

Horror and the *Cube* Films: An unlikely medium for the negotiation of Nationalist-Cultural ideologies

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, scholarship has come to recognise the unexpected significance of horror cinema ventures as both culturally and politically relevant. One of Canada's greatest horror film successes was Vincenzo Natali's 1997 psychological thriller Cube that metaphorically explores the suffocating nature of vocational social relations under the conditions of a patriarchal military-industrial capitalism. So innovative was its premise that US interests quickly acquired the rights to produce and distribute Cube 2: Hypercube (2002) and Cube Zero (2004), but they were just as quick to reformulate the most subversive critique of the original film. Two decades later, in 2021, Japanese producers released a remake of the original film (which was so popular there), although it also re-coded the thematic critique, just as the American sequels had done. With this group of films across three national production traditions arises an opportunity to "detect shifts in the ideological constellation", as Slavoj Žižek has argued, by "compar[ing] consecutive remakes of the same story" (2011, p. 61). Following primarily Herbert Marcuse's understanding of political repressive tolerance, this article demonstrates the way in which constructions of cultural identity are negotiated across national traditions in the age of globalisation. Cube and its follow-ups demonstrate the nationalist-inflected limits of critical expression in the way that each subsequent film attempts to re-focus and re-code the horrors of the narrative machine in order to assert their own nationalist sensibilities threatened by the cultural levelling effect of globalisation in an age of transnational cinema distribution.

KEYWORDS

Horror; Cube Films; Nationalism; Canada; Japan; Repressive Tolerance;
Cultural Identity, Patriarchy.

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1. Introduction

Horror film might seem an unlikely medium through which to negotiate national identity. However, over the past several decades, scholarship has come to recognise the unexpected significance of horror cinema ventures as both culturally and politically relevant. Kevin Wetmore (2009, n.p.) argues that:

[m]ore so than any other film genre, horror concerns the fears and anxieties of the society that produced it. ... Only a post 9/11 America, concerned with torture and imprisonment, would produce the Saw and Hostel movies in which the horror comes from bodies subjected to physical torture and minds subjected to psychological torture.

However, even before 9/11, one of Canada's greatest horror film successes was Vincenzo Natali's 1997 psychological thriller *Cube*. It is a metaphorical exploration of the suffocating nature of vocational social relations under the conditions of a patriarchal military-industrial capitalism.¹ So innovative was its premise that US interests quickly acquired the rights to produce and distribute *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002) and *Cube Zero* (2004), but they were just as quick to dilute and re-direct the most subversive critique of the original film. Two decades later, in 2021, Japanese producers released a remake of the original film (which was so popular there), although it also re-coded the thematic critique, just as the US sequels had done. With this group of films across three national production traditions arises an opportunity to "detect shifts in the ideological constellation", as Slavoj Žižek (2011) has argued, by "compar[ing] consecutive remakes of the same story" (p. 61). Following primarily Herbert Marcuse's understanding of political repressive tolerance, this article provides an explanation of the way in which constructions of cultural identity are negotiated across national traditions in the age of globalisation. *Cube* and its follow-ups demonstrate the nationalist-inflected limits of critical expression in the way that each subsequent film attempts to re-focus and re-code the horrors of the narrative machine to assert nationalist sensibilities threatened by the cultural levelling effect of globalisation in an age of transnational cinema distribution.

On the surface, the premise of the *Cube* movies is relatively simple, and the narrative construction in terms of both mise-en-scène and plot is quite ingenious in its simplicity. In each, unsuspecting victims are imprisoned in a labyrinth of cubicles, some of which are equipped with deadly booby traps. In this regard, the movies make use of at least two conventions of horror film: mystery and escape. The narrative dialogue focuses on the mystery of who or what built the machine and why. The narrative action focuses on escape. Working with "the cinematic equivalent of a bare stage" all of the films foreground the deterioration of gender-based and class-based social politics in an environment of such

¹ The "military-industrial complex" is a term coined by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 to warn of the social and economic implications of maintaining a large standing military in the US. In particular it indicates how the industrial manufacturing sector would come to depend on the ongoing production of military technologies that would require consumption to maintain the production output, thereby ensuring the need for ongoing military conflict in order to use up the weapons supply and justify the salaries of a standing army.

duress (Gates, 1998, n.p.). The social politics shift with every new room the characters enter. By focusing on these social interactions, however, these movies covertly distract from the vilifications of the larger social constructs that each presents.

Most horror films render the monster explicit but the *Cube* movies leave the malevolent force open to interpretations motivated by visual signifiers replete with ideological and nationalist underpinnings. Robin Wood's highly influential essay "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (1985) explores the psychoanalysis of repressed anxieties manifest in the mostly American-produced examples of horror films he samples. The *Cube* movies subvert Wood's characterisation of horror film as a genre which depicts "the actual dramatization of ... the Monster" (p. 201). In all of the earlier three *Cube* films the locus of anxiety in the narrative pivots on the enigma surrounding the malevolent source of the cube. The first movie, a Canadian venture, indicates that the US military-industrial complex is the source of malevolence under which putatively egalitarian Canadian social politics break down. The two sequels reformulate the malevolent forces in terms more acceptable to the financial plum of US audiences following 9/11; they demonstrate a change in social anxieties that required less ambiguity in any challenge to dominant ideology and more distinct articulations of their villains and heroes. The Japanese film, released some two decades later in putative homage to the success of Natali's original in that country, appears to be a relatively straightforward remake. However, closer scrutiny reveals yet another re-coding that betrays a Japanese anxiety regarding the slow death of aged-based social hierarchy in the era of social media and rising youth Internet stars.

Broadly, each film demonstrates a willingness to be critical of capitalist culture, but within limits based on national sensibilities of the historical-political moments in which they emerge. The films compete to determine which aspects of each production's originating culture it is acceptable to criticise in the context of moral leadership and national hegemony. In doing so they reveal a governing ideology of patriarchal capitalism to which they all subscribe, but with differing critical limits and taboos.²

² Here and throughout the article, "patriarchy" is taken to be more than simply a social organisation where the woman enters the family of the husband, and the family of the husband takes care of her, while she provides the ability to generate offspring (although this remains one element of it.). Rather, as it is more commonly understood in scholarship today, "patriarchy" is considered the pervasive ideology of masculinist privilege that underpins all social constructs and power relations under the

While these films negotiate nationalist moral hegemony and the acceptable limits of social criticism, the negotiation itself reveals a universal “tacit acceptance of capitalist economic relations and liberal-democratic politics as the unquestioned framework of our social life” (Žižek, 1997, p. 128). Indeed, the films share a common representation of the plight of the subject under the oppression of the state apparatuses that capitalism produces. Ultimately, the films of the earlier *Cube* trilogy betray the superficial ideological differences between Canada and the US and identify a common propensity between the two nations to recognise and to attempt to stabilise their mutually “neo-conservative” patriarchal and capitalist cultures.³ The addition of the Japanese remake further demonstrates how these films work to negotiate the boundaries of cultural criticism as a mode of defining national or cultural identity within their mutually capitalist social economies.

