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Bitten by the Demon of Cinema: An Examination of Women-Made Horror

A Dissertation Presented

by

ERICA TORTOLANI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2021

Department of Communication

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Bitten by the Demon of Cinema: An Examination of Women-Made Horror

A Dissertation Presented

By

ERICA TORTOLANI

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DEDICATION

For Albert.

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ABSTRACT

BITTEN BY THE DEMON OF CINEMA: AN EXAMINATION OF WOMEN-MADE HORROR

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Directed by: Professor Martin F. Norden

Moving away from a discussion of horror films directed by men, "Bitten by the Demon of Cinema" those films—and, where appropriate, works across media, like on television, the Internet, and in the visual arts—created by women. As I explore in this dissertation, women-made horror has narrative, thematic, and stylistic qualities that borrow from the genre at large but are then transformed into a class of films all of their own. While seemingly diverse, they share enough commonalities to constitute a new mode of filmmaking altogether.

The films and filmmakers that I have chosen in this dissertation are cases in point for the subversive tendencies of women-made horror—subversive in their reconsideration of common horror tropes, in their inclusion of alternative points of identification, in the flipping or switching of representational strategies, and, most importantly, in their pointed critique of socio-cultural norms otherwise endorsed through mainstream filmmaking practices. Such a discussion of women-made horror films is not limited to constructing an historical timeline of all films directed by women within a period of more than one hundred years. Rather, I combine this historical research with applied

theoretical analysis to look at a cross-section of different films within the rich pool of women-made horror.

In so doing, I juxtapose different perspectives, representational and aesthetic styles, and ways of manipulating the genre in order to interrogate the commonalities between them. This strategy, in turn, initiates a more thoughtful discussion of women within (and, sometimes, outside of) the industry, serving as an important starting point for understanding women-made horror as a unique phenomenon with lasting implications in the genre.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Setting the Scene

"At first it looked as though the genre would dissipate in the flood of lackluster imitations," scholar Noël Carroll observes of the state of horror in film and literature in his seminal 1990 study, *The Philosophy of Horror or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. "[Each] time the health of the genre seemed threatened, suddenly it would revive. The genre seems immensely resilient."[1] Indeed, across the span of some hundred or so years, the horror genre in American filmmaking and beyond has witnessed interesting ebbs and flows—from its catapulting into the mainstream during the Universal Pictures horror cycle in the 1930s, to its relegation as midnight B-movie sleaze during the 1950s and 1960s, to its slow but steady integration into prestige filmmaking as it entered the twenty-first century—that have solidified its place in the popular and critical consciousness. So too has its apparent resiliency, to borrow from Carroll, been witnessed in the academic sector. Historical concerns, such as defining the moments in film history when the genre first appeared, as well as theoretical concerns, like those questioning genre, spectatorial alignment, societal parameters of taste, and ideological underpinnings, have intersected to create a dynamic, scholastically rigorous subfield within the larger discipline of film studies. Scholars like Robin Wood and Stephen Neale come to mind as key figures in both legitimizing the horror genre within film studies, as well as carrying out

[1] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1990), 3.

foundational research for the ultimate future of horror-focused film analysis. The bulk of horror film scholarship, centering on feminist and queer theories, is of particular note: the horror genre has been one of the prime targets of this line of theoretical inquiry and, just as horror films reached their peak in Hollywood during the 1970s and 1980s, feminist film theory developed alongside it (and, in some instances, *because* of it). Carol J. Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*; Linda Williams in "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," amongst others; Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*; Isabel Cristina Pinedo in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*; and Harry M. Benshoff in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* are some of the pioneers of feminist—and, in the latter case, queer—inflected horror theory, branching off from earlier feminist film theorists in their consideration of gender(ed) relations in the horror genre, as well as representational politics, audience reception, and how horror films have, and can, rupture patriarchal societal norms.

Despite the abundant intersections between horror studies and feminist film theory, a surprising amount of scholarship across the field has been limited to those works created by men (and, in many cases, white, heterosexual men). This presents a unique deviation from the main goals of feminist theory—who, especially in American and British circles, were concerned with films made by women directors and visual artists—coming as an even greater surprise as, according to Barry Keith Grant, women are "noticeably prominent in contemporary horror film production."[2] Certainly, films by

[2] Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread Of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 8.

women horror directors are popular in the scholarship, with directors like Mary Harron, Kathryn Bigelow, and Mary Lambert gaining the most attention, at least in scholarship on American horror filmmaking. Yet, despite the increase of women working in the horror genre since the 1960s—as directors as well as producers, writers, and editors—little attention has been paid, in the academic sphere, to the work of these women horror creators. Moreover, a discussion of any of the horror media created by women has been limited to only a handful of specific categories: namely, those that are specific to only some sub-genres (B-movies and exploitation films on one end of the spectrum, and mainstream Hollywood releases on the other), those that are contemporary and American-made (neglecting silent and early Hollywood films, as well as those made in international cinemas), and those that are more traditionally distributed in American theaters (as opposed to galleries or art houses, streaming platforms, and on television/the Internet). By only isolating a certain group of films, this tendency in horror scholarship is deviating further from the original aims of feminist film theory and, ultimately, is doing a great disservice to the field of film history, privileging some works while neglecting a large portion of others.

Moving away from a discussion of horror films directed by men, my dissertation approaches those films—and, where appropriate, works across media, like on television, the Internet, and in the visual arts—created by women. As I explore in this dissertation, women-made horror has narrative, thematic, and stylistic qualities that borrow from the genre at large but are then transformed into a class of films all of their own. While seemingly diverse, they share enough commonalities to constitute a new mode of filmmaking altogether. The films and filmmakers that I have chosen in this dissertation

are cases in point for the subversive tendencies of women-made horror—subversive in their reconsideration of common horror tropes, in their inclusion of alternative points of identification, in the flipping or switching of representational strategies, and, most importantly, in their pointed critique of socio-cultural norms otherwise endorsed through mainstream filmmaking practices. Such a discussion of women-made horror films is not limited to constructing an historical timeline of all films directed by women within a period of more than one hundred years. Rather, I combine this historical research with applied theoretical analysis to look at a cross-section of different films within the rich pool of women-made horror. In so doing, I juxtapose different perspectives, representational and aesthetic styles, and ways of manipulating the genre in order to interrogate the commonalities between them. This strategy, in turn, initiates a more thoughtful discussion of women within (and, sometimes, outside of) the industry, serving as an important starting point for understanding women-made horror as a unique phenomenon with lasting implications in the genre.

B. Justification of Research

The motivation behind this dissertation is a rather personal one; as a scholar who has been so deeply invested (academically and personally) with the horror genre of film, I have often felt frustrated by the existing body of horror films that scholars tend to analyze, the majority of which have been made by men. This discontent has been intensified during my earlier research on horror in early silent cinema, as well as my discovery of some avant-garde films with heavy horror influences, two areas that have made some appearances in discussions of feminist film theory, but otherwise have been

also markedly absent in horror scholarship. By taking a deeper dive into films made by women, I feel that I am both achieving my personal goal of expanding the corpus of horror scholarship also attempting to encourage others to reconsider the existing horror film canon by including those women filmmakers who are conveniently left outside of it.

Beyond my personal goals, the rationale behind this study is one that takes influence from early feminist film theory: namely, the tendency for theorists to actively interrogate the role of women behind the camera, and the ways that women directors can break apart misogynistic ideologies circulating in popular media and establish new codes for representing female characters. While foundational feminist theorists like Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have taken up this task in their own writing (and, in the contexts of at least Mulvey and Trinh, have gone behind the camera themselves), it appears as if feminist theorists in the horror arena have, inadvertently or otherwise, overlooked women horror filmmakers. The closest that any scholar has come to this project, it appears, is Cynthia A. Freeland in her criticism of the state of feminist horror theory in the 1996 publication "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." But even in this case, Freeland fails to go into depth, giving hypothetical instructions for a so-called "modified"[3] approach to feminist horror that include issues surrounding gender dynamics within horror production. Moreover, many feminist horror scholars have considered the very ways that women have consumed horror, including Clover and Pinedo, but have yet to include the ways in which these audience have consumed women-

[3] Cynthia A. Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 751. Freeland also teases a promising argument about women authors in Gothic literature but fails to flesh this out in a satisfying way, instead leaving this analysis to scholars that she isolated in her footnotes section.

made horror. An exploration of the intersections between female spectatorship and female-made horror is beyond the scope of this project, but it nevertheless points to an important flaw in existing scholarship in the field. That is, while scholars have taken up the project of the ways in which women have, in a way, digested the images prevalent in the horror genre—and, to a greater extent, how the female body has been bound to, and communicated by, the horror genre—those images created and disseminated by women have by and large been avoided in feminist theoretical explorations of horror. A return to women-made films through the lens of horror scholarship helps to bring feminist film theory back to its roots in its exploration of women behind the camera. Borrowing from scholar Jennifer M. Bean, a consideration of women filmmakers in general assists in the foundational concerns of feminist film theory to conceive of "not only the cinema's production of gender and sexual difference, but also the very basis and terms by which we account for identity."[4] Exploring women's contributions to the horror genre takes this one step further, bringing contemporary feminist film scholarship full circle.

The historical trajectory of women in the film industry is one characterized by peaks and valleys. In other words, at least in the context of Hollywood filmmaking, the number of women who have taken up dominant creative roles—as directors and, in the context of the silent era, screenwriters/script preparers, producers, and editors—has varied, depending on the given time period. Therefore, a purely historically organized exploration of women-made horror films is an internally flawed one: after all, as the studio system grew out of the silent era and materialized well into the 1960s, there was

[4] Jennifer M. Bean, "Introduction: Toward a Feminist Historiography of Early Cinema," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

far less room for women to direct films. As Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson offer in their summary of the early film industry, due to the "economic downturn, technological change and a less forgiving moral climate"[5] beginning in the 1930s, women, who once had an equal role to their male counterparts, were pushed out of the film industry, therefore accounting for fewer films in general directed by women. Despite some of the niche spaces carved out by pioneers like Alice Guy-Blaché (discussed in this dissertation), Lois Weber, and Dorothy Arzner, amongst some others, this foundational period in film history is largely marked by "limited mobility," to borrow from Bridges and Robson, due in large part to the male-led unions within the film industry.[6] This is corroborated by Martin F. Norden in his discussion of women in early silent cinema who, in his concluding remarks, observes that

> As the industry matured into a vertically integrated oligopoly bent on outmaneuvering the remaining independent factions at every turn, and as interests in women's themes declined, women found themselves squeezed out of many substantive positions in all levels of the business. These actions on the part of a nervous, newly solidified, male-dominated industry may have been due to a belief that women were not as strongly profit-minded or business-oriented as men, and that some women-directed films were mildly subversive.[7]

From this perspective, the business of filmmaking—arguably materializing after the development of sound synchronization—robbed women of their creative and economic agency. Likewise, even before this shift, women directors of pre-studio films were deprived in a way of receiving proper credit for their works. In the case of screenwriting alone, women were often paired with their male significant others, with

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[5] Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson, *Silent Women: Pioneers of Early Cinema* (Twickenham: Arora Metro & Supernova Books, 2016), 17.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Martin F. Norden, "Women in the Early Film Industry," *Wide Angle: A Quarterly Journal of Film History, Theory, Criticism & Practice* 6, no. 3 (1984): 67.

credit instead given to their male counterparts, effectively diminishing their contributions to silent cinema.[8] A dissertation on women horror filmmakers that accounts for those directors outside of contemporary filmmaking seems at first to be a project that could yield very little progress. Thus, I am including discussions of non-filmmakers—those across other visual media—to create a context to better understand the work of these oftentimes neglected filmmakers, especially in the context of early cinema.

The reasons for including artists outside of Hollywood horror are varied. Firstly, including women working in video, television, and other visual media is simply a logistical one: there are so few women directors who, actively or otherwise, have been involved with horror cinema, so including these artists will help fill in many of the gaps in the present literature. Likewise, the cinematic medium is one that is a composite of several different, pre-existing media, both inside and outside of the visual arts. After all, as Gary D. Rhodes offers, horror-themed entertainment was abundant in the years leading up to the advent of cinema, eventually running parallel alongside proto-cinematic technologies like the kinetoscope and vitascope.[9] These visual experiments with horror—incorporating photography, illustration and animation, and other types of artwork[10]—would influence a lot of the technological innovations during the period of the "cinema of attractions" (lasting until around 1908),[11] having a hand in which types of narratives and styles would be utilized in early horror. This impulse towards

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[8] Anthony Slide, "Early Women Filmmakers: The Real Numbers," *Film History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 115.
[9] Gary D. Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 94.
[10] See Rhodes, 63-86.
[11] Rhodes, 8.

experimentation, as I argue, is one that has continued throughout the history of film and arguably more so throughout the history of the horror film genre. Therefore, a consideration of the convergence between visual arts and film would push toward a more critical account of horror and the boundaries thereof. Examining how women artist-filmmakers have remained at the forefront of this interaction adds even more to existing discussions of both cinema proper, and media outside of or tangential to the moving image.

