

It Follows: Horror in a Straight Line

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It Follows (2014), directed by David Robert Mitchell, owes its genius to the simple violence of the straight line. When the film's protagonist Jay (Maika Monroe) is followed—mercilessly, anonymously, slowly—by an unexplained force, it is the straight line that choreographs this following. Assuming various arbitrary human forms, the *It* advances directly towards its victims at a measured, unchanged pace and without divergence from its direct path. 'It follows'—a trite double-entendre implying both active pursuit and banal deduction—denotes less a conscious hunt than an ordinal succession along a rigid, geometric track. The film derives its affective kick not from any discrete body, be it following or followed, monstrous or human, but from this hideous, existential geometry.

The film charts the movements of Jay around an eerie and somewhat dystopian Detroit. Rows of abandoned houses, cars and empty roads form a backdrop that places the film outside of time, or indeed within a suspension of time. This is an uncanny teen world without parents and without the comforting, disciplinary anchor of geo-historical specificity that they might offer. This world is however uncompromisingly structured around one law: that of the straight lines and sequences that also constitute *It*. After Jay has sex with a guy she has recently started seeing, she finds him to have passed a curse on to her and is soon relentlessly followed by *It*, which arrives in many different forms but always advances at the same pace. Should it catch up with you, *It* promises a grotesque death before again pursuing whoever passed the curse on to you, and continues in this way along a seemingly unending sequence.

Whilst some commentators of the film have

attributed its tried-and-tested use of the pass-it-on horror convention to an allegory for the risks of sexual promiscuity (Robey 2015; Holden 2015), others deny the project's interest in any moral stance. For instance, *It Follows*'s sex can be understood to inhabit an uneasy ambivalence between life or death (Cruz 2015), or between a celebration or condemnation of underage sex (Abrams 2015). To speak of contagion, be this pathological or dynamic, would indeed miss the sharp, mathematical linearity of the straight line's unfolding. Like other aspects of the film's aesthetic fabric, sex is but another minion performing the work of the straight line; a superficial overlay upon the route and sequence which strangles and kills in its geometric predetermination.

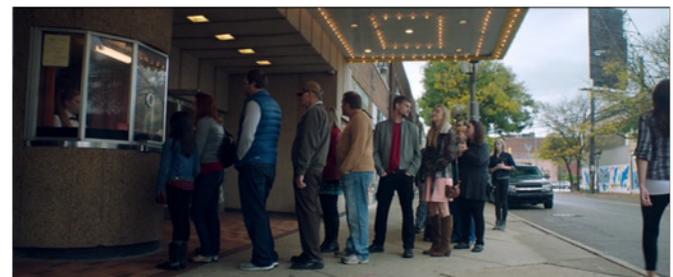
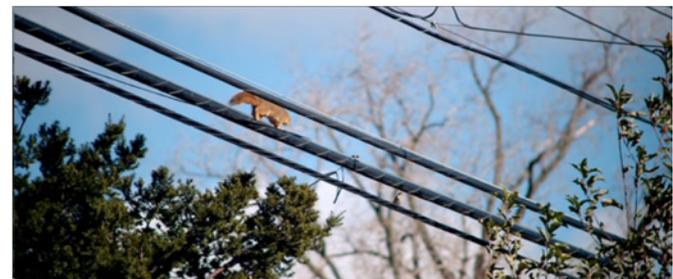
If the affective horror of *It Follows* operates by 'brutally wear[ing] its audience down' rather than relying on quick-hit shocks (Cruz 2015), this wearing down is a temporal and spatial activity that flounders haplessly in attempts to escape the sequence. That the straight line constructs the film's most foundational architecture or infrastructure, renders the burnt-out Detroit a sadistic playground for the slow exhaustion of bodies that is always already inevitable. It is no surprise that the film opens exactly how it ends: building a world choreographed of lines by tracing movement up and down suburbia's roads and sidewalks. The opening scene places the camera at the centre of a road between two rows of houses, the endless vertigo of the straight line illustrated by the road disappearing into the distance. As the camera pivots on the same spot—a technical trope repeated throughout the film—its circular motion only further underscores the harsh geometric linearity of the

world before the viewer.

In the opening scene, a girl runs from an undisclosed horror; following the architectural geometry of the suburban neighborhood in a grid-like pattern up and down the street. She runs into her house and back out, before jumping in a car and speeding back down the straight road at the centre of the frame. As A.A. Dowd points out, the opening scene echoes the legacy of John Carpenter in transforming ‘warmly lit residential environments into landscapes of dread’ (Dowd 2015). Yet it not only destroys the space of the domestic as safe-house, but actively puts the domestic to the service of the straight line. Suburban homes with a paucity of exits line the road, but rather than offering refuge reveal themselves to be part of *It*’s own mouse-trap. As Jay is later warned: ‘Never be in a room with less than two exits. It is very slow but not dumb’. The straight line knows architecture inside-out, both constituting and colonising these spaces. Within this design, there is nowhere to hide.

