

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS: THE NEW WAVE OF WOMEN'S HORROR CINEMA**

by

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## **Abstract**

My doctoral dissertation, “Unfinished Business: The New Wave of Women’s Horror Cinema,” responds to early considerations in feminist horror studies via the recent surge of horror films directed by women filmmakers for a primarily female audience. Placing this new wave of horror cinema in dialogue with the canonical works of Linda Williams, Carol Clover, and Barbara Creed, I re-evaluate the assumption that horror forecloses the possibility of female spectatorship in favour of male audiences. I argue that a change in authorship from almost exclusively male directors to women artists produces a markedly different form of address previously underrepresented in American and Canadian horror cinemas.

Now, for the first time in the genre’s history, women directors are developing a globally substantial body of work that explicitly centres the ‘feminine’ and uses the conventions of horror to bridge topics such as sexuality, menstruation, virginity, gender-based violence, trauma/PTSD, eating disorders, pregnancy, and motherhood all from a woman’s perspective and for a female audience. The result is a cinema that affirms women’s experiences of fear, paranoia, anxiety, and desire, and addresses the ways in which living within patriarchy constitutes its own horror. Given this unprecedented development, the primary aim of this dissertation is to document the ways in which this new body of women-authored/women-driven horror re-inscribes the genre’s primary mode of address as distinctly female/feminine and constructs a tenable subject position for the female spectator. I stake a claim in recording this phenomenon as a crucial cultural moment in the genre’s development and suggest more work needs to be done to account for this cinema’s representational and political offerings.

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## Chapter 1

### The Changing Face of Horror

Typically qualified as a masculinist genre, the canon of English-language horror cinema has been historically dominated by auteurs such as Alfred Hitchcock, Brian De Palma, Roman Polanski and David Cronenberg, as well as independent artists like Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, John Carpenter and George A. Romero, and celebrated B-producers like William Castle and Roger Corman. Horror's target audience is stereotypically represented as adolescent boys and their accompanying frightened girlfriends, who presumably cower from the queasy spectacles on screen. When women do figure into popular dialogues on the genre it is almost exclusively in front of the camera as Scream Queens or Final Girls, or both, if you happen to be Jamie Lee Curtis. And while many of the celebrated horror films of the last half of the twentieth century give great attention to their leading female characters (e.g. *Psycho* [1960], *Rosemary's Baby* [1968], *Carrie* [1976], *The Silence of the Lambs* [1991]), their inclusion in these narratives is often (but not always) meant as an entrance point into the disturbed male psyche – referring here to the film's central villain, or to the film's director, or to both. Though this may seem like a reductive summation, what I am trying to point out is that horror, as understood within the pop cultural imagination, primarily belongs to male filmmakers and viewers. It is precisely because of this (mis)understanding that women horror artists and fans are seen as a contradiction.

Yet, women's participation in horror, especially behind the camera, has been a lengthy one, with a strong contingent of female directors operating globally in the genre since silent cinema. A conditional list of notable artists and their films include: Alice Guy Blaché's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1913), *The Monster and the Girl* (1914) and *The Vampire* (1915); Lois

Weber's *Suspense* (1913); Ida Lupino's *Outrage* (1950) and *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953); Stephanie Rothman's *The Velvet Vampire* (1971); Amy Holden Jones and Rita Mae Brown's *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982); Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987); Mary Lambert's *Pet Sematary* (1989); Fran Rubel Kuzui's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992); Jennifer Lynch's *Boxing Helena* (1993); Kei Fujiwara's *Organ* (1996); Antonia Bird's *Ravenous* (1999); Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000); Claire Denis' *Trouble Everyday* (2001); and Maria de Van's *In My Skin* (2002). Even though women artists have displayed a prolonged engagement with horror, ranging from high-art films to exploitation cinema, the attitude nonetheless remains that these filmmakers are outliers or anomalies within the genre's development rather than essential to its growth. At least within the broader cultural imagination, women's contributions to the genre are considered sparse – if non-existent – as evidenced by the ongoing assumption that women simply do not make horror.<sup>1</sup>

In the last ten years, however, there has been an international influx of women directors working within mainstream and independent horror who have found substantial acclaim and public notoriety for their films. This new surge of directors has been documented in online and popular presses with headlines such as “Welcome to the Golden Age of Women-Directed Horror” (*Broadly*), “How Female Directors are Staking their Claim in Horror” (*Little White Lies*), “The Female Directors Bringing New Blood to Horror Films” (*The Guardian*), “From ‘Babadook’ to ‘Raw’: the Rise of the Modern Female Horror Filmmaker” (*Rolling Stone*), and “Jovanka Vuckovic and Other Female Directors ‘the Next Great Frontier of Horror Cinema’” (*CBC Radio*). This unprecedented boom has been led by artists and titles such as Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008), Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody's *Jennifer's Body* (2009),

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<sup>1</sup> Anecdotally, when I have asked individuals to name one horror film directed by a woman most are hard pressed to come up with a single answer and are often shocked to discover there is in fact a pantheon of directors to draw upon.

Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012), Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013), Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), Stewart Thorndike's *Lyle* (2014), Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), Alice Lowe's *Prevenge* (2016), and the recent anthology series *XX* (2017) featuring directors Jovanka Vuckovic, Annie Clark, Roxanne Benjamin and Karyn Kusama.

What makes this moment in time so striking is not only the substantial increase in women operating within the genre and being recognized for their contributions, but the fact that a large majority of these films can be described as texts 'by-women, for-women,' thereby challenging popular assumptions regarding the genre's masculinist orientation both on- and off-screen.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this boom, even though women horror filmmakers offered cogent explorations of gender and violence, there remained a masculine precedent for the genre, sustained, in part, by the continued narrative focus on masculinity presumably for its target male audience. This is especially salient of American horror cinema, which did not experience the female/feminine/feminist boom of New French Extremity, for instance, which saw a number of filmmakers like Claire Denis, Maria de Van, and Catherine Breillat offering more women-driven narratives. Now, for the *first time* in the genre's history, women directors are developing a globally substantial body of work that explicitly centres the 'feminine' and uses the conventions of horror to bridge topics such as sexuality, menstruation, virginity, gender-based violence, trauma/PTSD, eating disorders,

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<sup>2</sup> This new wave of horror cinema speaks to a larger movement of women reclaiming their stake in horror, true crime, and the macabre across the general cultural board. Notable names, projects and phenomenon include: Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark's true-crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* (2016-present), which has coined the phrase "stay sexy and don't get murdered" to empower women not to ignore their gut reactions around men; Emma Cline's novel *The Girls* (2016), which offers a fictional account of the Manson Family women from the perspective of a queer teenage girl; Emil Ferris' breathtaking graphic novel debut *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* (2017), a love letter to the 1930s Universal pictures amongst other things; Ingrid Jungerman's independent film *Women Who Kill* (2016), which follows two lesbian true crime podcasters as they investigate a potential murder suspect; *The AxWound Horror Film Festival* that exclusively profiles women working in the genre; and within the world of craft, the popularization of taxidermy classes amongst women (see Clay 2016).

pregnancy, and motherhood, all from a woman's perspective and for a female audience. The result is a cinema that affirms women's experiences of fear, paranoia, anxiety, and desire, and addresses the ways in which living within patriarchy constitutes its own horror.

Given this unprecedented development, the primary aim of this dissertation is to document the ways in which this new body of women-authored/women-driven horror re-inscribes the genre's primary mode of address as distinctly female/feminine and constructs a tenable subject position for the female spectator. Ironically, my investigative concerns remain the same as those posed by feminist horror scholar Carol Clover nearly three decades ago when she documented the rise of 1970s new regime horror by asking, "What horror, what viewers, and what sort of 'identification' exactly?" (5). Conversely, this is the first account to explore how this 'new wave of women's horror cinema,' as I name it, challenges established generic patterns, looking relations, and viewership. To do so, I return to the foundations of feminist horror studies, which similarly take into account questions of representation, authorship, and address in order to trouble the gendered dynamics of horror cinema. Constituted by Linda Williams' articles "When the Woman Looks" (1984) and "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" (1991), Clover's monograph *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), and Barbara Creed's study *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993), these three authors and their publications remain the cornerstones of feminist horror studies and some of the most influential works on the genre to date.<sup>3</sup>

As will be discussed in the next chapter, these authors challenge the presumed primacy of the sadistic male gaze in horror cinema and the innately victimized position ascribed to women.

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<sup>3</sup> The influence of these works is evidenced by their continued collection in readers on horror cinema, including Barry Keith Grant's *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (1996) and Mark Jancovich's *Horror, The Film Reader* (2002). As well, each is profiled in Peter Hutching's *The Horror Film* (2004), Christine Gledhill's entry in *The Cinema Book* (2007), and Murray Leeder's *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* (2018).

Focusing on different eras and subgenres of American horror, including slashers, revenge pictures, monster movies, and possession films, these authors show how the slippery and fluid nature of identification in horror operates in contrast to previous feminist psychoanalytic theorizations of spectatorship. In general, while each maintains that the male gaze can be considered the organizing look of horror, they argue that it is instead the female body that acts as the primary site of spectacle and identification despite the preeminence of the male spectator. Demonstrating the ways in which women exceed the position of passive victim, these authors note how the genre offers a potential promise but ultimate denial of female subjectivity and power, a dimension that I am quick to argue is re-addressed in this new wave of women's horror cinema.

The title of this project, "Unfinished Business," therefore refers to the ways in which this new wave of horror can be considered as a 'follow up' or in response to previous feminist theorizations, offering alternative directions for the horror genre once unthinkable in feminist horror studies. Additionally, this title also refers to this dissertation, which starts where previous horror theorists have left off, utilizing this emergent corpus of films to generate a new body of horror criticism. My central argument is that this new wave of horror cinema re-imagines the genre in productive, contradictory, and ambivalent ways, using devices such as intertextual reference, meta-commentary, humour, and irony to refer to, manipulate, and ultimately challenge the generic conventions identified by Williams, Clover, and Creed. It is of utmost importance that we return to these preminent scholars in order to grapple with the consequences of this new direction within horror, precipitated, as it were, by women directors who now unabashedly presume a female audience. I argue that this new mode of address, which constructs the female spectator as central to horror's operation, effectively re-orientates theoretical considerations of

the genre towards an understanding of the ‘female subject’ as a source of representational power, especially within the restraining conditions of patriarchal discourse.

Notably, this is not the first time in horror history that films have sought to address a female spectator. Nor is it the first opportunity to critique Williams, Clover, and Creed for their limiting focus on the male gaze. As I discuss in the next chapter, Gothic-romance-thrillers of the 1940s were distinctly concerned with women’s experiences of fear and paranoia in addition to the teen horror cycle of the 1990s that emphasized the frightful dimensions of girlhood sexuality and friendship. These changes have been registered by other horror scholars, who I also take up in relation to Williams, Clover, and Creed. So, although a female form of address is not necessarily new to the genre, it is, however, the first time in horror cinema history that women artists are the primary authors of these narratives. This shift in authorship away from male directors and towards female artists is a difference worth recording, and I stake a claim in naming this body of work as ‘productively different.’

Of course, there are some potential sticking points with respect to identity that my claim of ‘difference’ raises. First, it threatens to essentialize women artists into a homogenous group, treating their experiences of gender as uniform and their artistic products as the result of an ‘innate’ sexual difference from their male counterparts. As a response, I use the terms ‘women’ and ‘female’ not to refer to any intrinsic biological identity but instead to denote a cultural identity marked by the experience of being socially positioned ‘as a woman.’ In my writing, I work with the conscious assumption that the experience of living as a woman in patriarchy produces a markedly different positionality in which to make horror. While I cannot presume a set of gendered experiences to be common amongst all women, I suggest that the films

themselves construct a series of events as common to female identity and use these experiences as part of their appeal to women audiences.

Second, there is also justifiable concern about the spectrum of women profiled in this study and the female characters represented on-screen, who, for the most part, are overwhelmingly white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied (with few exception). Even though my project claims that this new wave of women's horror cinema addresses female audiences, the diversity of that address is strikingly limited. Given the availability of horror films to draw upon, this study speaks predominantly to the constructions of white, cis-hetero, able-bodied femininity and recognizes that this re-affirms a continued gap in horror criticism on race, queerness, trans identities, and disability.<sup>4</sup>

Third, I am cautious to claim that any of the films profiled in this study should be considered inherently feminist or politically nuanced in their portrayal of women simply because of their female authorship. As demonstrated in the following chapters, each film can be read as sharing a markedly different stake in feminist politics. I name this phenomenon "women's horror cinema" rather than "feminist horror" because the intended and inferred political projects of each film may vary. Even though I do believe that a large number, if not all, of these new horror films can and should be considered feminist works, I am also careful not to position myself as an arbiter of feminism, especially given each individual critic will have their own understanding of feminist politics. Instead, what I want to highlight are the ways in which these films address women's lived experiences in messy and complicated ways. So, while I consider my scholarship

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<sup>4</sup> For important monographs in these respective fields of study, see: Robin R. Means Coleman's *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890's to Present* (2011); Diana Adesola Mafe's *Where No Black Woman has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals in Speculative Film and TV* (2018); Henry Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997); Patricia White's *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999); and Angela Smith's *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (2012).

as part of a lineage of feminist horror criticism, I see this new wave of horror films as operating in relation to and sometimes in opposition to larger feminist projects concerned with women's agency and autonomy. What this 'productive difference' shows is how women come to understand their experiences within patriarchal culture, and how feminism itself, rather than being deployed as a 'method,' becomes part of the experiential territory profiled by these filmmakers.

I am concerned then with how this new wave of horror cinema accounts for women's experiences of patriarchal oppression and counters previous generic preoccupations heavily dominated by male anxieties. To address how this authorial shift allows for new, alternative, or re-inventive usages of horror cinema's ideological projects, I offer a critical reading of Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013), Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012), Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008), and Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009). These case studies have been selected based on the common feature of locating young women at the core of the narrative, meditating on related experiences of sexuality, desire, pleasure, and violence. Although this new wave of horror cinema as a whole also explores other (potentially common) experiences of womanhood, including pregnancy, mothering, and marriage, these narratives have not been included in this study. Instead, I concentrate on films that utilize the transformation of young women – either from children to adults or from victims to avengers – as a metaphor for the ways in which women come into knowing and occupy a space as female subjects in the world.

Additionally, the scope of horror films profiled in this study is limited to English-language productions from the United States and Canada, mainly financed by mainstream studios (with the exception of the Soska Sisters' *American Mary*). Although horror has often

been associated with low-budget or independent productions, as evidenced in Clover's study, I do not want to dismiss the boom of mainstream productions involving women creators. In fact, the industry drive to produce women-driven films may give this new wave of horror cinema a certain degree of cultural capital, even though some fans may alternatively view the mainstreaming of the genre as a threat to its integrity.<sup>5</sup> I have also chosen to restrict my study to American and Canadian productions so that I may better respond to theorists Williams, Clover, and Creed, who each formulate their analyses in relation to American horror cinema. Here, I acknowledge these theorists as part of the development of the American horror genre in their identification of now-popularized tropes such as the Final Girl or the monstrous-feminine, and suggest that the films profiled in this study operate within this evolving history.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, what I see as the productive commonality of the selected films are the ways in which they try to negotiate the representation of female power and subjectivity within the overtly masculine iconography of horror cinema, and culture at large. As discussed in the ensuing chapters, while this can be considered a problem of representation, it is also a theoretical concern, as the available methodological tools, namely psychoanalytic film theory, can restrict the potentially subversive offerings of these films. Although some feminist scholars such as Cynthia A. Freeland (2002) have suggested mitigating the potential pitfalls of psychoanalytically-informed film theory by adopting a cognitivist approach to horror criticism, I

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<sup>5</sup> There remains an ongoing debate within the horror community as to the veracity of large-scale, studio-backed productions versus the supposedly grittier (and thus more 'real') films of independent horror. Part of this conversation hinges, of course, on dimensions of class and means of production, since horror also has an extended history (at least stretching back to the 1970s) of being fueled by independent artists working on shoe-string budgets. While I do not detail this history, I do offer an extended analysis regarding generic purity and the threat women's horror cinema poses to it in Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that my pairing of American and Canadian horror cinemas may be problematized by scholars who identify the latter as its own national body of work. On the topic of the unique development of Canadian horror cinema, see Caelum Vatsndal's *They Came From Within* (2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and *The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul* (2015), edited by Gina Freitag and André Loiselle. For the purposes of my study, I suggest that a revisiting of feminist horror criticism would be incomplete without an analysis of the Soska Sister's *American Mary*, which offers an integral re-invention of the rape-revenge picture in respect to Clover's writings on the subgenre.

have instead chosen to preserve the psychoanalytic inflection found within Williams', Clover's, and Creed's writings. Even though these scholars also mobilize alternative modes of analysis including semiotic, (post-)structuralist, and analytical criticism, one cannot dismiss the influence psychoanalysis has had on feminist horror studies and the genre's iconography in general. While more will be said of Williams, Clover, and Creed in the next chapter (as well as other scholars), it is important to establish the primacy of psychoanalysis to this body of scholarship and to understand these conversations as operating within a longer tradition of feminist film studies, which takes Freud's and Lacan's theories of subjectivity, pleasure, and fantasy as a necessary starting point.

Within my own work, I deploy certain conceptual tools from psychoanalysis to analyze and interpret the selected films. Operating with the understanding that psychoanalytically-derived concepts (such as castration, the phallus, the abject, the uncanny) have been discursively interwoven into the very textual fabrics of horror cinema, I forward that a reading of the genre's gendered relations necessitates engagement with these theories. In the ensuing chapters, I offer a psychoanalytically-informed reading that uses a range of theoretical tools borrowed from the canon of feminist horror studies to analyze a select corpus of films. The project at hand is not to espouse an all-encompassing theory for this new cinema but to offer an inventive work of criticism that positions these films in response to previous feminist theorizations. To do so, I refract each film through a series of theoretical lenses, twisting and turning the cultural artifact through the principle work of either Williams, Clover, and/or Creed, in addition to more contemporary scholars, to reveal productive and problematic moments of generic intervention and development. The result is an original retrospective of these theories in relation to this new

wave of horror that offers a consonant collection of criticism attentive to established methodologies and discourses.

In chapter two, I offer an overview of Williams', Clover's, and Creed's respective theories on horror, as well as subsequent criticisms of their work. Here, I lay the foundation for my analyses to come, establishing some of the most important considerations of feminist horror scholarship so as to later challenge the relevance of these concepts with respect to this new wave. Heavy critique of these three scholars is reserved for the chapters that follow, and focus is instead placed on understanding how their collective theorizations of horror as male-orientated require re-visiting.

Chapter three takes up questions of authorship in respect to Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013), which, I argue, remains restricted in its ability to subvert Creed's theorizations of the monstrous-feminine that conceptualize the female body in horror as abject. I suggest Peirce's film remains burdened by anxieties over female power originally located in Stephen King's source novel and Brian De Palma's 1976 adaptation. I argue that an attempt to resolve the masculine anxieties Creed previously identifies in De Palma's film (and by extension King's writing), Peirce re-orientates her text towards the mother-daughter relationship of the story. This manoeuvre attempts to expose the ways in which women's bodies become aligned with the abject via patriarchal discourse, and as a result, the film offers an ambivalent treatment of the monstrous-feminine archetype.

Chapter four explores images of sexual violence and female empowerment in Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012). Beginning with an overview of Clover's and Creed's writings on the rape-revenge picture, this chapter considers how the Soska Sisters knowingly manipulate generic convention in order to reaffirm women's experiences of rage and trauma.

Counter to Clover's suggestion that the revenge picture translates the 'feminizing' experience of sexual violence for a male audience, I argue that *American Mary* exposes patriarchy's insidious proliferation of gender- and class-based violence, aggression, and harassment for a knowing female spectator. As a result, the film offers an evocative fantasy of female rage and revenge that exposes the patriarchal machinations of the revenge film, and the horror film industry at large.

A Canadian, independently-produced feature, *American Mary* is certainly a potential outlier within my selected corpus. It is also arguably the most subversive text of this grouping, making it stand even further apart from the other films. I have chosen to incorporate *American Mary* into this study because it stakes a claim in challenging the phallic economy of the genre's iconography, and in turn, imagines a visual lexicon of female power and a representational space for the female subject. I attribute part of the film's success to its means of production, as the Soska Sisters are not held to the same level of studio appeasement as the other directors in this study. While the mainstreaming of women's horror cinema can arguably work to 'accredit' or 'legitimize' these productions, it also potentially restricts their offerings since creators are held accountable to the studios. Notably, the contrast between production contexts is not addressed in this study, although I acknowledge the role it plays on the textual negotiations of each film.

Chapter five considers the female-driven horror phenomenon *Twilight* (2008) in respect to conversations of spectatorship, generic definition, and pleasure. By way of Clover's writing on female horror fans, as well as other feminist scholars, I first consider how Hardwicke's film has been continually excluded from conversations on the genre because it appeals primarily to teenage girls. Demonstrating how women horror fans are considered threats to generic 'purity,' I argue that (male) critics and fans alike discredit *Twilight* because it challenges the supposedly masculinist definitions of horror cinema. From there, I move into a sustained reading of the film

via Williams' work on spectatorship and pleasure, arguing that *Twilight* offers a palpable masochistic fantasy for female viewers that needs to be considered seriously with respect to the horror genre.

Lastly, chapter six offers an analysis of Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody's *Jennifer's Body* (2009). Expanding beyond the purview of feminist horror criticism, this chapter uses the film to consider broader questions of female spectatorship in feminist film theory. Utilizing the works of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Anne Smelik, I explore how the film constructs a tenable position for the female spectator in relation to Jennifer's 'masquerade' of femininity and monstrosity.

This introduction ends with a brief analysis of Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise, particularly the saga's fourth installment, which offers an important exploration of the threat of the female horror director. Reading the character of Jill from Craven's *Scream 4* (2011) as a prophetic figure of sorts, I suggest that the newest installment in the franchise makes an important commentary on women's cultural work behind the camera. By profiling Craven's films in this introduction, it is not my intention to re-centre the work of male artists in a project dedicated to honouring women horror filmmakers. Rather, it is to show how Craven's film anticipates the masculinist phobias of women's participation in horror, and how these anxieties are at once confronted and deflected within the genre.

### **“What's your favorite scary movie?”**

The hit horror movie of 1996, in fact one of the first to popularize a meta-critique of the genre, was *Scream*. Attempting a delicate balance between self-referentiality and parody, the film famously features a maniacal 'ghostface' killer who, previous to hacking and slashing his

victims, calls them from inside their homes to ask, “What’s your favorite scary movie?” Within horror history, the film stands out as both an homage to previous slasher flicks at the same time it subverts the tropes it references. After all, the film opens with an early *Psycho* (1960) inspired twist in which its anticipated female star, Drew Barrymore, is murdered before the title sequence. Given the star’s popularity with the film’s target teenage audience, her unexpected slaying was seen as cultural anathema. The fun of *Scream*, beyond its parodic and referential twists, is its premise; here, characters who are savvy to the rules of cinematic horror may fare longer against a ‘real’ serial killer than those who are not. Onus is thus placed on the core cast of characters to review their horror film trivia in an attempt to understand the seemingly random pattern of killings.

Upon release, *Scream* was an inventive critique of the conventional rules of the slasher genre that paired a poignant loss of innocence narrative with a meta, post-modern horror formula for the coming millennium. While the success of the original would seem to bode well for any following sequels, the originality and overall cultural momentum of the first installment could not be duplicated by *Scream 2* (1997) or *Scream 3* (2000), which would both have to rely upon a series of meta-gimmicks to achieve the same results. Given the waning critical reception for the films, Craven supposedly expressed concern when approached to revive the franchise, and apparently only agreed to directing a fourth installment if Kevin Williamson’s shooting script was as tight as the original’s. Premiering fifteen years after the first film, *Scream 4* (2011) updated the franchise for a new generation, one who had subsequently become even more attuned to generic conventions and had also seen the rise of horror subgenres heavily influenced by the slasher, including torture porn (*Saw* [2004], *Hostel* [2005]), home invasion (*Funny Games* [1997], *The Strangers* [2008]), and found footage films (*Blair Witch Project* [1999]).

In the fourth installment, familiar-protagonist Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) has recently returned to Woodsboro, the place of the first massacre, to launch her new autobiographical novel, *Out of Darkness*; bristling news reporter Gayle Weathers (Courteney Cox) finds herself lacking excitement and inspiration for a new story; lovable yet seemingly inept Deputy Dewey (David Arquette) has been promoted to Woodsboro Sheriff; and a new group of high school students is being targeted by a psychotic killer. Strongly mirroring the narrative arc of the original *Scream*, the fourth installment centers around Sidney's teenage niece, Jill Roberts (Emma Roberts), who is looking to dissociate herself from her family's tragic legacy. As the body count once again begins to rise, a final bloodbath is staged at a house after-party, where it is revealed that Jill and her easily-manipulated friend Charlie (Rory Culkin) have orchestrated the most recent killing spree in attempt to achieve their fifteen minutes of Internet fame. After killing Charlie, Jill explains to Sidney that she has been recording the murders and is prepared to upload them onto the Internet under the name of her now-dead (also murdered) boyfriend. Intending to kill Sidney so that she becomes the lone survivor of the horrific attacks, therefore garnering all the media attention, Jill is eventually stopped by the original survivors – Dewey, Gayle and Sidney – who together manage to kill the deranged teen.

While *Scream 4* can act as a standalone epilogue to the original trilogy, and thus, as a gateway into the contemporary horror landscape for a new audience, it is better served to be read both as a remaking of and as a call-and-response to the first production, updating its now-dated gender politics. After the first double homicide in the original *Scream*, Sidney and friends discuss the identity of the killer and bring up the possibility that it may be a woman. With an air of boyhood overcompensation, Stu (Matthew Lillard) quips, "Because there's no way a girl could have killed them." Tempered by an unmistakable 90s sardonic wit, the tone and lilt of

which was perfected by Sarah Michelle Gellar in another horror milestone, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Tatham (Rose McGowan) quickly scolds, “That is so sexist. The killer could easily be female. *Basic Instinct*.” What can only materialize as theory in the first film becomes practice by the fourth installment when Jill is revealed to be the film’s pathological mastermind. If Hitchcock’s adage to ‘torture the women’ still presides as an organizing rule for the slasher film and the horror genre at large, true to form *Scream 4* defies expectation by showcasing women not only as capable survivors but also as equally capable torturers.<sup>7</sup> Here, the film’s expected lone survivor or ‘Final Girl’ morphs into a killer extraordinaire, signalling a palpable transition regarding gendered representation in post-millennial horror.

As Craven states in an interview regarding his revival of the franchise for older nostalgic audiences and for new viewers alike, “You have to also, in order to live up to the standards of *Scream*, sort of analyze that decade and come up with something cogent and meaningful to say about it that’s original” (“*Scream 4* Interview: Wes Craven”). Given his positioning of the *Scream* franchise as a cultural barometer of sorts, I think it is fair to use the changing plot points in the latest installment as cursory evidence of a larger cultural shift that is beginning to re-evaluate the role of women in horror. Jill is as an interesting character not necessarily because she is a killer, since horror cinema is littered with female psychopaths and monsters. (For example, the equally meta *Urban Legend* [1998], released only two years after the original *Scream*, also features a woman as the killer.) Instead, Jill is remarkable because she is positioned as a cinematic director of sorts via the filming of the kills in ‘real time.’ By orchestrating another mass murder in Woodsboro wherein she controls how it is recorded, Jill figures as an authorial mastermind

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<sup>7</sup> This adage is made reference to in the writings of both Carol Clover and Linda Williams, and has become an almost mythicized moment in film history in which Alfred Hitchcock explains the secret to an effective horror or suspense picture. While the phrase may have originally been stated by Hitchcock with a bit of tongue-and-cheek, his documented behaviour towards his female stars certainly complicates this response.

poised to enact her own Internet-age rendition of *All About Eve* (1950) as she attempts to ‘become’ Sidney. Given the overtly saturated world of social media where desensitization to violence is perhaps more rampant than Principal Arthur Himbry (Henry Winkler) feared in the first *Scream*, Jill’s ability to carry out the killings and her performance as a victim must be exceptional in order to be shocking. She, like the film itself, is tasked with outdoing the slayings and subsequent media frenzies that have come before, and within the fictitious town of Woodsboro this means causing more sensation than Gayle’s best-selling autobiography and seven *Stab* films combined. (This perhaps also serves as an apt metaphor for the female horror filmmaker herself, who is often times forced to outdo her male counterparts in order to succeed.)

What then is left to do that has not been done-to-death already? As Charlie and Robbie predict during a meeting of the local high school’s Cinema Club, the new killer should heighten the stakes (and the meta-commentary) by making the ‘scary movie’ themselves.

Charlie: Well, if you wanna be the new, new version, the killer should be filming the murders.

Robbie: Yeah, it’s the natural next step in the psycho-slasher innovation. I mean you film them all in real time and before you get caught, you upload them into cyber space.

It is not enough then to simply restage the actions of the previous Woodsboro massacre, thereby replicating the plot of the original *Scream* verbatim. Nor is it sufficient to create an entire meta-movie franchise, like *Stab*, based on the same diegetic string of murders. Given the layers of meta-reality that have already been evoked, established and exhausted before the fourth installment, a new rendition of *Scream* must beat the franchise at its own game. As a solution, the film’s latest killer usurps directorial control of the meta-narrative, and in orchestrating a new massacre, simultaneously manifests as an auteur of grisly proportions. As Gayle aptly explains to Dewey, “This time he’s making the movie.”

Recalling Stu's exclamation in the original *Scream* that the killer could not be a girl/woman, Gayle's misgendering of Ghostface in the above quote is presumably meant to misdirect the audience. However, if the killer also figures as the film's proverbial meta-director, wherein having the final cut suggests much deadlier consequences than simple editorial control, then the underlining assumption of this statement is that horror cinema remains the exclusive territory of men. The gendered presupposition about who can film and therefore control the horror narrative is effectively undermined by Jill who takes metaphoric – but not literal – control of the camera. That the film works to restrict instances in which we see Jill recording the events is telling, as presumably Craven wants to avoid telegraphing the killer's identity. As a result, however, the film limits Jill's directorial gaze while at the same time establishing her killer look as the most pressing threat to the heroes' survival. Rather than show Jill utilizing digital recording equipment, say in an updated telling of Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), wherein the audience is aligned with the killer's 16mm camera, *Scream 4* never offers the same form of identification with Jill's point-of-view. As much as the film invokes the figure of the female horror filmmaker, it seems equally compelled to mitigate her scopophilic powers, subjecting her gaze to a rather diminished treatment. Here, we see the textual savvy of Craven's film begin to falter as it reveals its own internal(ized) phobias over the female gaze.

Furthermore, it may also be difficult to celebrate Jill outright (beyond her impressive ten-person body count) given her location within the landscape of postfeminist popular culture. As Jeremy Cornelius considers, Jill also symbolizes an ambivalent example of postfeminist girl power run amuck, wherein female empowerment becomes equated with neo-liberal notions of individuality that prize the achievements of one over the collective success of the group. For Cornelius, Jill is the millennial posterchild: a fame-obsessed, self-aggrandizing, social media

whiz, whose monstrous parody of anti-patriarchal attitudes threatens to demonize the hard-won battles of the feminist movements. Yet, if we read Jill exclusively as the monstrous progeny of postfeminism, her death can too easily become a point of potential celebration thereby eliding her symbolic significance as the film's meta-director. In a genre cinema dominated by male killer-artists, Jill emerges as important female author of cinematic horror – even if she perhaps goes to unnecessary lengths to save on special effects.

If we are to take the *Scream* franchise as a cultural barometer, reflecting the latest trends in horror cinema, Jill symbolizes an important shift in the genre towards the emergence of women artists as the “natural next-step in psycho-slasher innovation.” However, as I intimate in this cursory analysis, it does not necessarily mean the genre is willing to accept their inclusion without pushback. The limitation of Jill's gaze and her eventual death also points to a potential resistance towards this new wave of women's horror cinema, which demands space and attention. Although *Scream 4* is a male-authored text, I understand it as part of these overarching dialogues about women horror filmmakers and the generic and cultural anxieties they arouse from so-called arbiters of generic boundaries.

Just as Jill is positioned to unsettle expectations, so too does this project aim to trouble the definitions of horror cinema that have historically relegated women directors to the sidelines. Given the common perception of the genre as belonging to men, the rage with which Jill executes her attacks and demands her fame seems merited. I offer this dissertation as my own retort to the assumption that women do not or cannot make horror films, intervening into the ongoing erasure of the efforts of female filmmakers. And while this thesis, in a sense, offers a parallel to the film, it also looks further to the ways in which women are making horror films for other women, investigating what their films are about, what conventions they deploy, and

whether or not they succeed in offering a productive critique of the genre. Although Jill's contributions to horror cinema may be over, the reactive scholarship to these exciting shifts in the genre are only just beginning; they find a necessary start point in this dissertation.

## Chapter 2

### **Final Girls and Monstrous Women: Theorizing Female Representation and Spectatorship in Horror Cinema**

One of the most sweeping assumptions about horror cinema is that it is unflinchingly aligned with the masculine, either by way of male filmmakers who continue to dominate both academic and popular conversations on the genre, the hyper-visible male fan base, or the masculinized monsters that seem to haunt its canon. Part of the strategic work of this new wave of women's horror cinema is in disrupting the alignment between masculinity and the horror genre, which, as I suggest, finds precedent in feminist scholarship. In this chapter, I provide an overview of feminist horror criticism to better demonstrate how this new wave operates in relation to these analyses, and additionally motivates a re-evaluation of this same scholarship. In general, I believe the feminist theorists profiled in this study offer strong readings of the horror films available to them at the time of writing. However, this new wave of women-driven horror expands beyond the parameters of their original considerations and cannot be adequately accounted for by their theorizations of the genre. So, what was once perhaps true of horror for Barbara Creed, Carol Clover, and Linda Williams is no longer tenable, given the burgeoning corpus of films authored by women filmmakers. It is therefore necessary to first establish the foundations of feminist horror criticism in order to show how this new wave of women-driven horror simultaneously emerges in relation to these previous writings and also compels new interpretations of the genre.

To do so, I have chosen to organize this chapter around core conceptualizations of horror cinema rather than offer a chronological profile of these theoretical developments. In the first

section, I begin with Barbara Creed's offerings on the monstrous-feminine in order to first disrupt the notion that horror cinema is dominated by masculine imagery. From there I move on to consider Clover's formulations on the genre with respect to female representation and male identification. Complementing her readings with Williams' work on excess and mimesis, I lay out how horror cinema has remained tethered to the male spectator despite its categorization as a potentially 'feminine' viewing experience. In the second section, I pay greater attention to the role of female spectatorship in both horror cinema and feminist scholarship. Investigating the ways in which horror cinema has ambivalently solicited engagement from women viewers, I explore how subsequent academic discourses on the topic compete between acknowledging their presence and erasing their participation entirely. While this new wave of women-driven horror is not necessarily the first to address a female spectator, it does perhaps prompt an unquestionable alignment between horror and female viewers that no longer requires debate.

In order to avoid repetition, I reserve the majority of my critiques of Creed, Clover, and Williams for the subsequent chapters to follow. For the purposes of critique within this review, I instead explore how these writers have been taken up by other feminist film scholars in subsequent years so that I may locate this new wave of women's horror within these continually evolving dialogues. What is important here is showcasing how even these subsequent re-evaluations still cannot sufficiently describe the dimensions of this new wave of women's horror cinema, which requires an equally new wave of feminist criticism to account for its properties.

