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**Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!
The Monster Trucks' Black Sabbath¹**

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For Yuki

Such a monster has, then, really existence! I cannot doubt it, yet I am lost in surprise and admiration.
--Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Introduction

We had not yet gotten beyond the city limits of our hometown of Chicago on our way to the Sunnyview Expo Center in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, for the monster truck rally, when traffic ground to a halt. My wife, Yuki, and I found ourselves stuck in our aging Ford Escort, one car among hundreds clogging the northbound artery of Interstate 94. After maybe half an hour of stop-and-go, we came upon the ostensible culprit: a minor car wreck. But the involved vehicles had been pulled onto the shoulder; the highway was passable. It was we gapers who were causing the delay. Who can resist the spectacle of a car crash?

It was, of course, car wrecking of a sort that Yuki and I were out to see that day in the form of the Monster Jam, the traveling monster truck extravaganza featuring customized trucks on preposterously large tires. Heeding the trademark call of “Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!” millions of Americans treat their pilgrimages to mostly rural arena sites as a kind of Sabbath—a day on which they can rest, while watching the monsters play.² The constituent sacramental elements of the ritual are not, of course, the wine and wafers of high mass, but the populist victuals of beer and bratwurst, with heavy metal anthems replacing more traditional hymns.

However comical the Monster Jam may appear to those of us less implicated in its general ethos, it is a major cultural phenomenon, on par in magnitude and visual grandiosity with

¹ My title is drawn from the headline of a hoax perpetrated by *Weekly World News*, which treats “Jesus the Monster Truck.”

² The Sabbath, of course, is not always a Sunday; Yuki and I witnessed the ritual on a Saturday.

most any other form of entertainment spectacle, and to treat it as a joke or a disposable piece of lowbrow culture would be not only condescending, but negligent. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, ritual theorists and cultural critics have failed to scrutinize the Monster Jam. Attempting a first step toward righting this oversight, I treat the Monster Jam as a subject worthy of serious study, for it is an example of a troubling economic phenomenon underwritten by religious forces.

There is indeed something sinister about this black sabbath. In this paper, I will argue that the fascination that the monster trucks exert on those who behold them trades on the monsters' association with the sinister, or "left," aspect of the sacred, while the power of the outcome of the ritual depends in part on the embattled iconicity of the automobile and the ideology that it emblemizes. In concluding, I draw from Bruce Lincoln's treatment of another great form of sports entertainment, professional wrestling, in arguing that the Monster Jam is an example of a ritual inversion that, "rather than producing upheaval or significant modification within a given social field help[s] to preserve the sociopolitical and economic structures intact in the face of potential challenges."³

I. The Birth of Monsters from the Spirit of Opposition

The first monster truck originated in America's heartland. It was the invention of Bob Chandler, progenitor of the legendary Bigfoot. In 1974, Chandler—owner of the Midwest Four Wheel Drive Center, in Hazelwood, Missouri, and avid tinkerer and off-road enthusiast—bought a new F-250 4x4 that "became a laboratory for parts and engineering experiments."⁴ Oversized tires were among the first modifications. This feature combined with Chandler's "aggressive behind-

³ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 159.

⁴ Tom Morr and Ken Brubaker, *Monster Trucks*, 19.

the-wheel [offroad] escapades” to earn him the nickname Bigfoot, which was subsequently transferred to his truck in 1976.⁵

Bigfoot the truck, like its simian counterpart, achieved a mythical status. But although celebrated locally, in 1977, Chandler’s vehicle was rejected from a classic and custom car show in Las Vegas. In a conspicuous display of contestation, he parked his monstrous machine in front of the glitzy venue, where it inspired the admiration, not to mention bewilderment, of more people than did the cars in the show. In 1981, seeking to intensify the monster’s aura, Chandler set up a stunt field near his Midwest shop and drove Bigfoot over a few junked cars. The feat was captured on video and was disseminated through circles of 4x4 aficionados; the video stirred up sufficient enthusiasm to turn car crushing into a popular phenomenon in the mid-1980s. Previously, this enthusiasm reached a nearly hysterical pitch when, in 1983, Chandler put on a car-crushing exhibition at the Pontiac Silver Dome in Detroit as part of a tractor and pickup show. Event promoter Bob George describes the ecstatic near-riot inspired by the sighting: Bigfoot “came out of the tunnel, crawled over four cars, and then had to be escorted off the floor because 50,000 people came over the rails to get closer.”⁶

That monster trucks are capable of inspiring awe and inducing frenzy is indisputable; what, precisely, accounts for this awe and the religious sensibility it expresses and promotes, however, is less obvious. I submit that these trucks exploit the characteristics of the left sacred in order to inspire fascination in those who behold them. French sociologist Emile Durkheim famously characterized the sacred in absolute opposition to the profane. In fact, “the first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*.”⁷ The sacred, the wholly other, is thus, as one commentator has put it, “the very principle of opposition, contestation, and radical difference.”⁸ Not only opposed to the profane, the sacred is opposed to itself, internally

⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 10.