2. Squaring the Cube in Scholarship

The small corpus of literature that considers the *Cube* movies define the original film as a significant Canadian venture, but these contributions do not address the film’s nationalist or ideological underpinnings. Most canonical surveys of Canadian cinema overlook or summarily dismiss Natali’s film. For example, in his survey of Canadian horror film, Caelum Vatnsdal (2004) describes *Cube* as “something of a renaissance ... for Canadian science fiction” (p. 221), but he says nothing more. In his survey *Film in Canada* (2011), Jim Leach also makes only a cursory reference to this first feature-length film in which he dismisses it as one that “still basically operates within generic norms” (p. 96). Similarly, George Melnyk makes only one fleeting mention of *Cube* in *100 Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004) and excludes Natali entirely from his edited compendium of *Great Canadian Film Directors* (2007). Christopher Gittings also makes only one brief mention of *Cube* in *Canadian National Cinema* (2002), and Brenda Longfellow (2009) only mentions *Cube* and Natali in her one short essay that focuses on its thematic concern

contemporary conditions of global capitalism and that manifests in multiple sites of oppression. As Robin Wood (1985) convincingly argues, “[t]he battle for liberation, the battle against oppression (whether economic, legal, or ideological), gains enormous extra significance through the addition of the term patriarchal, since *patriarchy* long precedes and far exceeds what we call capitalism” (p. 107).
³ Cf. Sharrett, 1993, p. 100.

with alienating urban space as a defining characteristic of the Toronto New Wave of films with which Natali's *Cube* is often compiled.

In "The Symbolism of Synthetic Space in *Cube* (1997)", Angel Mateos-Aparicio (2008) argues instead that "the movie epitomises the role of science fiction film in postmodern culture, for it creates a virtual (fictional) reality that reveals the complex meanings and hidden structures of contemporary reality in Western technological societies" (p. 1). Unfortunately, while looking at the film as exemplary of post-modernism, Mateos-Aparicio does little to elucidate or clarify the cultural work it does within a stratified capitalist social system, or as a nationalist artefact. In "Lacan's Life, the Universe, and Vincenzo Natali's *Cube*" (2000), Sheila Kunkle similarly largely limits her analysis to an examination of how the film demonstrates Lacanian signification. In the context of neo-Marxist cultural theory, Kunkle at least observes that *Cube* "allows us to draw an interesting parallel between the *Cube* as a headless and forgotten public works project and the 'blind insistence' of modern science, modern political bureaucracies, and the global expansion of Capitalism" (p. 284), although she does not extensively explore this trajectory.

Conversely, in *Cult Cinema* (2011), Mathijs and Sexton consider Natali's original *Cube* as something of a "do-it-yourself" labour of love project undertaken by Natali with extraordinarily limited resources, but that the film is not duly understood from this perspective. They argue that "[w]hile directors still receive a lot of attention in DIY criticism [of films including *Cube*], there is less emphasis on their efforts than on other components of the films and their receptions" (p. 54). Mathijs and Sexton do not significantly consider the particular "other components" of *Cube* such as its ideological impetus, but they associate it closely with another of Natali's films, *Nothing* (2003), which "invites audiences to speculate on issues such as user-friendly technology, pop-philosophy, and morality in a world where one can only trust one's closest friends" (pp. 54-5).⁴ This notion of trusting friends under the more dire and humourless conditions of the cube is central to each of the *Cube* films, if only by absence. The characters within

⁴ *Nothing* was another Natali labour-of-love that focuses on two down-and-out Toronto stooges who discover the ability to wish the unsavory aspects of their capitalist-driven urban lives out of existence, along with anything else they capriciously find an irritant. Although the modality of the film is comedy, ultimately they end up imprisoned together and at each other's throats in an endless white void of nothingness.

each film, identified primarily by their capitalist-inflected vocational positioning, are required to cooperate with the strangers with whom they are confined. Otherwise, while their claim that D-I-Y auteurism deserves greater weight in understanding these films might be problematic in championing the idea of directorial intentionality too heavily, it also buttresses an assumption that these films are replete with the ideological and moral sensibilities of their auteurs and/or the broader cultural limits from within which they operate.

Beyond the original *Cube* film, the body of literature surveyed under the purview of this research indicates that the Americanised sequels and the Japanese remake have received almost no scholarly attention at all. It appears that no complete study has been done that explores these films in the context of either neo-Marxist cultural analyses or nationalism, and certainly there is no full comparison of the films across their transnational boundaries and across time for their ideological similarities and differences. Considering the popularity of the original film in both Canada and Japan, each relative to their own unique market vicissitudes, and the fact that US interests were so quick to appropriate and eviscerate the ideological underpinnings of the narrative, this analytical oversight is one that leaves ideological negotiations that the films engender without due exposure and articulation in scholarship. This article offers part of a corrective by focusing specifically on this internationally disparate but narratively similar quadruplet of horror/sci-fi films to elucidate what we can learn from their unique pattern of relationships.

3. A methodology of nationalism and ideology

To examine the ideological and nationalist dimensions of the *Cube* films, this study fundamentally employs the concepts of myth and ideology as defined by Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser. In *Mythologies* (1972 [1957]), Barthes explains how visual signifiers in bourgeois culture are imbued with connotations. In “Myth Today” (2009 [1957]) Barthes extends this semiotic approach into a concept of nationalist ideology with his famous analysis of an image on the cover of a 1955 edition of *Paris Match* magazine in which a youthful black soldier salutes the French flag. Barthes elucidates the way in which this image, in the specific context of the magazine’s nationalist affiliations, acts to gloss over the French imperial project against racial minorities by demonstrating and fossilising (in a photographic image) the black soldier’s apparently willing deferral to

French nationalism (2009, pp. 265-6). Such connotations similarly inform the visual depictions of the military-industrial, corporate, and bourgeois/religious sources of the cube in each of the movies. Althusser defines such institutions as repressive (military) or ideological (bourgeois, corporate, religious) state apparatuses (Althusser, 2010 [1970], pp. 207-8). The state “communications apparatus” contributes to the reproduction of “capitalist relations of exploitation ... by cramming every ‘citizen’ with daily doses of nationalism, ... moralism, etc.” (p. 210). Althusser proceeds to summarily indicate that ideology works to mask and displace any antagonistic forces that are a challenge to the current system, and to fragment and separate subject identities causing unified factions to compete internally rather than coalesce against the oppressor. This last definition is particularly relevant as the victims in all of the *Cube* movies, identified primarily by vocation, are set against each other in their bid to survive against the unknown, oppressive forces behind the machine.

Moreover, the *Cube* films exemplify the negotiation of national identities within the larger framework of globally shared capitalist economies. Popular culture is the artistic and commercial arena in which horror film arises, and, according to Gramscian theory, the primary arena in which cultural hegemony is negotiated. Gramsci states that “[e]very relationship of ‘hegemony’ ... occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and worldwide field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations” (2009 [1947], p. 77). Herbert Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance further indicates that the forces of dominant ideology in a stratified capitalist culture tolerate a certain amount of critical dissent in order to create an illusion of agency and to contain and defuse resistance. In his 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance” he states that:

what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression ... Thus, within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game (pp. 81-2).

Similarly, Louis Althusser states that “the ideology by which [capitalist state apparatuses] function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, *beneath the ruling ideology*” (p. 209). As such, any appearance of subversive ideology can only be in the service of dominant ideology in a community of

global capitalism. In this context, the *Cube* movies each compete to establish the acceptable parameters of social criticism within symbolic narrative constructions of national culture, and in doing so, they subvert their more progressive criticisms of global capitalist social relations into a nationalist competition over the limits of repressive tolerance. What all the films share is the normative context of a shared capitalist economy and critical subversions in which nationalist ideologies compete on the level of moral hegemony rather than attacking the social contradictions inherent to capitalism in general. However, it is only through an examination of each film separately that the visual signifiers that imbue the larger constructs become evident as part of a nationalist negotiation of moral hegemony.