### **Cavernous Maws and Bloody Chain Saws**

In her 1993 monograph *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed challenges the supposed masculinization of horror cinema by offering the over-

presence of women monsters within the genre, such as modern-day witch Carrie or possessed-child Regan, as evidence of alternative gender negotiations. Asserting that not all horror monsters are alike, Creed argues that gender serves as an important qualifier of monstrosity. These figures, whom she names ‘the monstrous-feminine,’ are monstrous precisely because they are female, or because they are gendered female via the text (e.g., the Queen Alien in *Alien* [1979]). Given the overwhelming presence of the monstrous-feminine within horror cinema, it is striking to Creed that little film scholarship has been dedicated to these figures and has instead focused more intensely on women’s status as victims in the genre. Creed accounts for this trend by suggesting that we are culturally more comfortable engaging with representations of women as passive objects who are threatened rather than being the ones who do the threatening. She argues that it is more digestible to (male) critics and audiences alike to understand women as those who are commonly ‘done to’ and to ignore contradictory representations that present them as agents, since doing so would oppose the patriarchal imperative to ascribe women as innately passive. For Creed, these re-imaginings of primal, archetypal characters of pre-modern Western mythologies, such as witches or vampires, bleed into the frame of modern horror cinema and force us to acknowledge the continued cultural power of these female figures.

As expressed by Creed, the monstrous-feminine stands to usurp the masculine/male monster’s reign of terror over horror cinema because both she and the genre share a grounding in notions of abjection. Meant to challenge the symbolic system of order, the abject, as formulated by Julia Kristeva, threatens the integrity of the subject’s boundaries through its refusal to be easily assimilated into the self. Within Kristeva’s formulations, women are afforded a special relationship to the abject via the body’s maternal functions, which prevent the female body from being understood as “clean” and “proper” (Kristeva quoted in Creed 11). If the ideal, fully

Symbolic body should not indicate any “debt to nature,” the female body through the act of menstruation not only acknowledges this debt but announces it with its monthly bleeding (Kristeva quoted in Creed 11). The female body is thus represented as one pervious to boundary instability, versus the imagined male body, which does not initially betray its own vulnerabilities.

In regard to horror cinema, Creed takes Kristeva’s notion of the abject and reads the genre as implicitly preoccupied by questions of boundary transgression. Creed’s psychoanalytic formulation echoes that of Robin Wood who previously outlines the premise of the horror film as a disruption of normality by a monster (*Hollywood* 71). For Wood, horror similarly relies upon the rupture of established normative boundaries and is foremost concerned with exorcising larger cultural anxieties regarding non-normative expressions of sexuality, including images of bisexuality, children’s sexuality, and female sexuality. Similarly, Creed also sees female sexuality as horror’s central preoccupation but instead reframes the genre’s structure as an encounter between the Symbolic order and the monstrous-feminine; in this encounter, the monstrous-feminine poses a challenge to the stability of the Symbolic (11; 14). Refracting generic conventions via the framework of abjection rather than repression, as Wood does, Creed presents a definition of horror that centres women’s proximity to the abject and espouses the hope that the genre can be seen as more suitably female. In other words, if horror is preoccupied with boundary transgressions, and the abject serves as the most notable symbol of this phenomenon, and women are conversely linked to the abject, then horror must be centrally preoccupied with the female body (11). Yet, even though this model may destabilize previous masculinist orientations of horror cinema, Creed concludes that the central ideological project of the horror film is ultimately a conservative one. For her, horror works to cleanse or purify the

abject via the act of representation, bringing about a symbolic encounter with the Maternal body, the quintessential monstrous-feminine, so that it may be defeated (14).

Importantly, she clarifies that while on the surface the prevalence of these monstrous images may present a productive feminist critique of patriarchal culture, inevitably they serve to reflect male anxieties and fears rather than images of female subjectivity (7). The monstrous-feminine having clawed her way back from the chambers of pre-modern consciousness emerges only to be constrained by the limitations of the male-authored cinematic text (see Chapter 3). While we may acknowledge the limitations of Creed's feminist readings given the constraints of the canon she is working with, her central argument that horror ought to be re-negotiated as a female-dominated genre still resonates, perhaps now more than ever.

For some scholars, Creed's model of horror is too broad, as her study potentially relies upon 'cherry-picked' examples to support her generalizing claim that all horror is in fact predicated on a relational struggle against the Maternal/the Imaginary. For these scholars, Creed's study is not necessarily restricted by the canon of horror cinema available to her but by her own selections. In opposition to these critiques, I understand Creed's work as interrogating the limitations of male-authored horror *in general*, which clearly attempts to exorcise phobias of the female body via the genre's iconography. What I see as a strong benefit of Creed's work is her suspicions regarding the political potentialities of these monstrous figures who tend to represent the inner-workings of male psycho-sexual anxieties rather than empowered female agency.

The fact that images of the monstrous-feminine are perhaps more productive measures of male anxieties than female identity is, in part, a result of Creed's methodology, which, utilizing a psychoanalytic framework, only takes into account male subjectivity as an authoring/organizing

force of horror. The limitations of psychoanalysis as a method is something I too struggle with in my own readings. As I discuss in Chapter 4 with respect to *American Mary* (2012), psychoanalysis strains to account for female subjectivity, and because of such, often fails as an interpretive tool to display the ways in which this new wave of horror cinema attempts to reconfigure conventions of the genre. Yet, to dispose of psychoanalysis entirely seems irresponsible, given the impact psychoanalytic concepts and analysis have had on horror. What is perhaps more useful is to offer an accompanying method of analysis that deploys psychoanalysis as a discourse within the broader socio-cultural context, as well as a language that is referred to or referenced by horror cinema. The result is to treat psychoanalysis not as an overbearing schema or ahistorical formula of subject relations, as Creed does, but as one piece in the larger interpretative puzzle that can be informed by other precipitating factors including one's personal relationship to horror.

Speaking to the problem of method and interpretation, in which the monstrous-feminine can only be read in relation to the male subject, Isabel Pinedo criticizes Creed for dismissing the ways in which these figures also serve as sites of personal pleasure for female viewers. In *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), she suggests that horror has and can be a meaningful outlet for women viewers to “exercise, rather than exorcise” feelings of terror, rage and pleasure that are continually denied expression in culture (3). For Pinedo, Creed's study erases the possibility that the monstrous-feminine holds alternative meanings for the female spectator as a figure of female agency and empowerment (68). Pinedo suggests a similar pitfall besets Carol Clover's work, whose investigation of female representation in horror also reaffirms male subjectivity/the male gaze as the organizing force behind the genre and thus the guiding interpretive lens. In adopting the male-orientated discourse

of psychoanalysis, both Creed and Clover rob the female spectator of her place in horror cinema and, as Pinedo argues, the potential readings this viewing position may produce. While Pinedo does not necessarily suggest a turn toward the ‘social audience’ of horror cinema to remedy this oversight (e.g., investigating the real women audiences who watch horror, as does Brigid Cherry for instance), she remains weary of psychoanalytic interpretations that limit the female spectator’s place within the genre. Indeed, the absence of the female spectator within this discourse seems like a particular irony given Creed and Clover presumably read horror from a female/feminist perspective but do not engage with this possibility in their own work. More will be said of female spectatorship in the next section. For now, I turn to Clover’s work to demonstrate how the male spectator has been continually treated as the genre’s central viewer in feminist horror criticism and how this assumption has organized subsequent theorizations.

In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Clover similarly re-iterates that even the most empowered images of women in horror ultimately service the male spectator. While Creed characterizes the monstrous-feminine as an image of horrific proportions, Clover suggests the inclusion of female figures like the slasher film’s ‘Final Girl’ may actually be part of the genre’s pleasurable offerings to male audiences. Her study goes on to demonstrate how horror may subvert traditional organizations of cinematic spectatorship by ‘opening up’ male audiences to the feminizing affects of fear and terror. Operating within a psychoanalytically derived paradigm of spectatorship previously established by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) and largely favored by other feminist scholars of the time, including Linda Williams, Clover challenges the presumed mechanics of identification in horror cinema by re-evaluating the connection between the male spectator and his on-screen counterpart. Within traditional ‘gaze theory,’ it is presumed the male spectator will adopt the

looking position of the on-screen male, which, within horror would often mean aligning oneself with the killer. However, given the genre's organization around female victimization and survival, Clover argues that horror may actually afford more formal opportunities for the male spectator to identify with the female 'victim-hero,' thereby opening up the possibility of cross-gender identification. This would then counter previous theorizations of spectatorship forwarded by Mulvey that assume the male spectator as incapable of being aligned with the on-screen heroine who is typically positioned as a passive object rather than an active narrative agent.

Clover's key point about cross-gender identification is most famously formulated in relation to the slasher subgenre, which provides a neat framework for her overall study. She categorizes these films as typically revolving around a group of young teens or adults who are forced to survive a methodical set of slayings. The film's killer is often depicted as an unusually resilient and unrelenting psychopath who is determined to unleash his fury upon a sleepy community. Usually equipped with a phallic-like weapon, these predators tend to attack sexually active straight couples first, placing particularly cruel focus on the young women, whose entrances into sexuality are gruesomely punished. While the motivations for these attacks range in nature (and believability), it remains that the majority of the killer's victims will be female save for one lone survivor. Named by Clover as the 'Final Girl,' she alone is able to outlast the rest of the group, eventually attacking and/or killing the monster in return.

At the outset of the film, male spectators are more closely aligned with the killer through the use of point of view shots in early attack sequences, which place the viewer in the killer's position. However, as Clover notes, the slasher film quickly oscillates between the killer's point of view and that of the Final Girl, who by the latter half of the film, often becomes the more dominant perspective and locus of audience identification. Indeed, she serves as a compelling

pseudo-masculine vehicle for the male spectator given her ambiguously-coded gender signifiers. As evidenced by her gender-neutral name, such as Laurie (*Halloween* [1978]), Stevie (*The Fog* [1980]), Marti (*Hell Night* [1981]), or Stretch (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* [1986]), the Final Girl commonly embodies both traditionally masculine and feminine features, which presumably allow her to easily negotiate the action of the film. Described by Clover as smart, competent, sexually reluctant, and “watchful to the point of paranoia,” the Final Girl is set apart from the other women in the film because of her intelligence and resourcefulness (39). Indeed, her very survival is contingent upon her practical abilities, which inevitably allow her to usurp the film’s investigating gaze and serve as a counterpoint to the passive reliance of the other female characters (39-40; 60). In doing so, the Final Girl challenges the binary structure of Mulvey’s paradigm, which can only account for an active male gaze. By becoming the one who ‘looks,’ namely the one who sees the killer and fights back, she also defies Williams’ principle that to possess the gaze as a woman is to subsequently be punished for such a daring transgression (see “When the Woman Looks”).

While on the surface, the trope of the Final Girl seems to indicate a pro-feminist leaning within horror cinema, first appearances are, as Clover is quick to point out, rarely trustworthy within the genre. What may code originally as a potentially empowering image of female agency is quickly dismissed by Clover who states, “To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development [...] is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking” (53). Rather than positioning the Final Girl as an anomaly within the masculine-dominated universe of the horror genre, Clover sees the character as a product of this very system; male spectators may assuage their dis-ease at the overtly phallic, often penetrative or castrating actions of the horror film by running it through a woman. In other words, what may

manifest as gendered violence between killer and Final Girl is in fact meant to act as a substitution for the markedly homoerotic tension that resonates within the narrative (52). Though the female body is sensationalized in the horror film, the sensation, as Clover sees it, is entirely a male affair.

For Clover, identification rests on the action of displacement; in this formula, the Final Girl is not a girl at all but a man in disguise, and it is this disguise which allows her to function as a psycho-sexual vehicle for the male spectator to exorcise his fears and anxieties. Her outward masculinity, despite her sex, offers a suitable channel through which the male spectator may displace his initial alignment with the film's main male character – the killer – and adopt a seemingly more radical, cross-gender identification. As much as this paradigm may initially offer exciting counter possibilities from Mulvey's more rigid binary, in which gendered spectators are fixed in place and cross-gender alignment particularly for the male spectator is seen as an impossibility, Clover remains skeptical of its utility for feminist politics.

What is perhaps most striking about Clover's study is the 'gender trouble' she sees as inherent to horror cinema, which, at least within popular dialogues, is thought to be one of the most regressive genres with respect to gendered identification and representation. For Clover, contrary to common belief, horror does not champion a sadistic male gaze that delights in the spectacle of female victimization but instead constructs a masochistic viewing position for the male spectator to experience the "abject terror" of being victimized 'as a woman' (35). The troubling of gender with respect to spectatorship and identification is equally matched in the representation of the Final Girl who, as Clover suggests, is depicted through a blend of gendered signifiers that code her as both feminine and masculine. Together, these elements suggest a

degree of mutability in horror to re-consider gendered viewing pleasures and representational strategies.

Yet, as Pinedo critiques, rather than fully embrace how horror destabilizes gender in productive and exciting ways, Clover seems to ultimately ‘pull her punch’ by re-coding power as male/masculine, especially with respect to the Final Girl. As Pinedo prompts, we ought to question why, for instance, the Final Girl’s resourcefulness or ability to survive needs to be read as ‘masculine’ and conversely, why these supposedly ‘masculine’ characteristics become signs of her empowerment. Turning to an alternative corpus of films she describes as ‘postmodern horror,’ Pinedo suggests that feminist criticism ought to show how horror breaks down binary notions of gender to create a tenable viewing position for the female spectator.

Similarly, Jack Halberstam in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), reconsiders Clover’s formulations of the Final Girl with respect to queerness. Rather than forward the Final Girl as a masculinized female, Halberstam, via the example of Stretch from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), demonstrates how gender “splatters, rips at the seams, and then is sutured together again as something much messier than male or female” (143). Reading the slasher in relation to queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Halberstam proposes that the Final Girl expands the boundaries of gender itself and troubles the idea that a stable, gendered subject position exists within the (sub)genre. For both Halberstam and Pinedo, horror offers the possibility to break down traditional gender locations and to destabilize the very gendered signification Clover’s study relies upon.

Regarding this new wave of women’s horror cinema, I argue that these films are not necessarily invested in ‘undoing’ gender so much as they wish to acknowledge the possibility of a locatable, gendered position known as ‘woman.’ These new films work to stabilize female

gender identity as something representable and identifiable *to women audiences*. If earlier feminist horror criticism made it a priority to interrogate the genre's 'gender trouble', this decision was in part motivated by the larger precipitating conditions that establish the male spectator/subject as the organizing force of horror cinema. Under previous models, horror offers male artists and audiences an opportunity to exorcise fears over sexual difference and women's power, such that the genre itself can be read as a working through of these anxieties. However, the topic of sexual difference, namely how female identity and femininity is expressed by male filmmakers for the sake of the male spectator, is no longer a central motivating factor in this new wave. Instead, this new wave of horror attempts to articulate the complexities of female subjectivity for the purposes of other women. What is being worked through is not the fear of sexual difference nor the threat women may pose to patriarchal power, but the very conditions of occupying a gender location that is already marked 'as difference' within patriarchy. This is why a film like *Jennifer's Body* (2009) becomes so important, for instance, because it exposes the ways in which patriarchy constructs women and femininity as 'other.'

What results is a cinema that does not offer the same degree of identificatory fluidity that Clover views as inherent to the horror genre and as part of its productive challenge to patriarchal discourse. The cross-gender identification Clover sees as important to the then-burgeoning corpus of horror films no longer applies to this new wave since it does not treat the male spectator as its primary viewer. If Clover sees horror as an important genre for feminist inquiry because it challenges traditionally gendered and restrictive formulations of representation and spectatorship via the act of displacement (from male spectator to female victim-hero), I am suggesting that this new wave of women's horror offers intervention by way of alignment between female spectator and on-screen heroine. This alignment is again part of the importance

of a film like *Jennifer's Body* (2009), which is not only thematically concerned with issues of closeness or proximity, but also openly relishes bringing women audiences 'closer' to genre (see Chapter 6).

To clarify, my comments are not meant to suggest that this new wave of women's horror is any less disruptive of gender as an essential identity, or any less queer than earlier cinemas. Indeed, this new wave may be even more playful regarding the use of gendered signifiers and conventions considering its deployment of irony and meta-textual reference, as well as more critical of gender as socially and cultural contingent. What I am instead proposing is that this new wave of women's horror does not operate along the same 'sliding' axes of identification that Clover previously conceptualizes as part of the genre's productive troubling of gender. What it offers is a different form of spectatorship and identification that relies upon recognition and validation to critique patriarchal systems of representation. While more will be said of female spectatorship and its place within the genre in the following section, what I wish to highlight here is that this new wave creates a different investment in gender than Clover previously identifies because of its shift in authorship and address.

In considering the ways in which horror may disrupt traditional experiences of gendered spectatorship, it is also important to take into account Clover's and Williams' claims that horror is a 'feminizing' experience for the male viewer. For Clover, horror offers the male spectator an opportunity to identify with the female victim-hero and in turn, to experience her journey of being stalked, hunted, potentially harmed, and ultimately triumphant over a masculine-coded threat. Similarly, in "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" (1991), Williams also understands horror as offering up a 'female experience' of spectatorship to its male audience by way of excess and mimesis. Defined as that which is not fundamental to a film's structure and

seemingly serves only as a visually gratuitous spectacle, excess may emerge in the horror film via the grotesque body of the male monster (classical horror) or in the pained body of the female victim (modern horror). Williams' formulations of excess introduce Clover's identification of three body genres – horror, melodrama, and pornography – to expand upon the ways in which the female body becomes synonymous with the horror text and hence with the viewing experience. As originally coined by Clover, a body genre seeks to affect a mimetic physiological reaction from its audience members that mirrors the action on screen. A successful film is thus measured on its ability to produce this desired mimetic response, which, as qualified by Williams, hinges on 'the jerk': a horror film is the 'fear jerker,' a melodrama is commonly referred to as the 'tear jerker,' while pornography may motivate one to 'jerk off' ("Film Bodies" 606). In each of these genres, it is the woman who figures as the primary embodiment of fear, pain, and pleasure. It is she who is the moved and the moving, and it is through her that the audience viscerally experiences the action on screen ("Film Bodies" 605). For Williams, as for Clover, the affective properties of horror are explicitly tied to the female body as it only through her that the horror film may run.

Together, these theories of horror cinema characterize the genre as a mimetic experience of fear that is ultimately controlled by patriarchy or the male gaze. Yet, it is my suggestion that this new wave of women's horror cinema exploits the genre's ability to offer a 'feminine' viewing experience for the benefit of a female spectator. In this new wave, it is not that the genre 'feminizes' its audience but rather that it treats the experience of horror viewing itself as aligned with 'the feminine,' in its ability to validate the experiences of being a woman in patriarchy. If male audiences were once 'opened up' to the feminine pleasure of fear, this cinema instead 'openly' invites female audiences to enjoy the pleasures of recognition by dramatizing the ways

in which women's realities in patriarchy may constitute as horrific. This is not to re-establish an innate, binary link between fear and femininity but to acknowledge how these films make the case that women may more palpably register expressions of patriarchal oppression as instances of violence, terror, anxiety, and panic. This new wave of horror cinema references these potentially common experiences in order to address female viewers and to invite them into a space of mutual recognition. Therefore, this new wave preserves the 'feminine' experience of horror identified by Clover and Williams but for an entirely other purpose than to assuage male audiences. Here, the genre itself becomes part of the expression of women's lived experiences that position men as the sometimes-literal, often-symbolic monsters that need to be defeated.

What I have done in this previous section is describe the ways in which Creed, Clover, and Williams interrogate representations of women in horror and the subsequent patterns of identification they map in relation to the male spectator. Although women often figure as impressive characters in the genre (ranging from famous monsters to celebrated survivors), there remains a continued pattern, at least within this body of criticism, of positioning these characters exclusively in relation to the male gaze. This produces an overarching theory of horror, as Pinedo critiques, that erases the possibility of female spectatorship and women's pleasure. It is my suggestion, however, that this new wave of women-driven horror effectively frees the lead female character from her previous obligation to play cypher for the male psyche. In re-centring the narrative around women, these horror films no longer require that she play stand-in Oedipal mother, for instance, or to serve as a safe vehicle through which the male spectator may safely confront his fears of castration. Within these worlds, she is liberated from this function so that she may exist independently from the traditional male gaze of horror cinema. It is one of the central claims of this dissertation that the new female hero of the horror film actively works to

address a female spectator, one who has been – as cited – historically under-acknowledged by the genre and underrepresented within horror film studies.

Additionally, while I have been mindful to note how psychoanalysis has been used to interpret representations of women in horror cinema, in the following section, I unpack how previous psychoanalytic paradigms of spectatorship diminish the centrality of the female spectator in horror. I consider how this figure has often been discounted within academic discourses on horror despite the historical participation of women viewers in the genre. Turning toward an ever-evolving corpus of films addressed to women, I note how the female spectator ought to be re-considered as a primary figure within these dialogues, and especially in relation to this new wave of women-authored horror.

### **Like Looking in a Mirror...**

Although Creed, Williams, and Clover each suggest that the female body is integral to the inner-workings of horror cinema, they do not necessarily consider how a female spectator may relate to these images. Indeed, even though each scholar nods to the possibility of a female viewer in their writings, they choose instead to overlook or minimize her functioning within the genre in favour of her male counterpart, thought to be the more pressing concern given his priority in traditional formulations of spectatorship. In this respect, these feminist theorizations of horror replicate some of the larger concerns in feminist film theory, which can strain to account for the possibility of a female gaze.

As identified by Mulvey, the voyeuristic pleasures of spectatorship depend upon an established distance between the traditionally male observer and the female erotic object. Under this model, the former is afforded an active, investigative gaze while the latter is fixed as a

passive, flattened image to be gazed upon. This established organization of scopophilic relations leaves little room for female desire or pleasure to operate independently from the male subject. As Mulvey formulates this set of positions, the female spectator – in order to enjoy the cinema – is either left to adopt a cross-gender gaze wherein she temporarily assumes the viewing position of the male spectator, or she must endure a masochistic viewing experience as she watches the objectification of her on-screen surrogate.<sup>8</sup> As Mary Ann Doane points out in “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator” (1982), the female spectator is not afforded the same distance from the cinematic spectacle as her male counterpart and is thus faced with the problem of being ‘too close’ to the image. What is first framed as a problem of activity and passivity for Mulvey is re-negotiated as one of proximity and distance for Doane, who suggests “to have the cinema is to have woman” (“Film and the Masquerade” 44).

Doane’s statement serves as a striking parallel to Clover’s understanding of horror as being unable to run without the presence of the female body, through which the action of the film is enacted. It seems in both formulations of cinematic looking relations, women are placed at a crossroads regarding the potentialities of their pleasures and desires, as to look is to see the self as victim or at least as temporarily victimized. Certainly, Creed’s formulations present a counter to this model, wherein focus is shifted away from female-victim narratives and towards the representation of female agency. The pitfall here, however, is that often the same expression of female agency which may serve as a celebratory site of subversion is also considered by Creed as the very condition through which the monstrous-feminine is formulated; it is the woman/woman-creature’s over-activity that becomes the very vehicle for her status as monster. While still

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<sup>8</sup> In the subsequent years after Mulvey’s original essay, she has reconsidered her earlier negative association between masochism and female spectatorship. See: Laura Mulvey’s “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by ‘Duel in the Sun’ (King Vidor, 1946)” (1981) and Linda Williams’ *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’* (1989). Within this dissertation, I return to the question of masochism and pleasure in Chapter 5.

operating within a male-monster/female-victim model, Williams also provides an alternative to the problem of spectatorship and proximity via her work on 'excess.' In her model, the male spectator is freed from an attachment to his same-sex surrogate on-screen and may be mobilized to identify with the heroine, just as Clover also stipulates. However, this again proves limiting as mobility in both Williams' and Clover's writings is understood in relation to the male gaze. It is the male spectator who is afforded the ability to indulge in his sadomasochistic fantasies whereby he may first align with the male/masculine monster and then with the female victim-hero.

While a renegotiation of looking relations may result for the male spectator, the possibility of female spectatorship goes largely undiscussed in these foundational works of feminist horror criticism. When the topic of the female gaze is raised, as Clover does in relation to the Final Girl, it is only in respect to the action on-screen and its relationship to male patterns of identification. The question of how the female spectator may be situated in relation to the gaze of the avenging heroine, for instance, is not necessarily a sustained preoccupation in this body of scholarship, save for Williams' essay, "When the Woman Looks" (1984). Here, she notes how horror has historically permitted women to adopt an investigating gaze, while also simultaneously working to police the possibilities of that look. Williams offers the example of the vamp, who, for instance, uses her sexual wiles to control the men who seek to dominate her, but who is ultimately punished for her assertion of agency and for her ability to 'stare back' at her lovers/oppressors. Here, the vamp's scopophilic transgressions render her look an empty, powerless parody of the male gaze (Williams "When the Woman Looks" 17). Instead, it is only during the female victim's encounter with the monster that an alternative formulation of looking relations may materialize (at least within the classical register of horror cinema). As Williams

describes, it is in this moment, wherein the woman looks at the monster that she recognizes a mutual affinity between herself and the creature, and understands them both as freakish, excessive, and/or lacking in relation to “patriarchal structures of seeing” (“When the Woman Looks” 18). As Williams makes clear, “[t]here is not much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned” (“When the Woman Looks” 21). Within this model, the monster becomes a mirror for the female victim who sees in his form a distortion of her own image (“When the Woman Looks” 22). Though this may be formulated as a moment of ‘not-seeing’ (of misrecognition) if we abide by the reigning phallogocentric logics of voyeurism, it may also establish a moment of possibility, whereby she may recognize her power as a product of her difference (“When the Woman Looks” 31).

Yet, even though Williams demonstrates how horror offers an example of the female gaze, she ultimately suggests that women whether on- or off-screen cannot take pleasure in looking. As much as horror presents the opportunity to look, Williams notes that it also punishes this act just as easily: for characters on-screen, this can mean death or loss, and for women audience members, this can mean having to watch their on-screen counterparts be tortured or killed. For Williams, women cannot take pleasure in looking because of the sustained relationship between horror and female victimization. Williams’ initial erasure of female pleasure in horror cinema is eventually re-addressed in her subsequent essay, “When the Woman Looks: A Sequel” (1994), which retracts some of her previous theorizations. In the latter piece, Williams critiques her own conflation between “a hypothetical woman looking *at* the film” and “the experience of women looking *in* the film” (author’s own emphasis, “When the Woman Looks: A Sequel” n.pg). Countering her previous assumption that “what is true of the woman in the film is also true of the spectator,” Williams goes on to note that female

spectatorship/viewership in horror cinema may be more complicated than she initially suspected. Using Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) as an example, Williams demonstrates how the horror film experience may actually seek to discipline female audiences into enjoying "highly gendered expressions of fear" ("When the Woman Looks: A Sequel" n.pg).

The conditioning of women audiences to take pleasure in female expressions of terror on-screen is arguably different than a horror cinema that transparently solicits women's enjoyment and positions it as a desirable outcome. As I argue, rather than understand female pleasure as a possibility despite images of female victimization, this new wave of women's horror tries to ensure both women looking 'at' and 'in' the film a pleasurable encounter, whether masochistic or sadistic (the de-stigmatizing of these responses is also part of the work of this new wave). In re-evaluating her previous dismissal of female pleasure in horror, Williams writes that although women and men may experience different performative responses to the images on-screen, women in particular may enjoy "being scared *with one another*" ("When the Woman Looks: A Sequel" n.pg). The female collectivity she describes as part of the horror watching experience, while potentially broad-sweeping as an overarching theory of spectatorship, does resonate with this new wave of women-driven horror that treats the viewing experience as a potentially communal ritual. As I suggest, this new wave calls women 'into' alignment with the horror text. This is contrary to Williams' formulations that describe the comradery of the female viewing experience as one predicated on identifying in opposition to the film or in training oneself to look at the action on-screen despite the desire to 'close down' to such images. Instead, this new wave asks female viewers to enter into a space of knowing enjoyment, in which the pleasures of horror are presented as an 'open' invitation women are encouraged to accept.

In turn, what is different about this new wave is the way in which women's closeness to the images on-screen is positioned not as a conflict but as a validating point of ownership over the horror film. Instead of constituting women's relationship to the genre as defined by a lack of distance, this new wave potentially reframes this relationship as one of proximity and affinity, much in the same way Williams reconstitutes the relationship between victim and monster in "When the Woman Looks". Traditionally positioned as the male hero's grotesque double, the monster is understood as an outward physicalization of the former's own inner menacing and threatening nature. However, in Williams' re-reading, the monster becomes akin to the female victim in that both figure as grotesque either in their excess or lack, or under patriarchal and phallogocentric logics of subjectivity. Conversely, perhaps proximity to the monster or, rather, to the horror film should not be feared in the circumstance of this new wave but should be looked at as an entrance point into reclaiming the genre from its masculinist restrictions. After all, horror is indebted to the presence of the female subject and cannot operate without her participation. Granted, this participation always seems to be a product of coercive manipulation, as her inclusion is often in service to the male psychopath. The difference now is that she is finally able to dictate the rules her own engagement with and in the genre, and figure as more than victim, metaphor, or cypher for the pleasure of the male spectator.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, to treat the relationship between female spectatorship and horror cinema as anomalous is to dismiss the ways in which the genre has historically played to women audiences. This new wave of women-authored horror is not the first to introduce this kind of gendered address, but in fact operates in a longer legacy of films concerned with female spectatorship and

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<sup>9</sup> The same sentiment can easily be extended to other marginalized communities who are now using the conventions of horror cinema to address to the ways in which the genre's development has been predicated on their victimization. The most recent and perhaps one of the most celebrated examples of this reclamation project can be considered Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), which redresses the ways in which black bodies have been represented in horror.

subjectivity. As Hilary Neroni reminds in her writing, horror has a “long-term investment in subjectively expressing and empathizing with marginalized female experience” even when under male direction (38). As an example, the 1940s saw a boom of highbrow horror films catered to women with titles such as *Rebecca* (1940), *Gaslight* (1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947). These films, via their adoption of a female-centric point of view, challenge the assumption that horror cinema is predicated upon male pleasure and instead offer a portrait of female desire and subjectivity. The problem, however, has been in the subsequent contextualizing of these films within academic dialogues, which often (mis)classify these texts as Gothic Romances and/or as ‘women’s pictures.’<sup>10</sup> The inability to conceptualize these films as belonging to horror cinema signals a larger desire within the scholarship to preserve a masculinist definition of the genre that forcibly excludes the participation of women audiences (see Chapter 5).

As a redress to this erasure, Rhona J. Berenstein offers a historical analysis of classical horror cinema that challenges the masculinist storying of the genre’s development, and, in turn, rethinks several key tenets of feminist horror criticism. In *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (1996), she specifically re-examines the assumption – as forwarded by scholars such as Williams – that classical horror audiences were primarily male and that female patrons only “cowered in fear whenever in attendance” (2). Utilizing archival research, Berenstein reveals how female audiences were integral to the success of classical horror like *Dracula* (1931), *King Kong* (1933), and *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936), often times being the target demographic of marketing campaigns or advertisements for these films. In repositioning women has part of the history of American horror cinema, Berenstein re-

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<sup>10</sup> See Tim Snelson (2009).

affirms women's stake in the genre and their place in its development. In turn, she challenges the conditional definitions of horror as appealing strictly to a sadistic male gaze and as relying on the male spectator as the genre's ideal viewer (2).

Alongside Berenstein, Halberstam also makes the point that Gothic literature, the origin of classical horror cinema, was largely written by female authors for women consumers. Suggesting that "women were once the willing audience of the literature of horror," Halberstam sees the genre as similarly operating within a larger legacy of women's cultural production and engagement (165). For Halberstam, Williams' initial claim that women do not participate as horror viewers to the same degree as their male counterparts is suspect, given the historical investment female audiences have shared in the genre. Indeed, if women do maintain a higher reluctance to watch horror it may not be because of their on-screen victimization as Williams suggests. Rather, as Halberstam proposes, it may actually be the case that horror too readily engages with women's "everyday nightmares" of violation and sexual violence (165). In this regard, women may be "fearful that the screen is only a mirror and that the monster may be sitting next to them as they watch" (165). Here again the notion of proximity is raised. In Halberstam's paradigm, women may show a discomfort at the spectacle of horror because it 'hits too close to home' and may remind them that the real threat is not on-screen at all but potentially in the audience alongside them.

However, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, the closeness women may share with these images may actually be one of the benefits of this new wave of horror, which acknowledges how the screen may function as a 'mirror' and utilizes this reflexivity to affirm women's lived realities of violence. The closeness that previously seems to challenge horror scholars is here potentially reclaimed by this new wave of filmmakers who use women's proximity to on-screen

images to their advantage. As I discuss later in Chapter 6, the question of closeness transforms within this cinema into concerns of address and recognition, as female viewers come to understand these films as ‘for them.’ This sense of ownership is accomplished, in part, through strategies such as irony, self-reflexivity and meta-critique, which respond to the conventions of horror cinema with a knowing ‘nod’ to female viewers.

The development of these strategies is, in part, owed to the horror cinema of the 1990s, which also saw a boom of films addressed to female audiences, specifically teen girls, using tactics such as irony, parody, and meta-awareness. As Martin Fradley writes, “perhaps the key structuring element in the evolution of teen horror since the mid-1990s has been its overt address to a young female audience” (206). Popularized by film and television titles such as *Scream* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Buffy* (1997-2003), these texts often play with and deflate popular conventions established in 1970s and 1980s horror cinemas, and as later identified in Creed’s and Clover’s studies. Operating within a “knowing *postfeminist* terrain,” as Fradley names it, these films surpass the dexterity of their predecessors by exposing the very gendered mechanics such earlier works rely upon (author’s own emphasis, 205). However, rather than treat this sense of awareness as inherently beneficial to feminist projects, Fradley sees these films as caught within an ambivalent bind, suggesting their address to female audiences is both “symptomatic” of and “oppositional” to the “socially emaciated politics of postfeminist culture” (207).

Offering a more generous reading of this body of films, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn explores how these works tap into issues particularly experienced by teen girls with a type of witty candor previously unseen in the genre. She identifies these concerns under the banners of “sexuality and virginity,” “adult femininity and its relation to agency and power,” “identity as it is shaped by the

narratives of popular culture,” and “identity as it is shaped by the family origin – in particular a daughter’s relationship with her mother” (101-102). If feminist scholars such as Clover, Creed, and Williams understand horror as a male-dominated discourse, Karlyn, alongside critics such as Pinedo and Halberstam, sees the genre as capable of housing a more female/feminist agenda, particularly for teen girls.

While I do not make the same specificity of claims about the thematic concerns of this new wave of horror, it is clear that the categories identified by Karlyn are integral to this body of films and to subsequent criticism. As I identify in this dissertation, questions of sexuality, agency, power, identity, and mother-daughter relationships remain central to this emergent corpus of films, which, as I have selected, either centre on teen girls or on young women moving into a space of adulthood. Given this precedent, I consider this new corpus of women-driven horror to evolve out of the boom of 1990s teen horror films but to ultimately offer a ‘different’ version of these stories because of their female authorship. To clarify, my analysis should not be taken as a game of ‘spot the difference’ between male- or female-authored films but a task of understanding that the social positioning of female artists informs subsequent representations of sexuality, agency, power, identity, and family. In order to account for this change, a similar re-evaluation must be performed on the canon of feminist film scholarship.

Addressing the way in which women may come to ‘read’ horror differently, Tania Modleski emphasizes the role positionality plays in her study, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (1988). Challenging Mulvey’s interpretation of Alfred Hitchcock’s cinema as exclusively offering a masochistic viewing position for the female subject (and by extension horror cinema at large), Modleski considers alternative responses to his films by stressing their ambivalent representation of women. For Modleski, part of the horror that

marks Hitchcock's cinema originates from the ways in which his female characters must navigate the conditions of being socialized in patriarchy. Rather than reiterate female representation and spectatorship as predicated on passivity as does Mulvey, Modleski suggests that both female character and viewer alike are marked by a process of negotiation. Modleski's study therefore sets a precedent for reading horror as a woman/feminist, and, in turn, reveals how this viewing position exposes the "guilt, gaps, and paranoia" contingent to male horror cinema (Mizejewski 126).