⁸ Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, xxii.

divided. According to Durkheim, the sacred is characterized by a polarity: “on the one hand, a pure, noble, elevated, life-giving form (the ‘right’ sacred); on the other, an impure, vile, degraded, and dangerous form (the ‘left’ sacred).”⁹

Monster trucks, I contend, are complicit with the sinister, negative, oppositional aspect of the sacred, and embody the transgressive, destructive force associated with death and the underworld. Like many other countercultural phenomena, this domain of custom culture inspires its fearful fascination through a combination of underworld associations and spectacular displays of destructive power. In particular, these trucks are the automotive embodiments of that most conspicuous form of potent alterity: sacred monstrosity.

To be sure, these trucks partake of a host of monstrous attributes.¹⁰ Standing about twelve feet high and fitted with “grotesquely oversized tires,” the eight-ton beasts count gigantism as the most patent of their monstrous features.¹¹ Their 2,000 horsepower engines emit a deafening noise—every bit a monster’s roar. But the awe-inspiring enormity of spatial and sonic volume is not alone responsible for their tremendous sinister force. In addition to egregious size, the trucks, like other monsters, embody contradiction. For example, the mingling of life and death, animate and inanimate, so often associated with monsters is evident in the trucks’ combination of mechanical and biological attributes; the customized metal and fiberglass bodies frequently exhibit 3-D fangs, horns, arms, eyes, and other creaturely features. Moreover, the non-factory bodylines, individually modified skins, and hand-carved tires endow the trucks with an air of uniqueness; each thus displays that monstrous attribute of singularity.

The trucks’ exploitation of the forces of the left-sacred is further underwritten by their association with the destructive forces of nature, from natural catastrophes to predatory beasts; with frenzy, panic, and rampage; and with the chthonic powers of death and the underworld.

⁹ Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, xxiii. Irwin here quotes Roger Caillois on Durkheim, *Man and the Sacred*.
¹⁰ In creating this list of monstrous attributes, I rely in part on David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*.

¹¹ Morr and Brubaker, 29.

Consider, in this regard, the names of just a few monster trucks: Aftershock, Beast, Brothers of Destruction, Carolina Crusher, Cyclone, Destroyer, Devil's Dodge, Extreme Overkill, Gator, Godzilla, Grave Digger, King Krunch, Madusa [sic], Megasaurus, Monster Patrol, Nitemare, Predator, Thunder Beast, Tornado, The Undertaker, and Wild Thang. The alliance of monster trucks and the underworld is made graphically explicit in this comic-style narrative from the pages of my Monster Jam program. It depicts the conjuring of the "spirit of Grim," the skeletal but muscular super-demon who propels the popular monster truck Grave Digger to ever greater degrees of frenzy, and who, having accomplished his demolishing mission, repairs to the underworld, "ready to return when the need for destruction arises once again."¹²

The trucks additionally feature the threatening maw often associated with monsters, reconfigured in their crushing or consuming tires, which are sometimes explicitly incorporated into the overall truck design to correspond to teeth. This attribute has its corollary in the monster trucks' cannibalistic hunger to devour other automobiles. Indeed, Predator's driver, Allen Pezo, claims that his truck "prey[s] on cars."¹³

The importance of the monster trucks' voracity for automobiles is not to be underestimated; an analysis of the symbolic significance of the consumption of cars is, I will show, crucial to understanding the ritual efficacy of the Monster Jam. It is thus to place of the automobile in the American imagination that I now want to turn.

II. *Auto-da-fé*: The Car as Icon

The dream of auto-mobility that found its realization in the production and distribution of the car is part and parcel of the American dream on the whole. Indeed, the freely roving person behind the wheel might be considered the horizontal counterpart of vertical or upward mobility within a

¹² "Grave Digger," Monster Jam comic, from the 2004 Official Souvenir Yearbook of the United Hot Rod Association.

¹³ *Monster Jam: The Amazing Guide*, 28.

free market economy.¹⁴ The car is, as cultural critic Jack Sargeant has put it, the “ultimate realization of individual affirmation.”¹⁵ The sense of freedom and individuality, economic and otherwise, afforded by, and emblemized in, the image of the driver on the open road has rendered the car an icon—an icon of the American Dream, the dream of “success through individual talent [and] effort” as expressed in the rewards of independence, personal freedom.¹⁶

However, the almost religious zeal with which cars have been embraced in America has not, in fact, culminated in the triumph of individualism. On the contrary, “mass car ownership heralded the beginning of consumer capitalism”—and what the automobile heralded at its advent has also become its destiny: The car is no longer only an icon of American individualism, but simultaneously an icon of American mass consumerism and the triumph of corporate capitalism.¹⁷

