Oil-Dependent America: Founded on the Passage to Hell
by Kenneth McCann

Kenneth McCann is a Mechanical Engineering major from Norman, OK, who wrote this essay in the “Modern Monsters” course taught by David Long.

Most homebuyers do not expect their new house to ooze black goo from the walls and toilets. In the 1979 film The Amityville Horror, George and Kathy Lutz find themselves in a gooey situation as the possessed land under their home drives their very existence into a crisis they never anticipated. Yet, in a way, the Lutzes were typical American homeowners of their day. The United States during the 1970s was an exercise in crisis management. The decade of disaster began when the country was blindsided by the 1973 energy crisis and ended with another energy crisis in 1979. Both events were the result of America’s dependence on foreign oil, particularly on imports from the politically unstable Middle East. Relying on such a risky source for an essential commodity placed the United States in an insecure position. The impact on American culture was so serious that in 1979, President Jimmy Carter dedicated his “Crisis of Confidence” speech to instilling a national resolve to preserve the American Dream in a society that he saw as economically challenged and morally adrift. A central tenet of the American Dream is home ownership, the market for which fluctuated during the 1970s due to economic stagnation. Carter emphasized that social change must begin with taking the high ground at home, arguing that the “strength we need [to recover our confidence in our future] will not come from the White House, but from every house in America.”

One house in particular – the imposing Dutch Colonial in Stuart Rosenberg’s 1979 film The Amityville Horror – put special demands on the strength of its owners as they seized upon their slice of the American Dream. The owners, George and Kathy Lutz, purchase the house to provide more space for their growing family. This is the first home the couple has owned; Kathy remarks to her sister that the family has “always been a bunch of renters” (Amityville 9). In Horror Films of the 1970s, John Kenneth Muir argues that horror films resonate with theater audiences because they “have always mirrored the fears and anxieties of their ‘real life’ epochs” (1). The excitement Kathy feels after buying the house likely resonated with moviegoers who either dreamed of purchasing a home or fondly remembered their first home. The new-home-turned-nightmare attacks what horror fiction writer Stephen King calls “national phobic pressure points” by exposing a secret horror in the lives of ordinary Americans (King 6).

How would an average American react to buying a haunted house? George and Kathy’s Photograph of the Dutch Colonial house in Amityville, PA that allegedly inspired the movie The Amityville Horror.
expansion-driven purchase of the spacious Colonial home upholds the colonialist spirit of frontier settlers from the early years of the United States. As the citizens of the young nation moved westward, they took it upon themselves to seize Native American land. This fulfillment of Manifest Destiny resulted in Native Americans suffering at the hands of the predominantly white male settlers (Baigell 3). The Amityville Horror most overtly suggests that the Lutzes are being haunted by Manifest Destiny. A white male himself, George discovers that his house was built on an Indian burial ground. Conducting research at the local library, he learns that Native Americans were tortured by a missionary who owned the land in the 1600s (Amityville 21-22). Thus, George hypothesizes that the encroachment of his family on former Indian land prompted the retaliation of the spirits of the Indians buried under his home. The Indian-spirit-possessed house attempts to drive the Lutz family away, much like the resistance of Native Americans to white settlers. The encroaching settlers often regarded Indians as “untamable and barbaric” thereby justifying “their elimination from areas of white settlement” (Baigell 9). Barbaric spirits living within the house use physical harm (e.g. slamming windows on children’s fingers, locking the babysitter in the closet, and making Kathy’s sister nauseated) to successfully drive the Lutz family away from the house. The Lutzes’ settlement of the house is a phenomenon that “reflects Americans’ tendency to invade a geographical area and imprint our own cultural values on the land and its people” (Zakerion 1).

The Lutzes’ ordeal and eventual flight is not simply a re-enactment of American colonial history, though; their story also symbolizes America’s response to the oil crisis of 1973. The United States had to decide whether importing oil from politically unstable countries was worth the risk to its own peace of mind. American oil importers accepted the risk of conflict of interests in the Middle East. In 1948, tensions stemming from the attempted division of the British Mandate of Palestine into three separate states had culminated in the Arab-Israeli war. The United States did not insert itself into the war; in fact, it maintained an arms embargo against all belligerent nations. Israeli forces triumphed, and Israel seized “control over 78 percent of the territory comprising former Mandatory Palestine” (Tobin 271). Ultimately, the proposed Arab state was never created and resentment towards Israel festered among the Arabs until the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. Under the orders of National Security Advisor and Vietnam War hawk Henry Kissinger, the United States supplied weapons to the Israeli forces to compensate for the destruction of Israeli planes and artillery by enemy forces. In retaliation for the United States’ involvement in the Yom Kippur War, the Arab nations instituted an embargo on oil exports to the United States, which sent the country into the 1973 oil crisis (Rustow 167). This raised fears about “the nations of OPEC uniting to blackmail the energy-dependent nations into…paying exorbitant prices for oil and natural gas” — a tactic with the potential to wreak havoc on the American economy (Runyon 7–8). Kissinger’s support of Israeli colonialism in the Yom Kippur War made the United States a party to the original land grab that denied Palestinians a homeland and infuriated the Arab world.