The same phenomenon occurs "when the woman directs," to borrow a phrase from Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. As I suggest in the subsequent chapters, this new wave of women's cinema is also forced to operate 'inside' and 'outside' the typical codes and structures of horror cinema, revealing the ways in which women create from a liminal position in culture. Exploring the ways in which women-directed films attempt to negotiate the over-determining signification of horror cinema, I reflect on the possibilities and pitfalls of this new wave. Writing in response to this new body of women-directed horror films, Paszkiewicz contrarily suggests that rather than 'undo genre,' these films "activate its generative force in the service of women's stories" ("When the Woman Directs" 42). Taking a cue from Jane Gaines, Paszkiewicz suggests these women filmmakers 'go with' instead of 'against' the codes and conventions of the horror genre and show how its feminist potentials are already in form ("When the Woman Directs" 50). While I agree with Paszkiewicz that horror is flexible enough to encompass women's stories, what I see as the more pressing problem is how feminist critics have set up conditional boundaries and barriers around the genre in response to the corpus of films available to them. My concern therefore is how feminist scholarship has narrated the codes and conventions of the genre, and how these now prove too limiting or restrictive in the treatment of this new wave of women's

horror cinema. The need is thus to return to this body of work and to consider how our accompanying scholarship of horror needs to shift to accommodate the development of an altogether unmatched corpus of films.

## Chapter 3

### Girls Just Want to Have Fun: Escaping Restriction in Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013)<sup>1</sup>

Prior to this chapter, I have reviewed the central claims of feminist horror criticism as established by Barbara Creed, Carol Clover, and Linda Williams. In providing an overview of this work, I note how this new wave of women-driven horror compels a re-evaluation of this body of criticism, one that differs from previous critiques by other feminist scholars. In this chapter, I turn to Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013) and look at how, in the hands of a female director who is mindful of her female audience, Carrie's experience of adolescence and her relationship with her mother is portrayed differently from previous iterations, with important analytical consequences for horror criticism. In this case, I suggest that while Peirce attempts to provide a more nuanced treatment of Carrie's story that attends more closely to experiences of violence, trauma and mother-daughter relationships from a woman's perspective, the results are ambivalent. As I suggest, the film remains constrained by the intertextual weight of Stephen King's original story and, more pressingly, Brian De Palma's adaptation, the influence of which ultimately does not allow Peirce to resist or subvert the tropes of conventional horror cinema, especially that of the 'monstrous-feminine.'

Originally written by Stephen King and published as a novel in 1974, *Carrie* has evolved its own mythos in horror cinema, encompassing Brian De Palma's 1976 film, Katt Shea's 1999

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter's title is taken from Cyndi Lauper's hit remake by the same name. Originally written and recorded by Robert Hazard, it was Lauper's rendition that made the song an anthem for women's empowerment and a rally call against restrictive gender norms.

sequel *The Rage: Carrie 2*, David Carson's 2002 made-for-television movie, and now Kimberly Peirce's 2013 remake. For many horror fans, the story of Carrie White is a familiar one: a young girl, raised by her fundamentalist mother, is traumatized when she gets her first period while showering in the girls' locker room. Certain she is dying, the girl pleads with her classmates for help only to be pelted with pads and tampons as they chant, "Plug it up! Plug it up!" As is revealed, Carrie's onset of menstruation coincides with the burgeoning of her telekinetic powers, as one 'change' precipitates the next. Unable to find comfort or sympathy from her mother, who denounces her as 'dirty' and a 'witch,' Carrie turns to her high school gym teacher, who encourages her to participate in conventional rituals of femininity such as attending her senior-class prom. In a scene which has now become canonized in the annals of horror, Carrie – having won the title of 'Prom Queen' – is given a royal welcoming by her principal tormentor, who drops a bucket of pig's blood onto the unsuspecting teen. Unable or now unwilling to control her telekinetic rage, Carrie massacres the school's senior grade, setting the gym ablaze and leaving a staggering body count in her wake.

Given the indelible mark the story of Carrie has left on the horror genre, it would seem like a nearly impossible task to reimagine King's narrative in the shadow of De Palma's canonic film, hailed by many as the reigning and yet to be dethroned 'prom queen.' Even Peirce expressed initial incredulity when first asked to helm an adaptation of *Carrie*. Admitting her original discomfort at the project in an interview with *The Advocate*, Peirce explains she decided to take this opportunity to reimagine the source-text from a contemporary perspective, stating: "What does this story mean now, 40 years later?" (cited in Anderson-Minshall). In this chapter, I explore Peirce's answer to this question, less by way of her modernizing of the novel, but more

in terms of her ability to re-constitute the text from a woman's perspective forty years later.<sup>2</sup> The success of this intervention, I argue, is strained by the burden of previous authorship and unavoidable intertextual reference to De Palma's film, made doubly salient by the fact that the 2013 screenplay is heavily adapted from Lawrence D. Cohen's original 1976 script. What results is a film seemingly 'stuck' in between two worlds, revealing a filmmaker struggling to individuate herself from a restrictive history and to recuperate the narrative away from masculinist tropes of horror cinema.

Identifying the limitations of King's authorial perspective, Peirce explains in the same interview, "Culturally [King] lives in a world where women's power can be threatening," noting the ambivalence in his novel between the growing cultural tide of second-wave feminism and men's fears of changing gender norms (cited in Anderson-Minshall). In De Palma's adaptation, King's treatment of Carrie's adolescent experiences as potentially secondary to the larger preoccupations of male psychosexual anxieties is exacerbated, the degree to which has been heavily criticized by feminist horror scholars. As Carol Clover and Barbara Creed separately argue, King's novel and De Palma's film both fail at presenting women as subjects. For Clover, King's explanation of his novel *Carrie* (1974) as dedicated to "any student who has ever had *his* gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or *his* glass thumb-rubbed in study hall" is telling (my own emphasis 4). For Creed, De Palma's film reveals an Oedipal anxiety over female biology that

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<sup>2</sup> In stating this, I am again aware of the essentialist pitfalls of my comment, which may imply a supposedly 'innate' ability on Peirce's part to construct a more nuanced or less problematic text because of her gender identity. This type of comment risks obfuscating Peirce's queerness, for instance, which also affects her relationship to the story. For example, when asked by *The Advocate* if her film would be free of the voyeuristic male gaze that plagues De Palma's adaptation, Peirce replies that as a queer woman she shares a different relationship to the gaze, particularly in her filming of women's bodies. The inference here being that queer desire and male voyeurism can produce similar cinematic results. However, when one watches Peirce's film, it is clear great attention has been paid to the treatment of women's bodies so as not to objectify the female actors (many of whom were teenagers at the time of filming). Rather than suggesting Peirce has a more 'natural' ability to adapt *Carrie* from a woman's perspective, it is my belief that her life experiences as a queer woman, coupled with her feminist praxis, affords her a potentially inventive vantage point.

equally hinders the text's potential to account for female pleasures or desires. I am inclined to agree with Clover and Creed, as it would seem that the story of *Carrie* has never actually been about Carrie White at all.

Here I consider the ability of Peirce's text to address the paradoxical absent-presence of female subjectivity in the Carrie story and its subsequent impact on previous theories of horror cinema, as formulated by scholars Creed and Shelley Stamp Lindsey in relation to De Palma's original adaptation. If Peirce's intent is to re-imagine the Carrie narrative from a woman's perspective, it ought to serve that her work be considered as responding to the previous critiques levelled at De Palma and as attempting to offer a markedly different horror experience than could be previously accounted for by Creed and Lindsey.

Expanding their studies by way of psychoanalytic theory and close textual analysis, respectively, Creed and Lindsey similarly suggest that De Palma's *Carrie* is motivated by a masculine/patriarchal fear of women that aligns the female body with the abject/monstrous, ultimately denying women a tenable subject position. In Peirce's remake, however, Creed's and Lindsey's criticisms may not be so apt. Attending to the differences between Peirce's and De Palma's films, I show how the former attempts to resolve some of the conceptual problems of the latter by re-casting the story as one between mother and child rather than the more typical narrative of the avenging female fury. In re-orientating the film towards the mother-daughter dyad, Peirce refocuses the story on women's lived experiences in the world and the fraught conditions they find themselves existing within patriarchy. As I argue, Peirce's film is about the conditions that make mothers and daughters 'monstrous,' rather than a reiteration of masculinist fears that women are by their nature 'monsters.' However, as I go on to suggest, the success of this negotiation is rather ambivalent.

In this chapter, I show where Peirce's film takes on the brunt of this recuperative work, offering a close reading of key moments in the text that differentiate her version from De Palma's original adaptation. Before doing so, I first consider the ways in which De Palma's film is subjected to critique by Creed and Lindsey, summarizing key theoretical observations that inform my own interpretation of Peirce's text. After offering an overview of this literature, I turn to Peirce's film and perform a close reading of several scenes. Refracting her film through Creed's and Lindsey's previous observations, I consider the ways in which Peirce's text offers up new possibilities for horror cinema at the same time that it struggles to escape the genre's masculinist restrictions.

### **The Monstrous-Feminine**

In order to evaluate the cultural and theoretical work Peirce's *Carrie* may offer in light of the restrictive intertextual influence of King's novel and more pressingly, De Palma's adaptation, I first turn to Creed's foundational work on the monstrous-feminine to understand how horror cinema works to deny female subjectivity. First, I offer a summary of Creed's thoughts on the genre in general before shifting focus to her exploration of De Palma's *Carrie*, which she reads ambivalently. From there, I introduce Lindsey's criticism of De Palma's film to complement Creed's readings. I have selected Lindsey's work as a suitable companion to Creed's theorizations because of its shared focus on familial horror and its emphasis on sexual difference as imperative to the construction of Carrie's monstrosity. While Creed's chapter on De Palma's film is informative, it also veers too broadly into the historical linkages between witchcraft and menstruation to offer a close reading of the text. In contrast, Lindsey provides an in-depth analysis of De Palma's film while treading similar theoretical ground to Creed. At the end of this

section, I briefly draw attention to the contribution of a third theorist, David Greven, whose offerings on De Palma's *Carrie*, focuses, like my own, on the problematic of mother-child individuation. Despite this common focus, our interpretations are markedly different, as my analysis of Peirce's *Carrie* will show in the following section.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), Barbara Creed theorizes that one of the central preconditions of horror is that it offer a symbolic, ritualized cleansing of the abject female body on-screen. Turning attention away from the ways in which women have figured as victims in horror cinema, Creed considers the phenomenon of female monstrosity. Unlike Linda Williams who sees the relationship between women and monsters as challenging patriarchal dominance, Creed views this conflation as highly patriarchal insofar as it relies on masculine fears of sexual difference. Where Williams argues that woman and monster become aligned in their outsider status from the patriarchal order, thus forming an alliance that potentially destabilizes the debatably conservative ethos of the genre, Creed understands the monstrous-feminine as indicative of the genre's inability to move beyond these misogynistic gender politics. Her concept of the monstrous-feminine indicates the otherness of women, and their irreconcilability within the dominant patriarchal order. The term is thus meant to emphasize the link of gender/sex to monstrosity.

Creed argues that the concept of the monstrous-feminine focuses not on woman as castrated but rather as potential castrator, thus playing into man's fear of castration. Using Susan Lurie's inverted paradigm of the Oedipal drama, whereby woman is ascribed the more powerful position of 'castrator,' Creed re-reads the role of woman in horror cinema as the threat of excess, as one who is not lacking but instead has the power to remove, to take away. Yet, even though this image of the castrating woman may offer a more empowered dynamic than originally

figured by Freudian psychoanalysis, Creed stresses that the monstrous-feminine as represented in horror is simply another manifestation of male psychosexual anxiety; a different face on the same proverbial coin.

For Creed, the horror film serves as a phantasmatic play-space where fears over the excessive female body may be ‘properly’ summoned and subsequently exorcized. Designed to expel and conquer the threat of the monstrous-feminine, the horror film offers a culturally-sanctioned and ritualized space to cleanse the threat of the abject in order to restore the ‘comfortable’ workings of the Symbolic order. As initially theorized by Julia Kristeva, and subsequently taken up by Creed, the abject hosts the potential to destabilize the already-fragile world of the Symbolic. Described as “the place where meaning collapses,” Kristeva’s theory of the abject as taken up by Creed offers a language in which to understand the ways horror cinema has contributed to the historical and cultural alignment of the female body with that which is ‘unclean,’ ‘dirty,’ ‘contaminated,’ or ‘contaminating’ (Kristeva 2). Presented in opposition to the clean, male body of the Symbolic, the female body is more closely aligned with the abject because of its reproductive functioning, thus revealing its “debt to nature” (Creed 11). As a result of this inscription, the female body takes on excessive properties that ‘ought to be’ controlled and limited, which, within the world of horror is often figured as a grizzly intervention, for instance, either by way of exorcism or death.

What is important to highlight in conversation with the Carrie mythos is Creed’s assertion that horror’s sustained preoccupation with the abject female body centrally manifests as a diegetic and formal movement away from the all-consuming world of the Mother (the Imaginary) toward the Law of the Father (the Symbolic). Translated into the action of the film, this results in an overwhelming maternal force – typically coded through the *mise-en-scène* –

that threatens to destabilize the normative world order of the narrative, the stand-in representative of the Symbolic. Again, what Creed stresses in her study is that all horror is in fact a dramatization of separation or abjection from the maternal/Mother/Imaginary in order to ensure the assumption of the patriarchal/Father/Symbolic. Against Robin Wood, for instance, who theorizes horror as the culturally-sanctioned space where the repressed returns, Creed figures the genre as a conservative tool of re-inscription, one that champions dutiful repression as a precursor to entering the Symbolic.<sup>3</sup> Here the monstrous-feminine is only given constitution on-screen so that the (male) spectator may watch on (in pleasure) as her body is properly cleansed of its generative power.

The potential image of unbridled feminine power on-screen, as represented by the monstrous-feminine, is a small consolation to Creed, who, throughout her text notes only few moments when the figure may work to subvert the overwhelmingly patriarchal imperative of the genre (the most notable being her study of *Alien* [1979]). For just as much as horror attempts to repress or repudiate the monstrous woman/maternal figure, it also re-enacts a vexed desire for a return to origins, to be absorbed or subsumed into the Archaic Mother/death. Just as the abject simultaneously repulses and compels, so too does horror play with this push-and-pull dynamic in dramatizing the need to escape the world of the Mother and manifest as a subject while at the same time reveling in the abject conditions of boundary collapse for both character and spectator alike.

The tension between the desire for the Mother and the imperative to break from her restrictive grasp is reiterated in Creed's ambivalent offerings on De Palma's *Carrie*, which posit Carrie as a sympathetic "menstrual monster" whose connection to blood and the supernatural

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<sup>3</sup> Of *Carrie*, Wood views the film as a liberation of repressed sexual energy. For more, see his article "Yet Another Terrible Child" (1977).

align the figure with the abject as much as it does with the repressed world of the Maternal (78). Rather than reading Carrie and her telekinetic powers as a liberating female force capable of challenging the Symbolic order, Creed sees the character's monstrosity as a result of the film's treatment of the female body overall, which it presents as unknowable or mysterious in order to horrify (male) audiences (80). Creed offers the scene in which Carrie first discovers her period as an example of this tonal treatment, suggesting a clear correlation between women's monstrosity and her reproductive functioning. At first enjoying stroking and caressing her body, Carrie is soon horrified at the sight of blood on her hands. What at first looks like a potential moment of female pleasure and sensual exploration is quickly interrupted (slashed, if you will) and replaced by Carrie's response of fear and panic. For Creed, this possible moment of feminine pleasure quickly gives way to horror *of* and horror *at* the female body, a treatment that is replicated in Carrie's bloody coronation later in the film.

As Creed notes, if Carrie's entrance into monstrosity is precipitated by her menarche, it also initiates her movement away from her mother. Determined to "be normal" and "a whole person," Carrie fights against her mother's intention to both literally and metaphorically closet her desires (*Carrie* 1976). However, Creed also suggests that by the end of the film Carrie returns to 'the womb' in surrendering herself to the world of her mother/the maternal. Though this would seem to offer a surprising example in horror where the world of the Maternal ultimately triumphs, Creed does not necessarily champion the ending as unequivocally feminist, even though her reading may suggest such. As she writes, as both child and mother die in the burning house, "[t]he castrating mother takes back the life she once created" (82). In making this claim, Creed forwards an understanding of Mrs. White as the pre-Oedipal or phallic mother who clings to her child and refuses to allow her proper entrance into the Symbolic. For Creed, Mrs.

White dramatizes the horror of the pre-Oedipal mother's inability to separate herself from her child. Yet, in figuring Mrs. White as the phallic mother who takes back her child by the end of the film, Creed contradicts an earlier claim where she describes the character as identifying with the patriarchal order (14). In this interpretation, Mrs. White is presented as an important ally to the Symbolic – not the Maternal – in her attempt to condition Carrie into repressing her telekinetic powers and emergent sexuality. Via her fanatical commitment to religious scripture, Mrs. White “speaks for the symbolic” by reaffirming the connection between women's sexuality and that which is filthy and evil, and needing to be cleansed (14). Read in this light, her function aligns her not with the role of the mother, but that of the absent father as it becomes her duty to protect the Symbolic order from her monstrous child.

The tension between these two interpretations of Mrs. White is not resolved in Creed's study. Presumably, as Creed herself writes, it is difficult to distinguish any clear-cut separation between each iteration of the maternal figure because each is a product of patriarchal discourse (260-1). To this extent, the overbearing mother becomes as much of a trope as the sexually unfulfilled, self-hating woman, as both do the ideological work of safeguarding the Symbolic from the threat posed by women, namely that of sexual difference. Whether Mrs. White figures as the phallic mother or the ally of the Symbolic, it is clear her role in De Palma's film is nevertheless limited to an exaggeration of masculine fears of women's subjectivity. So, while Creed may afford Carrie a more sympathetic reading (as victim of the very same prejudices against women the film problematically replicates), her treatment of Mrs. White indicates a more conservative reading of the film as a whole since both daughter and mother ultimately figure as monstrous.

While Creed forwards a rather ambivalent reading of De Palma's film, Shelley Stamp Lindsey offers a more clear cut interpretation of the 1976 film in "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty." Like Creed, she suggests Carrie's supernatural abilities do not represent a progressive displacement of repressed sexual energy but instead solidify a faulty union between the female body and the unruly body (280). For Lindsey, Carrie's abilities are precisely the very attributes that signify her body as excessive and overflowing; by the end she becomes a monster because she is unable to 'plug it up' (290). Rather than presenting an affirming image of female sexuality and autonomy, Lindsey similarly reads De Palma's film as a masculine fantasy regarding the horrors of the feminine (281). As a result, the film constructs a female subject position impossible to occupy. As Lindsey writes, "The fantasy *Carrie* offers is ultimately a paradoxical one: the film enforces sexual difference by equating the feminine with the monstrous, while simultaneously insisting that the feminine position is untenable precisely because it is monstrous" (293).

If there is any question as to whether De Palma's film may contain feminist echoes about female empowerment, Lindsey clarifies that the personification of the other women in the film – Mrs. White, Miss Collins, and the rest of the high school girls – points to an overarching consideration of women as 'culpable' and 'deviant' (287). This is where Lindsey's reading departs the farthest from Creed, the latter of which favours a psychoanalytic reading to the former's more discursive consideration of the gendered cultural structures represented in De Palma's film. Here, Lindsey offers a broader consideration of women in the film, suggesting each presents a model of femininity Carrie is compelled to re-perform as a way of controlling or disciplining the unruly female body. As Lindsey writes, De Palma's film sets up a trifecta of femininity, offering two equally restrictive options via Mrs. White and Miss Collins with Carrie

situated in the middle, forced to adopt one of these models. On the one hand, Carrie may choose the repressive and masochistic world of her mother. On the other hand, she is offered the dreary life of her gym teacher Miss Collins, whose compulsion to participate in traditional rituals of hetero-femininity equally serves to stifle Carrie's coming-of-age. As Lindsey writes, "The culturally sanctioned femininity proffered by the girl's teacher is as repressive as her mother's fundamentalism," with either avenue designed to ultimately mask Carrie's suddenly violent libidinal energies (288; 287). If Carrie's excessive body is understood as the problem in De Palma's film, then the solution, as Lindsey makes clear, is its disavowal in the form of repression and/or the masquerade of femininity (291).

Ultimately, Lindsey reaches a similar conclusion as Creed, namely that De Palma's film does little by way of offering voice or power to the female subject and instead re-presents male fears of sexual difference as provoked by the menstruating female body. However, one of the central differences between their arguments rests primarily on how they read the relational structures afforded to Carrie. For Creed, the film dramatizes the movement from child to woman to child again, and serves as a regressive story of failure whereby Carrie attempts to break away from her mother but is brought back into her fold (again, this movement is not explicitly considered a feminist assumption of the Maternal since Mrs. White remains a vexed figure). For Lindsey, Carrie is given a false choice as to whose embodiment of femininity she will adopt, with both her mother's conservative beliefs and her gym teacher's normative values restricting her expression of self. So, while Creed offers a more cyclical treatment of the film that revolves around Carrie's relationship to her mother, Lindsey extends the familial dyad outward to 'the third,' to pseudo-parent Miss Collins. The strength of Lindsey's reading, for me, is that it better accounts for the film's visual organization, which presents an obsessive repetition of threes: from

the organization of De Palma's shots, which are hyper-preoccupied with the use of fore-, mid-, and background, to the three-arch wall in Mrs. White and Carrie's home, to the relational structure of mother-daughter-teacher and good girl/Sue-monster/Carrie-bad girl/Chris. Here, Lindsey's model of 'threes' offers a potential alternative to some of the internal tensions in Creed's writing, which asserts horror's preoccupation with origins and returns but similarly describes a film like *Carrie* (1976) in ambivalent terms of movement from and towards the mother.

If De Palma's film is organized by triectas, as Lindsey suggests, then Peirce's *Carrie* (2013) is a world of twos, with the exclusive world of the mother-daughter taking stage as the primary relationship of the film. As I argue, *Carrie* (2013) diverges from Creed's previous formulations on the genre by showcasing the rather ambivalent relationship between Margaret and her child. There is a difference, I suggest, between the unresolved tensions in Creed's work and the ways in which we can read Peirce's film as consciously ambivalent, representing the mother-daughter dyad as a fraught one. If it is Creed's argument that horror is about the fear of the Mother and all that she represents, it is my assertion that Peirce's film is about the horrors of being in relation to the mother within a patriarchal culture, moving the trajectory of the film away from resolving the problem of 'woman' towards unpacking the cultural restrictions placed onto mother-daughter relationships. Within Peirce's film, images such as the monstrous-feminine and the phallic mother are located within larger cultural conversations of violence and trauma, and yet are nonetheless replicated to form these critiques.

Before continuing, it is important to note that David Greven similarly offers a reading of De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) in relation to Carrie's ambivalent bond with her mother, rather than seeing the film (as Creed and Lindsay do) as a work about male fears of women's bodies. Greven

offers his re-reading of the film via the Demeter-Persephone myth instead of the Oedipal drama, and suggests the visual motif of the 'split screen' underscores the narrative preoccupation with the daughter's ambivalent individuation from the mother. I do not share Greven's perception of De Palma's film, which he characterizes as empathetic to women's position in patriarchy and contradictorily, I may add, as "pull[ing] back to watch the ramifications of their intransigence, often dire if not utterly fatal" (92). Nor do I agree with Greven that De Palma is centrally concerned with the issue of individuation, versus, for instance, the threat of sexual difference and the 'mysteries' of the female body. However, as I will show in the next section, the focus of the mother-daughter relationship is centrally developed in Peirce's retelling of the Carrie story.

### **Beginnings**

The film's prologue begins with an establishing shot of the White's modest home. Birds chirp in the background as the camera pulls up from below the trimmed grass and moves towards the front door, an important camera movement that will be repeated at the end of the film, establishing a cyclical quality to the text. The quaint picture of familial normality, already askew from the ominous, low-level placement of the camera, is interrupted by the jarring sound of Margaret White (Julianne Moore) screaming as the first credit sequence appears. As we transition back into the world of the film, the camera moves past the front door and into the house like a ghostly apparition, sweeping delicately through the living room/sewing area, before resting on the closet door beneath the stairs.

Before the flash of the next title card, Peirce has already differentiated her *Carrie* from De Palma's adaptation by figuring the home – not the school or the gym locker room – as the

foremost site of the film, and the precursor to Carrie's trauma and rage.<sup>4</sup> By visually re-framing the narrative as primarily concerned with the space of the domestic, Peirce hints at a greater investment in Carrie's home life than her experiences at school. This decision to alter the central space of conflict to the home seems doubly salient when read through Creed's offerings: for Creed, the affiliation between the home and women's bodies (the maternal and the domestic) shares a relationship with the symbolic place of ultimate beginnings—the womb (55). Understanding the home as representative of the womb, the place of all origin, confrontation with the maternal/the domestic space can then be figured as a necessary step towards physical and psychic individuation. Yet, as the prologue goes onto show, this resistance is already determined to be an untenable trajectory within the world of *Carrie* (2013).

Peirce's decision to begin with the home also signals the process of individuation – rather than revenge – as the main action of the film and, in this respect, at least tries to re-orient the film away from a masculinist story of violence (and the fear of unchecked female power, as Lindsey might suggest) to one of fraught origins. If De Palma's film constitutes as horror, whereby patriarchal law dictates that a child *must* separate from her mother, Peirce's film works as a horror-cum-tragedy, whereby mother and child are forcibly pushed apart by the demands of society while still attempting to preserve some semblance of their bond.<sup>5</sup> What I see as an important difference in Peirce's text is the empathy afforded to the theme of separation, which is

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<sup>4</sup> Locating the origin of horror within the boundaries of the home, which is typically understood as a refuge from potential danger, is not necessarily new to the genre. As both Robin Wood (1986) and Vivian Sobchack (1987) profile in their respective works, the home and the family have been a source of horror at least since the 1970s, if not earlier. What is intriguing about Peirce's move is the emphasis placed on mother-daughter relations, which have remained scant at best within the genre and have instead been taken up in other formats such as melodrama. Even rarer still is a nuanced meditation on this relationship that does not blame the mother outright for the child's pathology (for instance, as she is blamed in *Psycho* [1960]) but instead tries to show the difficulties in navigating the tenable boundaries between the two individuals.

<sup>5</sup> Greven offers a similar reading of De Palma's *Carrie* as familial melodrama. For him, De Palma offers a meditation on the very patriarchal power structures Creed sees as supported by the film, and as I suggest, are better, if not more prominently, explored in Peirce's work.

even identified as an important dramatic concern in an extra feature on the film's Blu-Ray edition. As actor Chloë Grace Moretz (Carrie) suggests in an interview archived on the disc, the film is about two people who love each other but cannot skillfully negotiate the demands on their relationship ("Creating Carrie").<sup>6</sup> Informed by Creed, I read Peirce's film as one about origins and the fraught bonds between mother and child. However, I also see it as offering an important nuance previously absent from De Palma's film; here, the desire to remain with the mother is not so much pathological as it is heartbreaking, as the source of horror is not the fear of remaining in relation to the mother but the external forces that impose upon that bond.

As the opening scene continues, the camera moves into the bedroom, where we see Margaret writhing in pain on a blood-stained bed. In mistaking the agony of childbirth for her own death, Margaret announces an ignorance about her body that she will subsequently pass down to Carrie, who will also believe herself to be dying when she begins to menstruate (Bettison 142). Even before Carrie's birth, Peirce establishes a narrative and thematic tether between mother and child, producing a metaphoric umbilical cord of sorts, one which, unlike the more literal approximate, will remain uncut until Carrie experiences her own blood-letting. Once the child is born, Margaret resolves to "cut it down." With the intent of permanently severing their connection, Margaret thrusts a pair of large tailor scissors towards the infant before stopping herself. Here, Peirce cuts between close-up shots of Margaret's eyes gazing at the child and the newborn looking back up at its mother. Cycling between these close-ups, Peirce again makes clear the powerful yet tenuous bond they will share throughout the film. With scissors still held above her body, Carrie's entrance into the world and her relationship to her mother have

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Peirce also suggests in this commentary that the mother-daughter bond established between the characters translated itself into the working relationship between Moore and Moretz in a meta-manifestation of the dyad. She recalls, "But when you matched [Moretz] with Julianne, what was extraordinary was -- Julianne is a mother. Julianne is incredibly protective of her children. So she actually mothered Chloe and you saw Chloe transform once Julianne got there" ("Creating Carrie").

already been marked by a violent encounter. Eventually dropping the scissors, Margaret cradles the child to her chest, embracing the infant under the fixture of a crucifix. The baby's screams continue, creating a parallel to (and continuity with) Margaret's noises of pain earlier in the sequence, before the film cuts to the final title card: *Carrie*.

If we are to understand Peirce's *Carrie* as indelibly concerned with the fraught bond between daughter and mother, this opening sequence locates the origin of that conflict in the physical act of birth wherein 'one' becomes the permanently-divided 'two.' Countering Freudian logics that posit the threat of castration as the original trauma that informs subjectivity, Marcia Ian insists that it is the cut of the umbilical cord that is instead the more shaping experience (21). Literalizing, as well as signifying the moment when the child is separated from its mother, the cutting of the cord is the physical precursor to the psychic rupture that will occur when the child no longer experiences itself as part of the mother, a separation that will ultimately be encouraged by the social order (21).<sup>7</sup> In this regard, *Carrie*'s first experience of trauma is not her menarche – as shown in De Palma's adaptation – but her separation from her mother (which is replayed with her first period), and it is *this* origin story that will be dramatized by Peirce's film.

Appropriately, the prologue ends with *Carrie*'s scream – an expression of need and an assertion of self in the world. With the film's tagline establishing, "You will know her name," the infant's cry paired with the title card, 'Carrie,' constructs a powerful meta-address to the familiar spectator. Presumably seasoned horror fans will know this name very well, but the intent to re-present this story as one we are 'unfamiliar' with not only emphasizes the text's preoccupation with 'twos' or doubles (versus De Palma's emphasis on trios), it also helps to

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<sup>7</sup> Greven offers a similar reading of De Palma's *Carrie*. However, I argue that the absence of a birthing scene in the original film does little to show 'the cut' as the origin of trauma. Peirce's film, rather, visualizes this moment, giving it weight and treatment.

restore focus to the themes of female identity and subjectivity. In following this set up, the film already presents a markedly different approach to the Carrie mythos and in turn, counters some of the operational modes of horror previously identified by Creed.

For Creed, horror serves as a conservative vehicle through which to play out and ultimately conquer fears of the abject and the all-consuming Mother. The genre is designed to represent the female body in its varied states of reproductive defilement so that the world of the Mother can ultimately be denounced. The central conflict of the horror text therefore becomes the child's struggle to break away from the mother, whose primary motivation is to prevent such individuation. The mother's monstrosity resides in her prohibiting the male child from taking up its proper place in the patriarchal order, a world ironically signaled by the absent father figure (12). Peirce's choice to begin with Carrie's birth while seeming to set up this progression of familiar events, also maligns this trajectory by signalling an inescapable connection between mother and daughter. Reflected in the film's narrative motifs and audio-visual mechanics, their bond becomes the central organizing factor of the film; even as Carrie attempts to individuate herself from Margaret, she will be drawn back in, enveloped into the womb of the home where she will eventually cradle her mother in death, just as her mother did during her birth. Offering a foreboding image of what is to come, the beginning telegraphs the end, with Carrie destined to repeat her mother's cycle. More will be said of this ending in the passages to come.

### **Entrances**

The following scene opens in a high school swimming pool with a soft-focus lens that quickly sharpens on Carrie, now an uncomfortable teen, her hair covering one eye as she clutches a towel to her body. In a tight medium-close up on her face, the camera affords viewers

an important first look at Chloë Grace Moretz as the newly-selected Carrie, whose conventional appearance operates in stark contrast to Sissy Spacek's awkward iteration of the character. Responding to this casting choice, some online critics disparaged Moretz for being too "beautiful" (Fraley 2013) or "adorable" (Taylor 2013) to embody the mousy attributes of a repressed fundamentalist's daughter. Without perpetuating a dialogue that judges Moretz's merits on her outer appearance, I understand her casting as a larger signal of the film's preoccupation with violence, victimization, and trauma, as Carrie's gawkiness and misfit-status is not the result of her appearance but an internalized sense of otherness brought on by her experience of abuse. As Peirce expresses in her interview with *The Advocate*, the film attempts to offer an "authentic portrayal of violence," influenced, as she admits, by her own experiences of parental abuse (Anderson-Minshall 58). Peirce's admission to being a survivor, coupled with her long-standing artistic meditation on the topic of violence (most famously executed in her Oscar winning film *Boys Don't Cry* [1999]), offers a sense of credibility and direction to the narrative by stressing the generational effects of trauma. Coupled with the casting of Moretz, a teenager herself at the time of filming with her own experiences of bullying to draw upon, the personal inflection of Peirce's cinema speaks to some of the larger patterns identified in this study: namely, the importance of translating the personal to the filmic. What constitutes as horrific in *Carrie*, and in this new wave of women-driven horror more generally, are the fears associated with and the effects of violence. Therefore, it is not important what Carrie looks like but what she is subjected to and what type of individual she is becoming as a result; she is an any-girl rather than an every-girl.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is underscored in Sue's testimony during the film's epilogue when she states, "Carrie had some sort of power, but she was just like me, like any of you."

The connection between abuse and monstrosity is not unique to Peirce's text but has been established by feminist horror scholars as a familiar pattern in the genre. As Ariel Briefel writes in "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," female monsters are often seen to be the products of earlier abuse at the hands of familial relations, romantic or sexual partners, or other assailants (20). Their acts of rage are typically understood as retribution for these previous abuses, and are tellingly often precipitated by their menarche (Briefel 21). The association between female expressions of anger, rage and destruction are echoed by Creed, who elaborates that the violence exhibited by monstrous women on-screen specifically manifests as anger against previous familial abuses, enacted primarily by mothers against their children while inadequate or absent fathers fail to protect the child (47). In both Briefel's and Creed's observations, the rage experienced by the female monster is understood as an inherited effect of her familial relations, her monstrosity is something 'passed down' between women. What Peirce's film arguably tries to offer is a representation of the origins of this supposed legacy by showing how patriarchal norms ultimately injure the mother-daughter bond thus resulting in a monstrous dyad. Rather than presenting monstrosity as a symptom of the larger "disease of being female," as Creed writes of conservative horror films (47), Peirce's *Carrie* dramatizes the ways in which monstrosity is the result of generational trauma and the sustained (in)ability of mothers and daughters to share knowledge of what it is to be a woman in the world.

As part of this relational set-up, Carrie's understanding of her body must remain exclusively contingent on her mother, even within a modernized setting that utilizes contemporary technologies such as the internet and presents open displays of sexuality as part of the teenage landscape. Beginning in the space of the high school swimming pool, the film

presents images of young bodies on display, free from the segregation of gender/sex and the shame often associated with adolescent desire. The space Carrie inhabits is clearly one where the mysteries of adolescent sexuality are hardly secret, with Sue and Tommy openly kissing, and in a later sequence, even engaging in sex.<sup>9</sup> The fetishization that permeates De Palma's opening locker room sequence is replaced here by a tonal frankness that shows adolescent (female) sexuality as common-place, creating a stark contrast to Carrie's ignorance, and by extension, to Margaret's dogmatic preaching. As a means of emphasizing the distance at which Carrie finds herself from the contemporary culture of peers, Moretz is spatially positioned in the scene at a distance from the other girls in the pool, remaining on the fringes of her class as her gym teacher Ms. Desjardin reminds her, "You can't stay on the sidelines all the time." This line, although given in response to Carrie's nonparticipation in class, serves as a foreboding clue of what is yet to come, both by way of her impending menarche/entrance into womanhood, and by her taking centre stage at prom as an avenging force.