3.1. *Cube* (1997): The vilification of the US military-industrial complex

In the first *Cube*, a number of subjects awaken to find themselves imprisoned in a mechanical labyrinth of cubic rooms, some of which conceal deadly booby traps, within the construct of an enormous industrial cube. After an initial scene in which an unknown character identified as Alderson is killed, a black cop character named Quentin leads the motley group through each cube in a narrative trajectory that revolves around the notions of imprisonment and escape. Young Joan Leaven becomes the most capable assistant amongst the incarcerated, accompanied by a frustrating cynic named David Worth, a frenetic doctor named Helen Holloway, a criminal escape artist named Rennes, and an autistic savant named Kazan. Under the “horror” of industrial capitalism (Berman, 1983, pp. 120-1) social identities remain trapped in perpetual jeopardy and social harmony breaks down – a suggestion of the way in which capitalism reproduces a stratified social hierarchy, social inequality, and repressed violence. On the other hand, *Cube* posits a tacit acceptance of the capitalist culture that spawned it as the unquestioned and governing source of normalcy. There is also an underlying message that the social identities threatened are all middle-classed bourgeois capitalist identities; they are all cogs in the economic machine who long for a utopia in which they can maintain their capitalist identities without the contradictions the superstructure inherently produces. *Cube* defines a return to normalcy for the characters in the cube, never achieved by any of them except for Kazan, as a desire for a return to their quotidian capitalist vocations.

Otherwise, within its carceral space, *Cube* plays with an unsettling combination of spatial metaphors and identity constructions. Indeed, in *Cube*, the space itself is the threat. It is void of the necessities of life. According to philosophical anthropologist Mary Douglas (1991), it is the material insertion of commodities into a space that participates in identity construction, particularly in capitalist/commodity cultures. The commodities with which the subject chooses to fill domestic spaces reflect the identity that a subject wishes to project (pp. 287-307).⁵ The cube highlights the contradiction inherent in this commoditised spatial identity construction by demonstrating an aberrant commodity relationship between the space and the subjects within it. The cube is materially, culturally, and domestically vacant. The cube represents the impossibility of “producing” space because there are no things in it, only identities: *Cube* acts as a commentary on the way in which social relations in a capitalist culture are so heavily mediated by commodities that their lack is framed in a narrative of absolute nihilism. Not only are identities dissolved in the cube, they can hardly be constructed.

More broadly, *Cube* represents the maturation of the Canadian postmodern condition in which the dissolution of the individual subject is represented as a fatal splitting between national identities.⁶ Philosophers such as Frederic Jameson and John Docker point out that postmodernism is characterised by, amongst other things, the dissolution of the subject. Jameson (1992) claims that postmodern life causes the “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of” the subject (p. 413). Natali’s film offers a disturbing opening visual to introduce its critique of the annihilatory nature of such a splitting within the industrial confines of the carceral cube. Alderson’s dispatch is visually depicted by the character’s body splitting in half down the centre before completely collapsing – a typically postmodern dissolution of the subject – in a visually specific American-US environment. One obvious visual signification of the US landscape in which this death occurs is the colours of the first three rooms: white, blue, and red, respectively – colours frequently used to invoke a US

⁵ In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre offers further convincing arguments on the way commodity fetishism participates with identity construction.

⁶ Canada is not only officially bilingual and in the perpetual throes of political posturing between the French- and English-dominant cultural regions of the country, but it has also been famously characterized by Canadian scholar Northrop Frye as doubly-colonised with both a British colonial footprint and an invasive American culture and media. The postmodern subject is understood as split in the Foucauldian sense of a Cartesian duality between mind and body.

military nationalism. Ironically, Alderson survives his examination of the first three rooms but is diced by a mesh of metal wire in the fourth. The visual split of the Alderson character, centred and foregrounded in the frame, and slowly initiating the character's dissolution, hints at a fragmentation of identity for its victim in an American environment in which his identity is fatally split between two competing nationalist ideological modes (Figure 1). This early scene in the film establishes the nationalist context of its theme. Moving from red, white, and blue to a deceptively comforting atmosphere in which death occurs posits the visual metaphor of a US industrial prison, any escape from which is fatal.⁷

Cube also implicates those imprisoned within it as complicit with the machine's ambivalence on the level of complacency and political inaction. *Cube* is specifically concerned with the subjects' demise at the hands of the machine they helped create. John Nelson (2006) explains that "[t]he notion of terrorism as attacking innocents for political gain does not fit the genres of horror and dystopia" and, thus, "[t]he systematic, encompassing corruption of dystopias means that the civilians targeted by the regime share responsibility for its terrorism" (p. 188). All the characters in the film participate in the construction of their own horror. Worth, in particular, "finally admits to having been one among scores of people contracted by an unidentifiable source to help design the outer shell of the huge structure itself" (Kunkle, 2000, p. 284). Worth explicitly implicates himself by defining the unseen malevolence as an abstraction in which he participates. He asks, "What do you think the Establishment is? It's guys like me." Worth's admission is framed within the characters' conversation regarding their respective professions and suggests that they have all been directly or indirectly complicit with its construction. Before his grisly death, Rennes offers the well-scripted double-entendre "you have to escape yourselves." However, if they are all guilty of complicity, with what have they been complicit?

These anxieties regarding the threat to these bourgeois identities in the guise of an untenable social environment are mapped onto a nationalist vilification of the US military-industrial economy. The structuring threat in all of the *Cube* movies remains

⁷ Natali contends that the yellowish colour (of the fourth room) is the most aesthetically pleasing, a warm-looking and comforting environment (Natali).

an ambiguous non-identity that annihilates individual subjects – an elusive and unidentifiable superstructure that has enclosed around them and threatens their every move. The original *Cube* provides neither prologue nor epilogue to explain the enigma, unlike its sequels which use these narrative devices to clarify the source of the cube. *Cube* prefers to leave the source of the cube more ambiguously coded in its dialogue and visual environment. And visually, *Cube* implicates the military-industrial complex through images that identify the machine as a product of industrial manufacturing (Figure 2). Angel Mateos-Aparicio (2008) states that “the film’s main symbol, the cube, substitutes (and constitutes) the universe in terms of characters, setting and plot, and the discussion of its symbolic and metaphorical meanings (no ‘rational’ or ‘objective’ signification is evident) becomes the characters’ as well as the spectators’ task” (p. 6). Having invited viewer interpretation in the same sentence in which he claims that no rational or objective signification is evident, he goes on to observe the “virtually identical steel cells shaped as cubes” (p. 2). Both the steel and the cubical shapes he highlights indicate industrial manufacturing. Natali’s own description also implies industrial design. “I had this idea that it would be interesting to make a film that took place entirely in hell, but not in a Dante hell, but a modern one, you know symmetrical and free of all those Gothic trappings” (Natali, 2013). When I asked if he would agree that the cube was manufactured, he answered summarily, “Yes, absolutely”. The symmetrical aspect that Natali mentions is another visual feature of the cube that indicates its fictitiously industrial origin. The dialogue within the narrative then attaches the military to the industrial *mise-en-scène*. In *Cube*, a paranoid conspiracy theorist named Dr. Helen Holloway acts as the unlikely voice of reason. She articulates the most rational criticism that implicates governmental participation in the cube’s industrial design – a conflation that intimates the military-industrial complex. “Only the government could build something this ugly.” Holloway follows with another apparently paranoid observation that is less ambiguous. “Only the military-industrial complex could afford to build something this size.” However, contra paranoia, her analytical reduction to the cost of resources rationally implicates the military-industrial complex under the ruling ideology of capitalism that the film normalises.