Beyond these concerns, coupling experimental media and cinematic horror reflects the frequent interactions between the two on a broader, more historical level. For instance, J. H. Matthews in *Surrealism and Film* offers that, as the dada and surrealist movements in particular were blossoming during the 1920s, an increasing number of artists were drawn to what he calls the "film of terror,"[12] or the proto-horror genre in commercial cinema. As Matthews suggests, the film of terror held a special value for many surrealists, largely due to their strong interest in formal/technological, narrative, and aesthetic experiments. Not only did surrealists hold this type of proto-horror to the standards of avant-garde poetic protest,[13] but they also embraced these films' tendencies to explicitly map out nightmarish dreams and disturbed psychological states. Visual artists outside of film, at least in the early twentieth century, therefore have a special relationship with horror cinema, and although there was some institutional, economic, and creative fragmentation in the 1960s and 1970s between those working with moving images and others in the so-called "high arts" (and, internally, between artists working

[12] J.H. Matthews, *Surrealism and Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 20.
[13] Matthews, 21.

with film versus "expanded cinema," early video, and multi-screen, multimedia installations),[14] the avant-garde and cinematic horror are closely indebted to one another. This symbiotic relationship is not lost on women artists. As is explored in this dissertation, several women in experimental art and video have taken up the same fascination with cinematic horror (in arguably the same way—narratively, stylistically, technologically—as early surrealists), becoming active participants in interrogating existing structures of meaning conveyed through the horror genre. Women-made horror essentially picks up where discussions of the visual arts and film leave off, looking at how the two seemingly disparate fields have aligned to produce ideologically critical, visually polarizing, and narratively innovative contributions to a mainstream genre.

Regardless of the types of films that these women directors and artists have made outside of horror, and which types of cultural, social, and political backgrounds that they are situated in, I argue that the body of films selected for this dissertation come together to create one alternative mode of filmmaking—the woman's horror film. As I will explore in this dissertation, the woman's horror film is novel for a number of reasons: its experimentation with linear, narrative storytelling devices; its reconsideration of horror tropes, like the vampire, monster-cannibal, and ghost; its alternative, at times multiplied, points of identification; its intertextuality (that is, its references and call-backs to other well-known works); and, lastly, its often pointed critiques of patriarchal society, and the many norms and regulations that come from it. This study, then, removes women makers (directors, visual artists, etc.) from the footnotes of horror film studies, as well as shines a

[14] See Tanya Leighton, "Introduction," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 7-40.

light on what makes horror films, specifically made by women, so valuable. At the time of the writing of this dissertation, no other publication has done the type of work to the extent that I am undertaking. This dissertation will hopefully reinvigorate the field and fill in many of the gaps still present in film scholarship.

C. Parameters

At the most basic level, I have selected the films, filmmakers, and artists in this dissertation, and particularly in Chapters III and IV, because of their overall contributions to the women-made horror canon. All of the works in question have maintained a level of popularity in their respective time periods and from wide and niche audiences. Yet, I feel that they have not received proper attention especially in horror film scholarship. Likewise, while diverse temporally, geographically, stylistically, and technologically, they have interesting commonalities which I discuss later in this dissertation. In essence, it does not matter when, where, or with what budget these films were made; it is their overall contributions to women-made horror that make them so unique.

Additionally, the following variables have been taken into consideration when selecting the films for my analysis:

Parameter 1: Films must contain, in whole or in large part, "horrific elements."

Defining the genre of "horror" is a deceptively challenging task, since it is in a state of constant flux. Scholars like Joan Hawkins, for instance, have gone as far as to point out the "slippage" or instability of generic qualifiers within the horror genre;[15]

[15] Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 27.

moreover, what is "horrific" or scary to some may differ significantly for others. Considerations like intentionality, audience reception, vintage, and proto-cinematic media also complicate the boundaries separating horror from other genres to an even greater degree. Nevertheless, following along the lines of other several scholars' definition of horror has made the task of selecting films for analysis a bit simpler.

First and foremost, the films under consideration for this analysis are not merely defined through the horror genre proper. Instead, all of the films (and other media) discussed in this dissertation contain what Kendall R. Phillips calls "horrific elements." Developed in response to the lack of language for adequately describing films that pre-date contemporary genre classifications—namely, those films from the "cinema of attractions," moving into the 1920s[16]—the term "horrific elements" takes into consideration the semiotic, syntactic, and discursive implications of the genre. As Phillips argues, horrific elements semiotically refer to those visual, narrative and, later, aural qualities of a given film that help us understand which genre category(ies) it most closely resembles, absent of their historical context.[17] Likewise, syntactically, horrific elements help to describe "the core relationship between [filmic] elements—in this case, a relationship marked by fear and revulsion."[18] By this logic, films whose core elements strike negative or repellant feelings can therefore be considered films containing horrific elements. Lastly, horrific elements by and large consider discursive frames for film interpretation; that is, they hinge on the ways in which critics and, for Phillips, audiences

[16] Kendall R. Phillips, *A Place of Darkness: The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 4-5, 18-19.
[17] Phillips, 4.
[18] Ibid.

have linguistically categorized the films that they consume. Moving beyond the mere generic genre classifications that film studios have used to define their films for distribution and exhibition purposes, discursive frames instead look to a looser characterization of films based on the surrounding, ever-evolving cultural and social conditions of a given audience. Discursive frames consequently give better insight into the narrative and aesthetic expectations that audience members hold while watching a film, how they rationalize what they are seeing, and ultimately how they define films as horror or otherwise ("if we call a film a 'horror film,' then it is; if not, then it is not.")[19] This, according to Phillips, allows for a deeper understanding of the evolution of horror, both industrially as well as in the public sphere, beyond rigid the categorizations put in place by genre purists.

Borrowing from Rick Altman, Phillips asserts that horror can thus be seen as a "fluid and corrigible set of historically situated meanings."[20] This observation is particularly useful for my analysis, in that I explore how horrific elements have been created across various media categories, at various points historically, regardless of filmmakers' intentions to formally create a horror film. By isolating horrific elements as opposed to studying mere horror films, I am casting a wider net for my classification of women-made horror and opening up a deeper understanding of how broader aesthetics and themes unique to women-made horror have flourished over time and across geographic borders. Likewise, where appropriate, I also look to how these films have

[19] Phillips, 5.
[20] In Phillips, 19.

been discursively described and understood by critics and audiences; if there is language that broadly supports their connection to horror, then it will be included in my study.

All of this begs the question: what *are* these horrific elements? For this I will point in part to Carroll's discussion of art-horror in *The Philosophy of Horror*. As Carroll illustrates, the hallmark of art-horror—and, one that rightfully extends into the realm of horrific elements—is the inclusion of a monster or monstrous entity. For Carroll, the monster can take the form of the more traditional, fantastical creature, such as a vampire, werewolf, or zombie, but can also extend into the supernatural, including figures such as the ghost or ghoul, and into the scientific and organic, like an evil scientist. However, for Carroll, what differentiates art-horror from some of its neighboring genres that integrate the same types of monstrous figures (like science fiction and fantasy/fairy tales) involves two important elements: the fact that these monstrous figures are front-and-center in the narrative (instead of secondary elements, like in some science fiction media); and that these monstrous figures are "extraordinary character[s] in our ordinary world,"[21] that they invade the boundaries put in place by societal norms and threaten to disrupt the balance of this society through their presence vis-à-vis the uncanny and abject. Fear and repulsion towards these monsters are communicated and ultimately normalized in these narratives, adding to their classification as art-horror.

Adverse affective response, in Carroll's study, is the most crucial element of art-horror, that helps distinguish it from other genres, even within the broader horror genre. For Carroll, the protagonists and other supporting human characters of an art-horror narrative must feel physical and emotional repulsion towards monstrous

[21] Carroll, 16.

characters, whether through verbal utterances or visceral reactions like shrieks, shivers, and bodily excretions. In turn, audiences are allowed (and, often times, encouraged) to mirror the same types of affective responses that they see on screen; the perceived threat that the film (or other horror medium) communicates about the monster triggers physical and cognitive feelings within the audience, who in turn understand this horrific element in the same way as those on-screen—as impure, dangerous, and to be avoided. "This mirroring effect, moreover" in Carroll's words, "is a key feature of the horror genre. For it is not the case for every genre that the audience response is supposed to repeat certain of the elements of the emotional state of characters."[22] Consequently, horrific elements can be defined in the same way as Carroll's outline of art-horror: that some unnatural entity causes analogous feelings in the audience and protagonists of "abnormal, physical agitation" due to its perceived threat as a real entity, one that is both physically intimidating and biologically/socially impure, and is communicated as being something to avoid entirely.[23] Much like Carroll, I base my analysis on films that ultimately, as a whole or in part, feature these art-horrific elements, ones that have been traditionally (and, in many cases, discursively) been communicated as fantastical, yet repulsive and dread-inducing.

However, the limitations of Carroll's study of art-horrific elements—that he in fact mentions by name as inadequate counter-examples to his analysis—are two-fold. Firstly, while Carroll's art-horror accounts for those fantastical creatures that display categorical incompleteness (those creatures who come "without eyes, arms, legs,

[22] Carroll, 18.
[23] Carroll, 27.

or skin," or some combination thereof)[24] and interstitiality (transgressing classical the binary poles of living and dead, pure and abject, and so forth),[25] it neglects to consider horror objects rooted in the real: those figures that are interstitial and deemed abject or transgressive by society's standards, but nevertheless do not physically exhibit the interstitial and abject, like superficial grotesqueries and bodily decay. As a result, this completely disqualifies traditional horror media content such as witchcraft, slashers, body horror and bodily transformation, paranormal activity, and what Carroll describes as "natural horror," which according to scholar Michelle Saint, can be best understood as art-horror *sans* disgust.[26] Indeed, those art-horrific objects that are a "compound of threat and impurity"[27] are vital in defining horrific elements, especially for my analysis, but Carroll unfortunately misses the much larger picture in his discussion of art-horror by neglecting these adjacent horrific entities. Moreover, as many of the films that I have selected show, art-horror and natural horror can essentially work hand-in-hand, combining to create new aesthetic and affective categories of horror specific to women-made horror films. Relatedly, Carroll's classification of art-horror falls short in his eschewal of so-called "tales of terror." It does so in the same way as "natural horror," tales of terror that, for Carroll, include "eerie and unnerving" material but fail to become true art-horror media due to their exploration of "psychological phenomena that are all

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[24] Carroll, 33.
[25] Carroll, 31-33.
[26] Michelle Saint, "Art-Horror and Natural Horror: What's the Difference?," Atmosfear-Entertainment, accessed March 15, 2020, https://www.atmostfear-entertainment.com/literature/books/art-horror-natural-horror/#:~:text=We%20also%20cannot%20explain%20the,is%20left%20with%20no%20clear
[27] Carroll, 39.

too human."[28] Yet, Carroll goes on to quote literary horror icon Stephen King in an endnote in *Philosophy of Horror* specifically expressing the merits of these tales of terror. As King asserts, terror "is a kind of apprehension of the unknown; no monster is manifested but our imagination of what might be is nerve wrenching."[29] Horrific elements, in the horror genre at large but also in many ways unique to women-made horror, are indebted to the interplay between physical, art-horror entities, as Carroll defines them in his analysis, as well as tales of terror. As I explore in my analysis, many women-made horror films are effective through their combination of the physical and superficial with, in Carroll's words, "mysterious, preternatural events."[30] Although Carroll argues for a stronger deviation between art-horror (an "entity" theory of horror) and tales of terror (an "event" theory of horror),[31] he ultimately misses the mark in his separation of the two, glossing over the many intricacies of the genre and how it has evolved aesthetically, commercially, and culturally. I would be remiss to go along with such a narrow classification of horror in my own discussion of horrific elements, especially given the complex nature of many women-made horror films.

