but this revelation does not really explain his bloodlust). With his psychiatrist, Dr. Samuel Loomis (Donald Pleasence) in pursuit, Myers terrorizes Haddonfield on Halloween night, killing

ISSN: 2057-2301

two of Laurie's friends, along with one of their boyfriends. As Michael closes in on Laurie, she locks herself in a house with two children she is babysitting, fighting back with homemade weapons and the sociopath's own knife after she temporarily disarms him. As "The Shape" (as the script calls the costumed Myers) closes in on Laurie, Loomis suddenly appears, firing six shots into the homicidal monster, who tumbles off a roof deck and then promptly disappears.

What themes in *Halloween* follow the threads of Carl Schmitt's account of political life and its overriding concerns? To begin with, the film sounds a number of implicit critiques of the status quo. Overall, it conveys the sense that even our prosaic, orderly, familiar spaces are unsafe. As Leeder puts it, within Carpenter's middle class suburbia populated with loquacious teenagers and gleeful trick or treaters, 'danger lurks within the everyday' (2022, p. 22). Indeed, the film constantly plays with the idea that on Halloween night our symbolic and imagined dangers are hopelessly mixed up with real and terrifying ones. In this regard, the film tapped into several of the fears of the age in which it was made, including a contemporaneous preoccupation with the stranger or outsider who was a 'sexual predator, who lurked in every school, summer camp, rural town, and suburban subdivision' (Hume, 2019).

Michael Myers himself represents an arguably broader challenge to society. He is 'an inexplicable threat' (Leeder, 2022, p. 20) whose interests are unfathomable and whose behavior is opposed to a liberal paradigm which assumes that humans can be regulated within a network of laws based on our presumptive rationality. Like the threat of winter, respectfully feared in Samhain and other harvest festivals, Michael is an implacable, non-rational force, whose power must be resisted if not overcome. According to Darryl Jones, unlike the ordinary subject in liberal communities, 'Michael Myers is utterly anonymous. He has no personality at all, and no motivation. He is not, in any way that we recognize, an individual' (Jones, 2021, p. 92). It is not clear why he selects his victims, and why he spares other innocents.

Halloween presents other signs of an unstable social order through its representations of Haddonfield's authority figures. Parents are mostly absent from the film, leaving teenagers to watch after children, and those children relatively free (as befits Halloween). The most important adult figures portrayed in the film are official representatives of the state, but their performance is somewhat ineffective, if not feckless. In continuously sounding the alarm about Michael, Dr. Loomis comes closest to embodying Schmitt's sovereign. But he cannot prevent his charge from escaping from the Smith's Grove Sanitarium, and he only catches up with Michael after his murder spree. Loomis does save Laurie from certain death, but only after she repeatedly fights back on her own, and, during a final struggle, she unmasks the killer, giving the psychiatrist a clear

ISSN: 2057-2301

shot. And, of course, the discovery that Michael's body has disappeared raises the likelihood that he will continue to terrorize the community.

Laurie's father Sherriff Leigh Brackett (Charles Cyphers) is even less helpful in responding to Michael's mayhem. When Loomis warns the sheriff about Michael's encroaching threat, Brackett simply dismisses his fears: 'Nothing's going on. Just kids playing pranks, trick or treating, parking, getting high.' But his assessment that Haddonfield is still in a normal state is disastrously wrong, an error that leads to tragedy when Michael kills the sheriff's daughter Annie (Nancy Kyes). The compromised nature of the state is further conveyed by Michael seizing Loomis's state-issued station wagon and using it to cruise for prey. At one point, after Michael enters the vehicle, the camera pauses, ironically, on the state seal and 'for official use only' warning embossed on the door.

Beyond these suggestions that *Halloween's* suburban life is under duress, the film also plays with the idea of the exception—that the holiday ushers in a suspension of society's normal rules. The film's bloody exposition and its subsequent violent action fifteen years later both take place on Oct. 31st, suggesting that the date itself connotes a threat of violence and disorder. The movie is also dense with the signature elements of the holiday: the energy (and borderline lawlessness) of children roaming the streets, illuminated pumpkins, costumes representing monsters and the dead, and even trick or treating that 'carries with it a threat' (Paul, 2004, p. 322). In one scene a boy named Tommy (Brian Andrews) is harassed by three boys who surround him, push him to the ground (crushing a pumpkin he is carrying) and warn him that Halloween is a special night when "the boogeyman" will be coming to get him. This threat is immediately confirmed: after the bullies disperse, Michael surreptitiously follows Tommy home.