Summarily, the narrative in *Cube* operates as a social metaphor for the way in which capitalist ideology and the military-industrial complex imprisons the subject within a social environment that is contradictory (in that it presents itself as benign or even

nurturing when it is, in fact, stultifying), if not openly malevolent. The cube is first and foremost a space of deadly incarceration. Indeed, Natali (2013) states that he envisioned “a prison escape film”. The metaphor is ironically highlighted in the characters’ names, each of which refers to an American prison institution. Many of the scenes feature low camera angles and extreme close-ups of the characters, creating a claustrophobic sensation of confinement (Figure 3). However, *Cube* is much more than a mere allegorical criticism of a problematic prison system. The carceral aspect of the narrative works to further implicate the military-industrial complex. According to Althusser both prisons and the military-industrial complex are amongst the repressive state apparatuses that participate in reproducing economic and social relations beneficial to the dominant classes (pp. 209-210). Again, Holloway makes the connection that “it’s all the same machine right? The Pentagon, multi-national corporations, the police.” The statement echoes Althusser’s broader thesis that all elements of a culture, whether repressive or ideological, work towards the maintenance of a singular goal: reproducing the dominant system. And in this case, the dominant system is a capitalist-driven military-industrial cultural economy which is coded as dangerously elusive and explicitly hostile.

3.2. *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002): A corporate response

True to the horror genre, and the commodity culture which spawned it, *Cube* prompted sequels. However, *Cube*’s sequels were not just endless iterations, unlike the myriad sequels typical of the 1980s slasher cycles. They were rather negotiations: a conversation negotiating hegemony with the United States in terms of which state apparatuses it is acceptable to criticise. Although IMDb lists *Cube 2: Hypercube* (2002) as a Canadian production, it has few of the Canadian associations of the first *Cube*. Andrzej Sekula replaces Canadian director Vincenzo Natali. Most of Sekula’s career was spent as a cinematographer on almost exclusively US productions. His other major directorial venture is the 2006 US film *The Pleasure Drivers*. Similarly, the production input of the Canadian Film Centre is replaced with the more commercially motivated organisation Lion’s Gate Entertainment. Although Lion’s Gate was founded in Vancouver, it is headquartered in Los Angeles, and its production corpus holds no specifically Canadian impetus. Most of the cast members were originally Canadian actors, although some have moved into more lucrative American careers. However, their input comes after the script revisions of US producer Ernie Barbarash, and does

not provide an identifiably Canadian ideological tenor. The original script was written by American screenwriter Sean Hood. Compared to the original *Cube*, this body of transnational collaborative inputs is highly American. And while the original *Cube* film appears highly critical of the US military-industrial complex, such a critique apparently did not sit well with the American producers of its sequels following 9/11. It seems that the success of the first film with international audiences required an ideological backlash by the second two films following 9/11 so that US hegemony based on “moral leadership” could remain intact – a form of containment by reassertion of the US authority to define moral parameters, and, in the highly militarised post-9/11 political economy, to defend a militaristic ideology by corporate displacement.

Although the sequel maintains the premise of the first, it makes a number of revisions to the criticisms inherent to the original. The most obvious change appears to be merely aesthetic, but the ideological underpinnings of that aesthetic are significant. The ambiguous military-industrial source of the first *Cube* is explicitly identified as a corporate source. Corporate America unambiguously replaces the military-industrial complex as the source of malevolence. The industrial look of the first *Cube*, with its iron frame and coloured room panels is replaced with clinical, white cubicles and tie-toting, briefcase-bearing victims trapped within them (Figure 4). The film’s dialogue also indicates a shift from a military focus to a corporate one. After the characters determine that they have all been abducted from disparate geographical locations in the United States (eliminating any possibility that the characters might be ambiguously Canadian), Simon opines that they must have been flown to the hypercube in “private or military jets.” He separates the unnecessary adjectives “private” and “military” with the conjunction “or” designating a binary between private enterprise and military involvement. The military implication is perhaps unavoidable, but by saying “or”, Simon introduces private enterprise as a choice *against* military responsibility in a narrative that has been clear about the corporate origins of the machine. Sasha/Alex Trusk, who is later identified as a primary antagonist, is a famous hacker guilty of remotely crashing armed forces jets to protest military spending as well as having crashed the Tokyo stock exchange. This backstory of her actions justifies her incarceration as retribution for sabotage against the US military at the same time that it implicates corporate capitalism in the crime of malevolence against its own populace. Moreover, all of the characters are from private walks of life, with the

exception of the colonel who dies first. His knowledge of the previous cube, and his lacking knowledge of the hypercube is indicative of a change in vilification to private sector ownership. Lastly, *Cube 2* reveals that a corporation named IZON is responsible for the cube. IZON is a weapons manufacturer, obviously associated with the military-industrial project, but clearly a private rather than a public institution. *Cube 2* displaces the military-industrial malevolence of the first film onto a corporate weapons manufacturer and in some ways effaces American governmental responsibility.⁸

As with *Cube*, the characters are again implicated in the construction of the entrapping structure. However, in *Cube 2*, the crime remains explicitly corporate rather than social. In *Cube*, only Worth is *explicitly* implicated and the other characters provide a deeper and more ambiguous indictment of all participants within the social nightmare they have created. The second *Cube* film abandons the simple allegory of prison names, but extends the deeper prison allegory into an editorial metaphor against the cubicle world of corporate America. In the introduction, a number of victims, lying face up and encased in plastic sheaths, are framed from above; the camera pans upwards against their inverted supine postures as they depart on their symbolic descent into the corporate hell of the cube. The film's dialogue reveals that Jerry is an engineer who helped design the hypercube's door mechanisms; Max is a computer games prodigy who may have participated in the strategic aspect of the cube's labyrinth; Becky is an IZON employee whom Simon Grady is hired to locate; Mrs Paley formerly worked for IZON; and Sasha is later revealed to be Alex Trusk, a computer genius who designed the entire machine.

The fantastical nature of its reality-altering environment represents a shift from industrial fear to a fear of computer technology in a time when military-industrial technologies were a necessity for the Afghanistan war effort. The rising domination of Internet communication technologies, in which criticism of the war effort found a public forum, represented a threat to propagandistic agendas to justify the military campaign. Indeed, the opening scene of the film highlights corporate computer technologies. The terrified eyeball of the introductory character is intercut with

⁸ The extra-features on the DVD offer a deleted alternate ending in which the government is specifically implicated. The deletion of this scene demonstrates the way in which any specific reference to government involvement has been cut from the narrative.

flashbacks to scenes of computer hardware and what appears to be the science laboratory of a corporate research facility. An IZON identity badge belonging to one of the cube's victims then fills the screen. The claustrophobic cinematography of the first cube is replaced with a preference for higher angles on Steadicams. In concert with the rapid panning of the camera, the cinematography creates the disorientation of a series of cubes in which gravity and space are in flux. This is a world of surrealism and scientific experimentation more than industrial dread.

Another significant change in *Cube 2* is the postmodern condition upon which the narrative focuses. The first *Cube* explores postmodernism from the nihilistic perspective of the dissolution of the subject in untenable spaces. Jameson (1995) also discusses a temporal schizophrenia in his discussion of the dissolving subject: "as temporal continuity breaks down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material'" (p. 119). "Jameson suggests that the postmodern condition is characterised by schizophrenic temporality and a spatial pastiche" (Bruno, 1987, p. 184). The space in the hypercube is a pastiche of rooms which frequently occupy the same space. In this cube, however, rather than subjects who suffer existential and social identity crises within a military-industrial nightmare they have helped create, the victims are more specifically cogs in the corporate machine, trapped in a nightmare of white cubicles in which time, rather than space, becomes the primary threat; the hypercube destabilises linear time and captures its clock-watching corporate victims in endless iterations of the same horrific monotony. *Cube 2* highlights the annihilation of time in the space of its postmodern corporate nightmare. In an early scene in which Kate and Simon are struggling, Max appears almost simultaneously at a number of the doors, moving around the outside of the cube in which they find themselves in impossible time ellipses. Later in the film, the group encounters their own decomposed corpses from a future in which none of them escaped. Much like the employed drones in a corporate office space, these characters are stuck in endless and timeless reproductions of futile labour, which is coded as fatal for all but a single survivor. Time constraints then eclipse time repetition; Kate races against time to escape before the tesseract implodes.

