

# THE WITCH AND THE HORROR OF ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Philip Tallon and Cameron McAllister on  
the Portrayal of Real Evil

Despite the growing critical group hug, the horror genre remains on the cultural fringes. Given its abiding preoccupation with fear and darkness, it's unlikely to shift position anytime soon. Consequently, embattled horror fans may find it helpful to cast a critical eye over the subject matter of more mainstream genres to bolster the case for this much maligned mode of storytelling. Take comedy, for instance. The central plotline of one of the highest grossing comedies of 2015 mixes plushophilia (a fetish for stuffed animals) and bestiality: a teddy bear marries a woman, they want a child, seek a sperm donor, and then must prove in a court of law that a teddy bear qualifies as human enough to become a parent.

The brainchild of *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane, *Ted 2* manages to heap mockery and scorn on everything from love and holy matrimony to infertility and the U.S. justice system. Stated baldly, this plotline looks obscene and appalling, but the film isn't interested in wrestling with any of the issues it raises; it just wants to make you laugh. In this sense, to call it nihilistic is to miss the point. *Ted 2* isn't ambitious enough to qualify as nihilistic. To quote the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, nihilism is simply too "exhausting." Most of our current entertainment isn't willing to put in the work.

If there's anything approaching a coherent vision behind *Ted 2*, it seems to be the notion that the sacred is an inherently suspicious category, one that's permanently up for grabs. In effect, this movie says that human flourishing is equal parts destruction and hysterical laughter — people cackling like vultures in the wreckage of their own culture. In this sense, *Ted 2* is so far "beyond good and evil" that it doesn't even pause to recognize these as legitimate categories. It doesn't so much erase the line between good and evil as laugh at the very notion of a line in the first place. Lines, after all, are usually part of a tradition. Like so many of our current comedies, *Ted 2* can't wrestle with anything. It can only trivialize. The film is the rough

equivalent of a group of vandals cracking up at the obscenities they've spray-painted across the walls of a church. Perhaps one of the quintessential modern fantasies, it unfolds a world devoid of any real consequences.

From *Deadpool* to *The Bachelor in Paradise*, this particular brand of juvenile lawlessness is a key ingredient in so much of our popular entertainment that we scarcely take notice of it. Action movies prove a similar point. We may balk at the prospect of a masked killer stalking teenagers in the woods, but we have zero qualms about a “hero” spilling gallons of blood in the name of vigilante justice. James Bond’s “licensed” killings and killer licentiousness fly under the radar, precisely because they protect the status quo, as opposed to disrupting our sense of comfort, which is precisely what horror does. It is not that we dislike violence — we love it — but only when it’s part of a comprehensible “plan” (to quote *The Dark Knight’s Joker*).

Interestingly, because these titles belong to more socially acceptable genres like comedy, action, and reality television, their antics often get a free pass, whereas anything in the horror category is often regarded as guilty by association. Yet, many horror films consistently do the one thing that most of our other popular entertainers refuse to do —

namely, take evil seriously. They frequently move beyond trivialization to the much needed moral wrestling match. One particularly striking example arrived the same year as *Ted 2*.

In his perceptive review of Robert Eggers's *The Witch*, *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane draws attention to the fact that the primary engine driving the film is a fear that's as ancient as it is anachronistic:

The problem is simple: we can't be damned. One gradual effect of the Enlightenment was to tamp down the fires of Hell and sweep away the ashes, allowing us to bask in the rational coolness that ensued. But the loss—to the dramatic imagination, at any rate—has been immense. If your characters are convinced that a single action, a word out of place, or even a stray thought brings not bodily risk but an eternity of pain, your story will be charged with illimitable dread. No thriller, however tense, can promise half as much.

But this is a scary movie and a serious one, because it lures us into the minds, and the earthly domains, of those who are themselves scared, night and day, that they have forfeited the mercies of God. *It*

*takes an original movie to remind us of original sin.*<sup>1</sup>

What could be more culturally remote than the threat of hellfire? Do you remember the last time you got down on your knees and earnestly pleaded with God to spare you from hell? The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz speaks for many of us when he says, “It is simply impossible for me to form a spatial conception of Heaven and Hell. . . . But the imagination can function only spatially; without space the imagination is like a child who wants to build a palace and has no blocks.”<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the afterlife, many of us no longer have any blocks. Given the current vogue for end-of-the-world spoofs, many of us are liable to regard the prospect of eternal damnation as little more than a comedic trope.<sup>3</sup> Last I checked there’s still a cottage industry of “Zombie Apocalypse” paraphernalia. Some intrepid fans have even gone to the trouble of

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1 Anthony Lane, “Spellbound: The Witch,” *The New Yorker*, last modified February 29, 2016, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/29/the-witch-review> (emphasis mine).