Throughout the film, we become familiarised with the architectural tempo-spatial logic of the straight line (Figures 1-4). Jay watches lazily as squirrels run along networks of electric cables, and cinemas are packed with rows of unwitting spectators and stagnant queues at the ticket office. In a particularly striking shot, Jay absent-mindedly lines up blades of grass along her knee, giving the appearance of scoring the central composite of the straight line into the body’s flesh.

The road, as infrastructural accomplice of the straight line, emerges not as escape route, but as inescapable route. Inhabiting the road and carparks of a Detroit famously destroyed by the sudden obsolescence of its once-thriving car industry², *It Follows* cruelly reimagines the road movie. Just as domestic spaces are revealed to be porous and exposed, the road is denied any potential for emancipation, transformation or flight. At the climax of the opening sequence, the car emerges not as escape vehicle but that which sheds light on the unknown girl’s grisly, cornered inability to escape the line’s sequence. As she says her final goodbyes to her family on the phone, the headlights illuminate her impending and seemingly inevitable demise (Figure 5). The car, like



Figures 1-4:
The architectures of the straight line’s sequence; as inscribed in infrastructure, in the social rhythms and conventions of everyday leisure, and on the body.

the road, is not just another minion of *It*, but also of the film's own voyeuristic complicity in the straight line's primary violence: that of a body met with the uselessness of flight, with nothing left to do than seek solace in delay whilst awaiting its complete sequential exhaustion. To take to the road is to drive further into this closed-circuit of inevitability.

The structural insistence of the straight line is all about what does not move or mutate, rather than what shape-shifts; *It* remains irreducible to the endlessly mutating bodies it deploys at its service. Indeed, the avatars of the straight line that enact the 'following'—the creepy elderly lady, the crawling child, Jay's own father—are revealed to be disposable and superficial, much like the abandoned houses and cars that line the roads. The very build-up of these bodies and artefacts of urban decay creates an atmosphere of being outside (and increasingly out of) time. Relentlessly the sequence of the straight line marches on, leaving its exhausted avatars in the landfill of an imagined Detroit.

Yet, there emerges a paradox of the straight line. In its unwavering, inescapable linearity, it loops and stagnates. Follow the straight line, and you will end up going round in a circle. It suggests the idea that if you drive for long enough down a perfectly straight road, eventually you will arrive at where you began. It is a recurring motif; the 360 degrees of the

car tyre that allow it to roll forward down the road, and in the circular garden pool from which Jay stares upwards at the linear power lines above (Figure 6). Later shots collapse the birds-eye-view of the circular pool into a mid-shot that captures the straight line of the pool's edge (Figure 7). A similar dynamic is illustrated in the circular reading device that Jay's friend Yara (Olivia Luccardi) scrolls through, which is contrasted with line after line of rigid prose (Figure 8). This paradoxical spatial claustrophobia of the straight line reflects the film's primary existential anxiety: regardless of whether the sequence is temporally carried forward or regresses to the next person, or *It* spatially adjusts its trajectory, the straight line is inescapable in its ability to bend to find its victim. Once the person has been murdered, *It* immediately forgets and moves on to the next potential casualty, in an infinite loop that erases the progressions, deviances and growths of a human life as if no one had been there and nothing had happened.

The straight line's progression along its cursed sequence—whether shuttling back and forth, or looping—is not so much a 'progression' through time and space, but an imagining of the stale null-time of inevitability. The march back and forth among the sequence of victims that also form a straight line of sorts, creates not a progression but a stalling. The wearing down is also a stagnation; of



Figure 5: The road and the car are both complicit with the violence of the straight line, projecting lights onto a body left with nowhere left to hide.



Figures 6-8: Jay's swimming pool is imaged both as circle and straight line, with Jay often positioned in the middle. Similarly, the circular reading device is contrasted with the rigidity of text. These circular motifs can also be understood as contrasting with the linearity of narrative progression, and the borders of the frame.

of a body not running or fighting back, but slowly becoming obsolete in its inability to adapt to outside threats and demands.

That people are dying because of a straight line—a mere geometric whimsy—does not render two-dimensional or cartoonish the horror's violence, but makes its pang all the more cutting in the unexplained absurdity of this arbitrary reduction. As Eugenie Brinkema writes of affect in relation to formalism: 'It is not the case that the more formalist the film, the more distanced it is from affect: rather, the more rigorously structured the text, the more affective it is' (Brinkema 2014: 178). Similarly, *It Follows* is situated along a rigorously structured line that, whilst always in movement like a conveyor belt along a sequence, cruelly denies progress both spatially (to move on or escape along any given route) or temporally (to grow up, to progress into history).