Horrific elements can ultimately be extended into genres outside of horror proper, branching out into what Jeffrey Sconce terms "para-cinema."[32] An "elastic textual category" that describes a "particular reading protocol" as opposed to a unified classification of films,[33] para-cinema includes all cinematic texts that have been deemed

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[28] Carroll, 15.
[29] Quoted in Carroll, 218 n. 27.
[30] Carroll, 41.
[31] Carroll 222, n. 48.
[32] Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 372.
[33] Ibid.

low-brow, sleazy, or trashy by cultural tastemakers, often including horror but also extending into sci-fi, low-budget action films, exploitation filmmaking, and softcore pornography. A discussion of para-cinema is an important footnote to this definition of horrific elements, in that para-cinema, much like horror, operates on the visceral level. In other words, and in the same vein as Joan Hawkins in her discussion of the horrific avant-garde, para-cinema is a genre focused on the body: the physical limits of the body on screen, the ways in which those fictional bodies can be exploited and dissected, and how the audience physically exhibits their affective, emotional states through their bodies.[34] Furthermore, para-cinematic texts are often characterized by their collapsing of high and low culture, featuring taboo content meant to shock, but more often than not they serve the purpose of critically engaging the spectator with "sensitive social material that mainstream cinema is reluctant to touch."[35] So, too, do horrific elements blur the boundaries separating the mainstream from the abject. They do so by presenting those images or events that evoke a heightened, adverse bodily response but have implicit, thematic material that questions societal norms. Horrific elements can therefore be understood, to quote Adam Lowenstein, as "shocking representations"[36] that are dedicated to "terrifying and/or disgusting its audience with displays of graphic carnage"[37] but effectively engage in discussions of themes like trauma, identification, and agency.

In sum, I am including films that contain, as a whole or in large part, visual and thematic elements that have been traditionally, discursively, and culturally been deemed

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[34] Hawkins, 4-5.
[35] Hawkins, 7.
[36] Adam Lowensten, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 6.
[37] Ibid.

as horrific. They must include the physically horrifying and abject that are by and large not based in reality and may be coupled with narrative events that evoke feelings of terror, dread, and disgust. Horrific elements may be defined by the filmmakers themselves, or through commercial/critical/scholarly critiques, or some combination thereof. These horrific elements, as I assess, stake a claim in para-cinema, even though they do not formally belong to the filmic category of "para-cinema"—that is, they feature the physically grotesque and horrific but also, on a subtextual level, are embedded with deeper, thematic meaning as related to those aforementioned topics of trauma and agency.

Parameter 2: Films must have at least one woman listed in the film's production credits as "director."

As suggested in the above sections, I am considering those films which have been credited as directed by a woman filmmaker; collaborations with male creators, such as the case the works of husband-wife duo Claire Parker and Alexandre Alexeieff (*Night on Bald Mountain* [1933], amongst others), are considered, since the driving creative force behind these works is largely women.

A consideration of horror films directed by women can be situated in the deeper-rooted tradition of feminist film theory in building a more comprehensive film history dedicated to women-made films that "create disruptions in the ideological fabric of conventional films,"[38] to quote Sue Thornham. For early feminist theorists like Claire Johnston in the appropriately titled "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," the

[38] Sue Thornham, *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (Manhattan: NYU Press,1999), 12.

significance of studying a women-driven, counter-cinema—which was at the time relatively new—involves their "strategic use of the media" to provide alternative film texts that, as a result, break away from "the bourgeois, sexist ideology of male dominated capitalism,"[39] all while representing female desires, fears, and fantasies. According to Johnston, this counter-cinema involves the active interrogation of the ways in which the cinematic apparatus as an ideological tool attempts to represent reality, whether through breaking apart and/or rearranging the language of cinema to expose its most fundamental components, introducing subjective realities on the periphery of mainstream society, or some combination of the two. Studying women's counter-cinema, in the same way as partaking in counter-cinema, as many filmmakers and theorists have done, is therefore crucial for exploring the alternatives that it can provide to the "rigid hierarchical structure of male-dominated cinema,"[40] helping place women filmmakers in broader discourses on meaning-making.

Teresa de Lauretis in "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" extends Johnston's discussion of women's counter-cinema, noting that films directed by women share characteristics that both constitutes a new sub-genre altogether and, as I would argue, justifies the isolation of women directors when studying the horror genre. For de Lauretis, films directed by women overall have in common the "picture of female experience, of duration, perception, events, relationships, and silences, which

[39] Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Manhattan: NYU Press, 1999), 36.
[40] Johnston, 39.

feels immediately and unquestionably true."[41] These experiences are not merely those that belong to the unique perspective of women on and behind the screen; while this is certainly the case for de Lauretis, it is a rather simplistic assessment of her discussion of women's cinema. Instead, a much more nuanced characterization of women-directed cinema lies in those experiences that have been otherwise deemed "pre-aesthetic" or altogether outside of the "artistic realm"[42]—those everyday gestures that are otherwise insignificant, mundane, and confined within the private sphere. Coded as distinctly female and valueless within mainstream patriarchal filmmaking, women's cinema brings these pre-aesthetic (or non-aesthetic) factors into the forefront, expressing and making valuable the subjective experiences of women.

This leads to the most important component of women's cinema in de Lauretis' estimation: its address of the spectator, "regardless of the gender of the viewers," as female.[43] In other words, films directed by women, beyond exposing the flimsy ideological patriarchal structures of film as Johnston has argued, have in common the construction of "other objects and subjects of vision,"[44] in effect granting the spectator the same types of knowledge as the characters on screen otherwise on the periphery of mainstream media and allowing them to experience different types of reality than what is communicated in mainstream cinema. Consequently, women's cinema is best characterized through the communal experiences shared between character and spectator;

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[41] Teresa de Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Film Theory," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 292.
[42] de Lauretis, 289-290.
[43] de Lauretis, 294.
[44] de Lauretis, 295.

the feminine in cinema, in de Lauretis' view, is defined by subjective and discursive elements, rather than by arbitrary gender lines, which makes it all the more compelling to study and is evident in the films selected for this dissertation.

Isolating women directors in my study of horror cinema is supported by Johnston and de Lauretis' notion of women's counter-cinema, since the films and filmmakers that I am studying offer formal and thematic alternatives that are uniquely feminine to traditional horror media. Annette Kuhn in "Textual Politics" offers another important theoretical justification of studying these horror directors; in the same vein as Johnston, Kuhn notes that women's cinema involves a "subversion of [dominant] discourse by means of antirealist and or anti-illusionist textual strategies."[45] For Kuhn, however, these oppositional strategies can be approached in one of two ways, borrowed in part from feminist literary traditions: "deconstruction" and "feminist voices." The latter resembles de Lauretis' discussion of female experiences in film, of introducing a new, "non-patriarchal" cinematic language that can either "challenge the dominance of certain forms of signification" or "move toward the construction of new, non-dominant forms."[46] In Kuhn's view, feminine voices are most common in film writing, although the concept can easily be grafted onto the visual, setting up "radically 'other' forms of pleasure"[47] and representing feminine discourses through cinematic techniques. The former approach to women's cinema, deconstruction, is most valuable for my analysis of women-made horror films. As Kuhn maintains, deconstruction in general aims to "unsettle the

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[45] Annette Kuhn, "Textual Politics," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 252.
[46] Kuhn, 258.
[47] Kuhn, 259.

spectator,"[48] to bring attention to the codes and conventions of dominant cinema in order to provoke in the spectator a critical stance towards them. Furthermore, deconstruction in women's cinema involves the purposeful inclusion of taboo, neglected, or underrepresented topics; thus, the strength of deconstruction lies in its ability to engage the spectator with deliberately unconventional cinematic forms, in addition to unconventional subject matter. This, in turn, creates a new space for "active intervention on the part of the spectators in the meaning production process,"[49] bringing new modes of feminist representation previously placed outside of the boundaries of mainstream society back into the fore.

As I argue in this dissertation, women-made horror films operate using the same types of counter-cinematic practices discussed at length by Kuhn, making them all the more valuable as an object of study. In many instances, the films in question open up the space for feminine voices to be heard, either by using horrific elements discussed in the previous sections as metaphors for the feminine, subjective experience or, in a much more abstract way, by constructing new points of identification and pleasure between the spectator and the horrific content on screen. Moreover, deconstruction is a crucial element of the large majority of the women-made horror films that I am studying. As I explore here, these films pull apart horror genre conventions, magnify them for the spectator, and add new meaning to them, whether through the blurring of the boundaries separating monster and human (Chapter III, "Some Kind of Animal"); a reclaiming of the horrific, abject female body ("Some Kind of Animal"); or the amplification of the horrors

[48] Kuhn, 253.
[49] Kuhn, 258.

of patriarchal society (Chapter IV, "Monsters Inside and Out"). Female directors are upending horror, and much like filmmakers in the early women's cinema movement discussed by Johnston and others, they are redefining genre while making one of their own.

To be sure, the questions—and, arguably, the assumptions—that underlie this study follow the same logic as those of writer and critic Melissa Gronlund in her essay on women creators in the visual arts. Namely, to quote directly from this piece: "Can you tell if an artwork is made by a woman? Do women have a particular approach to style, a particular sensitivity, a proclivity towards certain aesthetics or subject matter that makes their gender legible?"[50] Gronlund makes many valuable observations when weighing these questions, the most compelling of which arising from the notion that "the term 'woman' offers a false universality that manifests itself in the discursive breach between the anecdotal and the academic."[51] In other words, isolating the variable of "women" when studying the arts, while advantageous when exploring things like "gendered under-representation,"[52] can altogether be harmful in that it presupposes a singular female experience, in effect neglecting the fact that women (as both creators and consumers) encounter these events in varying ways. This, for Gronlund, leads to additional academic problems like misinterpretation (of how gender is perceived and represented, both by the artist and the viewer), speculation (around the intended meaning of a given work), and the absorption of "the individual particulars of a work to a general argument that is put

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[50] Melissa Gronlund, "Can we still talk about women artists?," in *Women Artists, Feminism, and the Moving Image*, ed. Lucy Reynolds (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 245-246.
[51] Gronlund, 255.
[52] Gronlund, 247.

forward."[53] Indeed, Gronlund proposes a less restrictive notion of the notion of womanhood in the arts, one that accounts for the intricacies and pluralities of what it means for the artist to be a woman in society.

In general, I do agree with Gronlund's astute observations on, and criticisms of, the isolation of women in the arts—and, by extension, the isolation of women directors in horror filmmaking. After all, as Gronlund offers, women artists and directors may be ambivalent towards the term "woman" artist/filmmaker (or "cisgender" woman artist/filmmaker); they may not be concerned with issues surrounding women at all; and, they may be even more preoccupied by other facets of identity apart from gender.[54] However, I find that the study of women creators in the field of horror filmmaking is beneficial, at the very least because of the blatant gaps in existing scholarship; women simply aren't being discussed, despite their growing numbers in the industry. Furthermore, this study, for lack of better terms, will take a more bottom-up approach to the analysis of women-made horror. Rather than merely stipulating that there are unifying, generalizable characteristics of horror filmmaking, and then assigning them to the women filmmakers in question, I am instead analyzing films made by women, teasing out their unique, counter-cinematic and unconventional approaches to common tropes and techniques in horror filmmaking, and then assigning those attributes to the larger category of women-made horror. This will both account for the intricacies of each director's relation to the womanhood (isolated from and in tandem to other identities) and help to create a more dynamic portrait of women-made horror as a sub-genre.

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[53] Gronlund, 255.
[54] Gronlund, 247-248.