These elements and scenes remind us that we are in a distinctive, idiosyncratic state, a sense reinforced by the absence of parents, the mysterious status of Michael (who is almost intangible—sometimes spotted by the Haddonfield residents and sometimes missed), and the overall odd vibes of the town. While set in Illinois, the movie was filmed in southern California, which means that palm trees are visible in some scenes and the neighborhood plants are both flowering and remarkably green—odd conditions for the fall in a supposedly midwestern state. As Kim Newman notes, despite its surface normality, '*Halloween* seems to be set…in a poetic fantasy world, somewhere between the B picture and the fairy tale, where different natural laws obtain' (Newman, 2011, p. 201).

Indeed, the film suggests several ways in which Michael's power is uniquely tied to the holiday. Michael seems to kill only on Halloween, and he is able to travel easily through Haddonfield wearing gas station coveralls and an unusual white mask, attire that would surely raise questions on an ordinary night. But the holiday 'facilitates Myers's elusiveness and the vulnerability of his victims by virtue of the fact that it is a night for masks and pranks' (Rogers, 2003, p. 144).

ISSN: 2057-2301

The killer's association with the holiday is so strong that when Laurie wrests the mask from his face, he pauses his murderous assault to put it back on, giving Loomis a chance to open fire. Michael seems to need an 'alternative persona tied to the mythic space of Halloween' and is 'dependent on the holiday for his power' (Leeder, 2022, p. 69). The connection between Michael and Oct. 31 is also unintentionally captured by Laurie, who tells Tommy, one of the children she is babysitting, that the 'boogeyman can only come out on Halloween.' Her intended reassurance only serves to underscore the terrible peril they all face.

Schmitt tells us that establishing an enemy is the foundation of our political identity and a community's cohesion. In *Halloween,* we know from the film's first scenes that Michael Myers is an existential threat after he murders his sister. As Leeder notes, in contrast with other horror slashers with 'whodunit elements… [in *Halloween*,] beyond the opening sequence, the identity of the killer is never in doubt' (Leeder, 2022, p. 15). But even though Michael's specific identity and name is known, Loomis, Sherriff Brackett, Laurie, and the other residents of Haddonfield struggle to locate and neutralize him, underscoring the importance of the friend and foe distinction, and the terrible consequences if a community forsakes or mishandles this responsibility.

In this regard, Michael is an especially vexing foe for several reasons. To begin with, the relaxed norms of Halloween make it harder to discern malevolence from more innocent pranks. When the headstone of Michael's sister goes missing the cemetery caretaker blames it on 'Goddamn kids. They'll do anything on Halloween.' But in fact, Michael has uprooted the grave and eventually uses the tombstone as a kind of ritualistic calling card at the scene of a double murder.

Moreover, as noted, as a masked figure on Halloween, Michael's menace is both normalized and misunderstood. At the start of the film, a six-year-old Michael dresses up as a clown. This move simultaneously obscures his threat (to his sister), and alerts the audience to his terrible purpose as we observe Michael's movements from his rapacious point of view, with 'a masking effect over the camera' (Leeder, 2022, p. 7). Fifteen years later, he dons his ominous white mask and stolen garage coverall outfit, 'a familiar enough disguise to allow Myers to elude detection' (Rogers, 2003, p. 113). His true nature as a serial killer is concealed, and he blends in with the innocent trick or treaters. When Sherriff Brackett suggests that they should warn 'the radio and TV stations' to report on Michael's escape and likely threat to Haddonfield, Loomis pragmatically dismisses the suggestion: 'If you do they'll be seeing him everywhere, on every street corner, in every house.'

In one scene, Michael further confuses his status as an enemy by donning a sheet with eyeholes, an impromptu ghost costume that allows him to get physically close to Laurie's friend Lynda, who mistakes the killer for her boyfriend. Her confusion, prompted

ISSN: 2057-2301

by Michael's double disguise, leads to her murder. The monster hides within another monster, concealing his threat and our true foe.