But Carrie must remain on the sidelines at least for the time being. Again, as a function of the source text, Carrie's ignorance needs to be maintained even if it is getting increasingly difficult to believe a young woman of today may not have access to basic information about her body. This is one of the most palpable moments of restriction in Peirce's work, which, aside from setting the film in a more conservative location than she does (perhaps in the heydays of Bush-championed abstinence-only programs), cannot avoid this plot-point. What can be said of the ensuing shower sequence, while doing little to subvert or counter the original narrative, is that it importantly offers a less voyeuristic depiction of Carrie's first period. The teen girls in the

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<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Peirce dissociates these acts of female desire from the judgmental overtones that permeate De Palma's film. Here, neither Sue nor Chris are defined as "bad" for having sex. Their morality is instead measured by their actions towards Carrie.

locker room figure less as “nymphs” or “demons,” as Lindsey suggests (282), and more as everyday bullies, with more blood and cell phones added into the mix to contemporize the scene. Without undercutting the importance of Peirce’s ability to de-sexualize this sequence, which, in De Palma’s original film is represented as some sort of misogynistic dream, little is done to actually differentiate her film from the original narrative; Carrie must still be surprised at the mysteries of her period, and the female body must still be presented as unruly and needing to be ‘plugged up.’ In this way, the film still conforms to Creed’s and Lindsey’s observations concerning the representation of the female body as mysterious, dirty and excessive. What has been limited is the sensationalism associated with the menstruating female body and the degree to which the scene is meant to be constructed in relation to a male spectator (who may be apt to find the image of a menstruating body disgusting or horrifying). In this regard, I understand Peirce as trying to offer something different for a ‘new’ target audience, while also recognizing that she cannot necessarily make the most of this intervention.

What is perhaps more fruitful to consider beyond the shower sequence is how Carrie’s menarche affects her relationship to her mother, who reacts to the event with an ambivalent expression of care and fear. While driving home, Margaret responds to Carrie’s expression of regret over having to be picked up at school by tenderly holding her daughter’s hand. It is a small gesture but an important signal of the film’s attempt to make Margaret’s character more sympathetic. In this film, she is recast as a flawed individual struggling to communicate with and care for her daughter. If Piper Laurie’s 1976 Mrs. White is a sadistic zealot hell-bent on preventing her daughter from cultivating her own sense of agency, Moore’s 2013 rendition plays

as a sado-masochistic victim of circumstance, unequipped to handle the demands of motherhood.<sup>10</sup>

Once at home, Margaret retreats to an upstairs room where she begins hitting her head against a wall until Carrie asks her to stop. The editing here of Margaret's final self-inflicted blows disrupts the previous pacing of the film, with four quick successive takes. This temporal rupture matches the one utilized during Carrie's response to her period, where her scream for help is repeated in three quickly repeated shots. In formally paralleling Carrie's response to her own menarche with Margaret's reaction to the news of her daughter's period, Peirce usefully underscores the importance of this event to their shared bond. For both mother and daughter, Carrie's menarche is enough to distort the logics of their worlds, as represented by the schism in cinematic time. But as much as Carrie's blood signals a shared connection between her and her mother, it also represents the very threat to that bond. As figured by the film's use of doubling and repetition, Carrie's menstruation re-performs the initial trauma of her birth, the original site of separation and the beginning of her individuation from Margaret. "So," Mrs. White tells her daughter, "you're a woman now."

As characteristic of the source text, Carrie's menarche is a sign of her departure away from childhood innocence (and hence cleanliness) and toward the world of adult desire (associated with blood, dirt and filth). Accusing Carrie of having lust-filled thoughts in the locker room shower, Margaret's obsession with her daughter's innocence/cleanliness (-- later, she chastises her for exposing her "dirty pillows" --) can, on the one hand, be considered a reflection of the internalized workings of the patriarchal order that demand both her and her daughter's compliance. This interpretation upholds Creed's theorizations of horror cinema as re-

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<sup>10</sup> As Julianne Moore reveals in an interview on the Blu-Ray, Margaret can be described as a woman ruled by her belief system who is "in a tremendous amount of pain" and "experiencing a great deal of loss" ("Creating Carrie").

constructing the ideological alignment between femininity/womanhood with the abject. On the other hand, Margaret's response can be a reflection of her own fears of men and sexual violence. Her fundamentalism can be seen as an *example of* the same patriarchal discourses that work to restrict women's autonomy. These two images of Margaret, one as perpetrator and one as victim are not necessarily mutually exclusive but the split reading is itself a further indicator of Peirce's limited ability to distinguish her film from previous iterations. The desire to humanize Margaret seems clear, but the results are arguably less consistent as the two versions of this character go unreconciled.

I argue, however, that while both these images of Margaret percolate throughout the film, Moore, by way of her performance, tries to imbue the character with a prevailing sense of justifiable fear and dread over the hardships, Carrie will endure as a woman in the world. When Carrie tells her mother that she has been asked to the prom, she clearly anticipates Margaret's response suggesting, "I know this scares you. It scares me too." Here, Margaret tenderly cradles her daughter's face in her hands, her eyes softening while her voice drops to a stern tone. She warns,

Boys, boys. After the blood, come the boys sniffing, slobbering like dogs. [...] He's going to paw at you until he finds where that blood smell comes from. He's going to take you, Carrie, in his car out to the wilderness, out where it's cold and the roadhouses are, and the whiskey.

Margaret is clearly scared *for* her daughter, as her fixation with 'the blood' and 'the boys' is a telling indication of her experience of sexual violence. Rather than playing this scene as a threat against Carrie if she does not heed her mother's religious warnings, Moore's performance takes on a familiar albeit still disturbing quality of maternal care that at its core may be recognizable to female viewers. It is one of 'the talks' shared between women about the dangers of the world, first the world of strangers and candy and then, more frankly, the world of sexual violence. In

passing on this knowledge to her daughter, there is some attempt to represent Margaret and Carrie as part of a cyclical history, wherein mothers offer their daughters what they have learned of the world (Natov 2). In doing so, the film can be read as affirming a relational structure between mother and daughter as fluid and without boundaries (Natov 2), and affirming the cyclical nature of female experience (Kulish and Holtzman 48) in contrast to the masculinist imperative for linear separation.

While a similarly menacing dialogue is delivered by Laurie in De Palma's film, Moore's performance is a telling departure. As played by Moore, Margaret's response, rather than offering a corrective solution to her daughter's 'defiled state' by way of chastity and religious redemption, as Lindsey identifies in De Palma's film, instead reveals a mother worried for her daughter's safety in the world. Margaret sees Carrie's period as a 'problem' in relation to her daughter's flight into adulthood and the accompanying threat of sexual violence that haunts her daughter's emergent sexuality. The once overt threat of the correcting mother or the phallic mother is at least tempered in this scene, which tries to restore a sense of motivation and origin for Margaret's worries and perverse/pathological need to possess and control her child. If the phallic mother, as Creed suggests, is an image of patriarchal ideology because it positions the mother as desiring the phallus by way of her 'little one' (22), then the image presented in Peirce's film offers an alternative model or strategy for understanding Margaret's actions as part of a more cyclical structure of maternal care. Rather than read Margaret's actions as participating in the very patriarchal culture she warns her daughter against, I argue that we can instead interpret Moore's performance as part of the film's emphasis on the importance of female subjectivity, the mother-daughter dyad, and how the themes of sexual violence and intergenerational trauma become sustained preoccupations of the text.

## Discoveries

As Carrie continues her journey of self-discovery, she goes to the school's library to research telekinesis. Starting first with an online search for "magic powers," the research montage plays as an exciting moment of coming into knowledge for Carrie, who has been prevented from learning about her body by her mother.<sup>11</sup> As she searches the stacks, she pulls out books with the titles, "Fringeology," "The Black Arts," "What's Happening to My Body?," "So I Had My First Period," "Telekinesis," and "Miracles: An Encyclopedia." In a rare instance of humour, the film pokes fun at the alignment between Carrie's powers and her menarche, a familiar connection we have come to expect from this mythos. However, even this quick moment of subterfuge cannot undo the problematic connection found in the source text between Carrie's entrance into womanhood with her identity as a telekinetic 'freak.'

While it might be beneficial to underscore the degree to which woman finds herself as an 'other' in society by way of Carrie's freak-status, Creed and Lindsey both read this alignment as problematic because it re-produces her as 'different.' For Creed, there is a clear distinction between horror films that embrace the power of woman's sexual difference (those that heavily feature the Archaic Mother, the womb, or the *vagina dentata*, which all cannot be easily placed within the Oedipal scenario or phallic economy) and those that re-construct woman *as* difference for the purpose of subordinating her within the patriarchal order. In regard to the latter, Creed presents the phallic mother as an extension of this manoeuvre. Represented on-screen as a maternal figure who either wields a phallic object or has some sort of phallic appendage, this trope prioritizes an image of sexual sameness as a means of alleviating the male spectator's fears

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<sup>11</sup> The film also later implies that beyond preventing her daughter from learning about menstruation, Margaret has also refrained from telling her about her potential supernatural powers, which, as Carrie understands, may be inherited from her father or her paternal grandmother.

or anxieties over sexual difference. The phallic mother is only further evidence of horror's inability to reconcile with a female subjectivity apart from masculinist registers that prize the phallus as the supreme signifier of power and wholeness. For Creed, both woman as monster and as phallic mother serve the same purpose. Each provokes a confrontation with the maternal "and all that her universe signifies" so that it can be expunged (14).

Conversely, as Lindsey figures, woman becomes associated with the monstrous because of her sexual difference and as such is treated as a threat to be contained. Rather than seeing Carrie's monstrosity as an attack against a repressive society, Lindsey reads the figure as the fear/fantasy of patriarchal culture, not the antidote to it. For her, the female body, as represented in De Palma's film, becomes a site of transgression that needs to be 'covered over' via the masquerade of ritualized, hetero-femininity (288-289). For Lindsey, this covering up is for the benefit of the male spectator who displaces his male experience of loss and lack (castration anxiety) onto the 'wounded' and bloody female body. Within Lindsey's model, Carrie's 'freakishness' becomes a cypher for male anxiety and importantly restricts the representational frame of female subjectivity.

In Peirce's *Carrie*, however, some effort is at least made to subvert the problematic alignment between woman/femininity with monstrosity/freakishness in an attempt to offer a potential image of female subjectivity. (The success of this subversion, I argue, remains continually strained.) Prior to her search at the library, after seeing the phrase "Carrie White eats shit" graffitied across a row of school lockers, Carrie retreats to a bathroom. Upset, Carrie attempts to fix her physical appearance in the mirror but ends up shattering the glass with her powers. This sequence can be read as a type of Lacanian 'mirror moment,' announcing Carrie's

entrance into an already fractured subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, if her desire is to be a “whole person before it’s too late,” as she tells her mother, the film seems to remind her that she is still yet to materialize as such. The excess of the crack and Carrie’s subsequent ability to levitate the pieces back together, revealing a broken reflection of herself in the shards, offers no such image of the cohesion she desires. If anything, Carrie and her powers prove too difficult to contain, as her body literally breaks the object meant to reflect her image. The fracturing of the mirror thus symbolizing the shattering of herself and her identity.

Although this moment may work to reinforce what Lindsey observes as a problem in De Palma’s film, namely that the female subject position remains untenable because of its excessive properties, it also seems to subvert the very idea of a stable (contained) subjectivity in the first place. Here we have another example of the film’s internal tensions. As much as Carrie desires to see herself as a ‘whole person’ and to fit into normative society (the phallic economy of ‘oneness’), the film also seems to present the idea of this ‘wholeness’ as already suspect, especially for women. In this respect, the sequence may be better refracted through Creed’s claim that horror purposefully plays on (the masculinist) fears of losing one’s self and the boundaries of the subject. For Creed, horror draws the viewing subject into a confrontation with the abject, “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2), as represented by the maternal entity who seeks to subsume her child back into her. However, I suggest we read this mirror sequence as very much aware that the condition of woman is one of fraught boundaries (especially in relation to the mother). As opposed to (the illusion of) the cohesive masculine subject, woman is already understood as ‘not whole,’ and thus may be empowered to not fear the

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<sup>12</sup> In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mirror phase is when the child first perceives itself in a reflective surface and recognizes itself as an individual apart from the mother (as ‘One’). For Lacan, this recognition, however, is always a misrecognition in that the child does not see ‘the self’ but an ‘image of the self,’ and because of such the emergent subject becomes marked by lack.

loss of self into the mother to the same degree as man. The role of this new women-driven horror, as represented in this sequence, is not necessarily to dispel or defeat the abject but to re-affirm the female experience has already being a negotiated one. To this extent, in breaking the mirror with her telekinesis, Carrie also breaks the illusion of cohesive/normative identities and signals that her excessive monstrous body can actually be an image of empowered ‘otherness.’<sup>13</sup>

However, as much as the mirror sequence may challenge previous conceptualizations of the Carrie mythos and the horror film in general, the ensuing scene between Carrie and her mother re-establishes a more traditional narrative pattern. If Carrie’s destruction of the mirror may represent a nuancing of female subjectivity in horror, it also represents an embracing of the power of her body and the continuing of her process of individuation. Returning home with a number of new library books, Carrie sits atop her bed attempting to levitate the objects. As she lifts her hands, compelling the objects to move, the books begin to float mid-air while the bed rises from her powers. The scene is a familiar one: the closed room door, the need to remain silent and stealthy, the subtle movement of hands, the gasping breaths of surprise and pleasure, and the shaking bed. The scene plays as an unadulterated moment of self-exploration akin to one’s first experiences of masturbation. However, in keeping with the narrative preoccupation of interruption, Margaret, overhearing the noises upstairs, quickly rushes into the room with a knife in hand.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Even in her English class, Carrie seems to embrace the power of the other, reciting a passage from John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* that ends with the lines, “all in flames ascended.” A clear foreshadowing of the prom to come, Carrie’s poetic selection speaks to an individual willing to come into her own and to embrace the destruction that may follow. Yet, again, as much as Peirce wants to show Carrie’s telekinesis as a liberating female force, the reference to Samson again refracts the character’s journey through a masculinist text.

<sup>14</sup> Carrie’s few moments of pleasure are consistently interrupted throughout the film: first, she gets her period as she touches her body in the shower; next, someone walks into the bathroom while she is levitating pieces of the mirror; and lastly, Chris spills a bucket of pig’s blood on her as she is crowned Prom Queen.

The presence of the knife returns the film to fit within Creed's theorizations of the pre-Oedipal mother in horror, who, threatened over the loss of her 'little one' compensates by attempting to possess the phallus (22). As Carrie begins to map her own corporeal pleasures, her mother, via the added symbolism of the knife, remains desperate to restrict her movements (literally and metaphorically). Cinematically, the inclusion of the knife also adds an additional 'stake' to the scene, with Margaret's threat of violence against her daughter escalating the further her daughter moves from the 'safety' of her dogmatic teachings toward her own understandings of femininity and womanhood. Yet, even though Margaret may threaten Carrie into remaining under her control, she also cares for her child in a way equally representative of the phallic mother's attempt to stave off her own fears of loss. As noted by Mary Kelly, the female fetishist may also try to "delay," or "disavow" the "separation she has already in a way acknowledged" by continuing to infantilize the child (quoted in Creed 22). In this scene, as soon as Margaret places the knife down, she tucks Carrie into bed cooing, "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, little girl. You're safe with me." Maintaining an image of her daughter as an 'innocent' little girl, Margaret's phrasing and gesture of care reveal a mother desiring her child to remain with her, at the same time that her expressions remain abusive and inadequate.

Carrie responds to her mother's interruption by telekinetically moving the knife into the floor boards – her own gesture of threat towards her mother. In having her take control of the knife/phallic object via her telekinesis, Peirce's text perhaps challenges the over-determining weight of this symbol by subordinating it to Carrie's now-burgeoning feminine power. This revision to De Palma's text, wherein no analogue of this scene can be found, goes a small way toward challenging another problem of the original source text and the 1976 film. As Lindsey writes, the fact that Carrie's supposed empowerment manifests as a telekinetic power suggests

again another insidious disavowal of the female body and subjectivity. Telekinesis, as she notes, is the ability to move objects with the mind, “circumvent[ing] the body’s agency in the material world” (285). However, Peirce’s film has already worked to embrace the connection between Carrie’s telekinetic abilities and coming into her own as a female subject, even if this connection, as I argue, still preserves the conservative undertones of horror identified by Creed as a movement away from the mother. In this regard, Carrie’s usurpation of her mother’s weapon via her telekinetic abilities can be read as an attempt to show a reversal of power between mother-and-child; the more sexually empowered Carrie becomes, the more distance she gains from her mother and the more expressive her telekinetic abilities become of her entrance into a female subjectivity (after all, she ‘rejects’ the phallic object by telekinetically tossing it aside).<sup>15</sup>

Further subverting the disconnect between telekinesis and the embodied female subject, Peirce’s *Carrie* shows the phenomenon as a full-body experience.<sup>16</sup> If Spacek only uses sharp head turns and widened eyes to indicate when she is using her powers, Moretz offers a markedly more physical performance, with emphasis placed on her hand gestures. Not only do these hand gestures make her powers more visual (and more ‘cinematic’), they also work to restore the body’s role in her use of her telekinetic powers. By the time Carrie ultimately uses her powers at prom to seek revenge on her classmates, her body becomes fully absorbed in the process as she

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<sup>15</sup> As the film progresses, Carrie continues to resist her mother’s authority with her powers, as demonstrated when she prepares for the prom against Margaret’s wishes. Ready for her date with Tommy, Carrie sits at her mother’s sewing machine, happily stitching fabric. As the camera pans down, it reveals the pedal to be moving on its own, with Carrie’s legs crossed at the ankles. Not only taking control of her actions and desires (to go to prom), Carrie also takes control of the domestic space via her telekinesis. In this moment, she replaces her mother in the home by using Margaret’s equipment to make her dress. As will be seen later in the film, this reversal is solidified when Carrie locks her mother inside the closet underneath the stairs as she prepares to go out to the prom. Yet, as much as Carrie’s closeting of her mother is a striking act of self-assertion, it is accented by a telltale gesture of compassion that re-affirms the ambivalent relationship she still maintains with her mother. As her mother continues to pound on the closet door, Carrie tells her “I love you,” and turns on the radio. Presumably meant to drown out her mother’s banging, the gesture can also be read as an attempt to calm or soothe Margaret.

<sup>16</sup> This seems to fit with the film’s overall intent to make its female characters more active. For instance, in Peirce’s film, Chris is shown killing a pig for her prom night plans, whereas her counterpart in De Palma’s original adaptation remains on the sidelines.

even levitates over the gymnasium floor. Although the decision to represent Carrie's powers as part of her physicality attempts to reconcile the fractured female subject found in the original film, the necessity to show Carrie as 'whole' also problematically conforms to an Oedipal/masculinist narrative trajectory.

It would seem Peirce's film operates within an irreconcilable tension: she is 'damned if she does' and 'damned if she doesn't.' On the one hand, the earlier mirror sequence supports a feminist critique of patriarchal discourse, which positions woman as excessive and lacking. By drawing attention to the fraught conditions of female subjectivity, the mirror scene can be read as a commentary on larger, systemic ideologies that show the difficulty of representing female subjectivity within masculinist discourses of sexual difference. To this extent, if Peirce's film is trying to show the harm of repressive patriarchal ideologies (especially by way of Margaret's fundamentalist dogma), it also offers a meta-critique of masculinist representational structures that act upon the film as a whole. On the other hand, Moretz's physical performance of her character's telekinetic powers restores the presence of an active female body within the film, a point of criticism previously leveled at De Palma's film. Yet, in trying to restore this coherency to the female subject, Peirce's film again participates in the patriarchal ideologies it seems equally wanting to deconstruct. It is a problem, as I suggest, that cannot be easily remedied by the film.

### **Returns**

After enacting her revenge at prom, Carrie returns to her home, blood-soaked and whimpering for her mother. As the two reunite, the scene plays as a logical resolution to the film's prologue, the cyclical and ambivalent nature of Peirce's text reaching an apex. Born into the world via her mother's blood, Carrie returns to the place of her birth covered again in blood

and retreats into the tub, a reference as Creed notes of the original film, to the child's time in the mother's womb. This return to the home/womb marks the failure of Carrie's attempts to individuate from her mother, as her previous desire for separation is reconstituted as a need for integration. This need for reconnection is, as I argue, less pathologized in Peirce's text than in De Palma's adaptation, as Carrie's return to the 'safety' of her mother re-affirms the pre-Oedipal bonds established in previous scenes.

What the film does have trouble shaking, though, is the conclusion that the mother-daughter dyad, in its overbearing closeness, is ultimately a perverted one. As Lindsey notes of De Palma's film by way of its intertextual references to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), another film about the child's unhealthy proximity to the mother, *Carrie* (1976) positions monstrosity as the effect of perverse familial relations (280). Creed makes a similar reading of the film in her study, also noting similarities to Hitchcock's master-text, suggesting that the mother-daughter bond in De Palma's film is marked by repressed sexual desire for each other (82). As I argue, Peirce's film falls into this same pitfall, emphasizing the incestuous bond that lurks between Carrie and Margaret, but does so for a different end.

In *Carrie* (2013), as Margaret prepares to end her daughter's life, she asks that they pray together. Instructing, "I'll be the preacher, you'll be my congregation," Margaret guides Carrie onto her knees, as the two kiss each other's hands. The action, while potentially read as a moment of religious confession, is inflected by an erotic (over)tone via Margaret's earlier remark that prior to having sex with Carrie's father, "we got down on our knees and prayed for strength." While the act of 'going down on one's knees' may itself carry enough of a sexual register, the repetition of this action as preceding both an encounter between lovers and an exchange between mother and child codes the latter as sexual in nature. The hinting at an

incestuous relationship in this sequence thus seems to reaffirm the perverted bond between mother and child, as the two are represented as ‘too close’ to one another emotionally and even spatially in the frame.<sup>17</sup> Incest therefore becomes a signifier for the corrupting force of maternal care (especially in light of the absent father) and reaffirms the patriarchal imperative to separate wholeheartedly from the restrictive grasp of the mother.

However, the figuring of violence and sex as interchangeable, while a trope of horror cinema in general, may also work to Peirce’s benefit in representing the complexities of familial abuse as cyclical in nature. Instead of interpreting this scene as replicating a problematic conflation between incest and pathological attachment by/to the mother, as might Lindsey and Creed, I read it as a commentary on the legacy of trauma, both diegetically and meta-cinematically in relation to the Carrie mythos at large. I argue that Peirce uses this scene to code Margaret as a survivor of assault, and in turn, to show the ways in which trauma may be passed on from mother to daughter. This re-coding of Margaret’s character is accomplished by way of dialogue and Moore’s performance, which work together to tinge the scene as an admission of abuse rather than a confession of pleasure (as in the original film). The lines, “I should have killed myself when he put it in me,”<sup>18</sup> “one night I saw him look at me in that way” (Moore emphasizes the word ‘way’ with a tremble) and “that’s when he took me,” are all indicative of a sexual attack. Although Margaret goes on to say, “I liked it,” her confession reads both out of time – it is taken from De Palma’s 1976 script, written in an era when spousal rape was presumably treated in public discourse with a higher degree of cultural indifference – and as an internalized defence against the assault. In suggesting ‘she liked it,’ Margaret re-performs the

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<sup>17</sup> Their incestuous relationship is further hinted at later in the film when Margaret straddles her daughter in her attempt to stab her with a knife.

<sup>18</sup> This is a reference to Margaret’s impregnation but the ambiguity of ‘it,’ allows the statement to be read in relation to the phallic member.

trope of the woman who was ‘asking for it,’ or at the very least, the woman who ‘did not know she wanted it.’ While this may very well be the sentiment conveyed (and normalized) in De Palma’s film, Moore’s performance of the same dialogue is notably absent of the repressed sexual desire feminist critics have identified as problematic in the original. Moore’s delivery lacks the sensationalism of Lurie’s performance, an affect that is further downplayed by the film’s quick cut away from Moore’s delivery to Moretz’s/Carrie’s frightened response. If De Palma’s film makes a point of suggesting that women ‘just don’t know that they want it,’ Peirce’s text nuances the sequence by troubling the very sincerity of Margaret’s claim that she indeed ‘liked it.’

I read this scene as very much about Margaret’s own experience of sexual violence and her inability to grapple with the emotional and psychic damage. The internalized shame Margaret may feel (-- shame indoctrinated by a victim-blaming culture --) is transferred or externalized in her aggression towards her daughter; she wounds because she is wounded. In stating this, I am not suggesting that the abuse represented in the film should be understood *as* love, but instead I am claiming that the film makes an effort to account for why Margaret and Carrie’s bond remains so unhealthy. Rather than re-iterating the mother-daughter dyad as inherently pathological, an attempt is made to show the relationship as strained by the conditions of living as a woman in a patriarchal society. Taken in this light, Carrie’s return to her mother seems like a final ask for protection against the outside world, a bittersweet request that Margaret denies by literally stabbing her daughter in the back.

Eventually however, by the end of the film, mother and daughter are reunited in death. The subsequent ending of the film unfolds with Carrie killing her mother and bringing about a telekinetic hailstorm of rocks that swallows up the house and kills her as well. Here, I want to

highlight one final difference between Peirce's film and De Palma's original that I believe reflects the different ethos of the latter *Carrie* (2013). As in the epilogue to 1976 film, Sue returns to the site of Carrie's grave to place a flower on the marker. However, unlike in the original, Carrie's hand never rises up from the earth in a last attempt to separate from the mother in death. Instead, at the end of Peirce's film, the Whites' tombstone cracks and a scream scores the soundtrack. While the scream may 'come from beyond,' the fact that Carrie never re-appears in this ending is significant because it offers a finality to her death, as both she and Margaret return together to the Primal Mother. For Creed, the Primal or Archaic mother is often represented in relation to death, signifier of the ultimate abyss and engulfment. The threat of death in the horror film is thus a disguised fear of being consumed by the Archaic mother, who, as Creed writes, is unable to be controlled by the world of the Father or subsumed into the Symbolic. Rather than re-iterate the rather anti-feminist equation of woman with death, Creed sees the threat of the Archaic mother's envelopment as a point of male anxiety precisely because she cannot be conquered. Read through this lens, Carrie's and Margaret's death represents a final merger with the Maternal and thus a victory for her universe. It is not so much the 'castrating mother' who takes back her daughter but instead the Archaic mother who takes *both* of her daughters.

In these final moments, the life cycle that began with Carrie's birth is now complete, just as a new cycle begins with the now pregnant Sue. The cyclical quality of the story, which again underscores a more female/feminine life experience (versus the more masculinist/Oedipal linear trajectory), is played out further in the film's alternative ending, which was initially rejected by the studio and placed instead on the Blu-Ray edition. In this ending, Sue is shown struggling to give birth in the hospital. As her screams escalate, Carrie's bloody hand emerges from her vagina

and grasps tightly onto her arm. The image of Carrie's hand emerging from Sue's body is eventually transitioned into an image of Sue's mother tightly holding onto her arm as her daughter screams in bed. A further nod to the motif of 'hands' that occurs throughout the film (to which this chapter cannot do justice), the end also forwards a horrific image of 'the cycle' repeating itself. Less concerned with the cycle of menstruation, Peirce's alternative ending reiterates her thematic preoccupation with the cyclical nature of mother-daughter relationships, as the image of Carrie's hand becomes the hand of the mother, controlling her daughter's body as it jerks from terror. As the final shot pans out, we see a baby's bassinette placed below a crucifix, confirmation that the same relational structures will inform this new mother and daughter too. If Lindsey reads the ending of De Palma's film as a woman's nightmare that implicates women in the construction of their own monstrosity, then both of Peirce's endings seem to present a women's nightmare for the sake of affirming the horrors placed onto the mother-daughter bond. Unable to escape these conditions, the story is forced to repeat itself.

### **Endings**

In this chapter, I have sought to detail how Peirce's film attempts to depart from De Palma's adaptation and tries to negotiate some of the more pressing theoretical considerations of feminist horror criticism, especially in relation to the monstrous female body. As I state throughout this chapter, Peirce's efforts to redirect *Carrie* towards greater consideration of women's experiences from a woman's perspective still produces rather ambivalent results. The film remains bound, as it were, by its male-authored source text, in addition to the larger culture in which it relates its story and what is comprehensible or intelligible within that context. So, although Peirce's efforts are frustrated by the restrictive lexicon of horror cinema, and the

psychoanalytic paradigms the genre often relies upon, it still attempts to trouble these limitations and to re-consider the Carrie mythos in productive ways.

I suggest Peirce's strongest intervention is to focus on Margaret and Carrie's relationship and the ways in which their bond is upset by the demands for the child to individuate from the mother and take up a place in the world of the Father. While Carrie is still shown as desiring separation from her mother and as wanting to assert herself as a subject, Peirce's film also troubles the social pressures to abandon the mother in this quest. Turning away from the symbolic, over-determining order of the father (e.g. King's and De Palma's patriarchal texts), Peirce re-orientes her film to the world of the mother (e.g. the world of female desire) as a potentially recuperative strategy. As a result, *Carrie* (2013) showcases an alternative meta-narrative organized by female subjectivity and not the classical Oedipal scenario that seems to permeate the original story. The once palpable Oedipal anxieties over sexual difference now metamorphose into pre-Oedipal conflicts of attachment and individuation between mother and daughter, revealing the traumatic conditions of separation inflicted onto women by the patriarchal order. In this respect, I propose we understand Peirce's film as a kind of meta-intervention, as filmmaker and text alike both work to reassert the place of the desiring female subject in a story that has arguably lacked her presence.

## Chapter 4

### Hail Mary, Full of Rage: Avenging the Female Body in Jennifer and Sylvia

#### Soska's *American Mary* (2012)

The previous chapter considers how masculinist histories of authorship impede the ability of women horror directors to represent female subjectivity, and, in turn, to subsequently re-address generic tropes such as the monstrous-feminine, which hinge on male-dominated fears of women as abject. In this chapter, I continue to meditate on themes of authorship and address, turning to the rape-revenge subgenre, hereto referred to as the 'revenge film' or the 'woman's revenge film.' Returning to Carol Clover and Barbara Creed's initial readings of the subgenre, I explore how this body of films – once thought to be exclusively for the consumption of male viewers – is being re-orientated towards a female audience. Offering Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012) as an example, I suggest this film dramatizes the horror of rape and the fantasy of revenge as a way of validating and vindicating women's lived experiences of sexual violence.

Written in two weeks and shot on a shoestring budget in Vancouver, *American Mary* is the Soska Sisters' follow-up feature to their first indie hit *Dead Hooker in a Trunk* (2009). Starring Canadian horror darling Katharine Isabelle (*Ginger Snaps* [2000]), *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* [2004], *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* [2004]) the film follows Mary Mason, a medical student who turns black market surgeon, who seeks revenge on her rapists while managing a burgeoning extreme body modification business for willing clientele. Described as dealing with "the contradictions and pressures, but also the possibility and variations of modern female identity," *American Mary* is a celebration of marginalized or 'freakish' gender

expressions as much as it is a scathing critique of sexual violence and the dehumanization of women and femme folks (quoted in Sélavy). Part medical horror, part revenge picture, *American Mary* works very much like a generic interloper, using the familiar trappings of horror subgenres to deconstruct the often-imbalanced power dynamics found within the genre and the industry at large.

In blending the revenge subgenre with medical horror, the Soska Sisters develop a sustained concern over the violation of the body, wherein sexual violence and non-consensual surgical invasion are treated as equally debilitating forms of assault. Although both scenarios objectify the body, positioning it as that which is ‘done to,’ the film is careful to align the experience of trauma and boundary violation exclusively with survivors of sexual violence, suggesting surgery as a proper method of retribution. So even though the film is clearly influenced by medical horror, the act of surgery itself is not treated as the primary source of horror but instead as a means of regaining female agency and bodily autonomy. What constitutes the ‘true’ horror of the film is the experience of sexual violence and the ways in which the female body is assaulted, abused, and denigrated by men and patriarchal culture. For this reason, I have chosen to focus exclusively on the film’s status as a revenge picture and not as a medical or body horror film.<sup>1</sup>

To do so, I return to the work of Carol Clover and Barbara Creed who lay the initial foundations for feminist studies on the revenge film. Identifying a pattern beginning in late 1970’s horror cinema wherein the totality of a film’s narrative is organized around a woman’s

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<sup>1</sup> It is my intention to develop a complementary reading of the film as medical horror in my postdoctoral project “From Slab to Screen: Transsexual Bodies, Surgical Technologies, and the Evolution of the Medical Horror Film.” Although the film does not feature any explicitly ‘trans’ bodies, it is my argument that the characters of Ruby and Beatress can be read in relation to trans expressions of dysphoria and the need for surgery to better align the outer with the inner self. In this chapter, I hint at the possibility of a trans reading of the film but do not develop these ideas further.

rape and her eventual revenge, Clover positions the subgenre as simultaneously incendiary to feminist politics (via its graphic representation of assault) as well as potentially politically useful in its ability to ‘translate’ women’s experiences of sexual violence for a male spectator. Although Clover and Creed differ about the degree to which the male spectator may identify with the avenging heroine, both agree that the subgenre operates exclusively on a masculinist axis, invoking male fears over the loss of cultural power via its psycho-sexual iconography. Predicated on images of women appropriating phallic power for their own means (via their choice of weapon) and the often-literal dramatization of castration, the revenge picture, while heavily reliant on male anxieties, also attempts to represent the experience of sexual violence from a women’s perspective. For this reason, Clover, more so than Creed, points to the potential merits of the genre for its ability to critique patriarchal culture and the ways in which men are socially conditioned to objectify, abuse and assault women to assert their power/masculinity.

In this chapter, I show how *American Mary* is a calculated intervention into the subgenre that consciously exploits and disturbs convention for the benefit of a female spectator. I argue that the film destabilizes the victim status of femininity by subverting the necessity to reclaim the phallus before seeking revenge, thus challenging the need to participate in a masculinist representational economy of power/exchange. In doing so, the ideological purpose of the revenge film changes such that it becomes less about male spectatorship and identification with the heroine than it is about addressing women’s experiences of sexual violence for a female audience.

## The Woman's Revenge Film<sup>2</sup>

While some contemporary scholars such as Jacinda Read and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas suggest it is too limiting to relegate the 'rape-revenge' plot to the exclusive purview of horror cinema, or, as Claire Henry writes, that we should instead consider it as a genre in and of itself, I am most concerned with its place in feminist horror studies, as first presented by Clover and Creed. Although Read, Heller-Nicholas, and Henry all vary in their views about the extent to which the revenge film should be considered outside the purview of horror (for instance, Henry is much more forgiving than Read and sees horror as *part of* the rape-revenge genre), the practice of 'rescuing' the revenge plot from horror cinema still reiterates the assumption that horror is not capable of housing complex or politically productive narratives. The danger of promoting this type of 'rescue mission' (i.e., in locating the revenge plot outside of horror cinema), is that it obfuscates the cultural work horror is capable of performing. As Clover suggests, horror maintains an uncanny ability to distill complex power structures to formulaic narrative registers and visual motifs, and it is because of this streamlining that it is able to work through broader ideological concerns. So, rather than expanding my considerations of the revenge picture beyond the horror genre, as Read or Heller-Nicholas might suggest, I parse the subject back down to its beginnings in feminist horror criticism to document how the Soska Sisters utilize and exploit generic convention for political gain. To do so, I first turn to Clover and then to Creed to demonstrate how *American Mary* stands apart from previous revenge pictures both in terms of its narrative construction and its spectatorial address. In highlighting the ways in which the film diverts from previous expectations, I document the changing ideological function of the revenge film in horror cinema under this new wave of women-authored texts. In changing who the

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<sup>2</sup> This term is taken from Barbara Creed's study of the subgenre in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.

subgenre is meant to serve, the Soska Sisters move the revenge picture away from criticizing cycles of gender-based violence for the educational benefit of male viewers to vindicating the trauma of sexual violence for female audiences.