George Lutz was no Kissinger. His only mistake was acquiring a property that he had no right to occupy, yet his story is shadowed by Kissinger’s aggressive foreign policy. When Lutz, the newlywed stepfather of three children, shops for an affordable house large enough to support his family, he embodies the philosophy of American colonialism by meddling with the house’s intentions. Exercising his sense of entitlement, George finds a bargain in the former home of the DeFeos (who were murdered inside the house), and purchases the house at a “knocked down price [of $80,000 instead of $120,000] because of its bloody history” (“Amityville”). Despite the house’s low price, George’s wife Kathy expresses concern over
the murders that occurred at the home the year before. Ignoring his wife’s protests, George accepts the risks of buying a house with blood on its walls and puts his family at the mercy of the unknown force that caused the DeFeo murders. This occupation of foreign land antagonizes the demons within the house and results in their intent to drive the Lutz family away. The purchase of the house in spite of its bloody history underscores George’s relentless focus on fulfilling his dream of owning a home.

The house’s retaliation against the Lutz family mirrors relations between the United States and oil producing countries in the 1970s. America’s insatiable thirst for Middle Eastern oil continued to exist despite political instability in the region. Once George Lutz signs the contract, the family becomes subject to harassment by the house, just as the United States exposed itself by entering into a restrictive contract when it agreed to import oil from OPEC. At the start of the 1970s, domestic oil production was unable to meet the needs of an increasingly energy hungry population, whose “total energy consumption [in 1973] outpaced the nation’s capacity to produce sufficient energy from domestic sources” (Runyon 4). The only option for the United States was to increase its reliance on imported oil, exposing the country to price fluctuations decided by the oil exporting nations (Barsky 116). As the oil producer, OPEC had the power to limit exports and set prices as it saw fit. Thus, the embargo following the Yom Kippur War contributed to “fears about future oil supplies in late 1973” (Barsky 130). Because of the embargo, the United States’ livelihood and economy became “vitaliy dependent upon peace in that troubled area and continuity in the flow of oil supplies” (McLean 101). Likewise, the Lutzes’ survival in their house depends on the house’s cooperation in not trying to kill them.

Tales of deaths caused by haunted houses are deeply ingrained in conventional horror movies. In *Dante’s Inferno*, King alludes to The Amityville Horror’s use of cliché horror movie tactics—such as the house having a mind of its own—when he characterizes the film as “a Tale to be Told around the campfire” (King 148). The demons within the house awaken when the family invites Father Delaney over to bless the house. The blessing of houses is a Christian tradition intended to protect the residents of the house from misfortune and signify that they own and control the property. Since the Indian spirits beneath the house refuse to recognize the Lutzes as the new owners, they intervene in Delaney’s blessing ritual. After Delaney enters the first room off the stairs, the door closes by itself and he notices flies buzzing by the window. Once he dons his Catholic stole in preparation to bless the house, he is attacked by a swarm of flies and begins to sweat profusely. Once Delaney is nearly overwhelmed, an unseen voice orders him to “get out” of the house. The priest’s donning of the stole alludes to a Judeo-Christian tradition of promoting dialogue and understanding between religions (Hughes 71). Delaney’s attempt at religious diplomacy fails because the house forces him to leave. The house’s rejection of Christianity stems from the land’s use by a missionary in the 17th century to convert Native Americans to Christianity. The Native Americans resented the missionary’s intrusion into their lives, and the present actions of the house show that “a representative of the past is coming back to haunt a representative of the victimizer” (Zakerion 11). The demons target the Crucifix hung by the Lutzes in the living room. They coat the Crucifix in black dust and turn it upside down, escalating the tension further. George attempts to expose the demons by walking through the house waving the Crucifix while chanting “bless this house” (*Amityville* 21). The mere presence of Delaney and the Crucifix causes the unknown force within the house to drive them away.

Again, this force at another level represents America’s oil dependency. Oil’s control over the American people is evident within the Lutz
house, which is shown through the house’s manipulation of its inhabitants. During the 1970s, oil was a primary source of heat for American households, since “about one-fifth of energy [in 1973 was] used for commercial and residential heating” (McLean 104). In The Amityville Horror, heat is used to show the activity of demons within the house and how their presence has affected George. The family notices the draft emanating from the basement and how the air often feels colder than the reading on the thermostat, to which George remarks that “this house is supposed to be well insulated” (Amityville 6). Since the Lutz house is subjected to drafts, the (likely oil-fired) furnace must burn more fuel to keep the house warm, linking the demons within the house to America’s dependence on oil for heat. This increase in fuel consumption would have created an expensive situation for the Lutz family, especially in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis when “a shortage of heating oil drove up prices” for consumers (Runyon 4). Fortunately, the house features a wood burning fireplace that can provide heat without depending on oil. To fuel the fireplace, George chops wood in quantities so large that Kathy exclaims that he has “enough wood to heat the whole South Shore” (Amityville 9). In subsequent scenes, George sits in front of the fire, seemingly mesmerized by it. During one of these trances, he turns on his wife, drives her to the floor and nearly kills her with his wood-chopping axe. The fire-induced trances are products of George’s obsession with keeping warm despite his broken furnace. The Amityville Horror is a grim parody of the oil crisis, a post-energy crisis breakdown of American life.