2 Quoted in Roger Lundin, *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 2009), 12.

3 For a recent example, look no further than the Armageddon-sized munchline that is *This Is the End*

hacking warning signs in construction zones to alert unsuspecting motorists about the zombies ahead.<sup>4</sup>

Given its strange migration into literary anthologies, Jonathan Edwards's infamous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" may be the last time we encountered a sincere description of hell's infernal geography. For better or for worse, Edwards's words are now seared into the North American imagination; the sermon is perhaps the archetypal "fire and brimstone" message.<sup>5</sup> Think of the vivid picture of the unconverted strolling briskly over the pit of hell on nothing more than a "rotting covering."<sup>6</sup> Lest you think that a comparison between this sermon and certain horror films is a bit tenuous, consider this little scene where Edwards describes the ravenous demonic forces awaiting their prey:

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<sup>4</sup> Korva Coleman, "Motorists Beware! Zombies Ahead!" *NPR*, last modified October 11, 2012, accessed January 4, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/10/11/162712149/motorists-beware-zombies-ahead>

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the very phrase makes an appearance when Edwards argues that unrestrained sin turns the human heart into a "furnace of fire and brimstone." See Jonathan Edwards, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, eds. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, & Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 52

The devils watch them; they are ever by them, at their right hand; they stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back; if God should withdraw his hand, by which they are restrained, they would in one moment fly upon their poor souls. The old serpent is gaping for them; hell opens its mouth wide to receive them; and if God should permit it, they would be hastily swallowed up and lost.<sup>7</sup>

But perhaps the sermon's most enduring image is the "slender thread" by which we are suspended over the "great furnace of wrath."<sup>8</sup> As if this weren't precarious enough, Edwards informs us that said thread is surrounded by the "flames of divine wrath," which are "ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder."<sup>9</sup>

If you can push past your dismissive modern sensibilities and read the full sermon, you'll encounter a vision of immense power — one that taps into a primal sense of dread that's often scorned but never fully forgotten. For all their blasphemy and trivialization, could it be that films like *Ted 2* are

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<sup>7</sup> Edwards, *Sermons*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> As grim as this sounds, the image is not foreign to scripture. See the take-no-prisoners language of Ezekiel 22:17-22.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *Sermons*, 52.

really nothing more than nervous laughter—the laughter of drunken kids who hear the unmistakable sound of cops pulling into their parent-less driveway? What if this is not only a world of consequences, but one of *eternal consequences*?

In the words of Blaise Pascal, “We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing.”<sup>10</sup> It’s highly revealing that this sentence could function as a spiritual plot summary for most of the movies and shows we’ve got lined up in our queues. Part of what makes Pascal such a convicting thinker is his steadfast refusal to cater to our numerous distractions. By ruthlessly stripping away all our modern defense mechanisms, he offers a clear picture of our actual dilemma:

There are only three sorts of people: those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy, those in the middle are unhappy and reasonable.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Blaise Pascal, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, *Pensees* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

*The Witch* is not a film for people in that last category. It's not for people who are unhappy *and* foolish. To continue in this Pascalian vein, the film won't distract us while we run heedlessly into the abyss. It's not a film for the apathetic, since it presents a highly credible vision of a world of eternal consequences. Though many critics have put the film through ideological salad shredders, its witches are not symbolic, metaphorical, or ambiguous; they are terribly real.<sup>12</sup> They worship Satan, dance and cavort naked in the woods, levitate above the arthritic trees, shape-shift into wanton nymphs, and do unspeakable things to unbaptized babies. Above all, they belong to the devil. The consequences of their actions are woven into the warp and woof of their very identities; they are personifications of damnation.

The film opens with a family being exiled from a Puritan settlement for an obscure crime — namely, “dishonoring the laws of the commonwealth and the church with [...] prideful conceit.”<sup>13</sup> While the precise nature of this crime remains ambiguous, its

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<sup>12</sup> For a feminist reading of the film, see Diane Cohen, “The Witch’ Isn’t a Horror Flick--It’s a High-Powered Feminist Manifesto,” *Marie Claire*, March 17, 2016, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a19362/the-witch-review/>.