To be sure, the icon of the automobile retains an aura. The peculiar seductiveness of cars is at once double and other to the aura of the monster truck. It is a seduction predicated on the allure of mass-produced objects, and underwritten by the exhilaration of consumption itself. The fetishization of commodities is thus epitomized in the automobile, which, however, far from assuring a mobilizing individualism, is the embodiment of the age of *mass* production, with its attendant impediments and de-individualizing effects.¹⁸ For example, the irony inherent in the mass-production of machines of auto-mobility finds its most poignant expression in the traffic jam. A parody of the assembly line, the traffic jam is a phenomenon that dramatically displays the diminution of individuality and the arresting of mobility, forward or upward.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Lincoln, 158, for the relations between the American dream, upward mobility, and professional wrestling.

¹⁵ Jack Sargeant, “Squealing Wheels and Flying Fists,” in *Autopia*, 312.

¹⁶ Lincoln, 158.

¹⁷ Sargeant, 312.

¹⁸ As Julian Darius suggests in “Car Crash Crucifixion Culture,” in *Crash Culture*, 307.

¹⁹ See Christopher Sharrett, “Crash Culture and American Blood Ritual,” in *Car Crash Culture*, 323.

III. From Traffic Jam to Monster Jam: Hyperbolic Consumption

One commentator has suggested that “all motorists who’ve ever been stuck in gridlock traffic [respond] with primordial emotion” to the sight of a monster truck climbing over a row of cars, crushing them under its hungry, colossal tires.²⁰ I would go so far as to suggest that the Monster Jam is staged as the *antithesis* of the traffic jam. If the car has become the icon of mass consumerism and its de-individualizing effects, the monster truck—originally the customized, singular, unique creation of individual labor—is the expression of a kind of rage against the machines that embody consumerist culture in late capitalist society. They are the mutated, altered, and, indeed, monstrous others of the industrially produced automobiles in which they have their origins, and from which they deviate.

In fact, the monster trucks might be said to apotheosize road rage—that violent expression of opposition to the frustrating, de-individualizing effects of a road glutted with traffic—while the trucks’ ritualized auto destructions afford a cathartic “visual pleasure...associated with humanity’s most atavistic traits and rudimentary instincts.”²¹ But the exuberantly sensational and gratifying images of this mechanical mayhem are by no means the straightforward expressions of wish-fulfillment. Nor do they simply represent a revolutionary reclamation of individualism and freedom in confrontation with the homogenizing effects of capitalism and mass consumerism. On the contrary, I will argue that the spectacle of the Monster Jam dramatizes an inversion that ultimately “preserve[s]...sociopolitical and economic structures intact,” with corporate America left standing as the beneficiary of the ritually affirmed status quo.²²

To understand the power of this ritual inversion, one must note the social context in which it occurs. What Jim Freedman argues in regard to professional wrestling is all the more

²⁰ Morr and Brubaker, 22.

²¹ Sargeant is speaking here of the prurient sensibility evoked by the crash images in driver’s ed films of the ‘50s and ‘60s.

²² Lincoln, 148.

true of the Monster Jam: “what is most fundamentally at issue...is the nature of modern capitalism and the fabled ‘American Dream’ of success through individual talent [and] effort.”²³ In regard to the Monster Jam, it is important to recall that the American Dream is ambivalently iconized in the form of the automobile, that symbol of individual success, on the one hand, as well as the de-individualizing effects of the successful capitalist system that was to provide the conditions for the individual’s flourishing.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that the sinister fascination that the Monster Jam exerts on its predominantly lower-class audience²⁴ devolves in part on “its ability to present a convincing picture of the contradictions between the...ideology of upward mobility within a free market economy and lived experience,” where mobility is frustrated and individuality is absorbed into all the impotent anonymity and homogeneity of a traffic jam.²⁵ The ritual of the Monster Jam capitalizes²⁶ on the audience’s ambivalence vis-à-vis the automobile through a three-act challenge to, and concomitant re-affirmation of, capitalist ideology.

The first act of the Monster Jam rally consists of competitive races between pairs of monster trucks over a looping semi-circular course with impediments that include rows of junked cars.²⁷ The cars’ homogeneity is underscored by the fact that they are all uniformly painted in coats of flat primary colors; the indistinguishability of one car from another also highlights the custom singularity of the monsters that devour them. In an iconoclastic rage, the monster trucks variously trample, crush, or overleap the anonymous cars, those icons of freedom and individuality that have come to emblemize mass production. Here, then, is the initial challenge to the dominant ideology. But this routine simultaneously heralds the triumphant re-instatement

²³ As Lincoln summarizes Freedman’s argument, 157,158. Freedman includes virtue, along with talent and effort, in his account of the American Dream of success.