Even when Laurie discerns Michael, she has difficulty judging whether he is real or a kind of phantasm. In one sequence she briefly sees him peering at her from behind a set of sheets flapping on a clothesline. But when she looks again, he has vanished. 'Laurie is unsure what she is seeing, or even if she is seeing anything' (Leeder, 2022, p. 45). This theme is also captured when Tommy repeatedly expresses his fears about the 'boogeyman,' a threat dismissed by Laurie ('There's nobody out there') and mocked by his classmates. The audience is aware of the relentless menace headed to Haddonfield, but the community itself doesn't discern the danger until it is too late. Schmitt tells us that the 'high points of politics are…the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy' (1996, p. 67). The climax of *Halloween* occurs when Laurie unmasks Michael, revealing his human form, and temporarily leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

In summary, *Halloween* reflects several elements of Schmitt's diagnosis of liberal states that believe themselves to be politically robust but are actually failing. Such political communities have neglected the true calling of politics—a focus on the friend and enemy distinction and a recognition that the exception is at hand (and must be addressed). Just beyond Haddonfield's groomed lawns, Michael Myers lurks. The state's failure to contain him as a dangerous juvenile has come back to haunt the community when he returns, years later, as an even more dangerous adult. But the Illinois suburb cannot even find Michael Myers, never mind prevent his rampage. Simultaneously, the film's characters mistake the ominous nature of the Halloween holiday as something more banal.

Within this context, the community's official agents are largely impotent against Michael's havoc, and even Laurie's improvised self-defense seems to be inadequate, highlighting the ongoing vulnerability of political orders that do not face up to their core responsibilities. The film's closing montage shows us a sequence of the (now empty) locations Michael has previously "haunted" with his steady breaths filling our ears and enveloping each shot. The effect is to suggest both that Michael is still alive and that he could be anywhere within the community. As Carpenter explains in the commentary accompanying a 2003 release of the film 'he's not only gone, he's everywhere' (Smith, 2003). The enemy cannot be wholly divorced from the community that fears him. As Leeder elaborates, 'Irrespective of his embodied physicality, [Michael] has undergone a ghostlike diffusion into the very atmosphere of Haddonfield, his town, and perhaps Halloween itself . . . his holiday' (Leeder, 2022, p. 54).

ISSN: 2057-2301

Finally, *Halloween* reflects Schmitt's ideas insofar as the particulars of the friend and enemy distinction are primal, emotional, and empirical, rather than logical or strategic. Clearly, Michael is a genuine existential threat to many of the residents of Haddonfield. Nevertheless, his motives and targets are somewhat unfathomable. For Schmitt, our enemy is simply 'the *other*, the stranger' an entity who 'is existentially different and foreign in a particularly intense way' and whose nature drives us into conflict. When Brackett insists that Myers wouldn't mutilate a dog ('A man wouldn't do that…'), Loomis bluntly responds 'He isn't a man.' At the same time Reynold Humphries interprets Michael's insistence on masking as his refusal 'to become the object of the other's look, to recognize the other [his foes] as having the same rights and desires as himself' (Humphries, 2002, p. 140; see also Heller-Nichols, 2019, p. 116).

Analysis

This essay has drawn on the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt to make the case that the Halloween holiday uniquely explores our historic fears about the breakdown of political communities, especially by considering whether our social cohesion is dependent upon the presence of a discernible enemy. Ernest Mathjis captures these ideas when he notes that

> Halloween tests the boundaries of a community's sense of togetherness and its ability to recognize strangers and predators. Through dressing up we check our capacity to tell true danger from fake scares, and to signal both our friendliness and test that of others—if we can be recognized as friendly even when we wear a mask we must be in good company (2009).

While this essay traces these concepts through a single case study, we can find them recurring in other cinematic depictions of our Halloween traditions. Thus, Stan Winston's *Pumpkinhead* (1988) follows the narrative arc of Ed Harley (Lance Henriksen), who summons a monstrous creature to enact vengeance on a group of teenagers who negligently kill his young son. While not explicitly set on Halloween, the film features a title scene set amidst bonfire flames, an agricultural setting, omnipresent burning candles, an 'old pumpkin patch graveyard,' and a spell-casting witch. *Pumpkinhead's* central action occurs during a single night in which conventions are set aside (instead of burying his deceased son, Harley seeks supernatural revenge) and the line between the living and dead is erased (as the 'demon' Pumpkinhead is summoned from the grave to destroy the offending teens). The film returns to the centrality of the friend and enemy distinction

ISSN: 2057-2301

insofar as it pits the murderous 'city folks' against the rural 'hill people,' who summon the titular monster to destroy their foes.[3] Ultimately it becomes clear that under the terms of the black magic Harley has invoked, he can only survive if the teens perish, and vice versa. We find similar themes (and Halloween imagery) in *Pet Sematary* (1989), and the *Scream* franchise (especially *Scream VI* which takes place explicitly on Halloween).