Another underlying issue with this isolation of women horror films is related to the weaknesses of auteur theory —in sum, whether solely studying women directors undercuts the collaborative efforts of making a film, privileging the creative vision of one person while ignoring the talents of writers, cinematographers, and the like (who oftentimes identify as women themselves). Moreover, as Catherine Grant argues in "Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship," the topic of women's authorship in film suffers from the broader problems tied to auteur theory of, quoting John Caughie, "constructing the text as an ideal essence."[55] Auteur theory may be viewed as a type of cinematic essentialism that both falsely assumes that the director's persona is an intrinsic component of any given film and renders specifically the female cinematic voice as the result of a pure subconscious processes, devoid of the director's (or the film's) underlying political, cultural, and social contexts. However, the problem of female authorship in this case can, in my opinion, be alleviated in part by first considering some of the advantages of auteurism. According to Johnston, auteur theory came at the perfect time during the second wave of film criticism/theory, in effect challenging "the entrenched view of Hollywood as monolithic" by including other cinemas (outside of the United States as well as internally, through the inclusion of experimental cinema).[56] Borrowing from Peter Wollen, auteur theory has the more conceptual advantage of associating filmmaking with a single director "not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his vision in the film, but it is through the force of his preoccupations than an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded

[55] Catherine Grant, "Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship," *Feminist Theory* 2, no. 1 (2001): 121.
[56] Johnston, 34.

in the film, usually to the surprise of the individual concerned."[57] By this logic, singling out horror films directed by women allows for an analysis of the thematic and narrative techniques that these directors have chosen in making implicit comments about society, hegemonic structures, femininity, and other broader cultural codes. While I am not focusing exclusively on authorship in my analysis per se, I find that looking at women directors is important for understanding the larger category of women-made horror. In my analysis, women-made horror isn't simply an arbitrary offshoot of the broader horror genre. Rather, it is something that has unique characteristics that can be attributed to the directing styles of many women and is a movement that is quickly gaining traction now that more voices are included in mainstream filmmaking practice. Furthermore, in combining a historical overview of women-made horror with biographical information, critical reviews, my own theoretical analyses of horrific elements (and the ways that they operate symbolically and in contrast to dominant cinematic tropes), and a sense of the broader social context surrounding the production of these films, I address the problem of essentialism by providing a more well-rounded discussion of female directors in horror.

Importantly, in the case of the larger trajectory of women's cinema, a focus on female directors allows for a much more thorough film history, one that is infamously lacking in its consideration of women behind the camera. Scholars including Lucy Reynolds in *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image* have offered that the importance of studying women in film (and, specifically for Reynolds, feminist experimental filmmakers and visual artists) hinges on the long-held assumption that

[57] Johnston, 35.

women-made media "draws on a woman's lived experience while at the same time complicating the question 'who speaks' by dispersing the origin of the enunciation across many positions."[58] By opening up the so-called question of "who speaks"—of the types of agency afforded to those marginalized voices on and off screen—a focus on women in film opens up the possibility of studying the "more complex casual and contextual enunciations"[59] of identity as it is constructed in their works. Like Reynolds, scholar Alexandra Juhasz in *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* also sees the value of studying women in film and video, pointing out the fact that "traditional film histories deal very little with women in the media (not to mention feminists), and feminists themselves have written surprisingly little history about feminist media."[60] At the most basic level, an incorporation of women directors into film-historical discussions fills in many of the crucial gaps that theorists and historians have made in the past, which certainly has applicability in the context of the horror genre. Beyond this, however, studying women filmmakers helps redefine the canon of film scholarship, reconsidering the contributions that this group has made to the industry, and subsequently to academia. What's more, the value of a women's film history in my view aligns with Juhasz's argument that this type of scholarship is a "potentially transformative mode of knowing, [expressing] the desire to transfer power to those who have not had it."[61] Although problems could arise in the "re-establishment of power over others" —namely,

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[58] Lucy Reynolds, "Introduction: Raising voices," in *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices* (Camden: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 1.
[59] Reynolds, 7.
[60] Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11.
[61] Juhasz, 12.

those who also have intersectional, marginal identities[62] —the rewards of a woman's film history outweigh the risks, in the very least encouraging discussion about how to more conscientiously consider these directors as shifting dialogues in and outside of the industry.

A lingering concern that still remains in my selection of women directors in horror is a bit more practical: how would these directors feel in being lumped into the category of *women* directors? Wouldn't it be more beneficial—and, in a way, less degrading—to consider these figures first and foremost as *directors* who just happen to identify as women? While this is an issue that I continue to struggle with, I think it is important to consider the words of Juhasz in her discussion of women in film and video. Juhasz notes that women's experiences behind the camera are "multiple, personal, and sometimes mundane,"[63] and, I would add, hard to ignore. As she reflects on her in-depth interviews with a number of women filmmakers, "several more common themes and struggles define these women's careers":

> Many of these women use the media to interrogate the meanings and sensations of their bodies. They often focus on sexuality and sexual identity. Identity in and of itself is often a focus: identity in its formation, identity in its consolidation, and in its contestation and fragmentation [...] Interpersonal relationships matter greatly: the compelling desire for or appreciation of role models; the complexity of attachment to mothers; the uncertainty about having or the attachment to children; the support of friends, colleagues, and lovers; the responsibility of mentoring; the difficulty of intergenerational, interracial, and other boundary-crossing connections.[64]

By this logic, women directors, regardless of their differences, are connected to each other by an intricate web of experiences as outsiders penetrating the distinctly male world

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Juhasz, 7.
[64] Juhasz, 6.

of filmmaking, wading in the same politics of image production while still negotiating their personal experiences in a distinctly patriarchal society. Women horror directors, I argue, take this one step further, sharing in common the visual language of the horror genre to communicate these shared, yet unique, experiences that women face daily, sometimes even subverting these conventions in order to make more explicit the female experience. The category of women directors, rather than being derogatory, instead underscores how these directors are telling their stories, connecting to audiences, and transforming the genre in the process.

Parameter 3: Films must contain, as a whole or in part, avant-garde elements.

Unlike the first two parameters, Parameter 3—"avant-garde elements"—is a bit harder to operationalize. Generically, avant-garde can be considered anything new and against the mainstream; borrowing from Jürgen Habermas, Dietrich Scheunemann notes that avant-garde broadly describes media at "the peak of modernity."[65] However, this simplistic consideration of the avant-garde needs to be expanded considerably. First and foremost, "avant-garde" as a descriptor of film (or the arts in general), per Jacob Edmond, is oftentimes interchanged with the similar descriptor "experimental" and, in some other cases, is conflated with the "modern" or "modernist art."[66] While all three terms[67] arguably refer to those formal and representational strategies outside of the

[65] Dietrich Scheunemann, *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 16.
[66] Jacob Edmond, "American Language Poetry and the Definition of the Avant-Garde," in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 173-192.
[67] A fourth, related term, "underground cinema," is also important to consider here. According to Peter Stanfield, underground film can refer to one of two main schools of thought: that aligned with Manny Farber, which privileges "a rich seam of critically

mainstream—and, in the case of modernism and the avant-garde, those strategies that deviate from the "aesthetic" or representational[68]—the differences between them are, at face value, challenging to discern. What's more, the frequency with which the three are used in the field (avant-garde and experimental in particular are used in tandem in film studies as an academic discipline), gives the initial impression that the usage of the terms is based on a matter of preference; that is, descriptors like "avant-garde" and "experimental" in particular can be swapped, rather haphazardly, based on the speaker or scholar.

However, as Fred Camper notes in "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film," the problem of naming—of using the descriptors "avant-garde" versus "experimental" in particular—have proven to be a tangible problem amongst the very creators that are working with these non-mainstream strategies. "Stan Brakhage said the appellation 'avant-garde' was too European," writes Camper, "Peter Kubelka said of 'experimental' something like, 'I made many experiments in the process of making [a] film […] What you've seen is not an experiment, but a completed work.'"[69] Camper ultimately gives six features that all avant-garde films share; it is important to

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ignored, economically marginal Hollywood productions," versus that endorsed by Jonas Mekas, which endorses fringe filmmaking, that is, "a group of film-makers who were geographically removed from Hollywood and economically independent of the major studios" (Stanfield 2011, 212). Both interpretations of underground cinema share exhibition practices and, like avant-garde filmmaking, broadly "made use of modernist techniques [and were] not contained within traditional boundaries and thus were obscene" (quoted in Stanfield, 222). What this means specifically for women-made horror, and feminist avant-garde filmmaking in general, will be explored in my third and fourth chapters.

[68] Edmond, 175.

[69] Fred Camper, "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film," *Fredcamper.com* (blog), https://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html.

note that while Camper is guilty of the very tendency that he warns against (of conflating "avant-garde" with "experimental," which he describes as a residue of the very problem of "naming" itself),[70] his classification system is significant in that it gives tangible evidence to support the differences between avant-garde and other, similar qualifiers. These features entail: (1) development by one or a small group of creators, with a limited budget and the belief that "public success and profit is very unlikely," (2) the deliberate blurring of boundaries between production roles, like director, producer, and screenwriter, (3) the eschewal of a "linear story that unfolds in the theatrical space of mainstream narrative," (4) an emphasis on the means of cinematic or artistic production, drawing attention to the physical and mechanic specificities of the medium in question, (5) the "oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics of mass media and the value systems of mainstream culture," (6) and deliberate narrative and thematic ambiguity.[71]

In my opinion, Camper's discussion of the avant-garde is important not merely because of how it attempts to operationalize avant-garde practices separate from experimental, or modern, or even independent/underground filmmaking. On the contrary, the avant-garde, in Camper's assessment, shows how the avant-garde both goes against the mainstream, like experimental filmmaking, and also paves the way for new modes of anti-mainstream representation and production, unlike many other discussions of experimental filmmaking. It is for this reason that I have chosen the term "avant-garde," as opposed to "experimental," in my analysis of women-made horror. While I do

[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

not subscribe to a number of Camper's distinct features of the avant-garde, I agree with the general ideas guiding his assessment, in that the avant-garde, rather than the experimental, is a larger platform for innovation within visual media. All avant-garde films are, certainly, experimental to a degree in that they toy with form, style, and representation. But, by this logic, not all experimental films are avant-garde, since the avant-garde catalyzes change in future arts movements. The avant-garde is therefore the most appropriate descriptor those anti-mainstream, creative techniques found in women-made horror.

A similar approach to the avant-garde can be found in scholar Dietrich Scheunemann's discussion of its developmental trajectory. According to Scheunemann, the avant-garde has been broken by scholars into two groups. The first, the "historical" avant-garde, describes the period between in the early half of the twentieth century that attacked "the autonomous status of art in bourgeois society" and attempted to "reintegrate art into the praxis of life."[72] Alternatively, "neo" avant-garde movements, fomenting in the post-war era, has been imagined as "another bearer of the flame of hope, re-igniting it and passing it on after a period of darkness."[73] In this context, "hope" refers to the utopian vision of many historical avant-garde artists to interrogate the means of artistic production and redefine its role in everyday life. Yet, for Scheunemann, this clean split between the historic and neo avant-gardes in and of itself has a host of problems, which are contradictory at best—understanding multiple avant-gardes across temporal and geographic boundaries as wholly separate from one another, yet sharing the same,

[72] Scheunemann, 18.
[73] Scheunemann, 20.

practical aims of questioning the status of art in everyday life. Scheunemann instead endorses a view of the avant-garde as contingent upon the "production situation of the artist, the means of artistic production, and the overall notion of art";[74] that is, looking at the avant-garde as the response to the distinct socio-historical conditions of artistic production. However, the circumstances motivating the avant-garde should not cause distinct movements to be examined in isolation from one another. Rather, the unifying thread that connects all avant-gardes, and perhaps is the most successful way to better understand the avant-garde, is its relationship to technological advancement, or how art responds to the formal, stylistic, and representational demands of the mainstream. In this view, the avant-garde can be understood through the "transfer of new techniques and aesthetic principles from one another,"[75] where the artist acts as a historian of sorts of previous modes of (re)production and (re)presentation. This web of connections between the past, present, and potential future of the avant-garde is exemplified through the cinematic medium where, for Scheunemann, an entire range of technological and representational strategies are borrowed from and transferred "onto a new plane, one that easily embraces beauty and technology, abstract animation and the use of optical and technical means of artistic production."[76]

This distinctive understanding of the avant-garde, I argue, relates directly to the sub-genre of women-made horror. In the case of many, if not all, of the films and filmmakers that I have chosen for my analysis, efforts to draw upon previous modes of representation specific to the broader horror genre and modify it are evident. These

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[74] Scheunemann, 21.
[75] Scheunemann, 28.
[76] Scheunemann, 34.

efforts are both in response to the ever-changing demands of the social/cultural/industrial contexts that these directors are working in, and they may be also seen as a way to interrogate the very systems that operate within these contexts. In turn, such avant-garde strategies—whether they consist of non-mimetic representational strategies, alternative narrative structures, subversive plot elements, or some combination of the three—afford women horror filmmakers the opportunity to tell the types of stories that have been on the periphery of patriarchal society as well as challenge mainstream filmmaking practices that support the hegemonic scaffolding holding society together. Avant-garde artists in Scheunemann's analysis have been motivated to respond to technological development; women-made horror directors are taking this one step further by responding to the complex interplay between technology, industry, and culture.