Almost immediately following 9/11, *Cube 2* demonstrates a desire for less ambiguity than that represented by the unsettling aperture of the first *Cube*; in contrast *Cube 2* provides a less unsettling narrative closure and a more comforting horror fantasy in

which to release social tension. In *Cube 2*, narrative and cinematographic patterns indicate that Kate is the character with whom the viewer is intended to participate most sympathetically. While identification with any character in *Cube* is destabilised, *Cube 2* affords viewers the traditional single character with whom to primarily identify, and through whom they can position themselves against any participation with the machine of corporate nightmare. Kate describes herself as a psychotherapist and is able to therapeutically assist other characters in managing their terror. It is not revealed until the end that she was also a dupe of the corporate powers of IZON hired to retrieve an information locket carried by Trusk. Kate is summarily executed by agents of IZON in this epilogue, however, allowing her to maintain some degree of sympathy, and subjecting her to the same fate as the other victims of the cube associated with IZON. In *Cube*, Kazan escapes into an ambiguous ethereal white void at the end, which is amongst the film's many ambiguities. In *Cube 2*, no such ambiguous surrealism occurs outside of the machine. Kate escapes to confront her corporate superiors and is executed. The subtle military implication works to create a fantasy of a complicit soldier who sacrificed herself for the military cause, more than it vilifies a military agenda. As with most of the characters, it is for her complicity with the corporate machine that she is eventually killed. This re-coding works as a fantasy to displace anxieties regarding US governmental duplicity under the questionable leadership of George W. Bush onto corporate America. In *Cube 2*, the government's malevolent machine is decidedly of corporate rather than military-industrial design.

3.3. *Cube Zero* (2004): Full circle and new displacements

The third film in the *Cube* series, *Cube Zero*, released in 2004, is also listed by IMDb as a Canadian film, but like *Cube 2*, its productive inputs are primarily from the US (although, admittedly, it is aesthetically more similar to the first *Cube* than the second). While the film maintains a primarily Canadian cast of actors, Ernie Barbarash, one of the producers of *Cube 2* steps in as director of this third instalment, and its overt re-coding of the criticisms present in the first film is substantially more conservative than the all-Canadian original.

By 2004, public sentiment in both the United States and Canada had begun to question the Afghanistan military campaigns. In *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007), for example, published only two years after *Cube Zero* was released, Stephen Eisenman

concludes with a harsh psychoanalysis of specific American soldiers who were involved in torturing prisoners of the Gulf War and a scathing indictment of the American military authorities that supported their actions. Eisenman recapitulates the worn US rhetoric of manifest destiny and the rising tide of opposition to it when he describes “the feelings of national and racial superiority of the soldiers and civilians at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, to uphold the moral and political necessity of the American military venture in the face of worldwide opposition and condemnation” (p. 98). As public sentiment changed, the North American populace was in dire need of a fantasy that upheld their tenuous social mythologies. Indeed, unlike the cinematography of the first or second *Cube*, this third instalment makes use of wide-angle cinematography in its enclosed spaces to create a sense of delirium.

Cube Zero represents an explicit attempt to revise the significations of the first film with a semblant prequel rather than a sequel. Instead of moving in a different direction as the second film did, it re-codes the thematic implications of the first cube; the third *Cube* movie appropriates the narrative of the first film and attempts to overwrite its unsettling aperture with a backstory. To do so, *Cube Zero* problematises the suggestion of the first film that all victims of the cube, even supposedly innocent ones, are complicit in its design. In Althusserian terms, these characters are not transgressors against the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) but rather participants in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The third film, however, opts for a more explicit identification of the victims. They are all apparently convicts on death row, transgressors against the power structure, and more duly subject to the violent reprisals of the RSAs. Even the character of lesser guilt, Cassandra, is described as “a political dissenter.” This conceptual conceit is perhaps somewhat comforting to Western audiences in that it provides at least some vague rationale for the victims’ torture within the machine.⁹

Cube Zero also adds both an epilogue and a prologue, complete with a subplot that re-codes the amoral autistic savant in the first movie as a stereotypical male melodramatic

⁹ Indeed, the United States is one of those few western countries that have not ratified the Declaration of Man’s Universal Rights with China precisely because it does not wish to leave itself vulnerable to this horrific strategic mechanism without recourse to stratagem for itself. In this context, it remains a cultural lightning rod in American discourse.

hero. Eric Wynn is a cube technician who comes to believe that his superiors are condemning victims who do not deserve their punishment. He becomes enamoured of one of the victims, Cassandra Rains, abandons his position and his deference to authority, and enters the cube in an effort to save her. The main character, Cassandra, is represented as an innocent victim, and a maternal figure, unwillingly kidnapped while walking in the forest with her young daughter. Wynn remains complicit with his sadistic task under the understanding that all of the victims were convicted of capital crimes and were given the choice to enter the cube or face an immediate death sentence. When Wynn discovers that Cassandra's file is missing the requisite consent form, he realises her innocence in a symbol that immediately reverses the implications of complicity in the original film. He is eventually captured by the cube's authorities and is lobotomised by the evil agents that have imprisoned his love interest. He is subsequently placed into the cube and the performance of the actor playing him somewhat suggests he is the origin of the Kazan character of the first film.

Cube Zero further introduces a thematic trajectory in which the carceral technological environment of the cube hierarchy is set in opposition to nature. In both the epilogue and the prologue, Cassandra is shown outside the cube, hunted by its agents, trying desperately to protect her daughter as she flees through a forest (a convention of melodrama, a genre which maintains the clear distinction of heroes and villains). It is notable that she is not outside the cube in any sort of modern urban environment – an attempt to efface urban culture from the fantasy narrative. This new thematic focus is another diversion from the implications of the first *Cube* in which no-one within the social system is fully innocent of its malign side-effects. In so doing, the film creates a fantasy of innocent “natural” victims and personified evil oppressors that are distinct entities.

In addition to the re-coded “natural vs evil” thematic, *Cube Zero* also introduces a class-based critique into its narrative matrix through a sub-plot that personifies the otherwise absent authorities behind the cube. Indeed, *Cube Zero* longs to answer the bothersome question that the first film attempts to leave unanswered. When Cassandra asks, “What kind of animals would do this?”, her question is immediately followed by a scene change to two blue-collar stooges running the controls. These two eventually become the victims of the authorities who descend from above in an elevator. The bombastic villain, complete with a disgusting cybernetic eye implant, is both visually offensive and wholly unlikeable in his arrogant condescension to, and eventual murder

of Dodd. Thus, *Cube Zero* offers a narrative gambit between the working-class operators and their previously invisible senior authorities. In this version of *Cube*, it is no longer a vague and faceless US military-industrial monolith that threatens its complicit populace, but a specific class-based entity in which its own otherwise innocent proletariat is at risk. Dodd later concedes, “We’re just the button men. If we were meant to be analysts we’d be working upstairs.” The eventual call from upstairs is accompanied by military drums in the audio underscore and his repetition of “Sir, yes sir.” Here, *Cube Zero* highlights a theme in which questioning rather than participating with military authority is coded as fatal for both Dodd and Wynn.

Cube Zero finally attempts to complicate and dilute any military critique by positioning religious affiliations as the ideology behind the villainy. As part of the exit procedure for a victim who has nearly escaped the cube, the operators offer a grace to “the Lord” and are required to ask the victim, “Do you believe in God?” When he responds with an answer of “no” he is immolated. Any departure from conservative religious ideology, or any political dissent is fatal. The film’s attitude towards this mechanism of summary punishment seems to be one of disapprobation, implying that this power hierarchy is unjust. Wynn is clearly a protagonist against the belligerent authorities that condemn him. However, the nihilism of the narrative, and his ultimate banishment to the cube, indicate a more covert message that Wynn’s heroics are futile. The film vilifies the hierarchical (but only vaguely militaristic) and religified authority behind such fatal consequences, and ends with Wynn’s torture and demise. There is no cathartic romantic pairbond realised between Wynn and Cassandra, a trajectory strongly suggested by the melodramatic thematisation of his attempts to save her. As the denizens of another infamously horrific cube (the evil communist “borg” cyborgs of the *Star Trek* franchise) would insist, “resistance is futile” (Figure 5). In *Cube Zero*, while Wynn’s punishment is unjust, it is just as inevitable.

