"The Mindworm":
C. M. Kornbluth's Post-War American Vampire Tale at the Dawn of the Atomic Age

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Abstract: Through a close reading of C. M. Kornbluth's "The Mindworm" (1950), this paper focuses on the socioeconomic and political anxieties of post-war America including: fears of uncontrolled technological development (nuclear weapons), pathologies of consumerism (material affluence), and the McCarthyite suppression of dissent (the second Red Scare and government surveillance) to reveal the author's significantly veiled anti-authoritarian message. Published during the height of revived anti-Communist hysteria, Kornbluth's story challenges the legitimacy of American values of the 1950s, including consumerism, patriotism and conformity. A reworking of the traditional science-fiction narrative where the enemy represents the fear of the Other (i.e. Communists), Kornbluth's story exposes the real threat to American democracy: the American government's suppression of its citizens' rights.

Keywords: science fiction, supernatural, post-war America

 "The Mindworm" appeared in the first issue of the science-fiction magazine *Worlds Beyond* (Dec 1950), edited by Damon Knight. Knight is said to have suggested to C. M. Kornbluth the title and story, which would center on "a mental vampire" (Rich 151). Upon first read, "The Mindworm" appears to be typical of the pulp science fiction stories of the Golden Age: the characters seem to be almost indistinguishable and the plot is relatively simple – a mutant vampire protagonist stalks and kills his prey and is himself killed at the end.[1] Kornbluth's story, a beautifully crafted tribute to the author's conviction that science fiction can and should function as social criticism, is in fact a

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[1] This era was also noted for science-fictional vampires in films including *The Thing* (1951), *Not of this Earth* (1956), and *It* (1958).

critique of numerous aspects of post-war American culture. Through a close reading of Kornbluth's story, this paper focuses on the socioeconomic and political anxieties of this "Age of Anxiety", including fears of uncontrolled technological development, pathologies of consumerism, and the McCarthyite suppression of dissent, to reveal Kornbluth's significantly veiled anti-authoritarian message. In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach famously declares that "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (145). Careful attention to Kornbluth's portrayal of the supernatural suggests to what end his vampire reflects anxieties of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In challenging the legitimacy of American values of the 1950s, including patriotism and conformity, Kornbluth reworks the traditional science fiction narrative where the enemy represents the fear of the Other (i.e. Communists) to reveal the real threat to American democracy: the American government's suppression of its citizens' rights.

Kornbluth (1923–1958), who was of Polish Jewish descent, joined the Futurian Science Literary Society (FSLS), a group of New York science-fiction fans and writers, when he was 15 (Rich 10).[2] He authored numerous short stories and several novels in collaboration with fellow Futurians including Frederik Pohl, Judith Merril, and Donald Wollheim. Most of the Futurians were interested in the political applications of science fiction. Kornbluth's biographer Mark Rich explains that they valued global awareness, activism, and democratic participation; he writes, "they were called Communists … since one or two of them attended Communist meetings in the same meeting hall, other evenings" (14). Wollheim, the founder of FSLS, was attracted to Communism and believed that science-fiction writers and fans "should actively work for the realization of the scientific world-state" (Carr 430). Some members took this call very literally – Merril, for example, supported Trotskyism, and Pohl was a member of the Communist Party. Other science-fiction authors of the 1950s who were especially skeptical, like Kornbluth, took a "debunking position on society's infatuation with technological development", usually, as Jonathan Lethem points out, "in light of some instinctively Marxist sense of how capitalism corrupts the reception of radical technology" (Luter 23).

Kornbluth's most popular works, including the short stories "The Little Black Bag" (1950) and "The Marching Morons" (1951), reprinted in *The Best Science Fiction Stories of C. M. Kornbluth*, portray the United States as a "cynically conformist, economically corrupt, militarily aggressive and politically authoritarian society" (Latham 134). The novel he penned with Pohl, *The Space Merchants* (1953), about two enormous advertising agencies and their domination of the future world, is "an effective satire of the anticommunist oppression of the McCarthy era in which the book was written" (Booker, *Monsters* 40). Kornbluth's *Not This August* (1955; UK title *Christmas Eve* [1956]) portrays a US that is invaded, divided, and enslaved by Sino-Soviet armies (Seed, "Constructing" 75). Isaac Asimov and others have asserted that "Kornbluth was a brilliant writer, and perhaps the most brilliant of them all" (qtd. in Rich 5).