<sup>13</sup> The quote alone should fend off “gorehounds” and others who treasure the genre’s more exploitative elements

consequences are as practical as they are harsh. The family uproots from their settlement to eek out an isolated and slender existence on the edge of a vast forest. We get a hint of the approaching disaster when Eggers's lens moves toward the line of trees and we hear the swelling of a hysterical choir. We are given to know that these woods harbor dark secrets. For most of us, the woods still occupy a kind of mythic territory, and we wonder what primitive and unseen forces lurk in their ragged mazes.

It is a family of seven, but the camera soon lets us know that Thomasin, the oldest, is of especial interest. Though her natural beauty puts her at odds with the austere faces surrounding her, it's her elusive eyes that truly captivate; we simply don't know what's taking place behind her ambivalent gaze.

Things turn catastrophic after the banishment: a witch snatches the family's unbaptized infant and absconds with the child into the woods. When a rogue mission on the part of Thomasin and her younger brother (Caleb) to recover the perished child ushers in further calamity, the parents begin to suspect that their daughter is in league with the devil. If this sounds like Eggers is channeling his inner Arthur Miller to expose the repressive nature of religious dogma in *The Crucible*, it is not. Indeed,

Thomasin will soon make a pact with the Father of Lies in the family barn.

After a lethal confrontation with her mother, Thomasin enters the stall of the family goat (ominously dubbed “Black Phillip”) that her younger siblings believe to be the devil’s proxy. Given that this loathsome creature has just gored her father to death, this little outing is more than a bit odd. Her thick blond hair is down for the first time in the film, and her mother’s blood is still spattered on her chest. “Black Phillip, I conjure thee to speak to me,” she intones. Soon, a velvety voice asks her what she wants. “What canst thou give?” she asks. The voice offers a series of enticements that recall Satan’s temptation of Christ in the wilderness, culminating in the justly-celebrated line, “Wouldst thou like to live *deliciously*?” A figure in black enters the room with ringing spurs on his heels. Thomasin accepts his offer and the figure commands her, “Remove thy shift.” She undresses as a single tear escapes her eye. The figure now appears behind her and two black-gloved hands rest on her bare shoulders. Eggers shrewdly keeps the shape out of focus, but, in a fitting choice of wardrobe, we can faintly discern the costume of a courtesan. The devil bids Thomasin to seal their contract with her signature in his

infernal book.<sup>14</sup> She confesses her illiteracy. “I will guide thy hand,” he purrs.

The film’s final images seem to be near-archetypal manifestations of our most elemental woodland nightmares. We see a naked Thomasin entering the woods with the leaden steps of a somnambulist, pale moonlight illuminating her milky skin. Her hypnotic stroll is punctuated by the sounds of shrieks and hysterical chants. A group of witches is gathered around a massive bonfire. All are naked; some are down on all fours, braying like wild animals. Presently, these writhing hags begin to levitate. Thomasin takes her place at the head of this motley gathering and Eggers focuses in on her face, which becomes transfixed in a look of ecstasy. In the film’s final shot, we see Thomasin floating at the top of the skeletal trees in the shape of a broken cross as the bonfire’s livid glow casts the woods in stark chiaroscuro.

Eggers is forthright about his ambition for *The Witch*: “If I could upload a Puritan’s nightmare directly into the audience’s mind’s eye, that would

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<sup>14</sup> The Protestant literature on witchcraft placed a great deal of emphasis on the pact made between the witch and the devil. This pact was believed to be the source of the witch’s malign powers. See Brain P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe: Third Edition* (Edinburgh Gate, United Kingdom: Pearson Longman, 2006), 7-24. We’re grateful to Derek Caldwell for drawing our attention to this source.

be the goal.”<sup>15</sup> With its elaborate sets, immaculate wardrobe, and archaic dialogue, *The Witch* could initially be mistaken for a costume drama, more *Age of Innocence* than *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Eggers combed Puritan sources — Cotton Mather was an especial favorite — to capture their habits of speech and major theological preoccupations.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, many avid horror fans were initially perplexed and then increasingly frustrated as they endured extended conversations between a father and son on the nature of original sin, all rendered in terms that might furrow the brow of a seasoned seminarian.