The house’s wrath also extends to energy, particularly its influence on the operation of automobiles. In the 1970s, the Federal government forced the American automobile industry to recall many of its vehicles to repair safety-compromising defects (Hoffer 217). This eroded confidence in the American auto-manufacturing industry. Rosenberg capitalizes on the public’s wariness of unsafe automobiles by allowing the house to manipulate a car. After Father Delaney visits the house, his car suddenly begins to swerve out of control. The steering becomes unresponsive, and the brakes become nonfunctional, sending the car careening through an intersection and over a curb. When Delaney recounts the incident to Father Ryan and attributes it to Satan, Ryan dismisses it as “a mechanical defect” and that he would “blame Detroit a lot faster than the Devil [because it] seems like every month there’s some kind of recall” (Amityville 17). This comparison between automobile makers and Satan exploits the American population’s fear of unsafe cars. Automobile recalls arguably caused consumers to equate a misbehaving car with manufacturers’ liability. Hoffer also cites a steering recall affecting “3.7 million General Motors full size autos … for a steering lockup defect,” which likely provided a basis for Rosenberg’s depiction of Delaney’s possessed car (Hoffer 217). The futility of Delaney’s attempt to convince Father Ryan about the presence of demons in the Lutzes’ house suggests that automobile recalls had become commonplace in 1970s culture. Automakers themselves contributed to the problem, as they “were loathe to mention, much less recognize safety related defects” until the Federal government mandated that they do so (Hoffer 212). The 1973 Oil Crisis plagued the United States with a crippling immobility, since automobile owners had to endure high gas prices for their ration of mobility-granting gasoline. Stephen King emphasizes the connection between automobile-related struggles within the film and those in everyday America, arguing that “Stuart Rosenberg plays on [America’s car-dependent culture by showing] gasoline selling at a cool dollar forty a gallon” (King 151).

The Lutzes are implicated in colonialist expansion on two levels: they occupy a literal house whose origins are marked by the USA’s original colonial displacement of Native Americans, and their present domestic life—like that of
all Americans—is dependent upon a more recent colonial displacement in the Middle East. George discovers his house’s role in colonial history when he meets his business partner, Jeff, and his wife, Carolyn, at the local bar. They find that the first white settler of George’s property, John Ketchum, took the land from the Shinnecock Indian tribe after he was excommunicated from society for being a witch. Thus, the land became cursed, and George “is now living on special ground, [cursed with] devil worship, death, and sacrifice” (*Amityville* 22). She cites the physical law of energy conservation which states that “there’s one simple rule: energy cannot be created or destroyed….it can only change forms” (*Amityville* 22). Later, the three enter George’s basement, where Carolyn recalls that the Shinnecocks “put all the crazy people here and left them here to die” (*Amityville* 24). Thus, the Lutzes are haunted by aboriginal spiritual forces, the mysterious “energies” emanating from the basement, and by a more contemporary form of energy controlled by OPEC.

Ultimately, connections between the house and America’s reliance on oil imports are confirmed by the house’s suffusions of oil itself. During the Lutzes fourth day in the house, the toilets back up and release a thick black liquid reminiscent of raw crude oil. After the toilet sprays the goo into the air, George and the children back away because they assume it is toxic. The climax of the film reveals that a pit of similar thick black goo exists in a secret room in the basement. Due to the blood colored walls and floor, Carolyn deems it the “passage to Hell” (*Amityville* 24). The blood imagery alludes to the land’s history as a site of Native American pain and suffering. When the family flees the house the next day, George falls through the stairs and into the pit as he tries to rescue the family dog. After nearly drowning in oil, George is pulled out by the dog and the family leaves the house for good. George’s entrapment in the pit of “oil” is the metaphorical manifestation of America’s crippling dependence on foreign oil.

The “passage to Hell” in the basement is the source of the hauntings in the Lutz house. From 17th century colonists’ theft of Indian land to the insatiable demand for imported oil in the 1970’s, America’s lust for blood and oil is deeply ingrained in the country’s history. America’s passage to Hell was a social and political construction; the daily lives of United States citizens like the Lutz family are built atop a pit of oil that exerts control over them as they fuel their cars and heat their homes. The magnitude of oil’s control was realized during the Energy Crisis of 1973 when oil price increases by OPEC threatened the economic well-being of Americans accustomed to seemingly unlimited supplies of oil. Despite the town of Amityville’s eponymous atmosphere of friendly relationship, the house itself is quite the opposite. The hostile and unamicable Colonial home in *The Amityville Horror* remains a chilling reminder of the stranglehold oil had on Americans during the 1970s because it demonstrates the horrors incurred by building a livelihood over an oil-filled pit to Hell.
Works Cited


McCann, “Oil-Dependent America”