Kornbluth's "The Mindworm" was published in 1950, during the height of revived anti-Communist hysteria that had gripped the United States after World War II. Very little critical attention has been paid to the story. In *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War*, M. Keith Booker calls for "a more sophisticated – and more political – reading of the science fiction of the 1950s than has generally been

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[2] Deborah, Kornbluth's mother, was born in Kalisz, Poland; his father, Samuel, was a second-generation American of Polish descent (Rich 16).

attempted" (Booker, *Monsters* 3). David Seed writes extensively on the Golden Age of science fiction, and specifically on Kornbluth, yet his manuscript *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film*, which includes a lengthy chapter on Kornbluth, makes no mention of the "The Mindworm" whatsoever. Rich's 451-page seminal study of Kornbluth's life and works devotes one brief sentence to the story (on page 158) and offers no critical analysis.

Kornbluth's sometime collaborator Pohl has himself declared that "there is no good science fiction at all that is not to some degree political" (7). Seed's article on Pohl and Kornbluth delineates how "the authors substantiate this conviction in their fiction dealing with the area where politics and economics intersect" (Seed, *American* 93). The central strategy of science fiction, as Darko Suvin has famously argued, is "cognitive estrangement". Derived from the Russian formalist concept of *ostrananie* (defamiliarization), the literary technique of "making strange", cognitive estrangement in science fiction can be effective as a method of political commentary. Booker explains that science fiction uses unusual settings (distant times and galaxies) to "provide fresh perspectives from which to view the author's (or reader's) own time and place" (Booker, *Dystopian* 27). Writing about science-fiction films of the long 1950s, which is generally considered to span the late-1940s beginnings of the Cold War to the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Booker, *Post-Utopian* 1), Susan Sontag comes to a similar conclusion: these films, she writes, "inculcate a strange apathy concerning the processes of radiation, contamination, and destruction …. The naïve level of the films neatly tempers the sense of otherness, of alien-ness, with the grossly familiar" (Sontag 225). Science-fiction writer and editor Barry Malzberg claims that during the 1950s science fiction was "among the very few mass markets where, sufficiently masked, an antiauthoritarian statement could be published" (34). That Kornbluth engages in implicit social criticism in his works can hardly be contested. In a letter to Pohl dated July 30 1953 Kornbluth writes of a critic:

> He doesn't seem to realize, as *Advertising Age*, or Tide, or whoever it was, did, that we are Consies pure and simple, out to bring down American Advertising even if we are crushed in the ruins of the temple. Any other theory – e.g., that we were writing a story for $10,000.00 and were interested mainly in giving editors and readers value for the dough – is preposterous. (qtd. in Rich 201)

In his January 11, 1957 lecture at the University of Chicago, Kornbluth declared that "science fiction … should be an effective literature of social criticism" and that "science fiction … does contain social criticism, explicit and implicit" (Kornbluth, "Failure" 55, 75). Kornbluth's recurrent concerns in his fiction are political and economic in nature; he writes about the deep conflict created by the existence of weapons of mass destruction and the crisis of American consumerism (see, for example, *Take Off*, *Not This August*, "The Doomsman", "The Words of Guru", "The Marching Morons", and "The Last Man Left in the Bar").

Kornbluth's "The Mindworm" reflects the anxieties of his day: fear of possible nuclear catastrophe, the second Red Scare, surveillance, and guilt at increasing material affluence. The direct fear was of nuclear Armageddon based on the knowledge of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In post-war America, anxiety about the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union was rampant. In 1947 American President Harry S. Truman introduced the Truman doctrine to fight Communism, and defined post-war US policy by pledging support for any nation defending itself against communism (Fink 63). The spread of Communism abroad

only served to increase anxieties and frustration at home. Anxieties about collaboration with the enemy and the US government's surveillance of its own citizens, for example, reached new peaks of intensity in the US during this time. President Truman signed the National Security Act, establishing a National Security Council in 1947. Steve Budiansky's *Code Warriors: NSA's Codebreakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union* examines the clandestine surveillance activities that the government was conducting during this time (including Project Shamrock, which operated uninterrupted for 30 years, from 1945 to 1975). In a 1948 article entitled "Loyalty among Government Employees" in the *Yale Law Journal*, Professors Thomas I. Emerson and David M. Helfeld conclude that "no precedent is to be found in foreign experience, outside the totalitarian states, for a comprehensive, continuous system of loyalty surveillance similar to that instituted by the Loyalty Order in the United States" (67).