It is therefore fitting that the film's final set-piece proves ingeniously bathetic and without resolve. When Jay and her group of friends flee to an abandoned swimming pool armed with an arsenal of electronics, TVs, radios and lights, the plan is to lure *It* (as if *It* were a discrete, mortal body) into the swimming pool and electrocute it. The plan aims, structurally, to break the sovereignty of the straight line. The swimming pool's liquidity presents a challenge to linear sequentiality with the multi-directional, molecular flow of water, whilst the pool's presence in the centre of the room disallows the camera from its preferred position at the centre. The camera is suddenly unable to pivot round to reveal the many architectures of the straight line.

In addition, the depth of the swimming pool suggests a three-dimensional volume to challenge the line's geometric abstraction. The mistake is that the group confuses the underlying structure of *It* with the arbitrary body it sends at its service. In throwing the various items of trans-historical technology into the pool, they fail to realise that these too are but obsolete, exhausted bodies at the service of the straight line. Sure enough, *It* soon picks up the technologies, lobbing them at Jay as she flails at the centre of the pool. Water is no match for the line, nor does it constitute its emancipatory opposite (Figures 9-10).



Figures 9-10: The swimming pool can be understood as an attempt to break the murderous geometry of the straight line. However, the plan's failure is already written into the pool's visual adherence to the grid.

The genius of the pool scene lies in its exploration of the doomed body's attempt to communicate a claustrophobically personal, unshared horror amid the limiting determinations of lines and separations. As only Jay can see her follower, she has to communicate the location of *It* to the others as they attempt to combat that which they cannot see. Here, even though physically united at the pool, each individual is entirely alone in their terror. They do not share the straight line, nor stand side-by-side along it. It is a single-file, blind succession; each victim submits following the other. In their muffled screams and fragmented conversations, these friends can but flounder. As explored in an earlier scene, the failed communications of individual terrors even help to recruit bodies to do the line's murderous work. On the beach, Jay's friend Greg (Daniel Zovatto) stands behind *It* as Jay fires at its head; having to throw himself down into the sand, Greg almost takes the hit, demonstrating the frenzied complicity of all bodies to the line's metaphysical design.

The bungled communications and out-of-date technologies of the pool scene, however, brilliantly echo a question central to horror cinema: how, amid the campy make-up and special effects, do you represent the unrepresentable origins of fear? The bodies which follow murderously along the straight line, like the tatty technologies doomed to drown in the swimming pool, are somewhat corny, stale nostalgias from cult horror past. The echo of the sex-as-death trope, the creepy-crawling child, and the female body as monstrous (especially when imaged as pissing, menstruating, raping and maternal), are all readily cliché. Disposable technologies of horror, these recognizable landmarks, signal by contrast the unrepresentable horror of the straight line's *It*: that line which designs the inescapable, banal succession of human finitude and debunks the progression of history through time as cosy illusion.

The slow, ordinal calculations of the straight line are opposite to the frenzied entropy and panic found in the carnivalesque parade of the cult horror

horror aesthetic, and the entanglement of teen sex that attempts to shag away individual terror by sharing it (or, *It*). Amid this glib helplessness, however, the disposable bodies and technologies at the mercy of the straight line's sequence demonstrate a strange communication emerging from the build-up of kitsch and material obsolescence. It is no surprise that it is inside the cinema within the film that Jay first experiences the horror of trying to communicate the incommunicable, when her date asks her to look at a girl near the exit whom Jay herself cannot see. The horror of the inescapable sequence in *It Follows* is both one lived in horrific, claustrophobic separation, and one which the film's victims attempt to share clumsily in the cheap thrill of a first date, a comfy seat in a cinema, or a sleazy fumble in a parking lot. This incommunicability is a shared incommunicability; a weak, often laughably superficial intersubjective support, and yet the genius at the kernel of the experience of horror cinema.

It Follows' straight line is one that infinitely loops and from which there is no escape. The film appears to suggest that the only lifeline in this procession of inevitability is to cling blindly to the other objects and people strewn about and discarded within the loop; using everything and anything as potential anchors that do little but serve to communicate hopelessness, and a hopelessly shared, obsolescence.

Notes

¹ I will be referring to the film's monster as *It* throughout. Given that this monster assumes many forms, and that the central continuity between these forms is none other than the spatial and kinetic structure of the straight line, *It* also refers more broadly here to this inescapable structure and its ceaseless operation. As Germaine Lussier simply puts it in his review: 'It's just a force, creeping up on the audience' (Lussier 2015).

² See 'Anatomy of Detroit's Decline' (Padnani 2013).

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