From a theoretical standpoint, the avant-garde is valuable to my study of women-made horror due to its centrality to many early schools of feminist scholarship. Returning to de Lauretis, scholars like Mulvey often championed avant-garde, structural-materialist filmmaking as the logical solution to mainstream cinema's problem in representing female characters and situating the spectator with a female subject position. For de Lauretis, such feminist theorists (and, in some cases, theorists-turned-filmmakers) took up questions "of identification, self-definition, the modes or the very possibility of envisaging oneself as subject"[77] through alternative modes of filmmaking. While there was little consensus, during this period as well as arguably in the present day, in regards to what constitutes an avant-garde cinema unique to feminist

[77] de Lauretis, 290.

filmmaking,[78] there is overall agreement, as mentioned in my earlier discussion of women's filmmaking, that a feminist avant-garde actively utilizes counter-cinematic practices (representationally, formally/structurally, thematically, etc.) that break down the monolithic nature of the cinema and incorporates those experiences and perspectives unique to those women behind the camera. The avant-garde has been, and continues to be, a centerpiece in the discourse of women's filmmaking; the intersections between women-made horror and the avant-garde are more present than previous scholarship has given credit for, with the latter amplifying the stylistic and thematic transgression of the former.

According to David Hopkins in his edited volume, *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, the titular modern art movements (dada and surrealism) have been classified under the larger umbrella of the aforementioned historical avant-garde, a so-called "subcultural group"[79] that formed at the intersection of culture (uncovering the psychical mechanisms that underlie everyday life)[80] and politics (responding to the governmental changes surrounding them through anarchistic revolt and an 'appeal to the marvelous.').[81] In the postwar context in particular, surrealism's political undertones reached new heights, taking the dream-like, spectacular imagery at the core of this avant-garde movement and, arguably, transforming it into images of horror. Lowenstein's discussion of cinematic horror and the avant-garde wholly supports this claim:

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[78] de Lauretis, 290-291.
[79] David Hopkins, *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 27.
[80] Raymond Spiteri, "Surrealism and the Question of Politics, 1925-1939," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 155.
[81] Spiteri, 157-158.

referencing Walter Benjamin, surrealism experimented with horrific imagery as early as the First World War, where the "very real ruptured bodies"[82] of soldiers translated into the bodily deformities at the center of surrealist paintings. Surrealism, as a response to the rapidly modernizing world around it, can therefore be understood as a "violent, embodied assault on the social structures propping up modernity, rather than a romantic retreat within the self, in Lowenstein's words."[83] Indeed, the cinematic medium would prove to become one of the most effective vessels for disseminating this impulse towards violence and horror. The surrealistic *Ur*-film *Un Chien Andalou*, directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí in 1929, is one such example of the intersections between the avant-garde and horror, serving as exemplary of what Georges Bataille describes as the "unrelenting horror that 'risks making us vomit like drunkards this servile nobility, this idiotic idealism that leaves us under the spell of a few comical prison bosses.'"[84] The intense violence, gore, and sheer chaos depicted in *Chien* and other subsequent avant-garde films are plausible precursors to the horror genre proper, but specifically for my analysis, they are especially useful in understanding the connections between women-made horror and the avant-garde. As I show in this dissertation, many filmmakers working in the avant-garde sphere take on the same attacks on patriarchal society as the surrealists did on modernity, freely displaying horrific elements, violence, and abjection in order to make pointed counter-cultural statements. Conversely, several women horror directors explicitly adopt surrealistic filmmaking techniques to elevate their horror content, in effect both elevating the genre and scrutinizing societal norms. The avant-

[82] Lowenstein, 18-19.
[83] Lowenstein, 19.
[84] Spiteri, 165.

garde is intricately intertwined with horror, as I display in several points of my analysis, so it is crucial to select those women-made horror films that feature, to some capacity, these techniques.

What can be made of films made by women that are *not* avant-garde? After all, a number of women outside of the avant-garde arguably have in common many of the stylistic and thematic tendencies as those working within the avant-garde; Jennifer Kent (mentioned later in this dissertation), Anna Biller, and many others have played with genre expectations, and have provided pointed, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, social critiques in many of their films, and a wide variety of Internet creators (Becky Sloan, of *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared*) and music video directors (Floria Sigismondi) have unique stylistic takes on the horror genre.[85] Even visual artists like Cindy Sherman have dipped their toes into horror filmmaking; in her 1997 film *Office Killer*, Sherman grafted grotesque visuals and risqué character studies onto the slasher sub-genre. The contributions of women who make horror in general, across the artistic/industrial spectrum, should be more widely considered in horror scholarship. However, including women outside of the avant-garde, alongside those experimental filmmakers, would be a rather daunting task; there is simply not enough time, or room, to consider all filmmakers. Furthermore, those avant-garde filmmakers, like the ones I will be discussing in my analyses, are often *not* included in the literature; they are considered too obscure or outside of the genre for taking too many artistic liberties with horrific

[85] Filmmakers like Karyn Kusama, Jen and Sylvia Soska, Gigi Saul Guerrero, and Nia DaCosta are just some of the names that come to mind when considering entries into North American/Hollywood horror filmmaking post-2000s. Women have also figured heavily in New French Extremity horror, for instance.

elements (rendering them as something *other* than horror). Importantly, the avant-garde is a useful strategy for amplifying horrific elements and, resultingly, challenging those taken-for-granted components of horror filmmaking proper. Women-made avant-garde horror, from this view, brings new and alternative voices to the forefront, reinventing the genre in the process.

Parameter 4: Miscellaneous Considerations.

Due to the temporal limitations of the dissertation process—and, most importantly, since cinema is an ever-evolving, time-sensitive medium—I am limiting my analysis of films up to the year 2014.[86] In my opinion, fewer films allow for a more focused attention on each selected film, which is advantageous scholastically and organizationally. I also dedicate one chapter to a more historically driven overview of the history of women-made horror leading up to the post-war era; this strategy results in a strong foundation for analysis of films up to the modern day. After this dissertation, I hope to extend this project into multiple other projects, ranging from smaller publications to course design and, idealistically, a more comprehensive online database that houses titles of women-made horror media as they are being released, in real time. Therefore, my decision to cap off my analysis temporally will be beneficial in that it will provide the groundwork for future projects.

[86] That's not to say that women made fewer films after 2014, or that they stopped altogether. Sonia Lupher observes in her dissertation, for instance, that in "2020, there are at least 700 active female horror directors working globally" (Lupher 2020). 2014 simply pertains to the release year of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, which is the latest film I've included in my analysis.

On a more practical level, I have chosen films that are readily available, whether in whole or as fragments through physical DVDs, streaming services, databases, or some combination of the three. Understandably, there are many films, especially in the first chapter of my dissertation, that no longer exist. In these cases, where appropriate, I have accessed primary sources that offer clues about these lost films (how they looked and were received by contemporaneous reviewers), fitting together to hopefully become pieces of the larger puzzle of women-made horror. Lastly, my exploration of women-made horror is not limited geographically. I have included films produced outside of the context of the Hollywood industry, focusing on second- and third-cinemas. This strategy opens up a host of interrelated concerns related to such topics as conditions of production, national cinema(s), modes of reception, and the individual experiences of international women directors.

One guiding question of this dissertation relates to diversity, in terms of geography, race/ethnicity, and other identity factors. How can I strive to include a much more thorough consideration of women's film history, and consider all of those voices outside of the margins of mainstream society, if my analysis, inadvertently or otherwise, skews toward one group of filmmakers? Indeed, this is an underlying problem within the film industry, and of the historical chronicling thereof; marginalized voices are frequently left out of the production process, causing there to be fewer films from these diverse groups, which in turn results in blatant gaps in film history and analysis. In addition, an earlier tendency towards linearity within the field of film history (that is, organizing cinema in a neat, orderly manner, across chronological time), has complicated matters even further. Rather than accounting for the intricacies and multiplicities in

technological innovation, industrial change, and stylistic trends across diverse groups, the field instead has, intentionally or otherwise, privileged certain developments, in certain industrial/geographic contexts, over others, in isolation from one another. Film scholarship all too often falls into the trap of characterizing cinema as monolithic, which in my opinion affects which films enter the academic and popular consciousness, as well as which types of films, film styles, and filmmakers fall into favor within the industry.[87]

Even I, through my continued trajectory as a film scholar, have fallen victim to these oversights; through this dissertation, I am mindful of such disparities in diversity and aim to address them accordingly. Across each chapter—especially in the second, which is more historically driven—I consider multiple, sometimes concurrent, developments in technology, industry, and style, and how they come together to weave a more intricate tapestry, if you will, of women-made horror. I have also selected a relatively diverse body of horror texts, considering those non-white, non-American, and non-heteronormative voices that are so integral to the formation of the genre but have seldom been taken into account in the horror canon. In my final chapter, I discuss further

[87] This is especially true of the horror genre. Given the tendency to pinpoint Universal Pictures' "horror cycle" in the early 1930s as the start of horror films proper, the limitations many faced in the Hollywood studio system (see this chapter, and Chapter II), and the privileging of First World (and, at times, Second World) cinemas, horror scholarship and consumption has remained narrow in scope. Luckily, more literature is emerging on films made by those on the margins of mainstream filmmaking. But, even then, a quick browse on databases like IMDb for highest rated horror films is lacking in its diversity (the top twenty feature no women directors, and only two non-white filmmakers make the cut; celebrated director Jordan Peele is just shy of a top twenty spot. See "Feature Film, Rating Count of 25,000, Horror (Sorted by IMDb Rating Descending)," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed February 1, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?genres=horror&sort=user_rating,desc&title_type=feature&num_votes=25000,). Horror, from this perspective, is a unique case in point for this narrow-mindedness, arguably a microcosm for what is happening in film as a whole.

issues and concerns of diversity that extend to the present day. Film is an alive medium—it is always growing and transforming, beyond some of the boundaries that I have imposed in my own selection of texts for this analysis. An interrogation of where women-made horror has gone, where it is now, and where it will likely go is an important task that I have undertaken and will undertake in my continued scholarship.

D. Literature Review

While a growing number of film scholars have considered horror media created by women, prior to this research little else exists. However, by piecing together some earlier scholarship meeting at the intersection of horror studies and film theories (feminism, postcolonialism, and dialogues between the two), a sturdier foundation can be constructed. To start, feminist theories (and, stemming from this, queer theories) of the horror genre help to better get a sense of where the field started out, where it has been going in the present day, and ultimately where it can go.

According to Barry Keith Grant in his introduction to *The Dread of Difference*, horror film scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s was primarily concerned with "the terms by which we have come to understand the horror film,"[88] beyond basic genre-related parameters and moving towards questions of how the subject(s) of horror become "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization *re*presses or *op*presses."[89] In other words, scholars at the forefront of horror studies in its early years wanted to uncover the very ways in which the genre made thinly veiled statements (and, in some cases,

[88] B.K. Grant, 3.
[89] Author's emphasis; B.K. Grant, 5.

critiques) on race relations, class distinctions, and the traditional nuclear family through character and thematic tropes commonplace in horror. While these issues are still very much present in modern-day scholarship, as will be explored below, analyses of the representational capacity of horror—otherwise considered a lesser, low-brow, and otherwise low-class form of entertainment by societal standards—tended to dominate the discussion in early iterations of horror film scholarship. It was not until the introduction of "orthodox Freudianism,"[90] to borrow from Grant, that horror analysis slowly shifted its focus to concerns involving gender, looking/the gaze, desire, and the convergence of the three, which were coincidentally developing in feminist film theory.