But the real poetry of Eggers’s film is visual. Shot in pale blues and grays that aptly convey the cold and brittle New England landscape, the scenes positively scream whenever a bold color enters the frame. When an infant is whisked away by a cloaked

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with *Vice News*:

[https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/video/vice-talks-film-robert-eggers-on-39the-witch39/56c48832a3aa03407bcbfa7b](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/vice-talks-film-robert-eggers-on-39the-witch39/56c48832a3aa03407bcbfa7b), accessed December 18, 2018.

<sup>16</sup>For a sample of Mather’s thinking on witches, see *Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*, ed. Elaine G. Breslaw (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 42-48.

Along with providing helpful historical context, Mather’s prose informs a good deal of the cadences of *The Witch’s* dialogue. Once again, we’re grateful to Derek Caldwell for bringing this source to our attention.

figure in the woods, the red garment charges the shape with a demonic menace.<sup>17</sup> Even before we see a gleaming blade descending toward the infant's prone body, we know this child is doomed. A spurt of crimson blood in the milking pail cuts like a knife; a regurgitated apple, blood-red and intact, glows like a Satanic flower in the rustic gloom.<sup>18</sup> Most hauntingly, the reflection of flames on the character's faces, whether from a lantern or a bonfire, takes on an infernal aspect, as though these wispy pilgrims are themselves staring into the very hellish furnace Edwards describes so well. The fear of hell is rendered in visual terms in nearly every scene. If Eggers wants to "upload a Puritan's nightmare" into our heads, the end result is a kind of re-enchantment of hell.

Drawing on his background as a production designer, Eggers models many of his shots after actual paintings. Indeed, some of the film's most striking imagery owes its inspiration to the fevered imagination of Francisco Goya — a canny choice, since the painter's own ironic distance from his occult subject matter does little to diminish its

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<sup>17</sup> A clear visual nod to Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*, in which Donald Sutherland pursues a red-cloaked phantom through the damp streets of Venice.

<sup>18</sup> A symbolically loaded fruit that has clear associations with original sin

visceral power. In this sense, the man's supernatural paintings exhibit the same tension on display in *The Witch*—namely, a sincere treatment of a superstition we're supposed to have outgrown.

In *The Witch*, the cumulative effect of this meticulous and sincere approach to the fear of damnation is a film that not only confronts the moral lethargy on display in so much of our current entertainment, but one that actively shatters the adolescent fantasy of a world without consequences. One of the more poignant examples occurs when Caleb, the middle child, inquires about the eternal status of his little brother, Samuel, who died unbaptized at the hands of the murderous witch. His father's response is uncompromising, but not without compassion:

“Look you. I love thee marvelous well. But tis God alone, not man, what knows who is a son of Abraham and who is not. Who is good and who is evil. Fain would I tell thee that Sam sleeps in Jesus — that thou wilt, that I wilt — but I cannot tell thee that. None can.”

You can almost see Edwards's slender thread as the father utters these unsparing words to his little boy. That slender thread is also pulled taut as the characters repeatedly fall to their knees, begging

God to spare them and their family from the ordeal of his wrath. To watch this film is to be transported into a world where one's choices are a matter of life and death, and life *after* death — a world in which our principled irony is as defenseless as a spider's web in stopping a rock.<sup>19</sup> Unlike modern audiences, these weary pilgrims simply don't have the luxury of "running heedlessly into the abyss."

When Caleb responds to his father's queries on the nature of his sinful condition by saying that he is "bent unto sin, and only unto sin, and that continually," many of us will squint and wonder about the mental health of a child thinking in these terms.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the very word *sin* has been so trivialized in modern language that most of us are liable to see it as shorthand for self-indulgence, like a trip to Las Vegas ("Sin City") or a fifth scoop of ice cream.<sup>21</sup> The viewpoint of *The Witch* is not "What

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<sup>19</sup> The image belongs to Edwards: "... all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock." *Sermons*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> For much of the information on Eggers and his film, we are indebted to Lauren Wilford's superb essay, "Witch-Craft: Why Robert Eggers Is Our Next Great Filmmaker," *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, Issue 43, Best of 2016, accessed December 19, 2018, <https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2017/01/10/witch-craft-why-robert-eggers-is-our-next-great-filmmaker/>.

<sup>21</sup> As Francis Spufford observes, "Sin, you can see, always refers

happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” but rather, “What we do in life echoes in eternity.”