In her foundational study of the revenge subgenre, Clover focuses a majority of attention on Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (previously known as *Day of the Woman*) (1978) and Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981), both of which hinge on one woman's transformation from a survivor of sexual violence to an avenger of justice. As typical of these early films, and to some extent the remakes and contemporary revenge pictures of today, the first half of the film focuses on the woman's victimization, usually by a group of men, and often presents the assault in escalating scenes of violence. The latter half of the film is then spent on the woman's quest for retribution on the men that violated her. Her revenge is often presented as meticulously planned so as to maximize the amount of fear and injury inflicted onto her assailants.<sup>3</sup>

As Clover suggests, these films are gruesome to watch; the representation of rape is presented as a horrifying ordeal for audiences to witness, and yet it still operates as an insufficient proxy for the trauma of real-life sexual violence. Given the blunt and graphic treatment of rape in these films, it is unsurprising that they leave audiences repulsed or outright offended at the spectacle.<sup>4</sup> Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, for instance, feeling disgusted at male audience members for (presumably) identifying with the attackers on-screen, criticized these primarily films for easily playing into male fantasies of power and desire, and offering intended male viewers or "vicarious sex criminals" the opportunity to enjoy the degradation of women on-

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<sup>3</sup> Not all revenge films will meet these generic criteria. For instance, some may also focus on the family's revenge, as dramatized in Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972).

<sup>4</sup> For Clover, this is precisely the point; films that interrogate sexual violence should be difficult to watch since the very topic of rape remains so culturally contentious. (This was true both at the time of her writing and is at the present moment.) Reactionary or dismissive critical responses risk eliding the potential usefulness of such revenge films, which can be read as social commentaries on male group dynamics, structural misogyny, and the endemic failure of institutions (such as law enforcement and the legal system) to help survivors find justice.

screen (quoted in Clover 119; also see Lehman 104). Although the possibility of such a sadistic gaze can never be foreclosed entirely, Clover counters Siskel and Ebert's discrediting of revenge subgenre, challenging that these films, and particularly their sequences of sexual violence, are hardly enjoyable to watch, even for male viewers. She disagrees with their assumption that men are more likely to identify with the attackers on-screen (and thus conform more closely to Mulvey's original binary of spectatorship), and instead posits that revenge films compel male audiences to identify with the female survivor and to adopt her perspective. For Clover, the mechanics of the revenge picture, much like those of the slasher, organize the narrative development and audiovisual language of the film from the female character's point of view, which helps to elicit the (male) audience's sympathies and identification. The phenomenon of cross-gender identification explains, for Clover, why male viewers still cheer or vocally respond to the revenge portion of these films, despite the graphic torture, mutilation, castration, and killing of male bodies on-screen. By identifying with the woman, and understanding rape as meriting retribution, male viewers may find themselves "reacting to the most quintessentially feminine of experiences" (Clover 154).<sup>5</sup> In this respect, men are 'opened up' to the vulnerabilities of the female body, and may take on a masochistic viewing position that invites an empathetic affective register.

As identified throughout this dissertation, the trouble, however, in relying on Clover's description of the revenge subgenre in reference to contemporary films like *American Mary* is that she formulates its mechanics exclusively in relation to the male spectator. Even outside her study, scholars such as Peter Lehman present the revenge film as "nearly always made by and for

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<sup>5</sup> In her study, Clover does explore films that represent sexual assault and rape from a male point-of-view, including titles such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Hunter's Blood* (1986). However, in this quotation, Clover is speaking here of the feminizing effects of sexual violence, which often engender the survivor as 'feminine.'

men,” suggesting that this subgenre appeals to the male viewer’s masochistic desires to see male bodies ‘done to’ on-screen (106). Although *American Mary* offers audiences a healthy generic dosage of violence enacted onto male bodies, it does so for the benefit of the female spectator. The assumption that the revenge picture cannot or does not speak to female viewers is, as contemporary scholars have been quick to point out, highly suspect, given that Clover’s and Creed’s writings clearly document women’s engagement with this type of horror film (Heller-Nicholas 8; Henry 13; Oler 31). What has been lacking in previous scholarship is not so much commentary on how women viewers respond to this overwhelming masculinist body of work, but how revenge pictures may or may not understand women to be the *a priori* viewers of these films. While *American Mary* is not the first revenge picture to be directed by one or more women – this title goes to *The Ladies Club* (1986), directed by Janet Greek (credited as A.K. Allen) and initially released as *Violated* (1985) – it is a noteworthy model of how the revenge film can be re-tooled to (better) address female viewers, and in doing so re-prioritize the female spectator in subsequent academic conversations on the horror genre.

### Representing Rape

Atypical for a revenge film, the first act of *American Mary* is not structured around the impending sexual assault of its lead female character.<sup>6</sup> As opposed to productions like *I Spit* (1978), which show the male assailants discussing their sexual desires for Jennifer and planning their attack, *American Mary* does not afford any insight into her assailant’s motivations,

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<sup>6</sup> As mentioned, there are of course variations of this plot structure that may change with generic influence. For instance, an adventure/road-film like Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991) can be considered a revenge film even though it does not necessarily conform to the narrative pattern outlined by Clover. Within my own work, I deal exclusively with revenge films as they are situated within horror, a number of which do tend to preserve a common narrative trajectory. For this reason, I opt to use the phrasing ‘subgenre’ to describe the grouping of revenge films that appear in horror cinema.

choosing only to narrate the film's action from Mary's perspective. From the film's opening moments, the audience remains with Mary as she practices her surgical skills, attends class, calls her Nana, and performs her first underground surgery. At least early on, we as viewers do not leave her story to become privy to the worlds of other characters, especially those of Dr. Grant and his male colleagues. Indeed, few indications are given that Mary is being targeted by her male professors, except for a handful of attentive comments about her potential ("I can't wait to see how you perform when you start cutting into people"), and several instances of being watched by Dr. Grant, who remains in the background while she is training at the hospital. Although sinister in hindsight, these sequences can escape detection because of the assumed logistics of medical training – (male) instructors must observe their (female) students with utmost scrutiny. The extra attention paid to Mary, though possibly uncomfortable to watch, is not scripted to be read as obvious instances of harassment (i.e., unprofessional or lewd remarks directed towards Mary). The subtlety and the insidious manner of the doctors' harassment and eventual assault of Mary is of course part of the horror. Here, sexual assault is presented as the final stage in a larger systemic culture of misogyny and male privilege where small micro-aggressions towards female students are underplayed, and consciously presented by the Soska Sisters as seemingly 'justified' within the medical school setting. Isabelle's performance as a capable student who nonetheless smiles or chuckles politely when spoken to by her male professors helps emphasize the profession's insidious misogynistic culture, drawing attention to the ways in which women are trained to accept these micro-aggressions as part of their workplace environment and beyond. So even though viewers are given small indications that Mary's safety may be in danger, these moments are purposefully represented as common occurrences that merit little worry. Without the benefit of hindsight, Mary's assault 'seems' to

come out of nowhere, as character and audience alike are presumably both caught off guard. This is not to say that rape is ever or should ever be an ‘expected outcome.’ However, the revenge film is typically ordered such that the audience comes to predict the impending sexual violence. After all, replicating this trope is, in part, what helps constitute these pictures as ‘genre films.’ Refusing to abide by generic tradition, *American Mary* otherwise chooses to keep character and audience in suspense, and in doing so, is able to align the audience even more closely to the lead female character than in previous iterations of the genre.

Who exactly figures as dangerous in *American Mary* also counters generic expectation, given the genre’s classist tendencies to position the ‘white trash,’ blue-collar worker as the film’s rapist. Typical of this subgenre, acts of sexual violence are couched within a larger economic context, as the attacker often uses violence to avenge his disenfranchisement on an unsuspecting urban (read wealthy) female interloper. Identifying this pattern as part of the ‘double-axis revenge film,’ Clover notes how male assailants are often represented as ugly by virtue of their class status, stereotypically coded through their menial jobs, impoverished living conditions, unkempt appearance, and/or poor use of grammar or slang (Clover 125-126). For Clover, this exaggerated presentation is partially what helps to “other” the attackers and what allows for the shift in identification towards the female survivor as male viewers seek to distance themselves from their grotesque on-screen counterparts.<sup>7</sup> However, in *American Mary*, the Soska Sisters subvert classist expectations of criminality presenting the assailants as otherwise respectable professionals who maintain a seamless persona of reputable, upper class civility. Yet, even though these men appear ‘normal,’ they are morally bankrupt, using their professional success to

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<sup>7</sup> Clover offers a somewhat contradictory treatment on the topic, wherein she points to a tradition of normalizing the rapists (“rapist-as-standard-guy” [144]) in revenge films in order to criticize larger systems of misogyny and gender-based violence, while at the same time suggesting that the on-screen attacker is made Other by his class (126). This can partially be reconciled by changes in the subgenre itself, which can and does range in its presentation of sexual predators.

excuse their acts of sexual violence. As Grant explains to Mary at the party, “everything else is forgivable if the work is good.” A sinister foreshadowing of Grant’s actions to come, his phrase will continue to ring true throughout the film as Mary enacts her own revenge, echoing the statement back to Grant as she practices her surgical skills upon his body. In shifting the expectation of who precisely constitutes as monstrous away from the stereotypical working class of previous revenge films (as well as away from the body modification ‘freaks’ of the medical horror subgenre), to the seemingly ‘normal’ doctors, the Soska Sisters criticize larger systems of class privilege that protect sexual predators from detection in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

The assault sequence begins with Mary riding up the elevator to the party, where she is first greeted by Dr. Black, and then eventually by Dr. Walsh and Dr. Grant. With a drink in hand, Mary steps over to the condo’s built-in bar and shares a brief conversation with Grant before becoming noticeably unstable. Here, the film cuts to Mary’s first-person perspective, framing Grant through a distorted lens. The shot, which is repeated a second time with the additional distortion of Grant’s voice, cues audiences to Mary’s drugged mental state as she struggles to maintain focus and control of her perceptions. After Mary states that she feels unwell, Grant takes her into a private bedroom, shutting the door behind him before forcing her to lay down on the bed. As he steps into the room, Grant picks up a hand-held camcorder left on an empty shelf before pinning himself atop a nearly unconscious Mary. The sequence is edited such that the viewer moves from seeing Mary prostrated on top of the bed, to a profile of her head hanging over the edge as Grant begins to force his fingers into her mouth. At this point, there is a cut to the eye of the camcorder, as we watch the assault momentarily from the camera’s/Grant’s

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<sup>8</sup> Class also plays a part in Mary’s victimization, as Dr. Walsh and Dr. Grant mistakenly attribute her new-found wealth to sex work. In this misattribution, there is a direct connection made between the targeted violence committed against Mary and the belief that sex workers relinquish agency of their own bodies in performing their labour.

perspective. As the sequence escalates, Mary remains with her head suspended over the bed in a catatonic state, as her body forcibly convulses from Grant's attack. The camera lingers on Mary's glazed facial expression as the previously absent soundtrack returns and builds to a horrifying crescendo. From Mary's forced entrance into the bedroom, the entire sequence lasts a disturbing two minutes.

What is most striking about this scene, aside from its brutality, is the clear connection between sexual violence and the camera, which becomes directly implicated in Mary's assault. In a symbolic equivalent of oral rape, Grant pushes the camera into Mary's face while continuing to choke and strangle her, coding the camera as a phallic object capable of penetration and further adding to Mary's degradation. As the audience looks at Mary through the eye of the camcorder, we are aligned for the first and only time with her attacker's perspective, as the meta-camera's gaze collapses onto Grant's. However, rather than opening up room to identify with Mary's rapist, the added mediation of the camera obfuscates the spectator's relationship to Grant (i.e., we do not see 'as' Grant, but what Grant positions the camera to see), and instead draws attention to the very mechanics of cinematic looking relations. Aligning audiences with Grant's perspective is not the point of the sequence; what counts is exposing the power afforded to Grant via the camera. This set up is crucial to the revenge portion of the narrative, which sees Mary forcing Grant to submit to the gaze of her camera when she begins photographing her surgical modifications.

As Clover goes on to note, in the revenge picture and horror cinema at large, looking relations are central to the genre's production and sustained tradition of meta-critique. The inclusion of the camcorder within *American Mary* likewise brings a meta-awareness to the sadistic tradition of witnessing sexual violence on-screen, which, has been identified by feminist

film theorists as one of the central organizations of narrative cinema. What made and continues to make revenge films so disturbing is not necessarily their depiction of graphic violence, since the cinema at large is predicated upon this spectacle, but their ability to boil this trope down to its essence (Clover 120). As Clover explains, these films shock “not because [they are] alien but because [they are] too familiar, because we recognize that the emotions [they engage] are regularly engaged by the big screen but almost never bluntly acknowledged for what they are” (120). Peter Lehman also recognizes this double standard, particularly in the critical reception of revenge films, explaining, “I agree that *I Spit on Your Grave* is an extremely disturbing movie, but like many disturbing films in disreputable genres [...] it is so because of the manner in which it foregrounds and intensifies many of the elements that these same reviewers find acceptable in more muted versions of other films in the genre.” (1993, 104). Revenge films, when at their most critical, can do what other films cannot: they expose the cinematic apparatus as a violent medium that too often allows for a pleasurable viewing experience at the cost of the on-screen female body.

In drawing overt attention to these dynamics, the revenge picture itself, is for Clover, ironically one of masochistic rather than sadistic pleasure. Noting the difference between the assaultive gaze of the assailant/the camera versus the reactive gaze of the female victim-survivor, Clover identifies the former as vulnerable to threat (images of damaged eyes often belong to assailants) and as drawing attention to the very mechanics of looking relations that prevent, as I similarly suggest of the sequence in *American Mary*, full identification with the attacker (181). The alignment of audience identification away from the assaultive gaze can be accomplished by such tactics as the meta-appearance of a camera (as noted in the aforementioned sequence) or a ‘shaky’ first-person perspective (as typical of the slasher) that draws attention to the camera

device itself. Combined, these tactics work to dispel the visual power of the (male) gaze and deconstruct the expected patterns of spectatorship without necessarily recreating them.

As Clover suggests, modern revenge films, beginning with *I Spit*, instead of reiterating ‘old style’ tropes of the ‘cock tease’ who was ‘asking for it’ (thus playing into a sadistic gaze), largely tend to de-eroticize sexual violence so that male viewers are compelled to identify with the female survivor and understand her need for retribution (139;153). In *American Mary*, the Soska Sisters are similarly careful to direct the rape scene devoid of titillation, ensuring Mary/Isabelle’s body is never revealed during the sequence in such a way to eroticize the assault (Oughton 59). If the camera lingers, it does so only to show Mary’s visceral response and to bear witness to her trauma. Addressing the filming of the rape scene, Sylvia Soska explains in an interview their directorial choices: “And considering how rape is one of those things that is rampant in our society, and almost shameful to even mention, if you show it in the horrific light that it is and people are like, ‘it is a very long and upsetting scene’, I’m like, ‘yeah, because if you are in that situation you don’t get to cut away’” (quoted in Sélavy). Unwilling to afford the audience a sense of relief, Sylvia’s description pairs directorial intent and editorial choice (“don’t get to cut away”) with a larger political demand to witness Mary’s assault without the comfort of voyeuristic distance.

What is different about the Soska Sisters’ approach to representing sexual violence is that they take the process of aligning audience identification with the survivor as a necessary starting point rather than an end goal; in crafting the film to address a female spectator, the Soska Sisters place less effort on eliciting audience sympathies presumably because it is understood that a female spectator will simply ‘get’ the horror of the sequence. This is not to suggest that others do not or cannot identify with the experience of sexual trauma, rather, it is to say that *American*

*Mary* puts less emphasis, at least during the rape scene, on depicting sexual violence as palatable or easily relatable to a male spectator. As opposed to Zarchi's *I Spit*, which Clover explains, offers numerous first-person shots from Jennifer's perspective of the men's abject faces, the Soska Sister's *American Mary* does not revert to framing the action from Mary's point of view. Grant is monstrous not because he is made to be exaggeratedly horrific but because his actions make him so. In this respect, *American Mary* does not perform the same 'translation' other revenge films commonly rely upon to engage their presumed male viewer. Mary is a victim-survivor by definition not by effect.

Undoubtedly informed by ever-evolving discourses of sexual violence and trauma, as well as feminist activisms around consent politics, the Soska Sisters' directorial choices represent a new wave of revenge pictures made to reaffirm and validate women's fears (as much as their desires, as discussed below). As Sylvia goes on to explain in her interview response, "I love watching how difficult [the assault sequence] is for people to watch because it is realistic, it is *real horror*, and it is what a horror film should have" (my own emphasis, quoted in Sélavy). What constitutes as 'real horror' in *American Mary* is not necessarily the scenes of injury or surgical modification as would be expected in a body horror film, but the representation of sexual violence.

If the ideological purpose of previous revenge films was to interrogate rape, articulate a feminist politic, and problematize male violence such that male viewers could come to a deeper understanding of misogynistic culture (Clover 151), the ideological work of *American Mary* instead chooses to align itself more directly with survivors, validating the experiences of women and offering a momentary expression of female empowerment in the wake of sexual trauma. And while I will leave room further in this chapter to debate the representation of this self-

empowerment given Mary's grisly fate, I argue that the film comes from a place of emotional alignment with survivors and is made with the intended purpose to address that trauma. As the directors reveal in several interviews about the film, the narrative serves as an analogy for the Soska Sisters' own experience of working within a male-dominated industry. Speaking openly about being harassed and invited to parties where they were not on "the same level" as the organizers, the Sisters acknowledge how the continued inequalities of the film industry can manifest as targeted acts of sexual aggression and violence ("The New Hope"). In this respect, *American Mary* is very much a personal attempt by the Soska Sisters to grapple with other monsters in their industry and to resurface as avenging "psychotic surgeons," as they put it (quoted in Sélavy). In discussing what can be the fraught politics of rape-revenge fantasies, Martha McCaughey suggests that these narratives can often serve as a "cathartic ritual useful for displaying women's anger at past and potential sexual aggressors" (quoted in Hesford 208). In affirming the continued realities of working as a woman in a predominantly male industry, the Soska Sisters, while preserving the revenge film as the "premier processing site for the modern debate on sexual violence," (Clover 151) approach the topic with a vested interest in catering directly to a female spectator who may validate her own experiences of trauma.

### **Enacting Revenge**

In discussing the representation of rape in the revenge picture, I have exclusively relied upon Clover's writings, particularly in respect to the film *I Spit* (1978), which serves as a model text for the subgenre. In this next section, I shift the conversation towards the revenge portion of the narrative and begin to utilize Creed's writings on the *femme castratrice* and the phallic woman, pinning her observations against Clover's to highlight the competing interpretations of

the revenge fantasy. In navigating these differences, I show how the psychoanalytic models outlined by Clover and Creed are both recycled and refuted by the film, which champions an expression of (sexual) power grounded in the female body/femininity.

One of Clover's central arguments throughout *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* is that horror movies disrupt traditional looking relations by eroding the standard belief in the two-sex system that organizes previous feminist models of spectatorship (i.e., Mulvey's gaze theory). Relying upon Thomas Laqueur's 'one-sex logic,' whereby male and female bodies are understood as analogous to each other, Clover identifies a reoccurring pattern in horror whereby the coded gender identity of a character is not contingent on their sex but rather the opposite is true; a character's sexed identity is determined as a result of their gendering. In the slasher, this manifests as the masculinized Final Girl capable of appropriating phallic power by ultimately wielding the killer's weapon against him. As Clover explains, the Final Girl takes on masculine attributes or qualities through her heroic actions despite her being embodied by a female-sexed character/actor (the assumption being that heroic actions as innately characterized as masculine within the realm of horror).<sup>9</sup> In reading the Final Girl as a masculinized female (and by contrast, the psychic killer as emasculated and feminized), the male spectator is able to resolve his feelings of castration anxiety evoked by the film's psychosexual dynamics and iconography (for instance, the phallic knife, chainsaw, or machete) by adopting a cross-gender identification with the phallic woman. In this way, the once palpable threat to masculinity (enacted through the symbolism of castration) can be assuaged, as the male spectator is led to identify with the masculine attributes of the Final Girl.

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<sup>9</sup> Isabel Pinedo critiques Clover's acceptance of these conditions in *Recreational Pleasure: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. She writes, "[Clover] fails to consider that a gender order that aligns males with self-sufficiency and females with passivity deserves at the very least to be disturbed" (83).

In the context of the revenge subgenre, Clover's understanding of gender as preceding sex is enacted more literally through the graphic depiction of sexual violence that figures both women and men as potential victims of rape. Within this subgenre, the sex of bodies can become meaningless as the male anus is presented as being as vulnerable as the female vagina. Instead, what matters is how that body is "performatively determined by the social gendering of the acts it undergoes or undertakes" (Clover 159). For Clover, bodies are gendered through the process of sexual violence, which, within the world of horror, typically feminizes victims regardless of their sex. It is only in the revenge portion of the narrative that the usually female survivor is able to move away from her previously feminized position as a victim of sexual violence to appropriate a phallic agency in her literal and figurative castration of her attackers. As Clover states, "[p]aradoxically, it is the experience of being brutally raped that makes a 'man' of a woman," in that she adopts the masculinized position of attacker during her successful revenge (159). The ultimate benefit of this representational system, whereby the gendering of bodies precedes sexual identity, is that anybody (and also literally any body) can be aligned with the body on-screen, and thus the revenge film can help address larger questions of sexual violence that may remain abstract for presumably male viewers.

While Clover presents the omnipresent anxiety of symbolic and/or literal castration as eased by this process of cross-gender identification, Creed insists that horror cinema actively works to "arouse" rather than assuage these anxieties by presenting women as both castrated and as castrators (127). By the end of the revenge film, it is the latter image that becomes most dominant for Creed, who refutes Clover's original formulations of the phallic woman as the subgenre's central figure in favour of reading her as the *femme castratrice* (127). Instead of positioning her as the castrated woman who appropriates phallic power and allays castration

anxiety by reaffirming the fantasy of sexual sameness, Creed reads the figure as a representation of men's fears that woman is in fact *not* castrated at all. In re-framing her as a threat to phallic power, instead of one who co-opts it, Creed calls Clover out for reiterating phallogocentric norms that inherently masculinize acts of violence or revenge. She states, "When film critics draw attention to the notion of woman as powerful and dangerous they usually invoke the concept of the phallic woman, frequently referring to her as if she were the same figure as the castrating woman" (157). By offering an alternative reading that highlights the heroine of the revenge film as the deadly *femme castratrice*, Creed attempts to ascribe the lead female with what Christine Gledhill names as "a totally other, non-phallic potency," even if this power is ultimately imaginary (Gledhill, "The Horror Film" 355). Indeed, the desire to read the heroine thusly is not enough to undo the actual internal logics of these films, which, for Creed, position the female avenger as a monster because she fulfills the threat of castration (130-1). This point is crucial to Creed's overall argument; horror cinema *needs* to represent women as monstrous in order to restore the proper Symbolic order that the Archaic Mother (read abject woman) threatens to destabilize.

The difference between these two readings is how each author conceptualizes identification and power. For Clover, the male spectator identifies with the Final Girl because she appropriates the phallus (via her choice of weapon), and as such, power remains discursively tied to the masculine. For Creed, the male spectator resists identification with the *femme castratrice*, who, unlike the phallic Final Girl, represents the threat of castration and sexual difference. In Creed's paradigm, power is also re-produced as male but the *femme castratrice* poses a viable threat to the system, and hence must be coded as monstrous in order to refute her own castrating power.

Creed's desire to unbind the power of the feminine from masculinist frameworks (versus Clover who seems to re-affirm this alignment) is realized in the Soska Sisters' *American Mary*, which represents female identity/femininity as capable of producing its own language and visual lexicon of violence. As Sylvia Soska expresses in an interview, women are more than capable of harbouring their own rage and violent desires, especially in the wake of a traumatic event. She states, "In so many films, if a woman becomes the villain, she's either possessed by a demon or takes on very masculine qualities. People say that women don't have the same capacity for evil that men do, but I'm a girl and I know all of the crazy shit that goes through my head sometimes. A big driving force behind *American Mary* was, wouldn't it be cool to show that crazy rage that women can have?" ("The New Hope"). If part of the problem of previous horror cinema and, by extension, of feminist horror criticism is that strong, empowered women must always adopt masculine attributes or be coded as 'male' to survive, then the Soska Sisters offer an alternative solution by authoring Mary's "crazy rage" on her/their own terms.

What counts as 'on her own terms' will of course differ for each critic. Like the trouble of determining the feminist potential of films like *Twilight* (2008) or *Jennifer's Body* (2009), which will inevitably rest on how one defines 'feminism,' so too does an evaluation of *American Mary* depend on how you constitute the feminine or female empowerment. In speaking to this problem, Christina Pinedo, like Creed, addresses the key flaw in Clover's writing, which, in adopting Mulvey's limiting formulations of active-masculinity/ passivity-femininity, fails to actualize the possibility of female empowerment for the sake of the female spectator. Pinedo states, "If a woman cannot be aggressive and still be a woman, then female agency is a pipe dream. But if the surviving female can be aggressive and be really a woman, then she subverts this binary notion

of gender that buttresses male dominance.” (83) Yet, what precisely Pinedo constitutes as ‘real womanhood’ remains undefined.

In regard to *American Mary*, one of the most pressing ways the identity of ‘woman’ is established is through culturally intelligible performances of femininity, which vary from Mary’s erotic but more normative aesthetics (in contrast) to Ruby’s or Beatress’ more extreme embodiments. The alignment of femininity with Ruby’s and Beatress’ seemingly ‘freakish’ bodies is also part of the reclamatory project of the film, which refuses to hierarchize these expressions and instead celebrates these varying forms of femininity, or even hyper-femininity. In suggesting this, I am cautious of representing the film as postfeminist and thus, as being invested in reproducing conventional modes of femininity as self-empowerment (Tasker cited in Fradley 205). Rather, I see the film’s investment in subcultural, extreme, and even trans-femininities as evidence of an alternative cultural project. From Mary’s fetish-wear scrubs, to Beatress’ resemblance to Betty Boop, to the strip club setting, varying performances of femininity and the subsequent power relations these expressions are situated within, combine to form a self-aware film that treats femininity as a means to empowerment as much as a currency to be exploited.

Against André Loïsele’s misreading of the film, which suggests it functions as a “feminist critique of patriarchy and its relentless distortions of the female body,” I see the film as preoccupied with ascribing women the necessary agency to control their bodies within patriarchy. Ruby and Beatress are not “distortions of the female body,” they are variations of it, and nor are they misguided in their desire for plastic surgery, which Loïsele reads as an

“obsession with artificial beauty” (133).<sup>10</sup> The assumption that the desire for plastic surgery is ‘unnatural’ and/or anti-feminist (or in alignment with ‘unattainable’ patriarchal beauty standards) seems like a laboured point, especially in a film where surgical modification is treated as the ultimate exercise in control, especially for women healing from sexual trauma.<sup>11</sup> As Jon Towlson describes, Mary finds empowerment after her assault by taking control of her body and her sexuality, as well as helping others control theirs (198). Ultimately, she is the one who finds power in defying or violating the boundaries of the body, whether consensually or for her private revenge. To suggest the film is about the “misguided search for perfection through body-modification,” as Loiselles does, is to miss the point entirely (125). This is a film about women’s ability to harness the power of medical intervention for their own means.

After being assaulted, Mary pays strip club-owner Billy to kidnap and deliver Dr. Grant to her home in order to begin her revenge. She prepares for the event by ritualistically applying a bright shade of red lipstick and adding a quintessentially feminine Marilyn Monroe-inspired mole on her face. Emerging from the bathroom wearing a skin-tight, black latex apron with accompanying black surgical gloves, a composed Mary walks over to Grant who has been duct taped to her coffee table, a steel mouth prop prying his mouth open. Crouching down towards his head, Mary dryly explains that she has quit medical school (though “that shouldn’t come as a surprise”) to pursue a career as a body modification surgeon. As she slowly scrapes her scalpel across the metal mouth prop, she explains that “in the spirit of practice” she will perform some of the most popular procedures on Grant, including tongue splitting, 3D implants, teeth filing,

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<sup>10</sup> The celebration of variation and the use of plastic surgery to actualize an external expression that aligns with an internal sense of self is what further lends *American Mary* to a trans reading.

<sup>11</sup> Mary is not necessarily the only survivor in the film. Ruby can also be read in this light, especially given her quest to de-eroticize her body via plastic surgery. I owe this reading to Robin Alex McDonald.

genital modification, and amputation. With a long 14 hours of surgery ahead of them, she grabs Grant's tongue with her forceps, adding, "I'm still learning from you," before slicing into him.

The fact that Mary's revenge is performed using a scalpel is a telling divergence from the generic norm which often has women hacking, sawing, stabbing or shooting their assailants with overtly phallic weaponry. The prevalence of knives, axes, and guns to the subgenre suggest that women may take their revenge only if they are willing to emasculate, castrate and kill their assailants in the most 'manly' of ways. As Rikke Schubart attests, women in the revenge picture are pushed from being "soft" victims to "hard" avengers (95), a transition that is registered via the subgenre's iconography – hard women require the right 'hardware' to enact their revenge.<sup>12</sup> After all, this is part of the subgenre's appeal presumably to young adolescent men, who may find these scenes of revenge less threatening since they operate on a purely masculine axis and, as Creed points out, tend to eroticize scenes in which the heroine wields her phallic weapon (presumably to assuage the gender/sexual ambiguity of the figure). Mary, however, while still executing a graphic and torturous revenge is able to do so with the thin precision of her 'tiny' scalpel. In part, her choice of weaponry is informed by the film's hybridity with the body horror or medical horror subgenres. It stands to reason that she would use such an iconic tool of the trade (even more so given the notable influence Takashi Miike's *Audition* [1999] has had on the *Soska Sisters*). Yet, when considered alongside the history of revenge pictures, Mary's weapon proves to be less phallic and instead more clitoral in its signification; a small, precise but exacting weapon, capable of the same violence as a knife but without the same (masculine)

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<sup>12</sup> The visualization of the phallic woman in the revenge subgenre is again another potential moment waiting for a trans re-consideration.

excessiveness -- the 'little tool,' if you will.<sup>13</sup> It is not that Mary cannot use a knife in her surgical revenge, it is that she does not have to in order to get the same results.

The next time we see Grant, he is limbless and half-naked, being suspended from two hooks in a bricked-in storage room, a sole IV drip piped into his body. He groans in pain, but his cries remain muffled by his sewn-shut lips. Explaining that she has returned to photograph his body for her new modification website, Mary begins evaluating her crude work. Unable to escape or speak, Grant has been reduced to an object (comparable to his previous degradation of Mary) and exists exclusively as a flesh canvas for her to practice upon. As she inspects him, she contemplates out loud some of the different procedures she may want to perform in the future, repeating to Grant that "practice makes perfect" and that "surgeons, or whatever it is [she does] now, can't afford to make mistakes." In the damp of the storage room, Mary takes complete ownership of Grant's body (the production of this mastery also intersecting with important dialogues of corporeal autonomy and disability). Limbless, helpless, Grant is at her mercy and adding to this degradation, it has all been caught on camera.

Serving as a direct response to Grant's filming of Mary during his sexual attack, Mary, in turn, uses a photographic digital camera to document her torture. She goes on to use these images as portfolio pictures for her business. That Mary's success as a surgeon remains in part indebted to her professor serves as a suitably warped inversion of the teacher-student power dynamic Grant takes advantage of during his assault, as the male body of the teacher is now 'used and abused' by the female student. Mary's use of a photographic camera as part of her revenge also serves as a telling difference from Grant's attack; this is not necessarily a simple inversion of generic iconography, but an adjustment. Similar to the scalpel, Mary adopts a more precise tool,

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<sup>13</sup> I owe this reading to my supervisor, Dr. Eleanor MacDonald.

as each photograph registers with a shutter click and accompanying flash. This is not a messy filming session but a deliberate archiving of her revenge. In doing so, Mary takes charge of the symbolic gaze originally ascribed to Grant.

As Mary continues photographing Grant's suffering, she is attacked by a lone security guard (Sean Amsing) who discovers her make-shift torture chamber. After pushing her aside, the guard proceeds to pull at the chains suspending Grant's body, managing to release him off the hooks before Mary returns and viciously bludgeons him to death. Bloodied from the murder, Mary walks over to Grant, who has managed to only move a short distance, and electrocutes him to death with a Taser. This scene marks a noticeable shift in the moral integrity of the film, as we watch Mary unleash her fury on an innocent bystander who has simply fallen into her plot by accident. It is undoubtedly a jarring sequence that disrupts and challenges the previous "moral alibi" given to Mary via Grant's assault (Kirsten Marthe Lentz 378). Yet, the film also prevents the audience from understanding Mary's actions as perpetuating the same culture of violence as her attackers by refusing to condemn Mary's character outright.

After the double-homicide, Mary is comforted by her menacing body guard, Lance (Tawn Holliday) who reassures her that she is in fact justified in her actions. Sitting with two take-out cups and some food between them, Lance recounts the story of how his mother was brutally attacked by a burglar. He laments, "What I wouldn't give to have known you back then when I found that little motherfucker. [Taking off his sunglasses for the first time in the film] Don't you ever devalue what you do, Mary. You make sure they deserve it and don't waste a minute of your time thinking about them after you're done." With Lance's word hanging in the air, there is a moment of silence between them before Mary asks if she may have one of the

milkshakes. He responds, “I got vanilla and chocolate. You don’t seem like a vanilla,” before sliding over one of the cups.

Partially playing off of Lance’s/ Holliday’s intimidating masculinity, and what assumptions audiences may have about such men, the scene registers as one the film’s most touching moments. In keeping with the Soska Sisters’ desire to subvert audience expectation, the most stereotypically threatening male character turns out to be Mary’s greatest ally, as he reassures and vindicates her actions as necessary within a culture that disproportionally sees women (and femme folks) as the victims of violence. That one of the most powerful moments in the film should be focused on Mary garnering male approval can be read as problematic given the overt commitment to female empowerment throughout the film. That it also positions Mary’s murder of the security guard, one of the only notable characters of colour aside from Dr. Black, as collateral damage within this system is another regrettable aspect. However, this moment also seems to respond to Clover’s remarks that should revenge pictures be filmed by women, “they would be derided as male-bashing” (151). Instead, I read Lance’s comment as a moment of male solidarity, and a meta-diegetic invite for men to side with Mary (not because she is made masculine through the narrative or the visual iconography) but because she uses her femininity and her surgical skills to exact a justifiable revenge for sexual assault.

The representation of Mary as being capable of wielding her sex and her femininity (the two, of course, are not always mutually exclusive) as the seat of her emancipatory power, while diverging from the expectations of the subgenre, also provokes a theoretical crisis of sorts. Given the previous theoretical focus on the male spectator’s relationship to the image of dangerous or threatening women, little has been done to address how these images may be authored to address the female spectator, and subsequently what her relationship is to this form of representation.

The problem, in part, can be attributed to the fact that there are few, if any, comparable psychoanalytic parables suitable for unpacking this relationship (if we continue to adopt Creed's and Clover's preferred methodology). Models such as the phallic woman, the *femme castratrice*, or even the *vagina dentata*, are concerned with man's fear of sexual difference and do not offer any narrative of woman that she herself may participate in or may author.

Jacinda Read is perhaps the most vocal opponent against relying primarily on a psychoanalytic account of the revenge film, suggesting it not only risks an ahistorical treatment of these films, but the meta-awareness of new revenge pictures (particularly of tropes like castration) indicate a need for a new theoretical paradigm (246-7). However, as Henry clarifies, the interplay between feminist film theory and filmmakers should not mean that scholars "lay down their tools," but rather should embrace the productive discourse that can be fostered by this exchange (8). I similarly agree with Henry, as it is difficult to offer a proper treatment of the revenge subgenre without attending to the psychoanalytic iconography and narrative trajectories these films knowingly reference.