In Grant's summary, these psychoanalytic discussions were, by and large, traditionally Freudian, and, in consequence, strictly heteronormative; monsters were coded as male, victims as female, and the spectatorial pleasure derived from watching these types aligned with being both white and male. It was not until the active integration of second- and third-wave feminism(s) that the face of horror film scholarship would rapidly evolve, accounting for alternative interpretations of psychoanalytic theory to account for a broader spectrum of the horror genre. One such example of this reformulation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory comes from Carol J. Clover in "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," which isolates the slasher subgenre of horror and examines the ways that the blurred lines of gender presented in these films complicate the issue of male identification.[91] The first chapter of the larger text, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Horror Film*, "Her Body, Himself" challenges the

[90] Ibid.
[91] Thornham, 230.

traditional binary between character and spectator identification so common within prior film theories —that is, theoretically, male viewers naturally identify with (heteronormative) male characters, and female viewers subsequently identify with their (also heteronormative) female screen counterparts. Instead, in the case of the slasher film, the male spectator in particular is in a challenging situation when compared to traditional forms of identification. On one hand, male characters portrayed in these films are otherwise one-dimensional and, ultimately, killed off early on in the films,[92] making for an unsustainable figure of standard identification for the male spectator. Psychopathic killers, central to the slasher narrative, become an initial point of identification for male spectators, if only for the misogynistic agency that they wield through raping, pillaging and, appropriately, slashing their female victims.[93] However, as Clover attests, these killers are, more often than not, constructed as feminine.[94] Possessing non-phallic attributes by their abject positioning outside of patriarchal society, and at times taking on wholly female physical traits (like in the case of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, where the killer is dressed as a woman, or in *Friday the Thirteenth*, where the "male" killer *is* a woman), the killer is thus a feminized character who, as the centerpiece of slasher films, becomes the main unit of identification during the opening acts of the film. Along these lines, male spectators move away from standard modes of identification and occupy a passive position within the narrative economy of the film.

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[92] Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Manhattan: NYU Press, 1999), 236.
[93] Clover, 237.
[94] Clover, 238.

On the other hand, the "Final Girl"[95]—or the female protagonist who suffers from the psychopathic killer character's torment throughout the narrative but eventually defeats her foe at the film's finale—takes on an active role for the remaining half of the slasher narrative. Through her "intelligent, watchful, [and] levelheaded"[96] demeanor, the Final Girl approaches the same amount of narrative information as the viewer does at the same points, her perspective ultimately aligning with the viewer's at the same point in the film and becoming a main site of identification. Furthermore, this character develops a so-called "shared masculinity"[97] with her male counterparts; she exhibits the same types of active behaviors (culminating in the physical destruction of the slasher character) while moving away from an otherwise helpless, threatened femininity so often embedded in traditional horror representation. The idea that the Final Girl appropriates phallic symbols[98] in her quest to destroy the villain of the film, through her use of knives, guns, and chainsaws, to name a few, pushes this masculine characterization even further. Identification, then, happens at the site of this phallicized female body, and through her active, investigating male gaze[99] that is so often reserved for male characters and, by default, the male spectator. The Final Girl, by nature, becomes the lone survivor by the film's end, making male identification with female characters almost inevitable.

What's important to consider when looking at Clover's argument is that identification is a process marked by frequent oscillation between the poles of male and female, at least in the case of the slasher film. Foregoing arguably heteronormative

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[95] Clover, 235.
[96] Clover, 236.
[97] Clover, 239.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Clover, 238.

modes of identification, the male spectator is aligned alongside the imaginary perspective of feminized characters, regardless of whether they take on a wholly active or passive position in the film's narrative. The plurality of horror spectatorship, in this regard, points to larger anxieties and desires on the part of the male spectator,[100] and it indicates a shift in previous models of identification (posited by Mulvey) that assume male-male or female-male options in spectatorship.

In the vein of Clover in "Her Body, Himself," Linda Williams in "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" looks to film genres featuring bodily and emotional excess—the horror genre, in addition to pornography and melodrama—and how they cause the spectator to oscillate between male and female identification.[101] Since these types of films over-involve the viewer, fully immersing the viewer in an environment of bodily excess and matching the types of real-life reactions when watching these films,[102] they allow the audience to become fully invested, both consciously and unconsciously, with their narrative material, heightening the possibility of character identification.

Important to Williams' study of these body genres is her use of Freudian psychoanalysis to situate the viewer's sense of identification with both male and female characters. Williams adopts Freud's seminal work, "A Child is Being Beaten," as well as his work on castration anxiety, to argue that gender is not fixed on the part of the spectator. Rather, taking on "Clover's more bisexual model of viewer identification in the horror film,"[103] Williams asserts that the emphasis of the female victim particularly

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[100] Thornham, 231.
[101] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Manhattan: NYU Press, 1999), 267-281.
[102] Williams, 270-271.
[103] Williams, 274.

within the slasher film, moves frequently between sensations of sadism and masochism, of the spectator projecting their desires onto the female body while at the same time feeling similar sensations of being brutally and suddenly attacked by an unknown source.[104] In essence, the slasher film and the broader category of the horror film exhibit real shifts in gender identification taking place in film spectatorship and more broadly within Western society. As Williams concludes, the horror film "hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations between the 'sexes' and by rapidly changing notions of gender—of what it means to be a man or a woman."[105] This development presents a generally optimistic message surrounding the horror genre, one of changes in the ways in which gender is constructed and communicated within society.

Clover and Williams were able to contribute important alternatives to traditional horror film scholarship concerning spectatorship and spectatorial pleasure. Barbara Creed, in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, moves beyond the issue of spectatorship and instead focuses on the ways in which the horror genre constructs and represents the female body. Keeping in the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis while also considering semiotics, and feminist scholarship as a whole, *The Monstrous Feminine* contains two central arguments, working in tandem to develop a feminist perspective of the horror genre. On one hand, Creed's argument borrows from Julia Kristeva, whose work on horror fiction in literature argues that the representation of women as monstrous derives from the concept of abjection.[106] The abject, which

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[104] Williams, 278-279; Thornham, 232.
[105] Williams, 280.
[106] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1993), 8

according to Creed, situates "the monstrous-feminine in the horror film in relation to […] that which 'disturbs identity, system, order,'" is seen as a foil to what is typically prescribed in society as clean and normal. That is, things including bodily waste and fluids, religious "abominations," bodily deformities, and abnormal sexual desire, to name a few, threaten the border between what is normal and abnormal, human and inhuman.[107] Eliminating the abject—those objects or ideas that ultimately straddle the line between what is proper and improper—is the ideological goal of societal structures, in order to "guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic."[108]

Interestingly, Kristeva and Creed stress that woman, namely in the horror genre, has a particular relationship to the abject. Woman is connected to a staple in horror films—the monster—through her similar release of fluids in menstruation and other biological processes, as well as her subsequent disfigurement from the process of childbirth; woman can also be assumed as physically grotesque and abject, remaining on the border between being human and inhuman. As a result, woman's abjection deems her as "monstrous," therefore making her a threat to the inherent stability of patriarchal society. A supporting example of how woman is closely related to the abject and "monstrous" is in the construction of the maternal figure,[109] a point that both Kristeva and Creed emphasize in their arguments. As a site of both sexual desire and physical and bodily impurities, the maternal both "repels and attracts"[110] those around her, crossing societal boundaries and therefore becoming abject, much like the horror monster has the

[107] Creed, 8-10.
[108] Creed, 9.
[109] Creed, 11.
[110] Creed, 14.

unique ability to entice and disgust those around it. Moreover, the maternal is deemed abject and ultimately "monstrous" through her relationship to her child. Unable to fully break her control, the maternal figure threatens the development of her child's unique, independent identity and ultimate integration into the symbolic order within patriarchal culture. Consequently, the child has an unstable relationship "between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father."[111] In other words, the "monstrous," maternal feminine spawns children that are inherently abject, where they are not fully separated from the mother and cannot completely integrate into society. The representation of the maternal as abject, and essentially the "monstrous" feminine as a whole, is a semiotic device assigning meaning as a part of a greater ideology. As a rhetorical device, the construction of the "monstrous" feminine, especially within the horror genre in film, aims to communicate messages to members of society that maintain normalcy while eliminating things that threaten such stability.

On the other hand, Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" upends Freud's commonly held idea that "woman terrifies because she is castrated."[112] Using Freud's case study, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy [Little Hans]," plus his overall theory of castration anxiety in men, Creed reverses the oft-cited notion that castration anxiety is instilled at an early age (particularly in men, but that is not always the case) due to woman's juxtaposition of having strong phallic attributes—power, terror, and destruction—but lacking a penis. Rather, castration anxiety arises because woman's phallic attributes can be used to castrate men, ultimately asserting her dominance and

[111] Creed, 13.
[112] Creed, 87.

monstrousness. The female genitals, as an agent of castration, are therefore represented as the toothed vagina, or *vagina dentata*, and essentially weaken man, destroying him mentally, psychically, and physically.[113] Arousing the castration anxieties in male viewers,[114] the *vagina dentata* ultimately takes form in the horror film, as Creed points out, as the woman-as-castrator, or *femme castratrice*. This representation of "the monstrous feminine," commonly applied to the slasher film, is crucial to Creed's overall argument of castration anxiety, in that the image of the *femme castatrice* primarily "challenges Freud's view that man fears woman because she is castrated."[115] The *femme castratrice* therefore poses a direct threat to patriarchal society, as both an agent of male exploitation and antithesis of traditional female roles in her dominant, near-phallic power over men.

Creed's analysis of the monstrous feminine is valuable across the wider trajectory of horror film scholarship because of how it reconceptualizes the gendered binaries central to one of the theoretical building blocks in the field, Freudian psychoanalysis. Harry M. Benshoff in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* subverts these theory-based expectations even further by explicitly situating a more inclusive spectrum of gendered/sexual Otherness alongside monstrosity. Whereas Creed looks at the ways in which women have been coded as monstrous in the horror genre, Benshoff takes on queerness as a whole (and, in several parts of his analysis, male homosexuality/queerness), explaining how historically those outside of the status quo have been, implicitly and otherwise, been coded as abject, threatening, and altogether

[113] Creed, 105; 108-110.
[114] Creed, 127.
[115] Creed, 125, 127.

monstrous in the horror film. Benshoff uses Wood's study of horror cinema as his starting point, explaining that "the thematic core of the genre might be reduced to [...] normality (as defined chiefly by a heterosexual capitalism), the Other (embodied in the figure of the monster), and the relationship between the two," with the "Other," for Benshoff, being any sexual and/or gender identity that falls outside, and ultimately negates, "the oppressive binarisms of the dominant hegemony [...] both within culture at large, and within texts of horror and fantasy."[116] Borrowing from the sociological as well as the literary, Benshoff offers a laundry list of those identities that fall under the umbrella of the "oxymoronic community of difference" of queerness—"people who self identify as gay and/or lesbian, bisexual, transexual, transvestive, drag queen, leather daddy, lipstick lesbian, pansy, fairy, dyke, butch, femme, feminist, asexual, and so on"[117]—accounting for such ambiguity and difference that are in stark contrast to dominant, heterosexual normativity. Their perceived monstrosity, consequently, comes from this rupture from "identity, system, and order" (to borrow from Kristeva)[118] and, in a similar way to Carroll's definition of art-horror, are categorically incomplete, lying at the interstices of order and chaos, natural and unnatural. Benshoff also notes that the queer monster also toes the line between life and death, in that this figure is also stereotyped to partake in "non-procreative sexual behaviors."[119] The threat of the queer monster therefore moves beyond merely disrupting normalcy, instead taking on an altogether more sinister, life-threatening role within patriarchal society.

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[116] Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 4.
[117] Benshoff, 5.
[118] Benshoff, 6.
[119] Ibid.

Monsters within the horror genre are coded, according to Benshoff, in a variety of ways, the most common being their subversion of standard gendered behaviors: for example, male-presenting characters having a markedly feminine physical appearance or temperament, and vice-versa. Moreover, the monster queer is also portrayed as a sinister figure that takes part in sexual behaviors that are otherwise perverse, such as partaking in violent, abject sexual kinks, having non-procreative sex, and above all eschewing traditional, heterosexual relationship models in favor of ones that are deliberately alternative and ultimately "disavowing the possibility of a relationship between two (same-sex) equals."[120] Importantly, the horror film actively communicates these threatening differences between heterosexual normalcy and those across the queer spectrum lying outside of it. After all, for Benshoff, heterosexuality is indebted to homosexuality and queerness: quoting Simon Watney, Benshoff asserts that "[without] gays, straights are not straight."[121] Physical, fantastical monstrosity—bodily deformity, decay, mutation, incorporeality (having no body, like a ghost or spirit), and the like—is grafted onto the sexual, societal monster that is a real-life threat to heteronormativity, and as a result these monsters become one in the same. Of course, across history, the monstrous object of the horror film has changed over time, "as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments."[122] Nevertheless, the queer monster is a persistent trope that reemerges across horror's history in Hollywood filmmaking. For Benshoff, queer monstrosity is blatant in Universal Pictures'

[120] Benshoff, 7.
[121] Benshoff, 8.
[122] Benshoff, 9.

horror films during the 1930s and throughout the Cold War, for example, but is also readily apparent even earlier in the gothic novel.