Interpreting Halloween as a night of exception when we reflect upon our relationship with existential enemies offers up several intellectual returns. First, it helps us find continuity across the varied traditions that make up the holiday across two millennia: from Samhain to Guy Fawkes Day to colonial America to the present. Of course, Halloween 'has managed to survive for nearly 2,000 years' because of its adaptability to 'people's constantly changing' social and psychological needs (Bannatyne, 1990, p. 16). As indicated, there are many Halloweens, and Schmitt's framework does not capture any number of important historical currents and cultural influences that make up today's practices and beliefs. For example, while some Halloween costumes convey our interest in probing social and political anxieties, others merely transmit the cultural zeitgeist, often with a wink and a nod. Dressing up as a ballerina, a hobo, or a rock star is more about playing with identity or (perhaps ironic) aspiration than delineating friends and enemies.[4]

But over the years, Halloween's darker and more threatening elements have been consistently imprinted by two ideas: the holiday is limited to a single day or festive span, which is distinctively charged by the presence of dangerous spirits or forces that oppose a community and its way of life. In this way, thinking about the links between Halloween and Schmitt's philosophical critique of liberalism offer us a more specific approach than merely attributing the holiday's power and popularity to our 'shifting social and political anxieties' (Rogers, 2003, p. 21).

Second, my argument helps us decipher the puzzle of our ongoing fascination with a holiday that celebrates darkness, death, and horror. Halloween is not merely a $12 billion commercial celebration, but a cultural expression of our fears, and specifically our worry that our social order conceals a barely suppressed enmity between groups, and a yearning for what Schmitt called 'the existential negation of the enemy.' Christine Hume argues that the film *Halloween* gave birth to the popularity of 'slashers'—movies focused on the victimization of 'sexually active teenagers, and especially young women'—as a response to 'frantic anxieties about an ostensibly real danger: the sexual predator' who lurks unseen in our neighborhood and preys on our children (Hume, 2019). As she puts it,

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[3] The creature's distinctive power in rooting out the community's foes is captured by a children's folk song which warns us to 'Keep away from Pumpkinhead unless you're tired of living/His enemies are mostly dead, he's mean and unforgiving.'

[4] Traditions like Halloween block parties are more reminiscent of ancient celebrations that sought to bring a community together and joyfully celebrate the fall than anything expressed by Schmitt.

ISSN: 2057-2301

'Halloween is, in some sense, a holiday *about* this fear, when we struggle to define our own humanity by feeling around its edges.'

Before concluding, I consider a number of objections that might be made against this project. First, one might note that Halloween is hardly the only holiday associated with a suspension of the prevailing norms. Scholars have long documented the variety of holidays, festivals, and commemorations that celebrate a departure from the normal, often with a utopian longing for something completely different in human affairs. To cite just one example, Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the pre-Lenten 'Carnival' celebrations as involving a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' including a 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (1984, p. 10; see also Claeys and Sargent, 1999).

But Halloween's night of exception is unusual in several ways. To begin with, the holiday is fundamentally at odds with the status quo. Thanksgiving's annual commemoration of family gatherings, national unity, and what Lincoln called the bounties and 'blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies' (1863) is designed to reinforce existing institutions and conventional practices. In contrast, Halloween is 'a celebration based on pranks, reversals, and the ritual suspension of propriety' (Skal, 2002, p. 153). As noted, some of the holiday's 'underground' and rebellious spirit comes from its diffuse, democratic, and localized roots.

Moreover, Halloween's night of exception is distinctive insofar as it explores and even celebrates fear. While a holiday like Mardi Gras 'plays with hierarchical relationships' (Clark, 2005, p. 198), and captures some of the subversive and convention-challenging aspects of Oct. 31, it emphasizes joyful, bacchanalian pleasures and performances. In contrast, during Halloween, adults expose 'young children to matters usually [considered] age inappropriate, such as death, evil, and things taboo and horrifying' (Clark, 2005, p. 186).