The unique urgencies of the Cold War, and particularly fear of nuclear war, affected writers' perceptions of the changed status of science fiction. Isaac Asimov dated the shift precisely: "The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable" (qtd. in Seed, *American* 8). In "Empire of Liberalism: Cultural War on the Social under Cold-War Liberalism and Neoliberalism" Miura Reiichi identifies a Cold War literature of freedom that emphasises individualism against the social; of the culture of the Cold War 1950s, he writes that it is "epitomized by the notorious McCarthyism, suppressive, or even ironically and virtually *totalitarian* with its recourse to the aggrandized threat of the Soviet Union and its totalitarian communism" (11). Kornbluth's story can certainly be classified as "literature of freedom", as in its criticism of the culture of the Cold War, it indirectly advocates for an apolitical regime, or a more "perfect liberalism" (Reiichi 44). Sarah Daw, in *Writing Nature in Cold War American Literature*, argues that many Cold War writers engage in a subversive reexamination of the human relationship to its environment that was occasioned by the dropping of the atomic bombs; these authors portray nature "as an infinite ecological structure that is capable of containing both the human and the nuclear within its expansive dimensions" (109). Her analysis highlights overlooked literary portrayals of Nature as an "infinite ecology" and of nuclear science as "something other than a final conquest of Nature" (300).

My analysis is informed by theory from the field of nuclear criticism. Jacques Derrida famously claims that "nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event" (23). Science fiction, Grace Halden writes, seeks to "represent the future 'non-event' and craft a reality out of it" (5). In his examination of post-war fiction in *States of Suspense*, Daniel Cordle asserts that cultural anxiety about nuclear attack, along with the continued deferral of that attack, is the "signature mindset" of the Cold War period (1). Post-war fiction, he writes, is "nuclear anxiety literature", fiction that exists in "states of suspense" and expresses "the experience of living in extended anticipation" (2). Especially pertinent to my own analysis is Cordle's assertion that nuclear criticism can be understood as social criticism.[3]

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[3] For an insightful study on recent work in the field of nuclear criticism, see Kristin George Bagdanov's "Atomic AfroFuturism and Amiri Baraka's Compulsive Futures", in which the author discusses Atomic Afrofuturism as a "historically specific affirmation of black existence that was forged while facing nuclear apocalypse" (51). Bagdanov posits a new life for nuclear criticism that proceeds from Derrida's work to include Baraka's "anti-nuclear jazz musical" *Primitive World*; Bagdanov theorises a new grammatical category, the future compulsive tense, which she asserts allows Baraka to "rewrite the future at stake, rather than merely readjusting its already present structures" (52).

Kornbluth's Mindworm is a mutant conceived during the first test of the atom bomb at Bikini Atoll on July 1, 1946. A reinvention of the "supernatural vampire in science fiction terms", Kornbluth's vampire is a fantastic representation of the new alien: a direct result of biological and genetic engineering gone wrong (Meehan 51).[4] The story opens:

> The handsome j.g. and the pretty nurse held out against it as long as they reasonably could, but blue Pacific water, languid tropical nights, the low atoll dreaming on the horizon – and the complete absence of any other nice young people for company on the small, uncomfortable parts boat – did their work. On June 30th they watched through dark glasses as the dazzling thing burst over the fleet and the atoll …. Unfelt radiation sleeted through their loins. (347)

The Mindworm attacks by scanning minds, feeding on the extreme emotions of his victims and then killing them. As a psychic sponge, the Mindworm also threatens individual identity as he drinks in, feeds upon, and ultimately destroys one's most intimate hopes and desires. At first he is a figure of pity: both his father and mother abandoned him and he was forced to live with horrific foster parents as a child. However, after the Mindworm's first "attack", in which he uses his powers to avoid gang rape, he immediately becomes a predator. Of the first attack, Kornbluth writes:

> He could read the thoughts of the men quite clearly as they headed for him. Outrage, fear, and disgust blended in him and somehow turned inside-out and one of the men was dead on the dry ground, grasshoppers vaulting onto his flannel shirt, the others backing away, frightened now, not frightening. He wasn't hungry anymore; he felt quite comfortable and satisfied. (351)