3.4. Japan’s *Cube* (2021): From corporate-military capitalism to the digital family

The biggest box office and home rental successes for Natali’s original *Cube* in 1997 and 1998 were in France and Japan (Natali, 2013). Linnie Blake’s examination of the American adaptation of *Ringu* (1998) offers insights into the success of such horror films as *Cube* in Japan (also in 1998). “Nakata Hideo’s *Ringu*, the first cinematic treatment of [Koji] Suzuki’s novel, was made in 1998 as a recession-hit Japan’s

technology markets crashed, unemployment soared, and the nation seemed plagued both by a rash of insurance-money killings and by a number of apocalyptic quasi-religious groups, such as the Aum Cult who mounted a poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway system” (Blake, 2017, p. 217). However, since that time, new social and digital anxieties have emerged in Japan, along with new forms of salvific technophilia to mitigate them, both of which manifest in the thematics apparent in Japan’s remake of *Cube*. In addition, much of the scholarly literature concerned with intercultural horror remakes between Japan and the United States, including Blake’s, observe a unidirectional adaptation (US production companies acquiring the rights to remake original Japanese horror films but not vice versa) of what Kevin Heffernan and Kevin Wetmore refer to as “J-Horror”: iconic franchises such as *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and several other more contemporary examples (see Mee, 2014, p. 11). These contributions tend to discuss how the US remakes re-inscribe contemporary American ideological underpinnings within the confines of the surface narratives. But there is almost no literature that considers the remake in the other direction, a potential symptom of the fact that hardly any such remakes exist, positioning the Japanese *Cube* as a rare and valuable artefact through which to do so.

The Japanese version of *Cube* is a purported remake of the original, complete with a very similar opening scene of original slaughter, no prologue or epilogue, and the same characters by structural proxy. However, the film is informed by elements of the sequels as well. Each room is an aesthetic combination of the metallic frames of the original but with dulled colour panels of off-whites reminiscent of the corporate cubes in *Cube 2*. The opening scene that zeroes in on Yūichi’s eye as he awakens to confusion and delirium in the cube is also reminiscent of the opening scene of *Cube 2*, introducing a theme of ideological revelation to the imagery: moving from ideological “sleeping” to revelatory “seeing” within the cube’s bewildering environment (Figure 6). Nevertheless, although this Japanese *Cube* might be considered less ideologically insidious in its thematic re-codings of the original than the revisionist Americanised sequels, it is also more subversive as a “remake.” As an ostensible “exact copy”, the ideological subversions that are so obvious in the sequels are themselves subverted under a patina of identity, an identity that simply cannot maintain under the conditions of such a significant cultural and temporal translation from the original.

In his exploration of American remakes of J-Horror, Kevin Wetmore (2009) offers a useful and parsimonious summary of some of the contemporary Japanese cultural fears reflected in the original films. He explains that in *Chakushin Ari* (2003) (remade in the United States as *One Missed Call*) “it is discovered that the deaths have been caused by the ghost of ... a psychopathic, abusive child. Essentially the film is concerned both with the cycle of child abuse ... and with the interrelatedness through technology that provides only a simulacra [*sic*] of [social] closeness” (n.p.). In his discussion of what he refers to as “technoghosts” in films such as *Ringu* (1998) (remade in the US as *The Ring*) or *Kairo* (2001) (remade in the United States as *Pulse*), Wetmore claims that “[t]echnoghosts haunt the society that created them, and as often as not, they are children or women” (*ibid.*). He summarises all of these Japanese cultural anxieties with his description of *Ju-on* (2002) (remade in the United States as *The Grudge*): “In essence, *Ju-On* demonstrates both the failure of the family unit in post-industrial Japan, as well as the failure of conventional wisdom to solve problems” (*ibid.*). Cumulatively, these are the very anxieties with which the Japanese *Cube* is concerned, but the movie inverts and recuperates them as something of a response to these earlier pessimistic narratives. Instead of a straightforward critique of the military-industrial complex, as in the original, the Japanese *Cube* takes a different approach that is consonant with the rise of more contemporaneous digital anxieties and inquietudes surrounding the restructuring of the patriarchal family in the environment of corporate-controlled social media, all thematics that are entirely absent in the first *Cube*. Japan’s *Cube* directly maps the imagery of ideological revelation on to an ailing construction of family patriarchy and reconciles it with the metaphorically cybernetic subjects of a more digital age.

Both the enigma of the machine and the focus on vocational identity that were prevalent in the original, and that gave rise to the critique of both the military-industrial machine and social complicity with it, are largely subverted in the Japanese remake. One conversation early in the narrative indicates a suspicion that the characters’ unexpected incarceration may be in the service of a reality TV show, but this trajectory of thought is almost immediately abandoned. Instead, the suggestion works as merely a temporal marker of contemporary media dominance that is absent in the original *Cube*. Similarly, vocational identities are invoked and thematically repurposed. When the only female character in the narrative first encounters the rest of the group, she asks “*What* are you guys?”, rather than “*Who* are you guys?”, indicating identity by

vocation rather than subjectivity. However, the other characters are surprised to learn that she actually meant their names. Otherwise, the only relevant vocational identities are placed thematically in the service of generational distinctions. The older Andō character, who joins the group later, vaguely identifies himself as a business man. “I work at a company.” His primary nemesis within the group is Shinji, a young adult with the stereotypical job of a youthful slacker: clerk in a convenience store.

Indeed, throughout the film, there are various references to generational conflicts in the new age. The most obvious of these is comparative. In the proxy character transfer from the original, it is initially baffling why it was necessary to render the autistic savant character a child in the Japanese remake. The child, Chiharu Uno, even comments on the fact that he hates adults. When Andō joins the group and asks “Why is a child here?”, it does not make young Chiharu feel as though the question is sympathetic. Chiharu is, rather, immediately afraid of Andō. Eventually the child’s mathematical wizardry reveals the same numerical coordinate conceit to each of the rooms as in the original *Cube*. Each room is marked by a set of x, y, and z, coordinates, each coordinate three-digits, and Yūichi tentatively observes that “when there was a trap, there was always a prime number.” Of course, old sneering Andō dismisses the insights of a mere “child” in his disappointment that the prime numbers hypothesis is not absolutely certain. To prove he trusts the child against Andō’s anxiety-ridden dismissive scepticism, Yūichi (heroically?) risks his life by throwing himself into the next room without prime numbers before testing it with the boot-on-a-string technique. Less explicitly, the prime numbers conceit introduces a new narrative MacGuffin. Upon reaching a room in which *all* of the new hatches have prime numbers, they decide to go back, only to discover that the room from whence they came is now locked to them. As with the human condition of aging, they must move forward, even facing a potentially deadly future.