Interplay is essential to a film like *American Mary* and to the Soska Sisters, who actively invoke these tropes such as 'castration anxiety' in order to subvert their hold on the subgenre. The film itself pokes fun of these male fears by dramatizing Billy's (the strip club owner) sexual fantasies of Mary before interrupting them with violent or disturbing imagery that quickly denies any sexual gratification. In the first sequence, Billy imagines a scantily clad Mary dancing seductively on stage at the strip club. Filmed in slow motion with a flood of light decorating the stage, Mary undulates her hips, tossing her hair as she runs her hands along her body. As part of the performance, she takes a glass of beer from the edge of the stage, which in the next frame of the sequence, turns into blood. After pouring the liquid onto her body, Mary's real-life voice

interrupts the daydream as Billy is brought back to reality. In the next fantasy sequence, Billy is watching the security tapes of his first encounter with Mary, imagining that she is there in the backroom of the strip club with him, intent on having sex. Here, the image of Mary on the laptop screen seems to ‘come to life’ and serves as an uncomfortable parallel to the image of Mary found on Grant’s tape. Even if Billy has genuine feelings for her, his attraction and desire is coded as equally disturbing and fraught– both he and Grant reduce Mary to an image in order to achieve some form of sexual mastery and self-satisfaction. In this sequence, Mary appears in the same black lingerie as in their first meeting, and as is seen on the screen. Entering into the frame as her hand begins to trace along Billy’s shoulders, Mary kisses his neck before sitting on his lap. With a scalpel in one hand, almost imperceptible to the audience, she runs her hand/blade carefully down his face and body before stabbing him in the stomach. Here, the film cuts to a close up of her hand as she drives the scalpel further into Billy’s body, which has now become a literal ‘bloodied wound.’ Throwing Mary off of him and gasping for breath, Billy whispers, “You’ve killed me,” before the film cuts out of his nightmare. He is left sitting alone, staring at a black screen.

In both sequences, Billy’s desire to eroticize Mary or to have a sexual connection with her is curtailed, as his paranoia and fear of her ultimately overtakes him and overwhelms the fantasy. Mary’s final thrusting of her scalpel into Billy’s body can be taken as a symbolic ‘jab’ back by the Soska Sisters, who refuse to have their film co-opted for the exclusive enjoyment of the male gaze and/or for the male viewer’s pleasure. As one male critic’s cringe worthy review aptly displays, the sentiment that both Mary and the Soska Sisters are there to appease a presumably male horror audience is still all too apparent; Tim Lucas describes the film as “the first erotic horror fantasy written and directed by an erotic horror fantasy” (quoted in Kutner).

Sentiments such as these lend credence to reading *American Mary*, and specifically Billy's fantasy scenes, as an meta-commentary on women in horror and as a challenge to male enjoyment of the genre at the expense of women's exploitation.

### **Securing Victories**

If the revenge picture could once be considered an expression of male anxiety as much as a vehicle for men to understand the experience of sexual violence, then this new wave of women-driven horror re-positions the subgenre to be about women's fears of male violence for the sake of a female spectator. Speaking about the slasher genre, but capable of being extrapolated to the revenge film as well, Pinedo writes, "Part of the pleasure to be gleaned by female viewers lies in the combination of arousing such anxieties in men while securing a female victory" (85). In *American Mary*, the Soska Sisters certainly make reference to male psycho-sexual anxieties (as evidenced in Billy's fantasy sequences), but also place a more concentrated effort on avenging the female body by way of Mary's surgical practice. In this film, female victory is seemingly secured through solidarity, bodily autonomy, and most prominently, through retribution. Yet, what does it mean to the film's female/feminist victory that Mary is brutally killed by the end of the film? On the surface, it would seem that the Soska Sisters maintain their ability to subvert generic expectation, killing their heroine when most filmmakers typically leave the female avenger alive to fight (or at least heal) another day. However, as I suggest, I see this ending as another important departure from the subgenre that again constructs a more direct address to a female spectator.

In the final moments of the film, Mary receives a phone call from a dying Beatress who warns her that Ruby's husband, enraged over his wife's operation, is looking to kill her. Her

warning comes too late, however, as Ruby's husband attacks Mary with a knife while she is still on the phone. As the two engage in a struggle, Mary is able to critically harm her attacker and escape towards her operating room. Wounded, she crawls to her surgical equipment, the sound of her hand hitting the cold floor scoring the scene as a gentle rendition of "Ave Maria" plays on the film's soundtrack. The hymnal music continues to play as Mary attempts to sew herself back up before dying on her operating room floor. It is both a gruesome and operatic death, a tragic image that remains beautiful in composition and effect, and points to one last gesture of 'care' on behalf of the Soska Sisters to afford their heroine an emotionally resonant end.

With Mary's bent and bloodied body mirroring Beatress' similarly harmed figure, the last images we are given of these two women are ones of excessive male violence. It is a sobering reality ushered back into a film that delights in its construction of a female revenge fantasy. It seems contradictory then that given the film's intense preoccupation with female power that Mary is left to die on her surgical floor, reduced to a 'bleeding wound' with a vaginal-like gash cut into her abdomen; she is nothing now but her sex. For me, this final irony is the point of the ending. Mary can only exist as pure body within the patriarchy. It is not so much a pessimistic ending, but a political one that, as Towlson similarly suggests, shows how "patriarchy has destroyed her" and leaves her unable to "sew herself up after the final symbolic wound is inflicted" (210).<sup>14</sup> The fact that Mary dies at the hands of Ruby's husband (who remains an

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<sup>14</sup> Towlson goes on to note how the ending may show that empowerment, especially by way of violence, may come at a price, as Mary "becomes increasingly compromised by the situation that has been imposed upon her" and shows her "inability to fully heal because of it" (204). On the one hand, I agree with Towlson that the film shows the effects of trauma as uncontrollable, as Mary's violent tendencies begin to escalate, first with the murder of the security guard and next with her threatening a woman at Billy's strip club. In this light, we can read the film as preoccupied by the inability to suture a stable self back together in the wake of a traumatic event. On the other hand, Towlson's treatment of Mary's rape as an "imposed" upon "situation" reduces the magnitude of the event and risks placing all accountability for the film's violence onto Mary instead of Dr. Grant and Dr. Walsh. Rather, I believe the film shows Mary as already being violated and thus compromised by the sexual attack, and her ensuing actions as an attempt to regain the power that has been taken from her.

unnamed 'force' in the film) is telling, as the patriarchal imperative to control women's body that started with Dr. Grant and Dr. Walsh bleeds back into the diegesis. It is not so much that male anger and rage 'win out;' it is that it returns for its own revenge, seeking to re-establish the structures of power Mary has defied. This ending signals an awareness on the part of the Soska Sisters that their film can only remain a fantasy, and demonstrates a cogent need to stay conscious of the social conditions that continue to restrict women, especially in relation to gender-based violence.

Although Mary cannot save herself, nor the women around her, she perhaps begins a call to arms for other women filmmakers to avenge her death and to continue to seek retribution for the ways in which horror cinema (and culture at large) has positioned the female body as disposable. Posed in a crucifix-like position at the end of the film, Mary emerges as a patron saint for this new wave of horror cinema.

## Chapter 5

### **Taking a Bite: Horror as Female Fantasy in Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008)<sup>1</sup>**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrate how Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012) reworks conventional tropes of the revenge picture to better address women's experiences of sexual violence. By positioning the female spectator as the *a priori* viewer of the revenge picture, the Soska Sisters construct a sadistic fantasy of revenge against male aggressors and systemic patriarchal oppression. If the Soska Sisters' *American Mary* champions an expression of female subjectivity linked to autonomy and empowerment, then Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008) may be seen as a counter-text in which the female subject and femininity are re-aligned with the passive. However, as I show in this chapter, we can read Hardwicke's film as knowingly constructing a pleasurable, masochistic viewing experience for the female spectator. Reading *Twilight* in relation to Linda Williams' work on spectatorship, pleasure, and horror, I consider how the film provides an entranceway for female fans to assert their investment in the genre. I am concerned then with how *Twilight* has been dismissed as anti-feminist at the same time it has been similarly discounted by (male) horror fan communities for overtly centring the feminine. In this chapter, I present these competing tensions and reiterate the need to take seriously women's viewing pleasures in horror cinema.

In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover confesses, 'against all odds I have ended up something of a fan.' (20). Presumably impressed by the mutability of horror and its

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter emerges from of a co-authored publication with Angie Fazekas entitled, "What Were We – Idiots?": Re-evaluating Female Spectatorship and the New Horror Heroine with Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008)." It appears in forthcoming anthology collection on Carol Clover and the Final Girl, edited by Stacy Rusnak and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz.

potentially productive political inflections, Clover's eventual admission of her enjoyment of horror cinema counters the then prevailing (and currently ongoing) cultural stereotype that the genre cannot or should not be enjoyed by women viewers, especially those with any interest in feminist politics. Indeed, the very tone of her comment ('against all odds') acknowledges the construction of a gendered barrier around the genre that seemingly prohibits women viewers from access and claims horror cinema as an exclusively masculinist space.

Yet, as both Isabel Pinedo (1997) and Brigid Cherry (2001) point out in their respective studies on female spectatorship and horror cinema, women fans are not necessarily an anomaly. Writing on her personal love of horror in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, Pinedo celebrates the genre's ability to offer a cathartic outlet in which woman can "exercise, rather than exorcise" expressions of rage (2). For Pinedo, horror offers women viewers the opportunity to revel (albeit temporarily and in allotted doses) in female retaliation and violence, wherein women triumph over their assailants and defeat the patriarchal on-screen proxy. As opposed to Clover who seemingly hesitates to confess her enjoyment of the genre, Pinedo confidently admits her pleasure for horror even if she remains skeptical about the genre's potential feminist pitfalls. Conversely, in Cherry's sociological study of women horror fans, she notes how the female gaze has often been overlooked in popular and academic dialogues of the genre. As Cherry points out, when the female gaze is mentioned, it is often in relation to a negative viewing experience, as exemplified by Linda Williams' "When the Woman Looks" (1984). Yet, as Cherry's study shows, counter to Williams' previous assumption, women viewers both consume horror and take pleasure in watching these films.

In this chapter, I am interested in how female spectatorship and women's participation in horror cinema remains marginalized and altogether undervalued, especially in relation to

Hardwicke's *Twilight*. Here, I show how female desire, as directed towards the (male) vampire, threatens the supposedly masculinist ownership of horror cinema thought to preserve and ultimately stabilize the genre's boundaries. If *Twilight* is arguably charged with 'feminizing' horror, I argue via Clover and Williams that horror is already 'feminized,' and that we ought to consider its place in relation to so-called 'feminine' viewing pleasures like masochism. In this chapter, I argue that *Twilight* constructs an active viewing position for the female spectator that hinges on masochistic pleasure, which, although potentially troubling to some feminist scholars, disrupts the assumption of the genre's supposedly masculinized (sadistic) offerings.

### **Staking a Claim to Horror**

Occupying a historic place amongst this new wave of films, *Twilight* (2008) is arguably the first mainstream American horror film written and directed by two women since Amy Holden Jones and Rita Mae Brown's *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) and the first women-centric horror *phenomenon* in modern cinema history.<sup>2</sup> Based on a book series by Stephanie Meyer, Melissa Rosenberg and Hardwicke's film is the first installment in a five-part series and focuses on the emerging romantic/sexual relationship between 17-year-old Bella (Kristen Stewart) and 108-year-old vampire Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson). In the film, Bella moves to the small town of Forks, Washington, to live with her father Charlie (Billy Burke) and quickly develops a fascination with the Cullen siblings, Edward in particular. When she is nearly hit by a van in her school parking lot and Edward saves her using seemingly superhuman speed, Bella's fascination and attraction grow. Eventually, Edward confirms her suspicions that he is, in fact, a vampire

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<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, *Twilight* (2008) is the largest film production profiled in this dissertation (as measured by cultural reception and box office numbers). Following the immense popularity of the *Twilight* book series (Meyer 2005), Hardwicke's film adaptation was expected to gross anywhere from \$35 million to \$60 million in its first weekend but outperformed even these expectations by grossing \$70.6 million on opening weekend (Verrier 2008). To date, Hardwicke's *Twilight* ranks among the highest-grossing films ever directed by a woman.

and the two begin a sultry ‘teenage’ romance. As the pair become closer, rival vampire James (Cam Gigandet), intrigued by Edward’s protectiveness over a human, lures Bella into a trap and infects her with vampire venom. Eventually, she is saved by Edward and his siblings. The film ends with Edward and Bella attending prom and Edward refusing to turn Bella into a vampire, despite her wishes to the contrary.

As a number of scholars have already argued, *Twilight* (2008) and the book/film series as a whole can be considered a postfeminist narrative of coercion and abuse, representing a world wherein women’s autonomy is greatly limited, if not non-existent, with emphasis placed on the preservation of women’s sexual purity against an innately ‘monstrous’ or predatory masculinity (see Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Borgia, 2014; Budruweit, 2016). And while this narrative may hold echoes of earlier Gothic works that represent the dangers of patriarchal sexual aggression, *Twilight* (2008) has been critiqued as offering an essentialist portrait of sexual desire that fails to attend to the structural and cultural inequalities that produce such power differentials. As a concerned feminist scholar, I agree with these assessments and acknowledge that the representation of gendered, racialized, and classed relations in this narrative is highly conservative and replicates problematic structures of oppression.

However, for the purposes of this chapter, what I wish to highlight is how *Twilight* (2008) has become something of a lightning rod, not because it does anything drastically different than other vampire films, but rather because of its explicit focus on female subjectivity and pleasure, and how that subsequent organization is treated as an inherent threat to the (assumed) masculinist workings of the horror genre. Much of the conflation of violence and abuse with romance and love that *Twilight* is so often criticized for is inherent in the vampire subgenre more generally. For example, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992)

contains a scene that replicates the flawed narrative of *Twilight* almost verbatim. Vowing to give herself over to a reluctant Dracula (Gary Oldman), Mina (Winona Ryder) pleads to her would-be-lover to turn her into a vampire:

Dracula: Oh, no. I cannot let this be.

Mina: Please, I don't care. Make me yours.

Dracula: No. You will be cursed as I am to walk in the shadow of death for all eternity. I love you too much to condemn you.

Mina: Then take me away from all this death.

Compare this to a similar scene in *Twilight*:

Bella: Edward, why did you save me? If you just let the venom spread... I could be like you by now.

Edward: You don't know what you're saying. You don't want this.

Bella: I want you. Always. [...] I've decided.

Edward: So that's what you dream about? Becoming a monster.

Bella: I dream about being with you forever.

Taken together, both scenes share a female protagonist professing her desire to commune with the vampire and to become his eternal lover; her assertion is dismissed by the male vampire who treats her as uninformed or lacking awareness; subsequently, there is an established connection between sexual longing and the violent exchange of the vampire's bite. Notably, only Edward resists biting his beloved, deciding to deny her wishes and offering her a chaste kiss instead. This is understood in the film as an act of affection, when, in fact it frustrates Bella's efforts to satisfy her (sexual) desires.

While profiling a select scene from Coppola's *Dracula* does not attest to the subgenre of vampire films as a whole, it does point to an established narrative pattern. Namely, it shows how women's agency and victimization often become conflated in these films, and how, when the leading heroine does express her desires, she is often met with resistance and is forced to acquiesce to the male vampire's control. A feminist critique of *Twilight* as unprecedented in its regressive politics fails to take into account the fairly common tropes in which the film engages,

and risks redirecting blame to its female author, director, and audience, all of whom are shamed in public discourses of the film. In this regard, while I acknowledge the problematic dimensions of the film's representation (and the 'rescue fantasy' of the vampire subgenre as a whole), I nonetheless feel it is important to document the impact of Hardwicke's work given the outright refusal by critics and (male) fans to accept *Twilight* as a 'proper' horror film because of its unabashed focus on female desire.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Hardwicke's text has been discounted as a horror film is a telling example of ways in which the genre remains highly regulated and gendered. This ongoing restriction speaks directly to Carol Clover's original intention to challenge the steadfast association between horror, young male fans, and sadistic viewing pleasures. Arguing that precisely the opposite is possible, Clover understands the horror viewing experience as a quintessentially feminine one, wherein men are "opened up" to the experience of female-driven horror (xiii). She writes, "Taken together, these films offer variant imaginings of what it is, or might be, like to be a woman – to menstruate and be pregnant, to be vulnerable to and endure male violence, to be sexually violated. What new-regime horror showed us is that at least some male audiences were willing to make-believe these sensations" (xiii). Now that these sensations are laid bare, exposed and rendered for an alternative audience, namely women, there has been a significant backlash amongst (male) horror aficionados who are determined to serve as gatekeepers of generic 'purity.' The vampiric threat of *Twilight* is here laced with a meta-textual feminine danger of

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<sup>3</sup> I take my cue here from Tania Modleski, who, in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* addresses feminist theories' dismissal of soap opera as highly problematic and its audience as uncritical. She writes, "[It] is important to recognise that soap opera allays *real* anxieties, satisfies *real* needs and desires, even while it may distort them" (author's own emphasis, *Loving with a Vengeance* 108).

generic contamination, as male critics and fans work to re-establish proper boundaries around what is and is not ‘horror.’<sup>4</sup>

In her study of reviews of Hardwicke’s *Twilight*, Lisa Bode traces the way that the film is actively disavowed as a horror film because of its romance elements and primary audience of teenage girls. Bode quotes one reviewer as saying, “*Twilight* sparkles for its intended audience of indiscriminate adolescent females. However, it will only be deemed as a softened, hackneyed horror show of synthetic affection for the rest of us” (Ochieng quoted in Bode 707).

Characterizing *Twilight* audiences as “indiscriminate adolescent females” calls on widespread beliefs that pit good and worthy horror movies against more ‘softened’ or ‘gushy’ feminine narratives associated with soap operas, daytime television, melodrama and the Gothic romances of Anne Rice’s vampire fiction (Bode 711). Seen as ‘tainting’ the generic purity of the genre, the elements of romance and representation of (female) teenage introspection appear to destabilize the ‘proper’ characteristics of horror, which seem to only hinge on one universalizing aspect: namely, that they play to a male audience.

While men and adolescent boys are stereotypically considered the predominant audience of the genre, as Rhona J. Berenstein’s study of classic horror cinema makes clear, women have historically flocked to horror showings, and films that tend to appeal to these viewers have received similarly dismissive criticisms as those leveled against *Twilight*. As one example,

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<sup>4</sup> In part, this speaks to a rupture between academia and popular reception. As Clover notes in the prologue to the second edition of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, the figure of the Final Girl has colloquially morphed into something of a feminist hero when in fact her findings revealed otherwise (“To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development” is “a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking” [53]). The continued assumption that horror cinema offers a hyper-masculine viewing experience of blood, guts and gore again counters what Clover and other horror scholars have suggested about the genre. This schism between academic theory and popular reception, while perhaps unavoidable, is not altogether definitive, as the transcendence of Clover’s own work into popular vernacular (namely, the term ‘Final Girl’ itself) points to a productive merger of these two discourses. In turn, this study strives to re-associate the genre with a more female/feminine/feminist mode of practice that refutes the continued mis-reading of horror cinema in popular culture as inherently masculinist/male-dominated.

Berenstein cites newspaper reviewers who categorized *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), one of the first female-led vampire films in the American sound era, as “melodrama” or as a “cute little horror picture” (11). Although these statements do not necessarily encompass the breadth of reviews at the time, they hint at an established pattern of disparaging or at least questioning the authenticity of horror films that profile women as something other than helpless victims or props. Berenstein goes on to note how the ‘feminine’ elements of romance have figured as an inherent part of American horror cinema beginning with Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931). Opening in New York City on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1931, *Dracula* promised female viewers an intimate engagement with the matinée idol Bela Lugosi, who, if rumor is to be believed (and frankly, why not given Lugosi’s star status), had women swooning in their seats and writing love letters confessing their attraction to his vampiric alter-ego (Berenstein 14).<sup>5</sup> Despite assumptions to the contrary, female viewers have had a lengthy engagement with the genre, as Berenstein’s study attests, yet their inclusion continues to be understood as one of the chief threats to the genre’s (masculinist) authenticity.

Unsurprisingly, the same misogynistic rhetoric used to debase certain women’s horror in the 1930s appears prominently again in the 1990s with a surge of horror films marketed towards adolescents that feature “scantly clad, barely legal teen starlets,” as one disparaging fan remarks (cited in Jancovich, ““A Real Shocker”” 29). Profiling reactions to teen-horror flicks such as *Scream* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Urban Legend* (1998), Mark Jancovich notes how these films were dismissed by male-dominated, on-line fan communities primarily because of their association with teenage female audiences – the factor of age becoming of prime importance. Jancovich writes, “These films, it is implied, are not just

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<sup>5</sup> This is not far removed from the response female fans had towards Robert Pattinson (Edward), some of whom even stalked the actor.

inauthentic horror but they are made for, and consumed by, inauthentic fans: young girls who cannot have the subcultural capital to define what is hip!” (“A Real Shocker” 30).

The irony of course, as Jancovich also recognizes, is that the genre is nothing without its starlets, its scream-queens, or its-women-to-be-tortured. To disparage the inclusion of (young) women both on-screen and off seems counter-intuitive to the genre’s general functioning: namely, that women serve as the proper vehicles of “heterosexual deflection” that enable the stereotypical male viewer to enjoy what has continually been identified by academic critics as repetitive dramas of castration anxiety and homoeroticism (Clover 52). When on-screen women function ‘properly’ as cyphers for male psycho-sexual anxieties, and off-screen female viewers remain present but silent, their inclusion in the genre is treated as routine and even necessary. It is only when women or teenage girls vocalize their viewing pleasures that the films they congregate around are deemed liabilities to the genre’s integrity. In this respect, a film like *Twilight* becomes a prime offender because it centres women’s pleasures and women’s interests. While again we may be inclined to trouble the problematic dimensions of the film’s representation of young womanhood, we cannot deny its success with (young) female fans. As Jancovich’s example of 1990’s teen horror supports, it is precisely because *Twilight* is aimed at teenage girls that it has been dismissed from the horror canon since the teenage girl herself stands at a distance from those who have previously been allowed to dictate the rules of the genre, if not cultural ‘taste’ in general.

Developed from a series of Young Adult novels and set in a high school, Hardwicke’s film is geared towards attracting teenagers, as is evident in its promotional material. The first half of the film’s trailer is replete with images of high school: students with backpacks, a school bus, classrooms, a cafeteria and unmistakably institutional school hallways. This promotional

strategy clearly paid off in spades with teenage girls in particular flocking to theatres in such numbers that the mainstream press was compelled to write articles noting the success of marketing the film to this often-overlooked audience demographic. For instance, an article in *The Guardian* writes that teenage girls are “a film-maker’s dream come true” because “the female fan base [gets] really involved. And I mean really involved” (Jamieson). Despite this success, however, it is precisely the film’s attraction to young female audiences that sets it firmly in the category of ‘not-horror.’ The same article from *The Guardian* goes on to say:

[Hollywood] noticed that boys were being dragged along to see [the *Twilight* films], so it added more action to keep them happy. Bill Condon was hired in Hardwicke’s place to add some horror ... Crucially, Hollywood realized that what fans wanted wasn’t necessarily films, it was hot vampires to have crushes on. (Jamieson)

According to this article, in order for *Twilight* (2008) to be considered a genuine horror film (or, to add any horror at all), it must replace its female director with a male one, and thus restore the primacy of male authorship in horror cinema. Similarly, this article clearly frames teenage female audiences as uninterested in horror, or even in the *Twilight* films themselves, as they are problematically represented as only desiring “hot vampires to have crushes on.”

As cited in Bode’s analysis of *Twilight* (2008) reviews, the figure of the teenage girl as a film viewer is continually conceptualized as overly emotional, conformist and lacking critical and aesthetic acumen or taste. Additionally, she is repeatedly denigrated as being less intelligent and more susceptible to manipulation by marketing and commercialism than male fans (Bode 710). Bode further quotes reviews that use language like “indiscriminate,” “impressionable” and “insipid” to suggest that teenage girls consume media without any sense of critical thought and, because of this impression, their excitement over *Twilight* cannot be “trusted” as an accurate gauge of “good” culture or of what constitutes horror. Even when the popularity of *Twilight* among adult women is acknowledged, the same sexist and dismissive language is used to

characterize female audiences as less discriminating and thus less capable of recognizing proper examples of the genre. Dismissed and belittled in the media as ‘Twimoms,’ “adult female fans have been accused of: neglecting their children; letting the dishes pile up in the sink while they post on forums and make *Twilight* fanvids; leaving their families at home in order to stalk the movie actors and the set in packs; regressing into a fantasy of being 17 again and not having adult responsibilities” (Bode 717). The positioning of adult women who are fans of *Twilight* as failed homemakers and mothers works to realign women with the domestic sphere and away from the auspices of cultural criticism while simultaneously dismissing their opinions as less relevant. All of this serves to re-center men as the progenitors, inheritors and proper owners of the horror genre.

The problem then lies in how we understand female spectatorship as a practice in general and particularly in relation to the horror genre. Within film studies, feminist scholars have challenged the assumed passivity of the female spectator, and the characterization of her viewing position as inherently less flexible or less critical than that of her male counterpart.<sup>6</sup> Writing on the woman’s film of Classical Hollywood, Janet Basinger makes the pithy retort, “Even as children, we knew how much of what we were seeing was untrue, wishful, escapist. What were we-- idiots?” (4). Explaining the savviness with which women viewers would watch glamorous female stars on screen, Basinger goes on to suggest, “We grew to understand and accept the great secret of the Hollywood film: its ambivalence, its knowing pretense. You were a fool to believe any of it, but you were a fool if you didn’t” (5). As Basinger’s anecdotal insights neatly summarize, it is the task of feminist film studies scholars such as herself to identify how films typically aimed at women work to produce a female subject position, and how, at the same time,

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<sup>6</sup> See Tania Modleski, 1994; Mary Ann Doane, 1987; Christine Gledhill, 1988.

female viewers come to construct their own understandings of femininity either in alignment with or in opposition to these on-screen images. The assumption that women watch these films with a limited capacity for critical reception is precisely what Basinger's remarks challenge.

What is perhaps new to horror criticism, as I argue, is the level to which the genre can be considered an equally appropriate place to host questions of female spectatorship previously deflected onto other 'more feminine' genres such as the woman's picture, melodrama, and soap opera. Admittedly, the fact that there is a category of films named 'woman's pictures' should strike feminist theorists as problematic (Haskell 154). However, as Mary Ann Doane advocates in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, there is value in re-examining a term like the 'woman's picture' so as to lend expression to a pattern of films that centre women's lives and address a female spectator, thereby challenging the masculinist orientation of Hollywood cinema. For Doane, the reclamation of this term is itself an important display of ownership that I suggest ought to be performed in the horror genre. I advocate that we should more frequently contemplate horror, as configured by this new wave of women-driven films, as part of a list of genres addressed to women and concerned with women's spectatorial enjoyment.<sup>7</sup> There is a stake then in naming horror as a genre 'belonging' to women (as much as the melodrama, for instance) because of the continued disenfranchisement of women horror fans, and, moreover, given the ongoing strain to acknowledge the genre's capability of exploring the terrors, fears, and anxieties that mark female subjectivity. *Twilight* matters because it gives definition to this new

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<sup>7</sup> David Greven makes a similar point in *Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema: The Woman's Film, Film Noir, and Modern Horror*. He suggests that horror operates as a "concealed woman's film," noting that "the woman's film [...] takes on a new, albeit hidden, life in the modern horror film" (83; 36). He continues by suggesting that contemporary horror now houses the female-centred concerns once expressed in the woman's films of the 1940's. Although I agree that horror seems preoccupied by similar aspects of female identity as the woman's picture, I suggest, alongside Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, that this new wave of horror cinema instead shows us what has been innately intrinsic to the genre all along. Rather than see horror as a translation of the woman's picture, I see horror as being a 'woman's genre,' a fact that has remained tempered by masculine authorship.

wave of women's horror cinema, and, in turn, affords an opportunity to re-centre horror as an important genre to women viewers.

In this previous section I have attempted to show how *Twilight*, operating as an example of this new wave of women-driven horror, forces academics and critics alike to reconceptualize the boundaries and audiences associated with the genre. In the next section, I turn my attention to the ways in which *Twilight* offers an articulation of women's desires within horror cinema. By offering a close reading of the film, I explore how the conventions of classical horror, as identified by Linda Williams, re-emerge in the text and offer a masochistic fantasy that challenges Williams' conceptualizations of the genre's primary pleasures.

### **“I Know What I Want”**

As I move into a close reading of *Twilight* concerning questions of female pleasure and desire, it is important to remember that while we ought to be deeply suspicious of the postfeminist images of female dependency coded as autonomy that permeate Hardwicke's film (this, perhaps, will be the horror to some), we should also make note of how the film's formal mechanics and some of its narrative elements disrupt or at least “unsettle” these problematic dimensions, as Athena Bellas suggests (72). While this is not to forgive *Twilight* for its fraught aspects, it is to point out the ways in which Bella's subjectivity – her fantasies, fears, anxieties – inform Hardwicke's directorial choices, which work to elevate the character as the film's central, organizing force. Given the continued mis-alignment of horror cinema with male subjectivity and enjoyment, at least within popular dialogues, *Twilight* performs a crucial cultural intervention in its unabashed treatment of female subjectivity as imperative to the horror text.

Upon release, many reviewers pointed to the blankness and banality of Bella's character as a problematic (versus productive) aspect of the film and one that provides harmful messages to teen girl audiences. Bode quotes reviewer Sean Burns who refers to Bella as "clumsy" and "banal," (712) while Carmen D. Siering sees Bella as a "blank slate, with few thoughts or actions that don't centre on Edward" (51). Anthea Taylor suggests that this results in Bella comparing herself to Edward in a way that highlights his perfection and her inability to compete (38). While I do not disagree that Bella's so-called blankness works to idealize Edward and diminish her own personality, I also want to suggest that Bella's 'banal self' is one of the innate pleasures associated with the film, allowing the female viewer to position herself more easily as the heroine of the story. What these pleasures may be is addressed in the latter end of this section. For now, what is of concern is how Bella's supposed 'banality' can alternatively be read as a conscious 'open invitation' on the part of the film to situate female viewers more closely to Bella's perspective.

At the most basic level of the production, Bella's gaze is positioned as the primary 'look' in the film, even though the text opens from Edward's point-of-view. The film begins with an image of a deer in a lush forest being stalked by an unknown force. Although the camera at first adopts the shaky, first first-person perspective of the unidentified predator, the viewpoint quickly shifts to reveal Edward as the hunter. At this point, the film cuts to show Bella at her mother's home in Arizona preparing for her move to Forks. The perspective change from that of the 'monster's' to that of the 'victim's' happens so abruptly that the preceding moments hardly register as part of the film's structural set up (indeed, Bella's voice-over before the film's first image helps underscore the precedence of her subjectivity). Interestingly, this change in perspective – from Edward's to Bella's – happens much sooner than previously accounted for in

Clover's writings, which helps to identify and establish one of the genre's most famed conventions: the use of the first-person camera. Meant to align audiences with the 'seeing eye' of the killer/monster, the first-person camera is typically deployed in the first half of the horror film before focus shifts to the gaze of the on-screen female victim-hero. While Hardwicke still utilizes the first-person camera in the opening moments of *Twilight* to evoke a tonal atmosphere of fear or dread (after all, a predatory Edward is hunting a deer), the sudden cut to Bella's perspectives seems to suggest a cogent investment in altering the 'rules of the game.' Indeed, the audience is given fewer opportunities to identify with Edward/the monster as greater emphasis is placed on contextualizing the viewer within Bella's world.

As the film progresses, even greater effort is made to present the action from Bella's perspective, with another notable instance occurring when she/the audience is first introduced to Edward. Sitting in the school cafeteria, Bella watches as the Cullen siblings enter from outside, each dressed in glowing white attire save for Edward, who stands apart from the family wearing a grey shirt. Punctuated by a heightened cue in the musical score, Edward's entrance is framed as moment of narrative pause typically associated with a traditionally female character. Rather than imbuing Bella with what Laura Mulvey calls 'to-be-looked-at-ness' ("Visual Pleasure" 837), it is Edward who becomes the object of Bella's gaze as she looks on with curiosity. Further highlighting the intensity of Bella's look, two consecutive eye-match shots are used in the next moments of the sequence to pull focus to her gaze as it is returned by Edward. The motif of the eyes, specifically Bella's gazing at Edward's, is repeated throughout the film and emphasizes Bella's perspective as the one to drive the narrative events forward.

The continued visual emphasis on eyes looking or being looked at, while a potential trademark of Hardwicke's horror cinema (see *Red Riding Hood* [2011]), also permits a

heightened degree of gazing stereotypically assumed to belong to the male voyeur in horror cinema. However, while the seemingly unadulterated permission to look upon the female body is, as both Clover and Williams point out, commonly associated with generic peeping Toms such as Norman Bates (*Psycho* [1960]) or Mark Lewis (*Peeping Tom* [1960]), the actual power of their gaze is often tempered by the film's mechanics. For Clover, the 'assaultive gaze of horror' is rarely – if at all – associated with a safeguarded sadistic male look impervious to interruption or injury. Instead, she suggests the male gaze is continually represented on-screen as fragile and vulnerable to attack, thus limiting its scopical power and by proxy that of the male spectator's. As she states, "it is an inexorable law of horror that [the assailant's] vision must be extinguished, that its bearer be punished and incapacitated – typically blinded or killed or both" (189). At least within the post-1970s horror studied by Clover, it is the female look that is ultimately championed by the film, as her reactive gaze becomes the primary mode of identification for the spectator.

Conversely, in "When the Woman Looks," Williams promotes a theory on silent and classic horror cinema as similarly affording a preeminent position to the female gaze, even though the woman's look is typically punished by the end of these films. Regardless of the retaliatory measures taken against the on-screen heroine for her 'transgressive' behaviour, Williams suggests that her gaze nonetheless challenges established patriarchal viewing positions that subjugate the woman as a mere object or spectacle by realigning her look with that of the monster. Through her gaze, the monster is revealed not as an abject or freakish other (as it would be to the threatened male look), but instead registers as both a mirror and ally to the heroine. In looking at the monster, she sees a reflection of her otherness in patriarchy, and is also invited to find strength in that difference. For Williams, woman and monster are united in their separation

from patriarchal structures of seeing, and collectively represent a resistance to the dominating force of the male gaze. In both Clover's and Williams' accounts, horror is capable of prizing the female look above that of the male, and in doing so offers a compelling counter-narrative to popular assumptions that the genre makes no such room for the woman's gaze, nor for her desires or pleasures.

It is a shame then that *Twilight*, obligated as it is to its source text, competes between affording Bella unrestrained access to looking and simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of desire associated with her gaze. As is typical of horror, looking here must substitute for sex; however, counter to Clover's proposition that the bearer of the look – the male killer – must sublimate his sexual frustrations through his gaze and eventual violence (186), *Twilight* instead presents the looker as a teenage girl whose access to sexual pleasure is highly policed by the very monster she desires. Since she cannot 'have' him, she can only look.<sup>8</sup> In this case, *Twilight* seems to take on properties more similar to the silent or classic horror films profiled by Williams than to the modern slashers explored by Clover. Given that the rules of looking change slightly between these eras, an account of the mechanics of *Twilight* is perhaps better suited to Williams' work given the film's heavy investment in the Gothic monsters typically associated with the silent and classic cinemas.