Kornbluth's vampire, a product of the atomic bomb, scans the thoughts of the people around him, catching random inner monologues, ultimately using this information to stalk and kill his prey. The fragments of thought that the Mindworm feeds on become his means of introduction to his victims. The dialogue typically leads to an explosion of *uncontrolled* emotion (lust, grief, love) in the victim and ultimately the victim's death. The atomic energy that surges through the Mindworm is a metaphor of unlimited human technological capacity as it challenges humanity's capacity to control its force. The atomic bomb was, as Leonard Isaacs asserts, "humanity's *transcendent* creation" (66). At a 1949 Atomic Energy Committee meeting at which the hydrogen bomb was being considered, one member commented of the bomb's monstrous potential that "we built one Frankenstein" (Reid 172).[5] *Time* magazine, in its first coverage of the bomb, declared, "With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity … was brought inescapably into a new age in which all thoughts and things were split – and far from controlled" ("The Bomb" 19). Loss of control was one fear, and fragmentation was another. The atomic bomb symbolised these two fears in one.

The Mindworm's first use of telepathic force, on the drifters he encounters, is accidental and almost forgivable. There is no question in the second attack, though,

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[4] In pop culture this was the great age of the superhero comics Superman, Captain Marvel, and the British character Marvelman, whose magic word was "*kimota!*" – atomic backwards (Roberts 324). In film, it was the age of science-generated monsters like the Thing, Godzilla, and the Giant Ants ("Them"), most of which were said to be a direct result of nuclear attack. For a comprehensive study of 1950s Cold War science-fiction films, see Cynthia Hendershot's *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (1999).

[5] The quotation is preserved as written; a more accurate statement is "We built Frankenstein's monster".

that the Mindworm goads the elderly widowed glass-sculptor Sebastian Long into a heightened emotional state:

> Sebastian Long stared at him. "What the devil do you know about my Demeter Bowl?" ... As Long started for him, the stranger darted to the workbench and brought the crescent wrench down shatteringly on the bowl. Sebastian Long's heart was bursting with sorrow and rage; such a storm of emotions as he never had known thundered through him.
> Paralyzed, he saw the stranger smile with anticipation. The engraver's legs folded under him and he fell to the floor, drained and dead. (353)

As the Demeter Bowl is symbolically smashed, the reader comes to understand that Kornbluth's transcendent creation wields power even over Demeter, the goddess who presides over the natural sacred cycle of life and death.[6] Kornbluth's Mindworm preys exclusively on the vulnerable: he attacks the drifters, the elderly widower Long, the poor immigrant Dolly, and finally a community of marginalised Polish immigrants (including a prostitute). Kornbluth's narrative focuses on the home as the location of the Mindworm's attacks; the Mindworm breaks into Long's workshop, which is attached to his home; he picks Dolly up from the steps of her home; and he attacks the Polish girl just outside her home. Cordle identifies the home as a key motif of Cold War ideology; he writes, "nuclear anxiety was frequently expressed in images of threatened domesticity" (126). Cordle further asserts that "family breakdown and self-fragmentation are common tropes that symbolize the potential of nuclear weapons to destroy both the individual and society" (127). The Mindworm's third victim, the young, naive Delores, a Spanish-speaking immigrant from Central or South America, who prefers to go by the more Americanised "Dolly", is preoccupied with domesticity.

Dolly, who "practices sexy half-smiles like Lauren Bacall in the bathroom mirror" and can't wait to get out of her mother's home, is already at a ripe emotional crisis when the Mindworm comes upon her. Her final words, as she storms out of the house, are "'I don't know how many times I tell you not to call me that Spick name no more!'" (353). Dolly is eager to embrace what she believes to be the American dream:

> Then the miracle happened. Just like in the movies, a big convertible pulled up before her and its lounging driver said, opening the door: "You seem to be in a hurry. Could I drop you somewhere?" ... Dazed at the sudden realization of a hundred daydreams, she did not fail to give the driver a low-lidded, sexy smile ... He wasn't no Cary Grant, but he had all his hair ... kind of small, but so was she ... and jeez, the convertible had leopard-skin seat covers! (354)