²⁴ In regard to the claim that the Monster Jam’s audience is predominantly lower-class: anecdotal evidence will have to suffice here for what empirical data would, I am confident, bear out. I have tried contacting Clear Channel Entertainment, owner of Monster Jam, in order to obtain numbers, but my messages have gone unanswered.

²⁵ I am following, by way of an analogy with pro wrestling, Lincoln’s summary of Freedman’s thesis. Freedman, Lincoln claims, “argued that the fascination wrestling exerts on its predominantly lower-class audience derives from its ability” to offer an account of the disconnect between upward mobility and real life.

²⁶ I choose this word deliberately.

²⁷ The course also features mud pits that might be said to act as hyperbolic pot holes.

of an American economic ideal: individual talent and effort, embodied in the custom vehicles, are the inevitable victors of a ritual of competitive consumerism; far from corroding or opposing the system, they here dramatically comply with its conditions.

This critique and re-affirmation of mass production and its concomitant, mass consumerism, achieves preposterous grandiloquence in the second act of the Monster Jam. Lumbering to the center of the arena is a “transformer,” an earth-moving machine outfitted as a fire-breathing, car-eating monster. Raising its victim up with powerful claws, the Robosaurus, seen here, scorches the automobile before crushing it between mechanical mandibles, making carnage of the car. The singular monster devours and destroys the anonymous automobile: thus the second challenge. However, in this auto-cannibalistic display, the massive monster embodies the very thing it was to consume: mass consumption itself. In a moment of conspicuous, indeed hyperbolic, consumption, the transformer violently literalizes consumerism by devouring the automobile—a spectacular, fascinating re-affirmation of capitalist ideology.

In the third act, the monster trucks participate in a freestyle competition in which each machine is given the opportunity to display as much creative destruction as possible, crushing and jumping cars, letting their engines roar, and spinning donuts that stir up thick nimbuses of dust. It is in this third act that the trucks’ drivers, attempting to whip the crowd into a frenzy with risky stunts, are most likely to lose control of their vehicles. On the night that I attended the Monster Jam, a truck called Destroyer fulfilled the destiny implied in its name. Using junked cars as a ramp, Destroyer attempted to ride out a wheelie, before tipping over and crashing. This was clearly the highlight of the evening. With the crash of the monster, a staple of any Monster Jam rally, the audience goes wild. In fact, the ideal outcome of the freestyle competition, from the fans’ perspective, is a crash. For this reason: what we fans love most is to see a monster work itself into such a frenzy of destruction that it actually exhausts itself, destroys itself. In this instance, Destroyer’s frenzy of destruction extended beyond the cars to the very agent of destruction. The automobile-destroying Destroyer proved also to be autodestructive. But

Destroyer's crash marks the third re-affirmation of capitalism—this one with Aristotelian overtones, for the crash is also the death of the monster, and has all the cathartic moment of a tragedy. This catharsis has a rhetorical, persuasive effect: in stirring up excessive emotions of rebellion and opposition—those emotions most likely to corrode the prevailing ideology—it also rids the audience of those emotions. It thus effects a rewarding, gratifying release of potentially dangerous sentiments. To the cheers of fans, the destruction of the destroying machine spectacularly glorifies the risk-taking individual even as he stumbles and crashes, again and again.

And this, finally, is the task of the Monster Jam: to dramatize the myth of the American Dream, affirming its truth even in the face of challenge, and in so doing, to “repersuade the audience of the dominant ideology’s enduring validity, their own contradictory experiences notwithstanding.”²⁸ Indeed, it is the owner of the Monster Jam, the multimedia conglomerate Clear Channel Entertainment, headquartered in San Antonio, Texas, that cultivates and capitalizes on the enthrallment with death, destruction, and the left-sacred in order to maintain the frenetic commerce of promotional culture. While the monster trucks were born from the spirit of opposition, they are now the pawns of economic competition. Their sinister forces have been usurped and packaged, co-opted and sold in the form of tickets, t-shirts, toys, magazines, caps, pennants, and programs, all of which proclaim that the real winner of the Monster Jam’s competitive ritual is corporate America—for capitalism is always at work, even and especially on the sabbath.

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At the conclusion of the rally, as the monsters exited the twilit arena, Yuki and I joined the gathering masses in the parking lot, where we were all immediately caught up in a line of cars waiting to exit the Expo grounds.

²⁸ Lincoln, 158. Lincoln claims that this affirmation of the American Dream is the “task that wrestling undertakes—and it is hardly alone in this....” The purpose of this paper has been to show that the Monster Jam, like wrestling, undertakes just this task.

The nighttime ride back to Chicago was long, but lit up. At one point, we glimpsed a group of squad cars, blue and red lights flashing. The accident must have just happened: a car on the shoulder of an otherwise empty road, its entire body consumed in flames.