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the narrative, Bella's desire is continually policed by Edward, as well as by her father. It is not so much that Edward resists her affections, but rather, he decides for her the level to which she should be attracted to him and what she should do about her feelings. In this sense, Edward adopts a patriarchal attitude towards Bella, which is replicated in her dynamic with her father, Charlie. This is particularly established through the film's editing, which draws a visual connection between Bella's sexual expressions and male authority. For example, when Edward first stays the night in Bella's bedroom, the scene is immediately followed by an image of Charlie cleaning his gun. Furthermore, there is an uneasy inference of incestuous desire in the film, as Bella seems to transfer her desire for her father onto Edward. For example, at one point, Bella, while sitting with her father at the diner, extends her hand towards a ketchup bottle. A quick, close up shot shows her hand as well as her father's almost meeting as they both reach for the bottle. This shot is later paralleled in the film when Bella accidentally grazes Edward's hand in the car and discovers his touch to be ice cold. This latter scene is meant to accentuate the sexual tension between Bella and Edward.

In “When the Woman Looks,” Williams uses *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) as a blueprint for the looking patterns in early horror. She draws particular attention to the sequencing of the Phantom’s reveal, which, as she argues, limits the effectiveness of Christine’s gaze by first allowing the audience to see the monster’s face before she does. Filmed such that Christine looks on from behind as she pulls off the Phantom’s mask, monster and woman are first seen together before the film cuts to her horrified reaction. Williams suggests the privileging of the spectator’s gaze in this sequence diminishes the woman’s look such that she becomes “responsible for the horror that her look reveals, and is punished by not being allowed the safe distance that ensures the voyeur’s pleasure” (“When the Woman Looks” 19). Although this sequencing of events limits the degree to which the spectator identifies with the woman’s look, it opens up the possibility for an alternative alignment between woman and monster, both of which are considered objects of spectacle. This alignment, for Williams, at least serves as a productive consolation – if woman must remain a spectacle at least, by way of the monster, she may help reveal the very mechanics that position her/them as such.

In *Twilight*, however, the opposite sequence of events occurs, suggesting a potential inversion of this early pattern meant to deter or constrain identification with the female look. After Bella confronts Edward about his vampirism, he takes her to a remote mountain plateau above the clouds so that he can reveal his true form in the sunlight. Rather than editing the sequence such that the audience is the first to see Edward’s ‘abject’ body, Hardwicke instead offers a slow, zoom-in on Bella’s face as she watches him unbutton his shirt. The film next cuts to Edward sparkling in the light as he announces, “This is what I am.” A shot-reverse returns the viewer to Bella, who is now framed by a tighter close up on her face as she gasps with surprise. Finally, there is a cut back to Edward as the camera (presumably serving as Bella’s gaze) pans up

from his sparkling bare chest to his face. Seeing Edward as Bella does, the audience is compelled to agree with her next remark that he is not monstrous but “beautiful.” Here, the audience is first privy to Bella’s gaze, as viewers are invited to look at Edward through her perspective and come to see him as she does, not as a monster but as someone to be loved. (The two responses are figured as mutually exclusive within the world of the film.) If, as Williams points out, “to see is to desire,” then the audience is meant to see and desire Edward as Bella does, as it is her subjectivity that tempers the film’s affective offerings (“When the Woman Looks” 15). Furthermore, it re-directs the spectacle of the sequence away from Bella and towards Edward, who is again positioned as the film’s primary ‘object.’ The result is a reveal sequence that does not emphasize Edward’s monstrosity but denounces it outright, and uses this moment to fully establish a lexicon of female desire that refutes the vampire’s place as other or different.

In this respect, identification with Bella’s gaze promotes a conservative narrative fantasy through which female desire is used to temper the subversive power of the monster, so that woman herself may ultimately be re-cast as the ‘true’ monster/deviant of the film. As Williams’ indicates, what ought to make the woman’s look so powerful in horror is her ability to share with the monster an established threat to male power that treats both her and the creature as objects to be brought under voyeuristic mastery. She writes, “There is not that much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned” (“When the Woman Looks” 21). Bonded in their excess and their lack, woman and monster, while subjugated by the male look, also threaten the stability of these relations via their difference. Comparing the vampire’s threat to female sexuality, Williams writes, “The vampiric act of sucking blood, sapping the life fluid of a victim so that the victim in turn becomes a vampire, is similar to the female role of milking the sperm of the male during intercourse. What the vampire seems to

represent then is a sexual power whose threat lies in its difference from the phallic ‘norm’” (“When the Woman Looks” 23). Together, woman and monster are positioned as sexual threats to the male look because of their inability or, rather, their refusal to conform to phallogocentric sexual expressions and relations.

While *Twilight* affords Bella’s gaze precedence, the effects of her look hardly align her with Edward’s monstrosity, which is in fact tempered substantially by the narrative. Although the vampire can typically be an alluring monster, the figure also symbolizes repressed sexual desires that threaten the hegemonic sexuality associated with patriarchal masculinity. Even though Edward does figure as a metaphor for ‘monstrous’ or excessive male sexuality, he also represents the necessity for sexual control.<sup>9</sup> Rather than serve as a subversive force that compels the expression of a hedonistic, pleasurable sexual release (especially for his female lover), Edward represents the very maintenance of a conservative ‘status quo’ – a century-old, vegetarian vampire who ‘just says no.’ Furthermore, Edward, like the entire Cullen family, is imbued with racial and class privileges that hardly situate him as a threat to patriarchal authority. In fact, he is a paragon of conventional patriarchal dominance, and even suggests as much when revealing his vampirism to Bella. He states, “I’m the world’s most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in. My voice. My face. Even my smell. As if I would need any of that.” And while Edward continues his diatribe, the point that his vampiric charms are in some sense ‘overkill’ effectively explains his privilege. He does not need these traits to advance himself in the world or to prey on humans/women; his whiteness and socio-economic standing is enough.

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<sup>9</sup> The difference is that Meyer and her novel conceptualize masculinity as inherently threatening to the purity of a ‘naturally’ innocent female sexuality. While patriarchal masculinity does indeed pose a threat to the safety and expression of female sexuality, it is also a culturally-produced and socially-sanctioned exertion of power that remains unexplored by the original novel and Hardwicke’s film. Masculinity may indeed be monstrous, but it is not innately so.

There is an internal contradiction in the film then between its willingness to cast Edward as *potentially* dangerous (he needs to stay away from Bella for her own safety) and its affirmation that vampires who occupy a privileged space in the social order are innately to be trusted (and thus safe to desire). On the one hand, we can read Edward's confession as an affirmation of what Kathleen Rowe Karlyn sees as a staple convention of a 'Girl Culture text,' which explores sexuality as a point of anxiety for young women by often positioning boyfriends as potential threats/killers (125). Inheriting the Gothic's preoccupation with boys/men as mysterious and potential dangers in disguise, *Twilight*, as Karlyn points out, similarly centres female desire in relation to the threat of male sexuality but does so in a way that takes its "Gothic darkness straight" (124). Although the Gothic may indeed sparkle a bit too brightly in *Twilight*, there is at least some effort to represent Edward as dangerous because of his masculinity. As signaled via his whiteness and affluence, Edward is able to negotiate the world as an 'apex predator' in spite of his vampirism, and because of such should be treated with caution. On the other hand, however, as Karlyn also points out, this commentary is effectively stilted by the film, which champions the need for Bella to adopt Edward's conservative and controlling attitudes towards sex and relationships. The potentially productive negotiation of masculinity's threat – namely, in working through the legitimate fears young women may have of men and sex – is tempered by the film's denial of female desire. The monstrous threat of male sexuality is sublimated into the safety of patriarchal conditioning, and conversely, situates female desire as the more pressing and burdening concern of the film.

In locating the source of monstrosity away from the male monster and, as I suggest, displacing it onto Bella, *Twilight* takes on some of the characteristics Williams associates with post-1960's horror, which, unlike its classical predecessor, re-positions monstrosity as

exclusively embodied by the on-screen woman. As Williams notes, these films charge women with a greater responsibility for the precipitating horror by suggesting that the ‘dangerous’ nature of their sexuality acts as the central catalyst to the male monster’s violence. While woman and monster still share a relationship in these films, their bond becomes increasingly negative as the woman becomes blamed for the violent encounter and a greater emphasis is placed on viewing her (eventually mutilated) body as the only visible source of monstrosity (“When the Woman Looks” 31).

Although Bella does not necessarily become a spectacle of monstrosity by way of her death, she is nonetheless framed as the film’s ‘other,’ especially in comparison to the flawless Edward. Throughout the film, Bella is often represented as having an ‘out of control’ body, whose clumsiness and awkwardness fail in stark contrast to Edward’s grace and agility. This includes scenes where she bangs Jacob with a truck door, hits a peer in the head with a volleyball during gym class, and slips on ice outside her house. These subtleties are meant to characterize Bella as already lacking in relation to Edward’s mastery of his physical form and, by extension, the desires that accompany his vampiric urges. While Edward has learned to control his body and bloodlust, Bella seems unable to even co-ordinate her movements. In turn, she is narratively positioned as needing to learn from Edward, as her sexuality becomes something to be ‘tamed’ by a monster already in possession of the necessary self-control (the patronizing tone of this exchange is hardly subtle). For instance, when Edward confesses that he doesn’t “have the strength to stay away from [her] anymore,” Bella responds, “Then don’t.” Openly encouraging of Edward’s advances, Bella is presented as purposefully endangering herself and participating in ‘risky’ behaviour. In a voice over, Bella states, “About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him and I didn’t know how dominant

that part may be that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.” As Bella later realizes that should things progress poorly with Edward, she would “become the meal,” her desire is presented as both logical (because of his beauty) yet dangerous. To this extent, the film reveals, very much as Williams identifies in post-1960s horror, just “how monstrous female desire can be” (“When the Woman Looks” 33).

The threat of unchecked female sexuality, a by-product of the source novel, is of course one of the great ironies of the film itself, given the amount of sexual tension and repressed erotic energies made palpable under Hardwicke’s direction.<sup>10</sup> If Meyer’s narrative seems to condemn pre-marital sex and suggests that both young men and women ought to suppress their desires, the novel and the film simultaneously offer expression to these same teenage passions.<sup>11</sup> So even though it may seem that the narrative conspires to shame Bella’s desires, Hardwicke’s direction offers some mitigation or negotiation of the restrictive source text by emphasizing the repressed passions that undergird the story. For example, when Hardwicke’s camera does adopt a third-person perspective, it is characterized by an incredibly invasive quality, sitting too closely to the characters/actors, and is imbued with almost constant, unsettled momentum. Rarely static or free of motion, the camera seems to embody the kinetic energy of adolescence itself with the bubbling interiority of a psyche overwhelmed by hormones, and, with respect to Bella’s desires for Edward, unfulfilled sexual longings. Accentuating this aspect of the film further are

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<sup>10</sup> Both on-brand and fan-made merchandising for the film attempted to trade on these erotic fantasies, offering products such as t-shirts with the phrases ‘Team Edward’ or ‘Team Jacob’, ‘the Vamp’ dildo that sparkled and could be frozen, an Edward Cullen cut-out that could be placed in the bedroom to watch you sleep, and replica engagement jewelry as worn by Bella. Almost all these items, besides capitalizing on the buying power of tweens, teens, and adults, are clearly geared to asserting the predominantly heterosexual fantasies and desires of female fans.

<sup>11</sup> The irony of this contradiction is not lost within popular culture. An episode of *Parks and Rec* parodies the threat of Meyer’s abstinence-only text when a representative of the Society for Family Stability Foundation denounces the novel’s strong sexual overtones: “There are girls quivering. There are boys staring deeply into girls’ eyes as they quiver and so forth. There really is a tremendous amount of quivering. It is anti-Christian. It is pro-quivering” (“Time Capsule”).

Hardwicke's choices in colour temperature, which range from cold blues to selectively warm reds. These choices are most notable during Bella's nighttime fantasies of Edward wherein the tonal palette of the film shifts to a warm register to signal Bella's growing passions. On the one occasion when Edward enters her room (a break-and-enter mistaken for a romantic gesture), a hanging bedside lamp and twinkle lights serve as the source of a red glow. Again, the camera here refrains from resting, maintaining a continuous motion that not only adds a sense of disease or discomfort (perhaps the inability to settle in an otherwise distressing break-and-enter situation?) but can also be read as reflecting Bella's nervousness as she shares her first kiss with Edward. Taken together, these choices not only further heighten the film's organization around Bella but also actively construct an experience of teenage female subjectivity. In this respect, what Hardwicke's directorial choices ultimately create is a text that intensifies the degree of solicited identification, wherein (teenage) female audiences are actively encouraged to adopt Bella's positioning and presumably experience similar physical and emotional affects to the protagonist on screen.<sup>12</sup>

This would then seem to satisfy Williams' writings on the horror film in "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" as one of the three body genres, alongside melodrama and pornography, that encourages a mimetic relationship to the action on-screen. However, unlike previous horror films that, according to Williams, position the male spectator to adopt the physiological responses of the on-screen heroine (to experience her fear and terror), *Twilight* directs its attention to a primarily female spectator who is encouraged to participate in the film's

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<sup>12</sup> In making it easy for (teenage) female audience members to take on Bella's positioning in the film, Hardwicke provides fertile ground for a popular type of fanfiction known in fan circles as the 'Mary Sue' or self-insert. In Mary Sue fanfiction the author will insert themselves – or, sometimes an idealized version of themselves – into the story, usually as the protagonist. The blankness of Bella's character rather than simply being a negative aspect of the movie may actually provide fertile ground for women and teenage girls to 'see' themselves in her position and craft narratives that highlight their own subjectivity and importance to the narrative.

offering of sexual fantasy, alongside its elements of horror. While discussing the pleasures of Hardwicke's *Twilight* with a feminist media studies colleague of mine, I was interested to hear she had watched the film seven times and championed it above the other films in the saga. The reason for her multiple viewings, presumably, is that Hardwicke's text does offer some sort of 'real' fodder for female fantasy in how it positions its audience. As it stands, female fantasy is typically understood as being at odds with the horror genre, which has left little room for female subjectivity to manifest itself on-screen. Although women in horror are positioned as being both "the moved" (objects to be exploited) and doing "the moving" (affecting audience response), it is typically the male spectator who experiences these "powerful sensations" for his own gratification (Williams "Film Bodies" 605). The same, however, does not apply to *Twilight*, which defies this categorization. Even though Bella is narratively positioned as a restricted agent (the moved) she is rarely, if at all, visually objectified to provoke any 'sensation' from a male spectator (the moving). Instead, it is through her point of view that the story unfolds and the primary address is continually engendered as belonging to the female spectator. It is exactly these "powerful sensations" that my colleague was perhaps hinting at, as the text opens up the possibility for a new set of negotiations between the on-screen heroine and the female spectator.<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, we need to re-evaluate the understandings of pleasure associated with the horror text – pleasure which, as Williams points out, typically hinges on an oscillation between sadistic and masochistic fantasies consumed primarily by an adolescent (male) audience. While

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<sup>13</sup> In suggesting *Twilight* solicits the female spectator to experience Bella's on-screen sensations, I also risk positioning the female spectator as unequivocally heterosexual (a spectator who can only identify with Bella via her desires). Undoubtedly, Hardwicke's film does trade in heteronormative fantasies. However, as I have previously suggested, the female spectator is not a passive position. What *Twilight* offers is ultimately a fantasy that invites the female spectator to partake. What she does with that invitation can and will vary.

there is some implication that an adolescent female viewer may share the same polarizing mimetic effects of the horror film, she is ultimately subordinated in Williams' text to her male counterpart, and is instead positioned more prominently in relation to melodrama. For Williams, the mimetic spectacle of the melodrama offers its primary female spectator a masochistic fantasy via its often-overwrought emotions of pain, loss, and self-sacrifice. Although Williams is cautious to uncritically align the masochistic fantasy with female pleasure, she is equally critical of feminist scholars who disparage this connection as innately restrictive. As she states, "Masochistic pleasure for women has paradoxically seemed either too normal – too much the normal yet intolerable condition of women – or too perverse to be taken seriously as pleasure" ("Film Bodies" 609). She goes on, "There is thus a real need to be clearer than we have been about what is in masochism for women – how power and pleasure operate in fantasies of domination which appeal to women" ("Film Bodies" 609). Opening up the possibility to see the masochistic experience of the melodrama as pleasurable, Williams re-considers the passivity once ascribed to the female spectator as itself an active subject position. However, in containing the masochistic fantasy to melodrama, she also elides the potential masochistic desires found in the classic horror films she previously profiled in "When the Woman Looks."<sup>14</sup> As a film like *Dracula* (1931) prompts, horror has a legacy of playing on the fantasy of seduction, the temptation of giving into the vampire's bite, and the conflation of the violent encounter with a sexual release. Similarly, a film like *Twilight* also compels us to re-consider horror as a

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<sup>14</sup> Williams acknowledges that while each body genre appropriates aspects of the masochistic fantasy, it is also a matter of degree, with melodrama understood as the more complementary genre ("Film Bodies" 610).

‘feminine’ genre (like the melodrama) that trades in masochistic pleasures for a female spectator by constructing fear *as* sexual fantasy.<sup>15</sup>

This conflation between fear and pleasure works in opposition to the other films profiled in this study which utilize the sensations of terror or dread to help validate women’s experiences of patriarchy as horrific. Terror, although typically evoked within this new wave to vindicate women’s responses to violence and trauma, is, within the world of *Twilight*, part of the film’s performance of masochistic fantasy. It is not that *Twilight* cannot or does not speak to women’s experiences of patriarchy, but it is arguably less interested in exploring these expressions than other teen girl-centred horror films like *Jennifer’s Body* (2009). Instead, it seems more committed to offering a fantasy of submission, and as part of this construction, uses fear to eroticize the exchanges between Bella and the other vampires.

Towards the end of the film, Bella goes to meet enemy vampire James after he threatens to kill her and her mother. Taking place in a mirror-filled dance studio, their confrontation can be read as a sexual attack as James pins Bella against the studio wall while stroking her face and speaking to her in a whispered yet menacing tone. As he continues to threaten Bella, James takes out a camera (a stand-in phallus) to record his attack (rape). Interestingly, James’ attack layers the dynamics of sexual violence onto the mechanics of horror filmmaking, suggesting an uneasy relationship between the two. Taking on the role of horror director, James’ tells Bella “I chose my stage well” and calls out “Action” before filming her. Here, sexual predator and horror filmmaker become conflated in a nod towards the potentially sadistic gaze of the genre, which forces women to enact their victimhood for the (male) camera. In one moment, the audience

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<sup>15</sup> In stating this, one can also suggest that the masochistic fantasy of *Twilight* is indebted to the film’s hybridity as a horror-cum-melodrama. While I acknowledge that the film does borrow from both genres, I resist the idea that the masochistic pleasures it offers is *only* a result of its melodramatic conventions. Rather, I suggest, horror is equally capable of offering this type of viewing experience.

even watches through James' camera as it records Bella screaming, creating an *mise-en-abyme* of female pain. At first glance, the scene initially forwards a definition of horror cinema as exploitative of women, as Bella/Stewart is forced to perform as a sexual object for a sadistic male gaze. Yet, rather than confirm this power dynamic as innate to the genre, the film quickly alters its representational strategy, by affording Bella the more prominent identificatory position. As the attack continues, the scene's editing and camera work re-position the audience to experience the assault from Bella's perspective, as the adoption of the first-person camera shows 'our' body as it is bitten and wounded by James. By ensuring Bella's gaze/body becomes the primary site of identification, the film confirms what feminist critics like Williams and Clover suggest, namely, that the alignment of the horror spectator is not with the assaultive camera eye but with the female heroine.

What is important then is the *set-up* of the initial dynamic that lays the groundwork to stage the rescue fantasy to come. In other words, if fear *is* the sexual fantasy of the film, even though Hardwicke ultimately subverts James' power it still needs to pose as a suitable threat to Bella so that character and audience alike desire Edward's intervention. Therefore, the representation of James' sadistic gaze via the diegetic camera is part of the film's conscious and active construction of the masochistic fantasy. He, like the camera, is a prop, a device to be exploited in the scenario (it is perhaps unsurprising then that James is also visually objectified throughout the film as he is costumed in revealing attire to showcase his muscular torso). The use of the camera differs then from the assaultive gaze discussed by Clover, for instance, because it is never actually meant to align audiences with the male killer's point of view. Instead, the

camera is there to show the constructed theatricality of the fantasy scenario and to underscore the fact that we are in a 'play space,' a dance hall of mirrors.<sup>16</sup>

As the scene continues, the film's construction of the masochistic experience becomes more transparent, as the distinction between pleasure and pain finally collapses. As James' assault becomes more violent, Bella also seems to become more aroused: Stewart's chest is shown heaving heavily as her body begins convulsing while she lets out shortened gasps for air after being bitten. In this moment, the film tips its hand to the audience, aware of the tendency to conflate the vampire's bite with the excitement of sexual release. As Bella wrestles with the contradictory sensations of the bite, the female spectator is similarly invited to enjoy the eroticism of the sequence, and to experience alongside Bella the climatic surge of the masochistic scenario. In making this connection, I am not suggesting that we should conflate a violent assault with consensual sexual pleasure. What I am suggesting is that we can read the film as purposefully playing with convention of the vampire's bite as a source of pleasure to further its focus on female desire (even though the source-text restricts the degree of excitement in the film, as Edward must eventually rescue Bella from transforming into a vampire and hence, into a creature of hedonistic fulfillment). Rather than suggest this scene as problematic, I understand it as an important fulfillment of the film's masochistic promise.

What I have tried to show in this last section is how *Twilight* constructs female subjectivity and pleasure at the core of the horror film. Instead of refracting the action through the genre of melodrama, which *Twilight* can be hybridized with, I argue that it is important to see horror as equally capable of trading in sexual pleasure for the female spectator. After all, the

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<sup>16</sup> Adding to the scene's theatricality is the overt use of wire-work for the ensuing stunts. The 'obviousness' of the wires has been criticized by some reviewers who see the transparent mechanics of the film as evidence of its insufficiency. However, in keeping with my reading, I see the wire-work as adding another dimension of the fantastic to the already supernatural scenario. Again, what has been used to discount the film can also be used to recover its importance, especially in relation to female desire and the horror film.

promise of sexual pleasure is the selling feature of the vampire and the vampire film. Their predatory sexuality is as much compelling as it is frightening and it is that fright which produces the vampire's eroticism. To suggest that *Twilight*, as many male critics do, is not a horror film because it foregrounds the erotic in relation to female desire is therefore to discount the ways in which horror speaks to and about female subjectivity, and defies categorization as a masculinist genre. Instead, *Twilight* offers female viewers a proverbial apple of delights and asks them to take a bite.

## Chapter 6

### **Don't Stand So Close to Jennifer: Addressing Questions of Proximity, Spectatorship, and Genre with Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody's *Jennifer's Body* (2009)**

In this chapter, I expand the focus of my analysis from horror criticism to broader concerns in feminist film theory. As I have identified in the previous chapter, horror cinema has often been left out of broader conversations in feminist film theory, which pays greater attention to genres thought to play more readily to a female spectator (such as melodrama). However, as the new wave of women's horror cinema demonstrates, the horror genre is more than capable of addressing female subjectivity. Using Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody's *Jennifer's Body* (2009) as a case study, I place this film in dialogue with larger theoretical considerations of female spectatorship forwarded by Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane and Anneke Smelik, who promote the concepts of 'proximity' and 'artifice' as integral concerns to women's identificatory practices and viewing pleasures. With respect to *Jennifer's Body*, I explore how the film exposes femininity as artifice, and invites female viewers to participate more closely in the horror genre through self-referential performances of gender.

Described by one reviewer, "as if *Carrie* were being re-enacted by the cast of *Heathers*," *Jennifer's Body* revolves around the toxically co-dependent friendship between Jennifer Check (Megan Fox) and the ironically nick-named Anita 'Needy' Lesnicky (Amanda Seyfried). Friends from their early 'sandbox days', the two girls attempt to navigate their increasingly tenuous relationship after Jennifer is abducted by the band Low Shoulder as part of a desperate-for-

success Occult ritual and subsequently develops an unnatural appetite for human flesh. Unable to curb her new desire, Jennifer begins killing and devouring boys at her high school before revealing her new supernatural abilities to Needy. Frightened by her friend's powers, Needy hits the books and determines that Jennifer has turned into a demon as a result of Low Shoulder's satanic ritual. Worried that her own boyfriend Chip (Johnny Simmons) may be the next, Needy confronts Jennifer at the school's end of year dance, only to catch her ex-best friend feasting on Chip's neck. Unable to destroy Jennifer while also attending to a dying Chip, Needy later tracks and kills Jennifer in her bedroom. Eventually committed to a correctional facility for the criminally insane, Needy – now possessing some of the demon's powers, which were transferred to her after being scratched by Jennifer in their final fight – breaks out of the institution and goes on to enact her own revenge by killing the members of Low Shoulder.

For all intents and purposes, *Jennifer's Body* was set up to be a milestone in American horror cinema. Upon its release, it would be one of the first times in over twenty years that a horror film was spear-headed by two women artists, the other notable examples being *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982; directed by Amy Holden Jones and written by Rita Mae Brown) and more recently, *Twilight* (2008; directed by Catherine Hardwicke and written by Melissa Rosenberg). Furthermore, Fox's character, Jennifer, was anticipated to be a drastic departure from other strong-willed but primarily male-authored female characters of the genre like Regan MacNeil (*The Exorcist* [1973]), Carrie White (*Carrie* [1976]), Laurie Strode (*Halloween* [1978]), and Stretch (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* [1986]) who, although having suitably surpassed the title of victim, arguably remained trapped by masculinist understandings of femininity and womanhood. By comparison, Jennifer was supposed to be horror's first feminist (Ball "Jennifer's Body": Why Hollywood"). Even if her activist agenda was largely defined on the

political grounds of devouring young men for breakfast, the promise nonetheless remained: *Jennifer's Body* was going to be different.

When the film was released in theatres in September, neatly timed to coincide with the beginning of the new school year, critical reception was rather ambivalent. Some reviewers, mostly men, dismissed the film for its inability to shock and disparaged Kusama's direction for not providing enough thrills, gory or otherwise.<sup>1</sup> As Peter Hartlaub's warns in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, "know there isn't a single good scare" ("Jennifer's Body' sags"). For others, the film failed to provide its promised, feminist intervention into the genre and merely replicated the same misogynistic tropes audiences have come to expect from horror. Speaking to this upset, Sarah Ball of *Newsweek* writes, "it's hard to feel for Jennifer as horror's first feminist when she's basically written as a crass [sic]." She goes on to note, "This movie is not genre-subverting so much as genre-reinforcing: it annihilates the symbolically feminine (emotion, intuition, sensitivity) in one big ketchup splatter, all for the gain of the symbolically male (physical violence, sexual aggression)" ("Jennifer's Body': Why Hollywood").<sup>2</sup> Other critics, however, saw the film as successfully subverting generic conventions, and offering a highly relatable representation of the social pressures put on adolescent girls. Addressing the

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<sup>1</sup> While I do not offer a sustained analysis of the gendered responses towards the film, I find it curious that from the selection of reviews I read (ranging from print and online sources), male critics tended to be more concerned with the genre's integrity. This particularly gendered response would seem to fall in line with the male-authored critiques levelled at *Twilight* (2008), which similarly dismissed the film as romantic drivel versus hard-hitting horror (see Chapter 5). In fact, *Jennifer's Body* was continually compared to *Twilight* in the popular press, as both became symbols of the difficulties of making horror for women. As Tom Charity from CNN writes, "The last time a horror flick tried for a distinctly female point of view the result was *Twilight*, which was more of a wan gothic romance than a chiller" ("Review: 'Jennifer's Body'").

<sup>2</sup> As I have mentioned, accessing a film's feminist offerings is a decidedly fraught process. For instance, I disagree with Ball's assessment that a feminist film needs to champion "emotion, intuition, and sensitivity." In my opinion, a film like *American Mary* (2013), which arguably lacks all these qualities, can still be seen as offering an important feminist critique of sexual violence (see Chapter 4). Clearly, what is considered 'feminist' for one critic will not hold true for another. Given this variety, I have purposefully avoided determining a film's political value or analytic worth on its critical reception as 'feminist.' For further consideration of feminism, reception and *Jennifer's Body*, see Ben Kooyman's "Whose body? Auteurism, feminism and horror in *Hostel Part II* and *Jennifer's Body*."

hormonally-charged drama of the film, Dana Stevens for *Slate Magazine* writes, “[Jennifer] is less a teenage girl turned monster than an exploration of the monster that lurks inside every teenage girl” (“Jennifer’s Body”). A.O. Scott’s response from *The New York Times* is perhaps the most cogent. He writes, “*Jennifer’s Body* is not only a fantasy of revenge against the predatory male sex,” but “goes further, taking the complication and confusion of being a young woman as its central problem and operating principle” (“Hell is Other People”). As Scott’s comments cue, the ambivalent reactions towards *Jennifer’s Body* may be, in part, a result of the film’s subject matter, which attempts to navigate the fraught and contradictory dimensions of teenage girlhood with a necessary dose of self-awareness. Forced to operate within the conventions of horror in order to address “the queasy, panicky fascination with female sexuality that we all know and sublimate,” the film exploits normative cinematic codes in order to turn the genre “inside out” (Scott “Hell is Other People”).

In this sense, the film anticipates the very bind it must operate within; namely, that in order to turn horror inside out it must also cozy up to the genre, getting as close as possible in order to cannibalize it. Indeed, its closeness to genre is identified by some reviewers as hindering its critique of gender in horror cinema, as it potentially replicates the very tropes and narrative patterns it seeks to undermine. However, rather than disparage *Jennifer’s Body* for working within genre, we should instead consider how the film uses closeness – both to the horror genre and between viewer and image – to its ideological benefit by inviting the female spectator to take pleasure in the on-screen spectacle of (monstrous) femininity.

## **“Smart Bombs”**

Feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Anne Kaplan, and Teresa de Lauretis (amongst others), have argued that since traditional narrative cinema is organized by the male gaze, the on-screen woman is typically framed as an object or spectacle to be consumed by the presumed male viewer. This means that the image of woman on-screen merely serves as a hollow signifier, a two-dimensional representation of traditional femininity in service of male pleasure and patriarchal culture. Within this model, classical codes and conventions “seduce” the female spectator with or without her consent into viewing, adopting and eventually mimicking an expression of femininity that is distinctly artificial and non-threatening to patriarchal ideals of feminine passivity (de Lauretis 143; Smelik 17). Combined, the screen and the image on it act as a “mimetic mirror of masculine culture” that attempts to limit the expressions of femininity and coercively circumscribe women into desiring and eventually adopting traditional gender presentations and their accompanying social roles (Smelik 185). For these theorists, and Smelik in particular, the mirror re-presents an image of femininity as seen through a patriarchal lens that ultimately works to disavow female subjectivity. The metaphor of the mirror is thus used to describe the empty property of the on-screen image of woman, which can be likened to a fun-house reflection that warps and distorts reality but yet presents the image as an accurate portrait. Within most feminist film studies, the effects of the cinematic image are totalizing and constrictive, offering women few avenues of resistance. This approach, however useful, overlooks the ways in which more complex engagements between female viewers and cinematic images may function.

As Smelik has documented in *And the Mirror Cracked* (1998), a certain degree of successful intervention has been garnered by female/feminist filmmakers who have attempted to present “the signs and significations of ‘woman’ and of ‘femininity’ differently from the codes and conventions of dominant cinema, while [...] still employ[ing] and deploy[ing] (rather than deconstruct[ing]) visual and narrative pleasure” (2). The success of these filmmaking practices has led Smelik to claim that the ‘mirror has cracked,’ which introduces “if not an actual breakdown in classical forms of representation at least a shake-up within them” (6). Though Smelik surveys a number of practical filmmaking tactics in her study, emphasis is placed on the ability of these feminist filmmakers to introduce more ‘authentic’ or relatable images that skirt the line between fantasy and reality and attend to the varied lived experiences of women. The stake is no longer having the screen function as a mirror – to see it crack and to have the splintering pieces damage the camera eye, as Smelik describes (6) – while important to the larger project of feminist film theory and filmmaking practices, is perhaps doubly salient for horror cinema given the overwrought images of tortured women within the genre.

Far from displaying a flawless feminine form that ought to be desired and re-performed, horror cinema presents an altogether abject expression of femininity that often aligns female characters with a compulsory victimization or with the monstrous. Historically, it has been this same pattern of denigration that feminists have rallied against, and that served as the catalyst for feminist film studies in horror cinema. Yet, what is perhaps lacking in these studies is a sustained theory of female spectatorship that thinks through the relationship between the female spectator and the images of women on-screen when created by women filmmakers. As discussed in Chapter 2, when feminist scholars do pay attention to the female spectator of horror, it is exclusively in the context of male-authored cinema. What remains to be charted is how this new

wave of women's horror may craft a different relationship between the female spectator and the horror genre, and how in turn this affects representational strategies of gender.

*Jennifer's Body* offers the possibility to not only re-think the relationship between the female spectator and horror, but also overarching theoretical concerns about women's relationship to on-screen images of femininity. Deliberately scripted by Cody as an open invitation for young women into the horror genre, the film positions female audience members as 'in on the joke' from the start, since much of the film's work is to send up staple horror conventions as a way of deconstructing the trap(pings) of traditional femininity (Kwan "Cody exorcises demons"). Here, Cody and Kusama take great effort to 'employ' and 'deploy' the codes of femininity in tandem with the conventions of horror cinema to reveal the ways in which women are victims of patriarchy, while also respecting their capacity to navigate and exploit misogyny to their own ends. As a result, the film expresses an ambivalence that female audiences may relate to, showcasing the ways in which femininity is both pushed onto young women, while also becoming a seat of power within a highly sexualized economy.

Early in the film, Needy is shown getting ready to go out to a local bar so that Jennifer can swoon over the headlining act, Low Shoulder. As Needy tries on different outfits in front of the mirror, she explains in a voice-over that she is to avoid any tops with cleavage since "tits [are] Jennifer's trademark." Later, while at the bar, Jennifer attempts to convince her friend that they should offer themselves as groupies for the band, much to Needy's protestation. As Needy begins to physically pull away from Jennifer, she is chastised by her friend who reminds her, "They're just boys. Morsels. We have all the power, don't you know that? These things... [planting her hands on Needy's chest] these are like smart bombs. Okay? You point 'em in the right direction and shit gets real." While it is possible to interpret Jennifer's advice as the result

of postfeminism, the line more accurately serves as one of the first distinct moments of address towards the female spectator.<sup>3</sup> In this moment, the text invites her to identify with the characters on-screen via a presumably relatable quip about female sexuality, and knowingly exposes femininity itself as an embodied performance young girls are trained to master.

Responding to this moment, *Faculty of Horror* podcast co-host and Executive Editor of *Rue Morgue Magazine*, Andrea Subissati remarks, “I saw myself a lot [in the scene]. I remember being in high school and I remember finally developing the breasts I was scared I would never get and getting all this attention from boys and feeling a real sense of power in being able to get that attention” (“Episode 3: Jennifer’s Body”). For Subissati, the film mirrors her own personal experience of adolescence, which in turn helps her to relate to the action on-screen, an accomplishment, she suggests, few other horror films have achieved (she offers *The Craft* [1996] as another notable example). Although there is a difference between the theoretical spectator constructed by the film and its reception amongst a varied audience, there nonetheless remains an interplay between the two that cannot be discounted. Subissati’s comment demonstrates this interplay and, in turn, establishes the film’s ability to successfully deploy a female mode of address.