The Mindworm uses Dolly's innermost thoughts and desires to craft himself into the man of her dreams: Mr. Michael Brent, convertible-driving, sweet-talking advertising man, who is looking for a wife with whom to "share his town house in the 50's, his country place in Westchester, his lodge in the Maine woods" (355). They drive down Long Island, lunch at Medford and find themselves at Montauk Point. As Dolly looks out over the "last bit of the continent before blue water and Europe", she answers the

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[6] Demeter is the Greek goddess of fertility and the harvest who presided over the sacred law and the cycle of life and death. Mary Kornbluth was a potter and ceramicist (Rich 145). In 1950 the Kornbluths moved from a Polish neighborhood to an upscale storefront apartment with a glass engraver for a neighbor, where Mary pursued ceramics (D. Knight 198). "The Mask of Demeter" by Kornbluth and Wollheim was published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Jan 1953) without Kornbluth's consent (Rich 221).

Mindworm's question "Darling, will you marry me?" with an emphatic "Oh, yes!", and then dies (355). On one level, Dolly's story is a striking reminder that the threat of the bomb (the Mindworm) is real and final, but unseen. Moreover, the Mindworm's attack comes from nowhere; it is sudden and finite. Kornbluth's depiction of Dolly's death forges a direct connection between the Mindworm and the atomic bomb. Like the threat of nuclear war, there's an ominous intangibility to the Mindworm's deadly attack on Dolly; the effects of the attack are not directly experienced until it is too late.

Kornbluth devotes just two pages to Dolly's story: a subtle but profound depiction of the degradation of public life under the shadow of the bomb and a critique of post-war consumer capitalism. Specifically, Dolly's story focuses on the power of advertising to corrupt and to promote conformity. Kornbluth places subtle hints within the text that allude to this. Dolly is fascinated with American film stars: she dreams of becoming Lauren Bacall, notices that the Mindworm "smiles shyly, kind of like Jimmy Stewart", and thinks that although the Mindworm "wasn't no Cary Grant, he's still got all his hair" (355). Dolly's sole desire is to live the American dream she reads about in the magazines and sees on the big screen. Dolly is thrilled to learn that the Mindworm likes "dark girls" and thinks that "the stories in *True Story* really were true" (355). As a reader of *True Story*, Dolly would be familiar with the feature stories of girls who had married wrongly as well as the numerous shampoo, toothpaste, make-up items, and feminine-hygiene products advertised in its pages.[7] The Mindworm anticipates Dolly's deepest desires and fulfils her every wish:

> "Advertising!" Dolly wanted to kick herself for ever having doubted, for ever having thought in low, self-loathing moments that it wouldn't work out, that she'd marry a grocer or a mechanic and live forever after in a smelly tenement and grow old and sick and stooped. She felt vaguely in her happy daze that it might have been cuter, she might have accidentally pushed him into a pond or something, but this was cute enough. An advertising man, leopard-skin seat covers … what more could a girl with a sexy smile and a nice little figure want? (354)

Dolly's story is an illustration not of conformity of the Soviet totalitarianism type, but rather of the perceived loss of American individualism at the hands of new mass standardisation. Kornbluth captures the essence of the corruption of American values as he draws attention to the all-consuming power of the media and advertising to shape Dolly's thoughts and nourish her obsession to conform by concealing her ethnic identity to "fit in". Just after having learned that the Mindworm's name is Michael Brent, for example, Dolly "wished she could tell him she was Jennifer Brown or one of those cute names they had nowadays" (354). Fiona Paton and Booker describe the general tendency of Cold War science fiction to focus on the fear of exclusion. The 1940s and 1950s, Booker claims, developed a reputation for homogenisation, "not only of material life, but of thought itself" which ultimately led to the fear of exclusion, a fear of not fitting in (10). In her critique of William S. Burroughs's controversial *Naked Lunch* (1959), Paton points out that "1950s America also appears compellingly Gothic: the monstrous rhetoric of anti-communism sets up a rigid opposition between American and un-American, and into the category 'un-American' fell not only political but also ethnic and sexual difference" (51). Dolly's obsession with domesticity and

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[7] *True Story*, the first of the confession magazine genre, depicts the heroine as "a battered victim of cruel forces beyond her control, which made a strong male leader upon whom she could depend for strength an attractive source of salvation" (Honey 213).

consumerism is especially telling as it alludes to the sense of meaninglessness that nuclear threat was casting over everyday life.