Andō’s main conflict, however, is with the bumbling Shinji. Andō maintains an authoritarian posture, rudely ordering especially poor Shinji around, to which the latter inexplicably capitulates. However, this posturing does eventually reveal the fact that the sound of human activity (and not the sound of opening hatch doors) is what triggers the deadly traps. With this insight, they are able to safely navigate the booby-trapped room through which they must proceed, but not without Shinji’s clumsiness causing injury to Andō (and almost his death) which does little to improve Andō’s respect for the youth

surrounding him. Shinji defends himself, however. “I’m not your subordinate. ... None of your age-based status matters in this place. ... Adults like you are nothing great yet you guys act super arrogant.” Andō’s proleptic response is just as redolent of typical generational disdain for putatively disrespectful and entitled millennials: “I also hate you ... You blame everything on the world, and are a brat that never grows up.” Eventually Andō screams at Shinji, “What kind of strength do you even have?! ... Because of this shit I almost died!” Ironically, however, Andō becomes increasingly incapacitated due to his age and injury, and as he struggles to climb the ladders, it is Shinji who becomes his aid. In fact, Andō repeatedly turns to his younger comrades to seek meaning from the clues that they accrue (for a third time when they circle back to the first corpse), an odd deferral for his age-based posturing. Yet still, Shinji eventually murders him by smashing a portal door on his head. “Filthy adults like you ... stole our freedom!” In this way, all of the cube’s military-industrial malice is displaced on to Shinji as a harbinger of a youthful revolution against age-based patriarchy.

In the same vein, the near death of several of the characters in one of the booby-trapped rooms prompts Yūichi to have a brief flashback to his own youth, proffering some symbolic backstory towards explaining his presence in the cube, a narrative aside that is a complete departure from the Canadian original, and which is more reminiscent of similar conceits in the American sequels. Yūichi remembers sitting at a desk, apparently doing homework, while he is uncomfortably examined by a subjective perspective behind the camera eye, presumably an oppressive parent. In this first flashback, it is implied that because his younger sibling, Hiruto, was less academically talented than Yūichi was, the younger brother was obviously rAndōmly beaten by their father. In a later flashback, apparently motivated by a scanning of Yūichi by the cube, the wall in front of him appears as a stairwell in the open city. He sees himself scrambling breathlessly up the stairs to an outside vista atop a building. There, he is unable to convince his younger brother to step away from the ledge. He tells Hiruto to “Just do what dad says.” Hiruto replies, “That’s the only thing I didn’t want to hear”, and Yūichi witnesses Hiruto jump to his death. In this narrative configuration, it is undue parental expectations that killed Hiruto, and the cube is undue penance for Yūichi for failing to save him. In contrast, Yūichi manages to save the child Chiharu by reaching out his hand when he drops from one of the cube’s lower portals, a visual narrative mirror of his failure to reach his brother with the same gesture. Thus, the broader social

complicity and culpability of the original narrative are entirely subsumed and recuperated in Shinji's flashbacks. He feels a deep guilt over his failure to save his younger brother from committing suicide, and in his eventually sacrificial efforts to save young Chiharu, he absolves himself of his guilt and responsibility.

In the end, Yūichi dies in the machine, leaving young Chiharu to be united with the motherly Asako. Not only is she the only female character in the Japanese narrative, but she is significantly more subservient than the female characters in the original *Cube*; she performs mostly with a passively soft cadence of voice, if she speaks at all, and a vacuous wide-eyed glare (Figure 7). Chiharu and Asako inexplicably escape the cube in a conceit that aligns more conventionally with traditional horror and dystopia cinema than any of the previous *Cube* films. In his exploration of the transnational representation of terrorism in traditional American horror genre narratives, John Nelson (2006) observes that “[i]n horror, adults are guilty, secretly if not originally. That is how they can know and combat (but also be) the monsters. Children might begin as innocents, yet they must develop the moral and political sophistication born of facing their own eventual evils if they are to survive monstrous attacks” (p. 188). In the Japanese *Cube*, Yūichi's younger brother did not adapt these skills in time to save his own life, but this shortcoming is redeemed by the survival of young Chiharu. However, Chiharu emerges from the cube not merely into the potential utopia of the white abyss as in the original, but first into a long industrial hallway, a semi-digital realm that is reminiscent of similar scenes from *the iconic Matrix* movies (Figure 8). As he bravely ambulates his way into this realm, Asako chooses to stay behind in the cube.

She turns out to be a robotic part of the machine, indicated by a digitally cybernetic glimmer in her eyes, perhaps even a part of the machine system of the cube itself, but it is never richly explained why she or any of the others were incarcerated within it, especially the little boy. This new conceit, of her possible cybernetic ontology, again, subverts the capitalist vocational focus of the original film. Her original question of “What are you guys?” now indicates that, as a digital cyborg herself, she was actually scanning them and asking this particular question in order to determine whether or not they were also cybernetic. At the end of the film, she amiably returns to the innards of the cube to greet a new group of characters incarcerated within it with the same question and to begin the cycle of escape and revelation again. In something of yet another additional narrative epilogue, it is revealed that the former characters are all

“completed”, while Yūichi, thought dead, is ambiguously “continued.” Cumulatively, with the death of Andō, the salvation of the new maternal-like patriarchal hero Yūichi, and the reduction of the maternal-female to a mere techno-object, the film stages a gendered critique of generational trauma while positing the need for a new childhood independence of older cultural and patriarchal traditions for a digital age not yet as fully embraced in earlier Japanese horror films such as *Ringu* and *Kairo*.

4. Conclusions

What does all of this tell us about these respective cultures across such a broad swathe of time? Slavoj Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* (1997) offers a framework through which to begin to answer that question. “[I]t is deeply wrong to assert that when one throws out the nationalist dirty water (‘excessive’ fanaticism), one should be careful not to lose the baby of ‘healthy’ ... nationalism” as opposed to the “‘excessive’ (xenophobic, aggressive) nationalism. Such a common-sense distinction reproduces the very nationalist reasoning which aims at getting rid of the ‘impure’ excess” (p. 62) of other cultural sensibilities, while justifying social contradictions as normal or “healthy.” On a nationalist level, in the late 1990s, *Cube* reveals Canadian anxieties about military-industrial capitalism and Canada's questionable complicity with this American economic machine. In the case of the first *Cube* movie, and Canadian horror cinema in general, the impure excess of capitalist nationalism is projected onto the Other of American culture, simultaneously hated and recognised as too much of the self. In the early twenty-first century, following 9/11, the American *Cube* sequels betray an anxiety about such a critique that called for a refocusing of vilification towards institutions such as corporate America and fundamentalist religion during the era of the advanced wars in Afghanistan and its Islamic allies when the integrity of such war campaigns was under attack. Decades on, the new *Cube* exposes a Japanese anxiety regarding the attrition of aged-based patriarchal social hierarchy in the era of social media and rising youth Internet stars. Indeed, the generational and gendered calculus of the visual and narrative distinctions in the Japanese film can be summarised thusly: youthful naivety (Shinji) is trivialised and vilified, older patriarchal seniority (Andō and Yūichi's absent father) is vilified, youthful brilliance (Chiharu and Yūichi) is valorised and heroised. Summarily, when contrasted against the previous films, the first one of which it is an ostensible remake, this film demonstrates a nationalist ideology in which a critique of age-based social hierarchies is

acceptable, but the critique must tread lightly around these other industrial, military, and especially corporate concerns.

From Žižek's perspective, remakes such as these readily reveal such ideological differences, in this case across nationalist boundaries. However, under the conditions of transnational cinema, a more globalised perspective that does not view these as discrete nationalist-cultural phenomena might reveal even more universal anxieties that may be shared across cultures and national boundaries. Whereas traditional horror film renders the monster explicit, *Cube* hides its monster and transfers its malevolence onto its victims. With "little more than a bare stage", it foregrounds explicitly human social politics and relegates the horror of the state apparatus that governs social relations to a second-order mystery. Barthes refers to this type of signification as "an empty signifier", in which "the concept fill[s] the form of the myth without ambiguity" (Barthes, 2009, p. 267). While Barthes' definition of the empty signifier applies to the ambiguous source of the cubes in each film, his concept of the "mythical signifier" applies to the presence of capitalism in all four of the films: "driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, [the mythical signifier] will *naturalize* it" (p. 267-8). Indeed, what all of the institutions that become the nationalist focus of critique in each *Cube* film have in common is their broadly unchallenged capitalist environment. Even as they each vilify an aspect of global industrial capitalism, they work to focus their criticisms on specific abstractions that leave other elements of the larger rapacious capitalist environments uncomplicated.