Given that Eggers spent four years diving into Puritan sources in order to capture their mindset, we need to blow the dust off Edwards’s thoughts on original sin. Edwards places a very high premium on the doctrine of original sin because he believes “the whole gospel or doctrine of salvation, must suppose it; and all real belief, or true notion of that gospel must be built upon it.”<sup>22</sup> In order to make sense of the claim that all human beings are judged for Adam’s sin before they confirm their corruption with their own wayward choices, Edwards distinguishes between an “evil inclination in [Adam’s] heart and the “extended pollution” of Adam’s sin, which leaves us simultaneously infected and liable.<sup>23</sup> He illustrates this vexing idea with the picture of a tree. Adam is related to us like the root of a tree to its branches; Adam is the root and we are the branches.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, each of us

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*Why, Despite Everything, Christianity can still make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Edwards, ed. John E Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1995), 224.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

inherits a corrupt nature from Adam, one which we are guaranteed to confirm when we sin.

Lest we overlook or minimize its severity, Edwards is at great pains to spell out the disaster of this inherited condition: “so that this depravity is both odious, and also pernicious, fatal and destructive, in the highest sense, as inevitably tending to that which implies man’s eternal ruin; it shows that man, as he is by nature, is in a deplorable and undone state, in the highest sense.”<sup>25</sup> Little wonder that Caleb is deeply concerned about the eternal destiny of his missing sibling. This is not some arcane theological debate; this is the fate of a beloved family member. For this reason, Edwards allows us to glimpse the poignancy on display throughout *The Witch*. We glimpse it when Thomasen peers into her parent’s bedroom and espies her disconsolate mother pleading to heaven for her perished infant son; we see it when Thomasen implores the Lord to spare her own soul from eternal torment; we see it in the father as he lifts his craggy face to the sky and pleads for the Lord to spare him and his family.

Commenting on the film’s historical precision, Lauren Wilford points out,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 221

If [Eggers] had been any looser with period-accurate design, any freer with dialogue, any more manipulative with his camerawork, we might have taken the cue that this was a contemporary interpretation of the past, and felt free to judge its characters, slotting them into our preconceived category for ‘Puritans.’<sup>26</sup> But the members of the family in *The Witch* aren’t symbolic Puritans—they’re actual Puritans. They’re human beings who crossed the Atlantic to practice Reformed Calvinism in the New World. *The Witch* forces us to meet the members of this family on their own terms, and to enter fully into their world for the length of the film—to want what they want, and to fear what they fear.<sup>27</sup>

One particularly moving line that underscores Wilford’s point comes from the beleaguered mother:

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<sup>26</sup> Think of films like Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antionette* or Baz Lurhman’s *The Great Gatsby*, both movies that cast their historical subjects through a distinctly modern prism. Though this technique is often used to “humanize” the remote past, what it ends up doing is furthering the rift by creating an ironic distance between viewers and the story. Part of Eggers’s boldness as a filmmaker consists in his refusal to look down on the past in this manner.

<sup>27</sup> Lauren Wilford, “Witch-Craft: Why Robert Eggers Is Our Next Great Filmmaker,” *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, Issue 43, Best of 2016, accessed December 19, 2018, <https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2017/01/10/witch-craft->

“I want to go home.” Having already suffered the loss of her youngest child, this simple and heartbreaking admission is uttered as her son, Caleb, lies in a kind of demonic trance. When her husband assures her that they’ll seek medical attention at the local settlement, she admits that she doesn’t have any local settlement in mind; she means England. The scene reminds us that the family has made the irrevocable decision of crossing an ocean to make their home in this strange new country. In the ragged world of these pilgrim settlers, home is now permanently out of reach.

History often appears alien to us, and we struggle mightily to inhabit its constellation of foreign mindsets. There’s nothing foreign about this scene, though. When calamity strikes, we all crave the comforts of home, whether we’re in the unharvested terrain of a new world, or a Starbucks in a crowded airport terminal. This is a deeply humane moment in a film that often feels strange and remote. Never do we forget that these are real flesh and blood people struggling to make the best of their circumstances. Though it abounds in startling imagery and occult rituals, *The Witch* offers none of the convenient escapism most of us expect from our entertainment. It’s a film that inspires fear, revulsion, and, yes, horror. What it doesn’t inspire,

however, is the comforting fantasy of a world without consequences. Little wonder so many viewers were aggravated by its steadfast refusal to indulge their appetite for moral oblivion. Running heedlessly, we may say that Eggers' film puts a fresh vision in front of us of the looming abyss. In a sense, the film functions like elaborate fire and brimstone sermon that reminds us of the drastic importance of our moral choices. It's a message that isn't always welcome, but it is one that just may scare the hell out of us.

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