The Mindworm's ultimate undoing occurs as he moves from threating individuals to attacking a whole community. The wary predator is aware of drawing too much attention to himself, yet is ignorant of the historical precursors of his presence. The modern American society off which he feasts appears equally ignorant of this and is unable to recognise the nature of the vampire in its midst. Instinct tells him that he is safe in his pursuit of the young Polish virgin, but he is mistaken. His last two attacks, and his own demise, occur in a small West Virginia town. Kornbluth writes, "He got off at a West Virginia coal and iron town surrounded by ruined mountains and filled with the offscourings of Eastern Europe. Serbs, Albanians, Croats, Hungarians, Slovenes, Bulgarians, and all possible combinations and permutations thereof" (358).[8] The first victim is a jealous young Eastern European boy; the final death in this community is of a prostitute. Of these attacks, Kornbluth writes, "The Eastern Europeans of the town, he mistakenly thought, were like the tramps and bums he had known and fed on during his years on the road – stupid and safe, safe and stupid, quite the same thing" (359). It is significant that the community is comprised of Eastern Europeans; Kornbluth hits this home in the last line of the story:

> The sharpened stake was through his heart and the scythe blade through his throat before he could realize that he had not been the first of his kind; and that what clever people have not yet learned, some quite ordinary people have not yet entirely forgotten. (361)

The final word the Mindworm hears is *Wampyir*, the Polish literary term for the word vampire derived from the Russian term *upior'* (Perkowski 185); the Mindworm is unable to comprehend the danger he's in because he doesn't understand Polish.

Andrew Ross, among others, notes the tendency in 1950s discourse to connect social difference and disease: this is especially true in the genre of science fiction film, where the 'alien', an embodiment of "biological or genetic engineering gone wrong", also represents "a pan-social fear of the Other – communism, feminism and other egalitarianisms foreign to the American social body" (45). Kornbluth rejects the traditional discourse that the alien represents the fear of the Other (in this case, Communists) as he engages on a much deeper level with the socio-political fears of the day. There is an obvious parallel between the Mindworm, who looks like any normal American but who invades and controls the minds of innocent people in order to harm them, and the typical American post-war view of Communists. Seed points out in "Constructing America's Enemies: Invasions of the USA" that in the period after the Second World War, "the American identification of an enemy shifted to that of the Russians" (Seed, "Constructing" 74). Although it would be two months following the 1950 publication of "The Mindworm", in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia that Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of 205 Communists working in the US State Department, the McCarthyite suppression of dissent was already a very real concern for Kornbluth and other science-fiction writers of that time (P. Knight 71).

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[8] The town that Kornbluth depicts here echoes the "fantastic old neighborhood of Polish immigrants" that his wife describes their having lived in in Chicago. In an interview Mary recalls, "When he wrote that story he was attending the University of Chicago. There was a housing shortage and we were stuck back at the stockyards in a fantastic old neighborhood. There were ancient Polish people there, whom he described in 'The Mindworm'" (Platt 63).

Kornbluth would engage with this threat just two years later in *The Space Merchants* (1952), his influential novel co-authored with Pohl. Booker believes it to be one of the most important novels of the 1950s to "counsel against Cold War hysteria" (Booker, "Science Fiction" 180).

"The Mindworm" is about a world under constant surveillance, a political nightmare of total control signified by an elaborate system of monitoring. Upon first glance, it would appear that Kornbluth's vampire anthropomorphises the fear of the Other in an area obsessed with conspiracy theories. This specific fear is that one may never quite know what is lurking in the minds of others. Kornbluth's Mindworm, though, is a different type of post-war enemy: he is a prime representation of US bravado as a product of a US military officer and medical nurse, born in the aftermath of the bombing at Bikini Atoll. As a mutant product of the Atomic Age who has telepathic abilities to scan others' minds, the Mindworm, in its constant mode of surveillance, exemplifies for Kornbluth the problems of scientific progress, as well as the very immediate concern of government control. The Mindworm's use of his telepathic abilities to eavesdrop on the orphanage attendants signals the beginning of this surveillance:

> The doctor told the boy: "Three pounds more this month isn't bad, but how about you pitch in and clean up your plate every day? Can't live on meat and water; those vegetables make you big and strong." The boy said: "What's 'neurasthenic' mean?" The doctor later said to the director: "It made my flesh creep … and inside my head I was thinking 'we'd call him neurasthenic in the old days' and then out he popped with it. What should we do? Should we do anything?" (350)

With his ability to read minds, the Mindworm also represents the clandestine operations US secret services were conducting on their own people. Kornbluth emphasises this just after the Mindworm has killed Dolly, as he casts his "tentacles" through the city for his next victim:

> "die if she don't let me…" "six an' six is twelve an' carry one an' three is four…" "gobblegobble madre de dios pero soy gobblegobble." "O God I am most heartily sorry I have offended thee in…" "talk like a commie…" "… just a nip and fill it up with water and brush my teeth." "habt mein daughter Rosie such a fella goobblegobble." (355–56)

The Mindworm indiscriminately listens in on conversations that span multiple languages (English, Spanish, and German) and highlight a fear of communism. While Dolly's story centers on a culture obsessed with consumerism and a domestic ideal, this passage illustrates Kornbuth's ability to significantly alter the ideologically powerful trope that links deviancy with communism. In his story the enemy is not a Communist, but rather a purebred American.

Kornbluth calls upon the literary device of *ostrananie* in his reworking of Bram Stoker's traditional story of the sinister Eastern European vampire invading the West. In a subtle, but important, reversal of the nationality of the vampire and the hunters, the Mindworm (100% American) is ultimately killed not by enlightened Westerners with the aid of modern scientific progress, but by Casimir, an old Polish man, through traditional Eastern European folkloric methods – the vampire is staked through the

heart and his head is severed.[9] This curious turn of events is significant as it forces the reader to contemplate a new type of post-war hero. Seed observes of Cold War invasion narratives, "If the enemy is some kind of subhuman creature, that might carry an evolutionary consolation, but it also cues in an essential role for the specialist"; typically, protagonists of these narratives tend to be "*experts* in different fields" (83–84). They are members of elite intelligence agencies, scientists, doctors, detectives, physicists, etc. It is significant that Kornbluth's vampire is defeated by Casimir, a political outsider located in the margins of society. The Polish "Kazimierz" is derived from the words *kazit'* (to destroy) and *mir* (peace).[10] It is Kazimierz (the one who destroys peace, that is, the great warrior) who defeats the vampire, not with scientific prowess, but by calling upon his old-world beliefs to identify and then destroy the enemy who is hiding in plain sight.

"The Mindworm" challenges the validity of American values of the 1950s and offers ripe material for understanding the socioeconomic and political anxieties of the post-war era, including fears of uncontrolled technological development, pathologies of consumerism, and the McCarthyite suppression of dissent. Kornbluth's portrayal of the highly materialistic, compulsively patriotic American immigrant "Dolly", who fantasises about her American dream but will not live to experience it, is highly critical of traditional family values, capitalism, and consumerism (355). By reversing the ethnicities of the vampire and the hunters, Kornbluth's text calls to question the demonisation of the enemy (in this case, the Communists). The author reworks the traditional science-fiction narrative to redirect the reader's focus toward the real threat: the measures members of the US government were taking, in the name of democracy, to significantly curtail the rights of its own people. The story is more than a cautionary account of the dangers inherent in a particular scientific creation: it serves as a warning about the political and social structures that allow for such a creation and that threaten American democracy at its core.

Acknowledgements

Biography: Kristin Bidoshi is an associate professor of Russian and director of the Russian and East European Studies Program at Union College, where she teaches courses in Russian language, literature and culture. Bidoshi conducts fieldwork in Eastern Europe and publishes on subjects including the use of the oral tradition in the works of Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol, and Liudimila Petrushevskaia and Russian language pedagogy. She is currently working on a program that will allow students to train on Russian verbs of motion in virtual reality.

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[9] Jan Perkowski's *Vampire of the Slavs* is the definitive source of essays and primary texts documenting Slavic vampire traditions. "Slavic Folk Culture" by Kazimierz Moszynski outlines Polish folk customs related to vampires. Moszynski writes, "The aspen or other type of stake was usually driven into the heart … drove a sharpened aspen state into the head" (183).
[10] See Różycka's *Księga imion polskich* for a detailed history of the origin of the name.

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