Given Subissati’s comment about recognition and identification, perhaps the metaphor of the mirror merits some reconsideration. As Lucy Bolton suggests of feminist film studies in general, perhaps all that is needed is to rethink women’s relation to the mirror in the first place. Inspired by Luce Irigaray’s interjection that “the mirror should support, not undermine [woman’s] incarnation” (quoted in Bolton 39), Bolton proposes we challenge notions of physical beauty, artifice and reflection by asking, for example, “how [women] respond to [their] reflected

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<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of postfeminism and *Jennifer’s Body*, see Martin Fradley’s “‘Hell is a teenage girl?’: Postfeminism and Contemporary Teen Horror” (2013).

image” instead of assuming an antagonistic relationship between the two (39). Subissati’s comment regarding her identification with Jennifer provides a partial answer to Bolton’s question. For Subissati, her viewing pleasure is enhanced by the film’s representation of female sexuality as operating within the blurry boundaries between victimization and empowerment. As she goes on to discuss, Jennifer’s quip regarding the eroticism of women’s breasts calls attention to the ways in which young women simultaneously learn how to escape or at least combat objectification by taking (back) ownership of their bodies. Subissati remembers it as a “fleeting superficial power,” while also recalling what it feels like “to be empowered by that kind of power” (“Episode 3: Jennifer’s Body”). In this respect, we may understand the moment of mirrored reflection not as a foreclosure of possibility, but as an invitation to participate in a genre that has historically isolated women, both on- and off-screen. Here, the introduction of lived experience works to complicate the supposedly clear-cut power dynamics of the horror text and create a more nuanced portrait of femininity that is conscious of the fraught relationship it holds within the genre and within society at large.

### **“Someone’s Snack Pack”**

As *Jennifer’s Body* demonstrates, this new wave of women’s horror cinema invites the female spectator to share in the film’s critique of gender. The spectator’s constructed closeness to the text is arguably a precondition of this cinema, and clearly part of this new wave’s pleasurable offerings. Yet, this type of closeness would also seem to contradict previous theorizations of female spectatorship, which treat closeness to the on-screen image as a problem. Within the psychoanalytic heritage of feminist film studies, the female spectator cannot enter into the same looking relations as her male counterpart because she lacks the necessary distance

between herself and the on-screen female character.<sup>4</sup> In sharing the same gender location as the on-screen object, the power of her gaze collapses, leaving her unable to disassociate herself from the cinematic spectacle since she – woman – is the image. Because of this uncomfortable proximity, the female spectator may resort to a cross-gender identification in adopting the male/masculine looking position, a narcissistic response wherein she becomes her own object of desire, which contrasts the masochistic response of over-identifying with the objectification on-screen. While all three options limit the access of women’s viewing pleasure, Doane’s theory of the masquerade offers a potentially useful alternative.

Borrowing from Joan Riviere, Doane describes the masquerade as the conscious construction of femininity, such that femininity itself is exposed as artifice. Through an exaggerated performance of “the accoutrements of femininity,” (Doane, “Film and the Masquerade” 49) woman may use “her own body as a disguise” (Montrelay quoted in Doane, “Film and the Masquerade” 49). By recognizing the image as a performance of woman – as a conscious manipulation of codes and signifiers – the female spectator manufactures the required distance between herself and the on-screen object in order to take pleasure in cinema. Although originally conceptualized as a theory of spectatorship, Doane later clarifies that perhaps the masquerade offers a more appropriate description of woman’s status as spectacle rather than as spectator (see “Masquerade Reconsidered”). In this respect, masquerade becomes a more suitable model for describing the action on-screen, which can be explained as “a woman demonstrat[ing] the representation of a woman’s body” (Bovenschen quoted in Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 181). Via the masquerade, womanliness itself becomes hyper-spectacularized, such that what one witnesses on-screen is the reflexive construction of the fantasy of woman.

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<sup>4</sup> See Mulvey “Visual Pleasure”; Doane “Film and the Masquerade”.

*Jennifer's Body* is, at its heart, a study on the masquerade, on the artifice of femininity itself as performed in its most monstrous permutation by a hyper-femme demon. In exposing the trappings of femininity, the film creates an altogether unique horror film character in Jennifer, who, rather than skirting the lines of gender (as Clover's Final Girl) or is made monstrous because of it (as Creed's monstrous feminine), actively manipulates her femininity in order to survive. On the one hand, we may constitute this manoeuvre as its own reaction against the overwhelming masculinity of the horror genre, as a way of easily performing a non-threatening intervention that works to hide its subversive underpinnings (e.g., working within convention to destabilize it). On the other hand, in exposing femininity as artifice, the film importantly constructs a tenable viewing position for the female horror spectator who is invited to share in this disruption and its broader critique of gender.

The risk of this strategy, of course, is that it will be misread as an uncritical objectification of Jennifer/Fox for the male gaze, as a number of reviews demonstrate. At the time of release, Roger Ebert described the film as "*Twilight* for boys," completely obfuscating the female-centred audience both Kusama and Cody worked diligently to address in their promotional interviews for the film ("Jennifer's Body"). Peter Travers for *Rolling Stone Magazine* put it even less eloquently, describing the movie as "Hot! Hot! Hot!" ("Jennifer's Body"), while Michael Sragow of *The Baltimore Sun* dismissed the plot entirely, suggesting "No one is going to like this movie for its brain." ("Jennifer's Body' is dodgy"). Focus was especially pulled to Fox's performance, which inspired a number of misogynistic reviews that position the actor as a prop in an already shaky film. Joe Neumaier of *The New York Daily News* suggested that "Fox merely needs to look either vacant or evil, which the *Transformers* boy-toy does spookily well" (my own emphasis, "'Jennifer's Body': Megan Fox").

Again, it is Scott who recognizes the film's tactics, predicting that "[t]he inevitable critical sneering at Ms. Fox's acting abilities will miss exactly this point. Her blunt, blank affect belongs to the character, not the performer, and is part of the film's calculated tease" ("Hell is Other People"). Purposefully playing on Fox's history as "always an object," exemplified perfectly by Neumaier's descriptor "boy-toy," Scott recognizes the knowingness in the casting decision. As Stevens also points out, Fox has "never been given a chance before to be anything *but* a body on-screen," and the film exploits this history to its gain ("Jennifer's Body"). This is not then a failed performance by Fox, but rather a highly successful one in which persona and function collapse, such that Fox herself becomes a self-aware performer of the feminine object. What Fox is able to do is provide audiences with the idea of the feminine, one that is itself unreal and merely a masquerade.

Indeed, the entire design of the film is meant to accentuate Fox's ability as Jennifer to perform the fantasy of available femininity. One notable example occurs when Jennifer, having developed a taste for boys after turning into a demon, returns to school post feeding. In comparison to the other students who are dressed in dark shades, Jennifer wears a cropped pink sweater patterned with hearts, low-rise jeans, accompanying heart earrings and a bright shade of pink lip gloss to accentuate her predatory mouth. Her high-femme performance is exaggerated even further by the film's camera work and editing, which centrally frames Jennifer and cuts the sequence into several slow-motion shots. This short montage is a recognizable trope in the lexicon of teen films, wherein the (newly-transformed) popular girl is given a slow-motion walk down the hall to show off her appearance. In many ways, the hallway walk is the contemporary equivalent of the performative 'staircase sequence' of previous woman's pictures, when the newly-remade heroine descends down the stairs for all to see. Identified by Doane as the "locus

of spectacularization,” the staircase, like the high school hallway, provides an architectural space that organizes the spectator’s look towards the female object (*The Desire to Desire* 136).

However, while these conventions are typically played for a male gaze, *Jennifer’s Body* resists this co-option through exaggeration and parody, and additionally by organizing its action through Needy’s meta-look.

What allows the film to obfuscate the power of the male spectator and to re-establish the action in relation to women audiences is its deployment of the female gaze, both via Kusama’s camera and Needy’s organizing point-of-view. After the prologue, the film’s central action begins at a high school assembly, where Needy is watching Jennifer perform a cheerleading routine. In her voice-over, Needy establishes, “There’s Jennifer,” her narration serving as another important element of the film’s address and emphasis on female subjectivity. Again, slow-motion is used to draw attention to Jennifer, as the film cuts between Jennifer waving to her friend in the stands and Needy responding with an affectionate grin. It is a small moment overall but a neat visual summary of the film’s mechanics as a whole: here, Jennifer and her femininity are put on display for a female onlooker, as both women are invited to share in the enjoyment of the spectacle. If previous horror cinema was often hindered by the (over-)determining gaze of the male filmmaker, even when displaced onto the film’s heroine, *Jennifer’s Body* demonstrates how the meta-textual workings of the female filmmaker’s gaze – coupled with that of the on-screen female character of Needy – allows for alternative looking relations in horror. Through these alternative negotiations, the film is able to offer a self-aware critique of femininity that emphasizes the work of genre in constructing women as pure spectacle.

As Katarzyna Paszkiewicz suggests, the film’s critique of gender is sustained by its subversion of the monstrous-feminine trope, revealing monstrosity itself as a device much like

the masquerade (*Genre* 81;82). For Paszkiewicz, monstrosity and femininity operate in tandem to expose each other as constructed conventions capable of being exploited for female pleasure. Indeed, part of what makes Jennifer such an exaggerated spectacle of femininity is her status as a monster; the more she feeds, the more beautiful and alluring she appears. However, rather than reaffirm Creed's innate alignment between femininity and monstrosity, the film is careful to emphasize Jennifer's monstrosity as a construction. Addressing this tactic, Paszkiewicz writes, "Rather than *being* a monster, Jennifer *becomes* a monster" (*Genre* 82). Much in the same way the film revels in the artifice of femininity, so too does it represent monstrosity as a performative identity placed onto Jennifer.

If *Jennifer's Body* is meant to signal a new iteration of horror cinema that plays with and exposes the gendered conventions of the genre, it is only appropriate that the central catalyst of the film's narrative – the moment of Jennifer's demonic possession and transformation into a hyper-femme man-eater – should be a result of a divergence from 'the rules.' After researching the Occult in her high school library, Needy explains to her boyfriend Chip that Jennifer's newly formed monstrous identity is a result of Low Shoulder's botched attempt at a Satanic offering. For the ritual to work, the band had to sacrifice a virgin and Jennifer, as she herself quips earlier in the film, is not even "a backdoor virgin." As Needy deduces through her research, Jennifer's monstrous origins can be traced to a singular moment of rupture from pre-established codes that demand the ritual and the narrative be played out in a specific way. Defiance or failure to comply by these rules is precisely what allows Jennifer to materialize as an altogether uncontainable creature who threatens the safety and sanctity of formulaic conventions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The film goes on to poke fun of the dominance of masculinist narratives and conventions with enjoyable one-liners from Jennifer such as "PMS isn't real Needy, it was invented by the boy-run media to make us seem like we're

Here, Jennifer's monstrosity is given a source of origin by way of a markedly violent event, thereby disrupting any innate alignment between women and the abject, and repositioning the monstrous as an effect of patriarchy (similar to compulsory femininity). Early in the film, after being coerced by the lead singer of Low Shoulder to ride in their van, Jennifer is taken to a remote location in the woods where the band can conduct their Satanic ritual. As Jennifer pleads for her life, the frontman ignores her and continues into a diatribe about the difficulties of 'making it' as an indie band, asking Jennifer to understand their predicament. Acting as though his hand has been forced, the band leader unsheathes a sacrificial blade and begins to frantically stab Jennifer. In proper horror form, the underlining implication of sexual assault within the scene is displaced onto an act of violence. As identified by Clover, violence and sex, while relationally linked, act as substitutions for one another in horror (29). Here, Jennifer's victimization in the sacrificial ritual is undoubtedly meant to read as a gang rape.

Through this assault, Jennifer experiences the horror of being rendered into an object via the trauma of sexual violence. Here, she is forcibly placed under the control of the male gaze, which demands her sacrifice in order for its success (one can recall DeLauretis' quip that "story demands sadism" [134]). While the entire sequence is horrific, the most disturbing moment occurs right before Jennifer is stabbed by the band leader. Pausing before he plunges the ritualistic dagger into her body, the band leader croons, "Jenny Jenny who can I turn to, you give me something I can hold on to. I know you'll think I'm like the others before," before eventually building to an unsettling crescendo and singing, "Jenny don't change your number, eight six seven five three oh nine." In this moment, Jennifer's identity is erased and diminished to a popular music reference, her objectification now complete.

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crazy," and "I forgot to read Hamlet. Is he gonna fuck his mom?" In the latter, the Oedipal drama collapses into the Shakespearean story, as the film irreverently treats male narratives as 'all the same.'

So, as much as the film shows Jennifer as capable of exploiting her femininity and monstrosity for her personal gain, it is equally invested in exposing the violent effects of patriarchy that forcibly render women into performative, sexual objects. However, instead of relishing the objectification of Jennifer as a 'typical' horror film might, and rather than treating her status as object as 'normal,' the film instead presents the lingering effects of violence as forcibly grotesque. Returning to Needy's home after her assault, Jennifer confronts her friend in the kitchen. The first time the audience sees Jennifer after the attack, she is only as a shadow moving across the wall behind Needy; importantly, Jennifer initially appears as an impression of a body that ought to be there, the image or trace of the person who used to be. When Jennifer does reveal herself to Needy, it results in the most chilling visual of the film. Shot in a tight medium-close up, a beaten Jennifer silently looks at her friend and smiles. As her lips curl up, we see her bloodied mouth. The image is undoubtedly grotesque, and an antithesis to the portrait of Jennifer as the hyper-feminine demon she will become. Having been rendered an object by the band's assault, Jennifer takes back her subjectivity in the moment of the smile. Soon to transform into an avenging feminine fury, Jennifer retaliates against the patriarchal conditions that birthed her monstrosity. By exploiting the very femininity that is culturally demanded of her, she regains control of her body while also taking control of the bodies of male others through consumption.

However, the process of reclamation – whereby Jennifer uses her monstrosity to reclaim her subjectivity – is ultimately presented in ambivalent terms. Towards the end of the film, Jennifer sits in front of a mirror preparing for senior prom. Not having fed recently, she appears emaciated and gaunt, her hair even beginning to fall out. As the camera moves closer to the mirror, Jennifer begins to apply foundation, at first in smaller dabs and then smearing it across her face. The result is a garish image of femininity that stands in stark contrast to the framed

picture of a smiling Jennifer that rests beside the mirror. As the twin images of Jennifer signal in this sequence, monstrosity and beauty can be seen as two sides of the same patriarchal coin, with artifice remaining contingent to both categorizations. Like the diegetic mirror in the sequence, the more metaphorical ‘mirror’ image of the film itself rather than naturalize femininity (and monstrosity as a condition of being a woman) instead exposes the cultural constructedness of gender. Indeed, these mirrors reveal a potent image of the violent effects of patriarchy, which mutilate the female form and render it an empty shell of itself. In contrast to the framed photo of a plucky and cheerful Jennifer, the garish mirror image of a makeup-splattered monster shows a Jennifer unable to perform the artifice of femininity others have come to expect and that she herself has relied upon to feed. What was first a playful manipulation of the codes and signifiers of femininity – both by character and by film alike – becomes in this moment an ultimate breakdown of the female subject.

While this is not the last image the audience is given of Jennifer, it is certainly a powerful one that suggests any attempt by Jennifer to regain her subjectivity after her assault has ultimately failed. Fractured into twinned images – beauty and demon – Jennifer can no longer materialize as a unified self; again, in this moment, she is rendered purely as a grotesque object of spectacle. Is it enough then that the film is ‘in on’ this construction? Is it enough that this is part of the film’s setup, which must show the damaging effects of patriarchal violence in order to comment on it? It is this lingering sense of ambivalence, of irresolution, that prevails, as the film ultimately proves troubling as much as it troubles.

## Chapter 7

### Unfinished Business: Concluding Thoughts on the New Wave of Women's Horror Cinema

While teaching an upper-year course on feminist film theory, I allotted one week to the study of horror cinema much to the dismay of many (female) students. For my screening, I selected Jennifer and Sylvia Soska's *American Mary* (2012). Even though some students were nervous about watching horror, many quickly admitted their enjoyment of the film during our tutorial. As one female student described her reaction, *American Mary* provided her with the first example of a horror film that openly addressed her as a woman. Another confessed that she had never considered horror a very worthwhile genre, especially with respect to feminist politics, but was now apt to re-think her assumption. Continuing our dialogue, I asked the female students who responded what had kept them away from the genre and why they assumed horror could not speak to their experiences, especially given teen horror films like *Scream* (1996), which are supposed to appeal to young women. As a response, they shrewdly reminded me that they were infants during the 1990s boom of women-addressed horror films, and that, for the most part, they had simply grown up to believe horror was not 'for' women.

Indeed, when I began my lecture on horror cinema, I asked the class to offer words or phrases they associated with the genre. Common responses, as one might anticipate, included: blood, gore, sex and death, violence, jump scares, and exploitation. Not once have the words 'feminine' or 'feminist' been used to describe horror cinema (granted, students might identify with these words very differently than I might, and in some cases not at all with one, the other, or both). Especially within the context of a feminist film studies class, students have tended to point out the (rightful) problematics of the genre while disregarding or remaining unaware of the

constructive ideological work horror offers. As this class exercise made clear, the popular assumption regarding the potentialities of the genre remain strictly entrenched in a masculine lexicon of violence and sexism, that rarely, if at all, takes into account women's place within horror.

Like my classroom exercises, this dissertation is motivated by the desire to combat the common attitude that horror cannot accommodate women viewers or feminist politics. In drawing attention to this new wave of women's horror cinema, this project explores how a shift in authorship has led the genre towards a more female/feminine/feminist mode of operation. If horror scholars like Linda Williams, Carol Clover, and Barbara Creed once expressed concern over the diegetic female body of horror, I raise awareness over the changing body of the horror film canon, which requires us to reformulate the very definitions, popular assumptions, and mechanics of the genre in a way that centres the female artist and spectator. In this respect, my work operates as both a response to the changing landscape of horror cinema at large, as well as to previous theorizations on the genre.

Scholars Williams, Clover, and Creed, whose work I rely upon throughout this project, have been foundational to the recuperation of horror cinema with respect to feminist politics. Writing during the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when a strong contingent of feminist activism was vocally opposed to horror cinema's violent and misogynistic spectacles, these authors offered nuanced portraits of the genre that revealed more complicated gender negotiations than had been previously assumed. In general, these scholars argued that horror cinema is not organized by a sadistic male gaze but is in fact one of the only genres to give preeminent consideration to the female investigative gaze. As such, horror may actually challenge dominant modes of representation and spectatorship as established by earlier psychoanalytic, feminist film theory.

Profiling a robust body of films from the silent era and beyond, these scholars each suggested that the genre instead creates a masochistic viewing position for the male spectator and potentially ‘opens’ him up to feminine expressions of terror, victimization, monstrosity, and revenge. Collectively, these scholars champion the productive possibilities of horror even while recognizing some of the genre’s overarching political pitfalls.

A central critique of this body of work is its failure to take into account a female spectator, despite emphasis on feminist methodologies and close textual readings of women’s on-screen looking relations. So, even though Williams, Clover, and Creed all challenge the identificatory functions and pleasures associated with the male spectator, they nonetheless re-affirm a masculinist ownership of the genre by continuing to treat the male viewer as horror’s primary audience. What is missing from their critiques is an exploration of how horror cinema might either appeal to or even construct a sustained address to a female spectator. Notable scholars such as Isabel Pinedo, Jack Halberstam, Rhona J. Berenstein, and Brigid Cherry have each offered valuable interventions into this scholarly gap, turning towards alternative collections of films to show the lengthy engagement horror has had with women audiences. Ranging from historical surveys to personally-inflected close readings, these corrective studies demonstrate the possibilities of female spectatorship in horror cinema and the complicated relationships women viewers may share with such on-screen images.

However, as I suggest, even these critiques cannot adequately account for the recent developments in the genre as precipitated by this new wave of women’s horror cinema. For the most part, this body of intervening scholarship predicated its analysis of female spectatorship on films directed by male artists. While this is not to exclude the ways in which male-directed horror films have historically played to women (e.g., 1940’s Gothic melodramas or 1990s teen

horror flicks), it is to point out that when scholars address the topic of female spectatorship, it is largely within the context of male filmmaking practices. Little work has been done within these particular literatures to advance theories or criticisms of horror cinema that prominently engage with films directed by women.

Notably, there are examples of both global horror cinemas and subsequent scholarly responses that do focus on female filmmakers and their contributions to the genre. For instance, after the zeitgeist of feminist writings on American horror cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, attention moved to the political dimensions of New French Extremity, which housed a number of women directors within the genre, such as Claire Denis, Maria de Van, and Catherine Breillat. Writing on the topic of “feminine horror,” Adam Lowenstein shows how films of New French Extremity like de Van’s *In My Skin* (2002) demonstrate the “adaption and transformation of horror genre tropes and affects for female-focused concerns” (471). Although some of these films were capable of constructing a ‘female-focused’ intervention, this is not to suggest that New French Extremity as a whole was a ‘utopian’ space for women, considering its widespread examples of sexism both on- and off-screen. Nor is it to suggest that the scholarly attention paid to this movement demonstrated a unilaterally robust interrogation of gender with respect to representation, identification, and authorship. Rather, it is to note that since the time of Williams’, Clover’s and Creed’s writings alternative bodies of filmic and scholarly texts have emerged that prompt reconsideration of the relationship between women directors and the female spectator of horror cinema.

While these shifts can and have been noticed abroad, the recent and concentrated surge of women horror filmmakers working globally within the genre remains an unprecedented development. Since the release of Catherine Hardwicke’s *Twilight* (2008), this is the first era in

which there is a significant corpus of horror films directed by women that explore women's subjectivity, and that presume women as their audience. As a result, the narrative properties and representational structures of horror have also begun to change. Within this new wave, horror is not necessarily constituted by what is done to the female body (as a sheer spectacle of violence), but rather the lived experience of being a woman within patriarchy and the physical and emotional effects of systemic, oppressional structures. It is thus a difference of perspective, as the 'real-to-life' horrors experienced by women take precedent over sights of excess or grisly violence. Although the staple 'gore' and 'guts' of horror remain, their shock value and purpose is effectively recalibrated. As I outline in my case studies, this new wave uses the trappings of horror cinema not (exclusively) to terrorize but to validate the female spectator and women's accompanying expressions of fear, rage, and desire.

For the purposes of this project, I have confined my study to American horror cinema (with the exception of one title) because it remains the necessary starting ground of feminist horror criticism, as developed by Williams, Clover, and Creed. If the goal of this dissertation is to revisit feminist horror scholarship with respect to this new wave of women-driven films, it is reasonable to contain this study to the same generic context used by these authors. In doing so, I explore how these previous theoretical considerations on American horror cinema no longer hold given the ways in which the genre is permutating under the direction of women artists. Rather than dismiss this body of theory or suggest we have surpassed its theoretical offerings, I argue that it is imperative that we return to this scholarship because it remains the basis for feminist analysis in horror cinema. Any subsequent formulations on the genre must take these writings into account given how highly influential they have been to the development of the field. What

we need to do is reevaluate the theories offered by Williams, Clover, and Creed given the more central role women filmmakers and the female spectator play in this new horror cinema.

I have also chosen to limit my scope to films about teenage girls or young women, versus profiling works that address other potentially common experiences among women including marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, or aging. The narratives I have selected are ones in which teenagers or young women transition from a state of innocence or victimization into a deeper level of awareness and autonomy, often times with ambivalent results. Shared thematic concerns over the body, sexuality, male partners or authority figures, distant mothers, and violence, resonate throughout these films: Carrie must learn to control her changing body; Mary needs to find healing in violence; Bella seeks to express her sexual desires; and Jennifer exploits the demands of hetero-femininity for her own gains. In these stories, the generic trappings of horror are used to express the fraught dimensions of female adolescence and young adulthood, emphasizing the terrifying events that educate girls and women on the pervasive damage of patriarchal oppression. In many ways, these stories of transformation also serve as apt metaphors for this new wave of women's horror cinema, which itself is 'coming into its own' to challenge the masculinist stranglehold on the genre.

By refracting this new corpus of films through previous theorizations on the genre, I demonstrate how horror is changing to accommodate more nuanced portraits of female subjectivity that do not exclusively rely upon the male spectator or re-centre questions of sexual difference. Although previous histories have shown horror as capable of expressing the complexities of female subjectivity within patriarchy, I argue that there is something productively 'different' about this new wave that cannot be accounted for in earlier feminist horror scholarship. One of the presiding 'differences,' I suggest, is the diminished role of the

male spectator, and, in turn, the lessened desire to work through questions of sexual difference that seem to haunt the horror film canon. As respectively described by Williams, Clover and Creed, horror can be considered a space for the male spectator and/or artist to exorcise his phobia of women's power. The central drama of the horror film is often directed at his gaze, even when agential women figure centrally to the narrative, and as a result, the genre has been formulated in relation to the male subject.

What this new wave of women-driven horror presents is an opportunity to re-think the foundations of the genre and the baseline conditions of its mechanics utilizing a body of films previously unavailable to feminist film scholars. We can, and now should, ask what happens when the female spectator is treated as the primary viewer of horror? What does this do to the very mechanics of the genre, its codes and conventions, its tropes and thematic preoccupations, when women become central to its organization? As Katarzyna Paszkiewicz asks, what happens to horror “when the woman directs” (“When the Woman Directs” 42)? This study has attempted to answer these questions by offering a collection of textual criticisms on this new wave of women's horror. In my analyses, I explore how a shift in authorship and address often produces ambivalent interventions into common tropes and mechanical structures previously identified by Williams, Creed, and Clover.

Regardless of its ambivalent results, I stake a claim in naming this new wave as offering something ‘different’ than previous iterations of the genre. As I argue, horror changes when women filmmakers take control of the narrative and offer cogent explorations of female identity from their lived positionalities. Without essentializing the work of female artists, I suggest that their social location as ‘women’ undoubtedly presents a different perspective in which to create culture, and that an open acknowledgement of this is necessary within horror scholarship. As one

blogger bluntly expressed with regard to this new wave, “Girls are different: suck it and deal” (Scribe). It is our task now to question what this ‘difference’ means to the genre. My view is that this acknowledgment of difference does not mean reiterating the same, psychoanalytic treatments of sexual difference that measure the female subject in relation to the male. Rather, it means considering how this new wave of women directors are changing the very properties of horror when dramatizing female subjectivity. So, while ‘difference’ should remain a key consideration, I do not wish to re-centre dialogues on sexual difference as the most pressing concern. Although it was once crucial to interrogate these dynamics in horror cinema, it is now more critical to investigate how this new corpus of films creates a lexicon of female subjectivity against male-inflected narratives and conventions. In other words, we need to consider how these artists are ‘filming woman (back) into horror,’ to borrow generously from Hélène Cixous.

Emerging scholarship is beginning to reflect on the unique properties of this new wave of women-driven horror, with a small but growing selection of works attending to these changings. Notable examples include: Paszkiewicz’s articles on women-directed horror films and their negotiations of gender within the genre (“When the woman directs”; “Repeat to Remake”); Martin Fradely’s discussion on the influence of postfeminism (““Hell is a Teenage Girl?””); Ben Kooyman’s study on the difficulties of applying the label ‘feminist’ to these films (“Whose body?”); Erin Harrington’s monograph on reproductive and maternal horror, which includes reference to some of these newer films (*Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*); Andrea Wood’s forthcoming title *Beyond the Final Girl: New Directions in Contemporary Women’s Horror*; and Sonia Luper’s online database “Cut Throat Women,” which collects biographical entrances on women horror directors and influential feminist horror scholars. This new wave of scholarship is also beginning to see an increase in calls for papers and conference

panels on female filmmakers on horror, with noteworthy examples including: an upcoming anthology edited by Stacy Rusnak and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz updating Carol Clover's theories on the Final Girl; another forthcoming anthology edited by Alison Peirse on women horror filmmakers, entitled *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre*; and the 2017 conference "Women-in-Peril or Final Girls? Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema," which emphasized the need to attend to female spectatorship in horror. It is evident then that scholars are eager to keep up with the changes ushered in by this new wave, and that there is a building momentum to address the effects of this cinema.<sup>6</sup>

While it may be exciting to look to the future and anticipate the reconfigurations to genre this new wave of women's horror promises, it is also pertinent that we remain in conversation with the past, as this project demonstrates. The scholarship that comes in response to this new corpus (and hopefully, soon-to-be canonized) horror films needs to emphasize the generic space women have taken up in the genre, so horror films like *Twilight* (2008) or *Jennifer's Body* (2009), for instance, do not need to keep competing for recognition. By documenting women's histories in the genre, and demonstrating how this new wave of women's horror is capable of playing with generic convention (preserving its definitions, hybridizing its boundaries, or exploding it altogether), we need to show that horror filmmaking is 'women's work.'

As I have mentioned, there is value in considering horror as a 'woman's genre,' in order to re-address the historical erasure of women from the history of horror cinema. Elsewhere, David Greven has argued that contemporary horror cinema can be considered a displacement of the 1940's woman's picture, with the latter taking on a "new, albeit hidden, life" in the former

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<sup>6</sup> I have made reference to the most salient scholarly works in this dissertation. For instance, publications such as Harrington's monograph, while touching upon the topic of women-directed horror, is not exclusively focused on the subject and pays greater attention to maternal horror films, which fall outside the purview of this study. The publication of some of the forthcoming works is also so coincident with the writing of this thesis that it is impossible to incorporate their ideas into the project.

(36). For Greven, contemporary horror does “the work of the classical women’s films under a different genre heading,” inheriting its anxieties regarding gender, sexuality, the family, and female desire (13; 36). While I agree that contemporary horror, especially this new wave, shares a number of preoccupations with the woman’s film of the 1940s, I question what would happen to horror if it were to be innately understood as the domain of women. Rather than position horror as an alternative iteration of the women’s film or melodrama, what would happen if we re-conceptualize horror has always already being a ‘feminine’ genre, capable of a female mode of address?

While I can understand the historical and industry conditions that have led to the masculinist ownership over horror, I am left with the lingering sentiment – or perhaps, resentment – that horror ought never have been considered a masculine genre in the first place. Given its origins in women-centred Gothic literature, the conscious marketing to women fans in the 1930s, the female-orientated Gothic melodramas of the 1940s, the Final Girls that emerged from 1970s horror cinema, and the monstrous characters that have always haunted the canon, it strikes me as particularly odd (but not unexpected) that women have been left on the sidelines of this genre. It is my hope that this dissertation can add to a collection of work that aims to re-assess and also champion women’s contributions to horror, and to show their labour as necessary to the genre’s ongoing development. Clearly, we have work still to do -- let us now attend to this unfinished business.

## Filmography

- Alien*. Directed by Ridley Scott, Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.
- All About Eve*. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Twentieth Century Fox, 1950.
- American Mary*. Directed by Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska, IndustryWorks Pictures, 2012.
- American Psycho*. Directed by Mary Harron, Lions Gate Films, 2000.
- Audition*. Directed by Takashi Miike, American Cinematheque, 1999.
- The Babadook*. Directed by Jennifer Kent, IFC Films, 2014.
- The Blair Witch Project*. Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, Artisan Entertainment, 1999.
- Boxing Helena*. Directed by Jennifer Chambers Lynch, Orion Classics, 1993.
- Boys Don't Cry*. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.
- Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Columbia Pictures, 1992.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui, Twentieth Century Fox, 1992.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Created by Joss Whedon, The WB Television Network and United Paramount Network, 1996-2003.
- Carrie*. Directed by Brian De Palma, United Artists, 1976.
- Carrie*. Directed by David Carson, National Broadcasting Company (NBC), 2002.
- Carrie*. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, Screen Gems, 2013.
- The Craft*. Directed by Andrew Fleming, Columbia Pictures, 1996.
- Dead Hooker in a Trunk*. Directed by Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska, MPI Home Video, 2009.
- Deliverance*. Directed by John Boorman, Warner Bros., 1972.
- Dracula*. Directed by Tod Browning, Universal Pictures, 1931.
- Dracula's Daughter*. Directed by Lambert Hillyer, Universal Pictures, 1936.

*The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Bros., 1973.

*The Fog*. Directed by John Carpenter, AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1980.

*Funny Games*. Directed by Michael Haneke, Attitude Films, 1997.

*Gaslight*. Directed by George Cukor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944.

*Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.

*Ginger Snaps*. Directed by John Fawcett, Unapix Entertainment Productions, 2000.

*Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed*. Directed by Brett Sullivan, Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, 2004.

*Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*. Directed by Grant Harvey, Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, 2004.

*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Directed by Ana Lily Amirpour, VICE Films, 2014.

*Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter, Columbia Pictures, 1978.

*Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann, New World Pictures, 1988.

*Hell Night*. Directed by Tom DeSimone, Compass International Pictures, 1981.

*The Hitch-Hiker*. Directed by Ida Lupino, RKO Radio Pictures, 1953.

*Hostel*. Directed by Eli Roth, Lions Gate Films, 2005.

*Hunter's Blood*. Directed by Robert C. Hughes, Concorde Pictures, 1986.

*I Know What You Did Last Summer*. Directed by Jim Gillespie, Columbia Pictures, 1997.

*I Spit On Your Grave*. Directed by Meir Zarchi, Cinemagic, 1978.

*In My Skin*. Directed by Marina de Van, Wellspring Media, 2002.

*Jennifer's Body*. Directed by Karyn Kusama, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009.

*King Kong*. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, RKO Radio Pictures, 1933.

*The Ladies Club*. Directed by Janet Greek, New Line Cinema, 1986.

*The Last House on the Left*. Directed by Dennis Iliadis, Rogue Pictures, 1972.

*The Love Witch*. Directed by Anna Biller, Oscilloscope, 2016.

*Lyle*. Directed by Stewart Thorndike, [www.lylemovie.com](http://www.lylemovie.com), 2014.

*The Monster and the Girl*. Directed by Alice Guy, Paramount Pictures, 1914.

*Ms .45*. Directed by Abel Ferrara, Drafthouse Films, 1981.

*Near Dark*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, De Laurentiis Entertainment Group (DEG), 1987.

*Organ*. Directed by Kei Fujiwara, Eleven Arts, 1996.

*Outrage*. Directed by Ida Lupino, RKO Radio Pictures, 1950.

*The Phantom of the Opera*. Directed by Robert Julian, Universal Pictures, 1925.

*Peeping Tom*. Directed by Michael Powell, Astor Pictures Corporation, 1960.

*Pet Sematary*. Directed by Mary Lambert, Paramount Pictures, 1989.

*The Pit and the Pendulum*. Directed by Alice Guy, Exclusive Supply Corporation, 1913.

*Prevenge*. Directed by Alice Lowe, Shudder, 2016.

*Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Paramount Pictures, 1960.

*The Rage: Carrie 2*. Directed by Katt Shea, United Artists, 1999.

*Ravenous*. Directed by Antonia Bird, Twentieth Century Fox, 1999.

*Raw*. Directed by Julia Ducournau, Focus World, 2016.

*Rebecca*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, United Artists, 1940.

*Red Riding Hood*. Directed by Catherine Hardwicke, Warner Bros., 2011.

*Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1968.

*Saw*. Directed by James Wan, Lions Gate Films, 2004.

*Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 1996.

*Scream 2*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 1997.

*Scream 3*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 2000.

*Scream 4*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 2011.

*Secret Beyond the Door*. Directed by Fritz Land, Universal Pictures, 1947.

*The Silence of the Lambs*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures, 1991.

*The Slumber Party Massacre*. Directed by Amy Jones, New World Pictures, 1982.

*The Spiral Staircase*. Directed by Robert Siodmak, RKO Radio Pictures, 1946.

*The Strangers*. Directed by Bryan Bertino, Universal Pictures, 2008.

*Suspense*. Directed by Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1913.

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*Trouble Everyday*. Directed by Claire Denis, Atlantis Entertainment, 2001.

*Twilight*. Directed by Catherine Hardwicke, Summit Distribution, 2008.

*Urban Legend*. Directed by Jamie Banks, TriStar Pictures, 1998.

*The Vampire*. Directed by Alice Guy, Metro Pictures Corporation, 1915.

*The Velvet Vampire*. Directed by Stephanie Rothman, New World Pictures, 1971.

*Women Who Kill*. Directed by Ingrid Jungermann, FilmRise, 2016.

*XX*. Directed by Roxanne Benjamin, Karyn Kusama, St. Vincent, and Jovanka Vuckovic, Magnet Releasing, 2017.

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