As a consequence, while other holidays generally urge us to extend their (perhaps exaggerated) themes and values throughout the rest of the year, Halloween's night of lurking malevolence is meant to be contained within its boundaries. Politicians, relatives, and priests are likely to urge us to prolong, respectively, the patriotism celebrated on July 4, the gratitude of Thanksgiving, and reverence of Christmas. But Halloween's end provides a kind of social relief through closure. On November 1, our day of exuberant anarchy, terror, and congress with the dead comes to an abrupt, discrete close.

Exploring the links between the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt and Halloween raises a second concern: does my argument imply that the holiday is somehow anti-liberal and, if so, what is the evidence for this proposition?

ISSN: 2057-2301

As we have seen, Schmitt is a blunt critic of constitutional liberalism, arguing that societies built on liberal precepts suffer from political divisions and legal deficiencies that make them intellectually incoherent and ripe for collapse. He urges us to replace these regimes with a strong, unified sovereign who will focus the state's energies on protecting the nation from its domestic and foreign enemies and restoring order when the rule of law breaks down or otherwise compromises our security. Such an approach is necessarily anti-liberal in discrediting the equal political and legal worth of every citizen, evincing disdain for pluralism, and supporting a political structure in which a single decision maker is vested with nearly unlimited power.

But this essay is based on applying an analogic rather than literal reading of Schmitt as a basis for comprehending Halloween. The German philosopher's anti-liberalism does not obviously extend to a holiday that otherwise reflects some of his ideas. As indicated, Halloween, both in its antecedent and present forms, does gesture to implied critiques of the status quo, especially by recognizing our fears in the face of superordinate natural and supernatural forces. But even those elements of Halloween that celebrate its darker and more entropic elements are consistent with the basic principles of constitutional liberalism for any number of reasons.

To begin with, Halloween represents a single night of exception. Thus, even to the extent it conjures 'taboo and horrifying' elements, these expressions are necessarily cabined, with the implication that for the rest of the year, the prevailing social order and its life-affirming values will be sustained. Scholars like Ryan and Kellner note that horror is often a *conservative* genre to the extent that it aspires to a *status quo ante*, and the restoration of traditional community structures and conventional mores (1998, pp. 179, 181). Schmitt anticipates that the exception will constantly threaten to occupy our political center stage. But by limiting Halloween to a single night, society strengthens the default power of the normal. We arguably see this in the movie *Halloween* insofar as the film's closing scenes establish both the end of the holiday, and Michael Myers's failure to destroy Laurie, the film's protagonist.

Halloween is consistent with liberalism in other ways. Today's holiday invites individual expression and even pluralism through diverse (and personally chosen) costume choices. The de-centered, non-institutionalized nature of the holiday does not require an active state, or somehow imply a longing for national greatness at the expense of others. Even those cultural expressions of the holiday that depict communities under siege (such as *Halloween* or *Pumpkinhead*) do not find their solutions in the form of powerful sovereigns, but instead look to plucky and resourceful individuals such as Laurie Strode. In this sense, Halloween's night of exception is more anarchic or libertarian than statist.

In short, while Carl Schmitt offers us the sovereign as a response to the tensions and inconsistencies in contemporary liberal orders, Halloween provides, instead, a single day celebrating our contradictions: a holiday that simultaneously embraces 'the sacred

ISSN: 2057-2301

and the profane, order and lawlessness, the mainstream and the marginalized' (Skal, 2002, p. 153).

Conclusion

Every October 31, the costumes we wear, the decorations we put up, and the entertainment we consume, reflect our persistent interest in revealing enemies who speak to our fears, at least for a night. Understood in this way, the holiday is certain to retain its power, as a commercial enterprise, a welcome escape from the routine (for children and adults alike), and a touchstone for our twenty-first century political anxieties. In our current environment of low political trust, crumbling belief in a wide range of institutions, and misgivings about basic democratic procedures, Halloween will continue to draw us in, providing a relatively unthreatening prompt to reflect on the limits of social order. As Skal elaborates, 'As American communities become more transient and impersonal, more virtual than visceral, and as civic participation wanes at all levels, the appeal of Halloween rituals may not be so mysterious after all' (Skal, 2002, p. 121). The ascendance of 'negative partisanship'—political identity based on dislike (and even hatred) of an out group—strikes a chord with Schmitt's preoccupation with the friend and enemy distinction and Halloween's explorations of the same theme. For all these reasons, we might safely conclude that Halloween is our most political of holidays, and one that rudely pulls the mask off our polite personas, revealing the horror, fear, and unease that courses through so much of today's public and private life.

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