For Benshoff, there are a number of specific ways in which queerness has intersected with the horror genre of film: through the inclusion of "identifiably gay and/or lesbian characters"; in films that have been actually been made by queer folks, regardless of subject matter; through "subtextual or connotative avenues," in which queerness can be read in the film's subtext; and through a queer reading of a film by queer audiences, resulting from the "recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along."[123] By this logic, the horror genre since its inception has been an important tool for understanding the "complex range of queerness" present both in the cinematic medium and in society at large.

Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* is valuable in that it, unlike some other analyses preceding it, accounts for the intricacies of gender and sexuality vis-à-vis the horror film. While many of the aforementioned feminist-inflected horror studies are revolutionary in their reconceptualization of gender dynamics in horror, they ultimately suffer from similar, reductivist tendencies that have inadvertently endorsed the very binaries that they are working against. Benshoff, however, fills in some of the critical gaps that feminist theories have left in their theories, accounting for a much wider and more variable understanding of the ways that horror has further constructed and disseminated norms *qua* patriarchal society.

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[123] Benshoff, 13-15.

In a similar sense, Isabel Cristina Pinedo, in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, has also upturned feminist horror theory; her work complicates prior, traditional understandings of horror spectatorship by focusing not on *male* pleasure and identification, but on *female* pleasure in particular. Pinedo's 1997 text was one of the first to actively assess how horror films can create "an opening for feminist discourse"[124] by featuring a female character with narrative agency (à la Clover's Final Girl) with whom the audience has no choice, or otherwise, to identify with over the course of a film. This emphasis on the female subject, in Pinedo's analysis, dually arouses "male anxiety about feminism and female agency" and allows the female spectator to "vicariously indulge feelings and actions forbidden to her," namely, extreme violence towards a fictional killer.[125] What's more, the dynamics of looking within the horror genre are structured around what Pinedo terms "recreational terror" which, akin to a metaphorical roller-coaster ride, is characterized as "a simulation of danger that produces a bounded experience of fear [...] in which controlled loss substitutes for loss of control."[126] Throughout the narrative of any given horror film—Pinedo uses the slasher film as a case in point—the action flows through the patterning of showing and not showing, looking and not looking,[127] of which the female spectator is actively invited to partake in amongst her male counterparts. Pleasure is derived from the reveal, from actually seeing a dead, mutilated victim or the abject, mutilated monster-killer at the heart

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[124] Pinedo, Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Viewing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 6.
[125] Pinedo, 85-86.
[126] Pinedo, 5.
[127] Ibid.

of the horror film's violence; a sense of resolution, and perhaps piqued curiosity, is generated from the display of the body on screen.

Yet, pleasure is also derived from the act of not looking, of the mystery and tension that inevitably lead up to the unveiling of the mutilated body. Unlike some mainstream media, in which the inability to look directly results from the passive positioning of the female spectator (compared to the active male viewer, whose voyeuristic gaze is encouraged), horror media deliberately allow for the alignment of the female spectator with the main female protagonist. The protagonist's inability to see, thus, correlates with the viewer's inability to see, resulting in a stronger identification amongst the two. This tension between looking and not-looking "enables [the female protagonist] to use violence to defend herself effectively and to drive the narrative forward" as Pinedo concludes.[128] So too is the female spectator granted agency as an active, rather than passive, spectator, and as she experiences the violence enacted at the hands of the active female body, feelings of pleasure heighten.

Central to Pinedo's assessment of female spectatorship in the horror film is her model of the postmodern horror film. As Pinedo asserts, hundreds of films fall under the larger umbrella of horror, but only those that are "postmodern horror" films can achieve the feeling of recreational terror on the part of the female audience. For Pinedo, five attributes define the postmodern horror film. Firstly, postmodern horror "constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world"; that is, these films are distinct due to their deliberate showing of the mutilated, dead body, causing a certain spectacle from "the

[128] Pinedo, 76.

uncompromised or privileged detail of human carnage."[129] This leads to the second defining factor of postmodern horror: the purposeful transgression and violation of boundaries surrounding the "natural," taken-for-granted order of society.[130] Harkening back to scholars like Carroll, postmodern horror in this case violates rigid categories of order and chaos, cleanliness and filth, normal and abnormal. This second characteristic takes this notion of horror one step further, however, in that it wholly subverts the common trope of conflict resolution: that is, of society once being broken but, by the end of the text, being put back into its rightful order. Postmodern horror, on the contrary, leaves the spectator with a much more dismal ending, with Pinedo arguing that this paradigm "blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous. Danger to the social order is endemic."[131]

Thirdly, postmodern horror "exposes the limits of rationality and compels [the viewer] to confront the irrational," to quote Pinedo.[132] Taken from this perspective, the worlds constructed within postmodern horror in a way normalize what is seen in real, everyday life as unpredictable, inexplicable, and beyond our control. Unlike Carroll in his discussion of art-horror, Pinedo claims that postmodern horror effortlessly makes rational the irrational, normalizing it instead of placing the two in stark contrast with one another.[133] This irrationality motivates characters within the world of the film to have to

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[129] Pinedo, 17, 19.
[130] Pinedo, 21.
[131] Pinedo, 22.
[132] Pinedo, 23.
[133] In her discussion, Pinedo cites a host of slasher and sci-fi horror films, to illustrate her point that "horror throws into question the validity of rationality" (1997, 23). These include Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), where "the monster [Freddy Krueger] is usually irrational and impervious to the request to sit down and reason together" (24) and Christian Nyby's *The Thing* (1951), in which the "rational skeptic,

think on the same level as their monstrous antagonists, to display the same types of senseless violence that would otherwise be reprimanded in real life but is posited as a logical solution to the main point of conflict. This narrative resolution is, in the end, not made in the postmodern horror film, with the fourth characteristic of this type of horror being the violation of narrative closure.[134] Order cannot be restored in the postmodern horror film, simply because there is no real order for the world to return to; either the monster wins (in effect, championing irrationality over the rational) or there is an open ending, in which danger and disruption become an endemic part of life.[135] Lastly, Pinedo describes postmodern horror as producing "a bounded experience of fear"—in other words, simulating terror and danger, becoming an unconscious way for the audience to cope "with the terrors of everyday life."[136] As mentioned earlier, this bounded experience of terror has important implications for spectatorship, since it causes the audience (namely, the female audience) to be more engaged with and within the narrative environment of a film.

Pinedo's discussion in *Recreational Terror* marks an important shift in the ways in which horror scholars worked to understand spectatorship and identification outside of more traditional ideas where the male spectator is in the forefront. What's important to

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usually male, is punished or killed for his epistemological recalcitrance" (Ibid.). Compare this to Carroll's analysis of films like William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), two examples where in the basic plot structure (onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation, and variations thereof) involves "ratiocination," or a knowing of the unknown (Carroll 1990, 125-126). While the latter, Carroll, privileges a linear narrative structure, with an emphasis on justifying the existence of monstrosity, the former, Pinedo, stresses the oftentimes dread-filled open-endedness of postmodern horror narratives.

[134] Pinedo, 29.

[135] Pinedo, 31-32.

[136] Pinedo, 17, 39.

consider regarding *Recreational Terror* is the fact that it accounts for intersectionality in the horror genre. In one of the final chapters of the text, "Race Horror," Pinedo looks at how the monster in contemporary horror films has been racially coded, as well as at how the postmodern horror film has violated previous genre conventions by occasionally placing the narrative action in the city, a rarity (at the time of publication) in horror films that largely took place in the so-called "ideologically safe environment"[137] of the suburbs, or a campground, or any other open area removed from urban crime. Pinedo asserts that so-called "race horror" is a valuable instrument within the larger sphere of postmodern horror, a prime example of the ways in which conventions are subverted, irrationality dominates, and audiences derive pleasure from and through identification with characters who have otherwise been deemed monstrous Others in classical horror fictions.

Despite her efforts, Pinedo's discussion of race and postmodernity seems to be lacking when compared to her generally well-thought-out analysis of female spectatorship and identification in the horror genre. Outside of Pinedo, a host of other scholars have effectively explored the intersections of feminism, race studies, and horror. Jack Halberstam in *Skin Shows* is one such scholar who looks at all three of these topics. Focusing on Gothic fictions in literature and film, Halberstam argues, along the same lines as Carroll in his discussion of art-horror, that Gothic fiction, as a pre-cursor to modern-day conceptions of horror, is a "technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known."[138] Where Halberstam deviates from Carroll and other scholars within horror

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[137] Pinedo, 112.
[138] Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

studies is his discussion of how difference—racial, which morphs into sexual and gendered difference—is developed in the Gothic, ultimately being communicated as monstrous to audiences. As he asserts, the figure of the monster in Gothic fictions clearly exhibits "embodied deviance," or those physical traits that demarcate from patriarchal, heteronormative, white society. By and large, "embodied deviance" is represented through literal and figurative differences in the skin: "its color, its pallor, its shape mean everything within a semiotic of monstrosity […] Skin houses the body and it is figured in Gothic as the ultimate boundary, the material that divides the inside from the outside."[139] As a blatant marker of difference, the monster's skin in Gothic literature is seen as impure or abject—signifying death and decay, in addition to something foreign and unusual—but also brings to the forefront that which is concealed by or contained within mainstream society, breaking down the boundaries separating outside and inside, foreign and familiar.

The racialization of the Gothic monster ultimately subsumes into its sexualization, a process which, according to Halberstam, involves "other 'others' [becoming] invisible, and the multiple features of monstrosity [degenerating] back into a primeval sexual slime."[140] At its most simplistic level, the sexualized monster encompasses embodies "fears of the foreign and the perverse"[141]—those sexual behaviors which pose an external threat through their perversity, abjection, and danger to procreation. The sexualized monster becomes all the more complex, however, due to its intricate relationship to socio-cultural shifts in mainstream European and American society. In brief, Halberstam

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[139] Halberstam, 7.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Halberstam, 14.

states that "rise of bourgeois culture" and the overall development of nationhood and national identity set a major precedent for the way in which the Other—the real and the fictionalized—was conceived by audiences:

> The construction of national unity increasingly depended upon the category of race and class. Therefore, the blood of nobility now became the blood of the native and both were identified in contradistinction to so-called "impure" races such as Jews and Gypsies. The nobility, furthermore, gave way to a middle class identified by both their relation to capital as producers and consumers and a normal sexuality that leads to reproduction.[142]

The racial monster, already codified as alien and unfamiliar, therefore exhibited behaviors that were altogether against the aims of national prosperity and societal norms, possessing a pathological, non-reproductive, wasteful, and/or distasteful sexuality.[143] Contrasted against normal sexual behaviors, the monstrous sexual body in Gothic fictions is even more threatening due to the power it wields over so-called normal sexuality; it depicts "normal sex as a sickly enterprise devoid of all passion"[144] and incites the dual feelings of pleasure and disgust in the reader. Ultimately, the power that the racial-sexual monster wields through its perversity and abjection makes it all the more horrifying through the lens of Gothic fictions.

Halberstam bridges the gap between Gothic literature and horror film—and between race, sexuality, and gender—in his discussion of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Demme's horror thriller is of particular note in Halberstam's discussion of the Gothic monster, in that it is one of the chief examples of the "switch in emphasis within the representation and interpretation

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[142] Halberstam, 16.
[143] Halberstam, 16-17.
[144] Halberstam, 17.

monstrous bodies from class, race, and nationality to a primary focus upon sexuality and gender."[145] For Halberstam, the impact of the Gothic monster in a postmodern text like *Silence* (namely, the character of Buffalo Bill) proves all the more horrific through its close proximity to others in mainstream society—monstrosity "no longer coagulates into a specific body, a single face, a unique feature; it is replaced with a banality that fractures resistance because the enemy becomes harder to locate and looks more like the hero."[146] Skin in the postmodern Gothic text, rather than inciting physiological fear by bearing more explicit, physical markers of difference, instead combines horrors of the body with horrors of the mind, consequently making transparent desire and pleasure otherwise seen as perverse, threatening, and altogether non-heteronormative. Gender therefore works itself into this equation, at least in texts like *Silence*, by becoming an explicit, deliberate reduction of "norm and pathology."[147] The reversal of typical gendered displays poses a threat to the rigid categories of (cis)gender, calling attention to their ultimate meaninglessness in society. By this logic, race is external, sexuality is internal, yet gender is the middle ground within which these other monstrous identities function in Gothic horror.