Overall, in the context of repressive tolerance, there is a tacit acceptance in all of the *Cube* films of global capitalism, and each film merely jockeys to define the limits of acceptable criticisms inflected by the bias of decidedly nationalist sensibilities. The more contemporary Japanese "remake" has a lesser need to compete for nationalist ideological hegemony being at such a significantly greater cultural and economic distance than the linguistically and geographically continuous United States and Canada. However, it is even more subversive as yet another film that appears to be critical of specifically patriarchal capitalist social relations, but that is replete with normalisations and moralisations that recuperate, or at least re-validate, masculinist heroes and conservative gender roles within an industrial capitalist environment. The organising framework of all of the films is the capitalist utilisation of military-industrial, corporate, or human commodities. While all of the films demonstrate a

fundamental concern with the contradictions of capitalism in which each country mutually participates, and the carceral aspects, whether literal or ideological, that such social economies generate, they conceal the governing acceptance of capitalist social relations and its industrial designs under nationalist-inflected demarcations of acceptable criticism.

Indeed, Althusser observes that “[a]ll Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (2010 [1970], p. 210). Althusser explains that “[t]his concert is dominated by a single score ...: the score of the Ideology of the current ruling class” (p. 210). In this context, notions of nationalist cultural sovereignty, or worse, superiority, in a capitalist trading block are little more than repressive tolerance illusions in the service of reproducing the dominant ideology. Cumulatively, the four *Cube* films work to negotiate the boundaries of such social criticism under an illusory cultural sovereignty and use their implied indictments to conceal the manifestation of Althusser’s observation that, to some degree, they are all singing the same tune. However, if all capitalist ideological state apparatuses are singing the same tune across global nationalist demarcations and historical time, it seems that, according to the *Cube* films, Japan is generationally just a bit “off-key” in an era of new digital and patriarchal anxieties.

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Fig. 1.

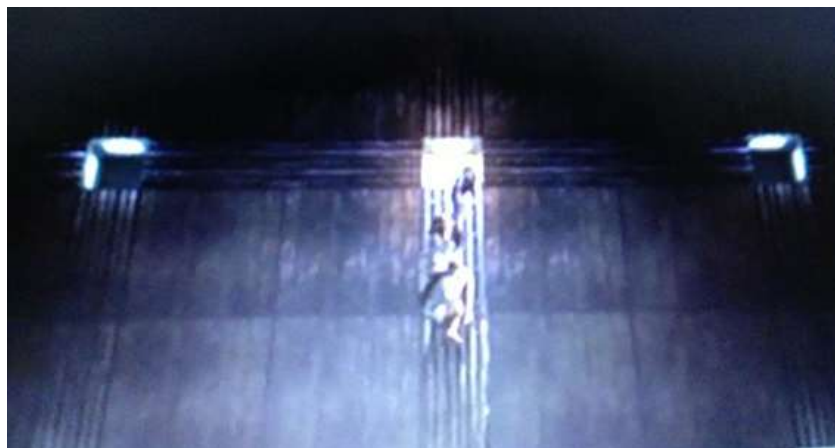


Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

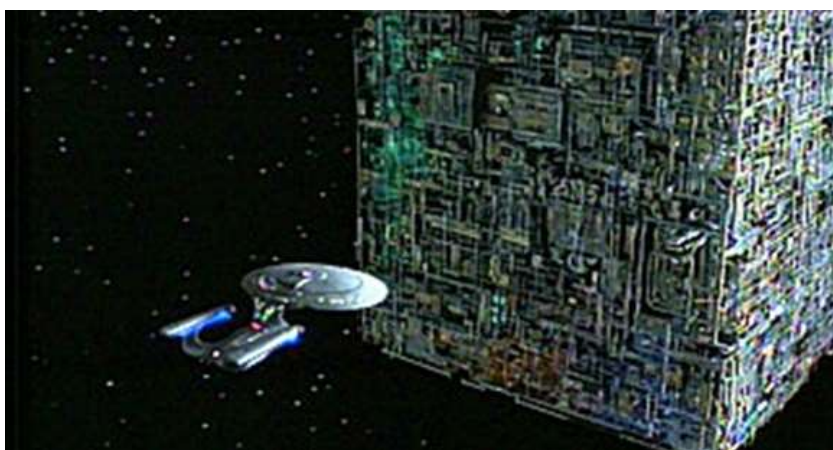


Fig. 5.

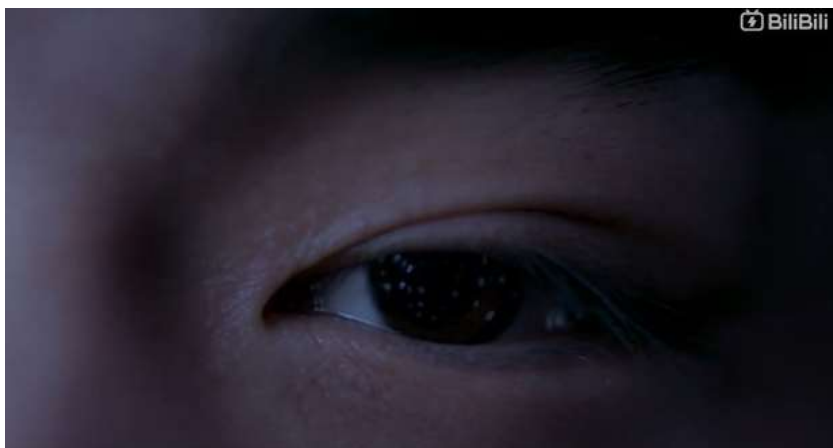


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

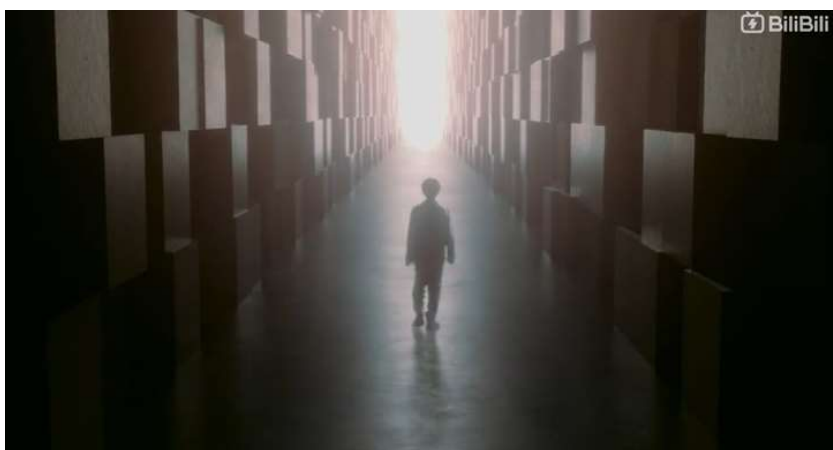


Fig. 8.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David CHRISTOPHER is a lecturer in Popular Screen Cultures for the Department of Film Studies in the School of Arts, Media, and Communication at the University of Leicester. He received his Ph.D. in Critical Cultural Studies in Media and Cinema from the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Victoria in Canada. He has worked as an educator in his various fields of study in Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, and the UK. His research and publication dossier covers digital cinema, Canadian cinema, ideology and culture, anarchist philosophy and apocalypse cinema, media studies and political economy, horror cinema and horror video games, Shakespeare and gothic literature.