This shift from the purely racial to the sexual-racial (and, sexual-gendered racial) in the Gothic may be caused, in part, by the "success of the hegemonic installation of psychoanalytic interpretations of human subjectivity which understand subjectivity as sexual subjectivity and identity as sexual identity and monstrosity as sexual pathology,"

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[145] Halberstam, 24.
[146] Halberstam, 163.
[147] Halberstam, 169.

in Halberstam's words.[148] I see this movement from race to sexuality and gender, however, as a broader movement in horror texts that considers the multiple, Othered identities deemed abject or monstrous in an evolving, patriarchal, and heteronormative society. This, in my opinion, is the underlying value of Halberstam's analysis in *Skin Shows*; despite its shortcomings (such as the occasional conflation of sex and gender in her discussion of postmodern Gothic), it nevertheless excels in its consideration of intersectionality, which previous scholars in psychoanalytic, feminist horror scholarship have neglected to do.

An equally important text when looking at the intersections of racial and gendered representation in horror is Robin Means Coleman's *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*. Focusing on how "horror films can reveal, through representations, [our] understandings of Blacks and Black cultural tropes," in addition to the sociopolitical and cultural implications of these images,[149] Coleman combines theoretical, historical, and reception-based research to formulate an argument about the overall trajectory of blackness in the horror genre—which, as Coleman reveals, is fraught with portrayals that demonize, overly sexualize, and in general make mockeries out of black characters. As she discusses in the first portion of her analysis, on "blacks in film," Coleman suggests that, in the overall trajectory of horror filmmaking, there need not be an explicitly black character in order to "say something about or against Blackness."[150] That is, throughout the course of the horror genre, the metaphorical black

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[148] Halberstam, 24.
[149] Robin Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011), 2
[150] Coleman, 6.

monster—taking the form of traditional, supernatural monsters, in addition to beasts, human-animal hybrids, and even unfamiliar, primal natives or tribespeople—has remained a constant, a looming threat to the stability of a largely white social order. For Coleman, even the lack of racialized characters is telling, with the absence, rather than the presence, of blackness speaking volumes on how horror filmmaking, and by extension American culture, considers race and racial difference. Horror, then, maintains a constant preoccupation with race and, in Coleman's estimation, blackness, serving a more important function as a rhetorical instrument for "sharpening the distinction of the color line" and circulating "society's racial beliefs and angst."[151]

Coleman makes the important consideration of intersectionality in her discussion of race in horror, stating that her analysis, in the vein of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, "takes on a number of '-isms' […interrogating] the consequences of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, separatism, notions of the masculine and masculinity, and of feminism and femininity."[152] Indeed, Coleman, in chapters like "Jungle Fever—A Horror Romance" and "Scream, Whitey, Scream—Retribution, Enduring Women, and Carnality," looks at the ways in which gender and race have overlapped in horror, and how the image of black women in particular has been complicated in the genre. In sum, the horror genre has been historically been preoccupied by two main images of black femininity. Primarily, black women's bodies have been "tied to such hypersexual primitive figures, colloquially referred to as 'freaks,'" whose monstrosity was simultaneously linked to hyper-masculine savagery and sexuality in addition to physical

[151] Coleman, 9.
[152] Ibid.

grotesquerie. Black womanhood, both appealing and repelling, is one facet of the complex ways in which the horror genre, and in particular the early horror film, solidifies the dichotomy between "civilized (human) Whites from savage (beastly) Blacks, thereby distinguishing Whites as examples of racial supremacy."[153]

A second, more contemporary strategy for portraying the black female body in horror filmmaking is the inversion of Clover's "Final Girl," a concept which Coleman rightfully observes is linked to white femininity. As mentioned in my earlier summary of Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, the figure of the Final Girl in horror slashers takes on an active, masculine role in defeating the monster or murderer, becoming the main site of identification for male viewers. When race enters the equation, this theory gets a bit more complicated: how can an audience come to identify with the female characters on screen, when those characters are habitually linked to passivity, inactivity, and, in the case of the above trope, savage monstrosity? For Coleman, the answer to this question lies in the notion of the "Enduring Woman." Like the Final Girl, the Enduring Woman is a figure who, by the climax of a horror narrative, must move "intro fight mode"[154] to defeat the killer in question. Unlike the Final Girl, however, the Enduring Woman is blatantly "highly sexualized, with seduction serving as a principal part of their cache of armaments."[155] Following along the same lines as traditional portrayals of black women in horror, which were highly sexualized (or, at the very least, sexualized in a way in stark contrast to pure, White femininity), the Enduring Woman is still bound to sex, but it is sex that serves as an entry point into the realm of the monster, becoming a tool

[153] Coleman, 38-39.
[154] Coleman, 131.
[155] Coleman, 132.

that can ultimately defeat them. Furthermore, the Enduring Woman differs from the Final Girl in the target of her sex-violence; whereas the latter goes up against a literal, grotesque monster, the former must defeat the metaphoric monstrosity that lies in "systems of inequality"[156]—i.e., the racism and sexism that plague society. As a result, the work of the Enduring Woman is never quite done. Whereas the Final Girl resolves conflict by slashing the slasher, so to speak, the Enduring Woman faces constant conflict with the world around her; as Coleman puts it, "there is no going to sleep once the 'monster' is defeated, as the monster is often amorphously coded as 'Whitey,' and Whitey's oppressions are here to stay."[157]

While the figure of the Enduring Woman arguably reverses the altogether harmful images of black womanhood in prior horror films, in Coleman's assessment, it is not without faults. In part, many 1970s films featuring the Enduring Woman, for instance, characterized black female characters as distinctly and dangerously hypersexual, "ever available for sex, no matter how horrifically violent."[158] This sexual readiness, in Coleman's view, continues the same stereotypes prevalent in horror filmmaking as a whole, which code the black female body as transgressively and monstrously sexual. Additionally, the seemingly progressive and empowering image of the Enduring Woman is often made at the expense of other black characters in film, whose representation calls back to the savagery, abjection, and sometimes buffoonery tied to blackness. Representational strategies related to the black female body, as evident in the Enduring

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[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Coleman, 135.

Woman trope, thus signify the overall fraught landscape of racial representation in horror filmmaking. Even when strides are being made, by this logic, setbacks often follow.

What's important to consider in Coleman's consideration of race in the horror genre is the fact that she considers a wide range of representational strategies tied to the black body and, importantly, leaves room for those films that are not normally linked to horror proper. As she offers in her Introduction, Coleman's analysis of blackness in horror "at times reaches beyond traditional expectations of what would typically constitute a horror film to reveal how—in form and process—that which horrifies is solidified in the imagination."[159] Consequently, Coleman effectively explores how horror and race are bound to one another not just in filmmaking but in the American consciousness, and how both have been realized in fictions at different points in time. Like Halberstam, Coleman also weaves an intricate web of race, sexuality, and gender in her analysis of horror filmmaking, moving beyond one-dimensional considerations of just gender in horror, as other scholars have been guilty of undertaking. Coleman therefore lays the groundwork for a number of other studies on race and gender in the horror genre, which are utilized in several parts of this dissertation.

Nevertheless, Halberstam and Coleman, like the other scholars discussed in this section, fail to include those women behind the camera, who have contributed to and transformed the very images that they discuss in their analyses. As discussed in earlier sections, this movement away from women directors deviates from the larger project of feminist film theory, at least in its earliest first- and second-wave iterations. As Catherine Grant notes, women directors have often been included in the earliest versions of feminist

[159] Coleman, 7.

film theory, where "authorial questions of women's interventions into film-making"[160] were the norm in writings from theorists like Johnston, Kaja Silverman, and Judith Mayne. Moreover, in the 1990s and 2000s interventions in feminist film theory, outside of horror studies, have taken up the project of including marginalized voices—female directors, as well as those with other gender identities—in their theoretical interrogations of film. These include auteur-inflected case studies of directors like Sofia Coppola, Dorothy Arzner, and Ida Lupino;[161] broader production and distribution practices in women's and queer film festivals;[162] and studies considering international women directors and women directors of color.[163] Such developments in film theory are important, in the very least, in their ability to fill those crucial gaps within an existing body of scholarship that otherwise shuts out such marginalized voices. In addition, they are valuable in considering what Catherine Grant describes as "various aspects of directorial 'authors' as *agents*: female subjects who have direct and reflexive, if obviously not completely 'intentional' or determining, relationships to the cultural products they help to produce, as well as to their reception."[164]

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[160] C. Grant, 114.
[161] See texts like "Sofia Coppola: Reading the Director" by Belinda Smaill, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* by Judith Mayne, and *Queen of the B's: Ida Lupino Behind the Camera* by Annette Kuhn, amongst many others.
[162] See texts like *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* by B. Ruby Rich, "Saving space: Strategies of space reclamation at early women's film festivals and queer film festivals today" by Theresa Heath, and *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* edited by Michele Aaron, amongst many others.
[163] See texts like *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* edited by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Cinematic Howling: Women's Films, Women's Film Theories* by Hoi Cheu, and *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* by Patricia White, amongst many others.
[164] Author's emphasis; C. Grant, 124.

Yet, this emphasis on agency has been somewhat lost in horror studies. True, there has been an increasing interest in women who direct, produce, and write horror: namely, Victoria McCollum and Aislinn Clarke's co-edited anthology, *Bloody Women! Women Directors of Horror* (forthcoming as of this writing), as well as the online database, *cutthroatwomen.org*, compiled by Sonia Lupher. Still, not enough, in my opinion, is being done in including these female agents in horror scholarship in the 2000s, especially when compared to the larger body of work on women and queer directing in contemporary film scholarship. I will therefore borrow from those influential horror scholars, as referenced in this literature review, in their consideration of alternative representational strategies. I will also consider, as foundational feminist (and queer) theorists have done in the field at large, those direct interventions from women behind the camera: the ways that they adopt, dismantle, and subvert common horror tropes and, consequently, how such practices intervene within "'elite' and other forms of cultural agency and agent-hood available under patriarchy to particular women at particular times and in particular places," as Catherine Grant puts it.[165] Modes of production, the representational strategies afforded from these modes of production, and the ways that women-made horror offers alternatives to such representational strategies are all important, yet neglected, in the bigger picture of horror studies proper, and throughout this dissertation, I keep these items in mind.

E. Methodology

[165] Ibid.

I approach my study on women-made horror in two interrelated ways. Firstly, I am undertaking an historical study, influenced heavily by a New Historicist paradigm, which can best be defined as the interpretation of a text through social, cultural, and historical means. Importantly, New Historicism looks closely at a "broader cultural spectrum,"[166] considering the other cultural products made alongside, or within the same historical period, as the text under analysis. This approach guides the first part of my analysis ("Chapter II: Horror's Founding Mothers: Women in Proto-Cinema, Visual Avant-Gardes, and the Silent Era") as well as various other areas of my analysis that account for industrial conditions of production, social/cultural/political contexts, and the evolution of genre-specific tropes. The benefits of approaching the history of women-made horror lay in the broader advantages of New Historicism, which in a nutshell allows for an understanding of the cinematic medium as a unit "full of contradictory tensions"[167] and puts films and other adjacent media in conversation with one another, creating a more inclusive and plural analysis of the cinematic medium/institution as a result. Broader themes developed historically and socio-culturally will also be teased out in this historical timeline, which helps transition into the more theoretically driven portion of my dissertation.

This consideration of New Historicism leads to the second way that I am approaching my analysis of women-made horror—by undertaking a close, theoretically driven reading of each of my films. The tools that I will be using to tackle this portion of

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[166] "New Historicism," Poetry Foundation, accessed February 1, 2021, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/new-historicism.
[167] Quoted in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, *Explorations in New Cinema History* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 5.

my analysis derive from horror and horror-adjacent theorists mentioned in my Literature Review; although I am not covering film spectatorship explicitly (which is a substantial component of feminist film practice), I take on the same types of language standard to feminist horror theory in order to dissect and find meaning in each of my chosen films. This approach therefore entails the use of terminology related to psychoanalysis and cultural studies, both of which are at the heart of most feminist film theory articulations. In turn I, in a similar way to the forerunners of feminist theory, am able to better understand how women-made horror both overhauls existing modes of representing women and manufactures new meaning within the text of a film,[168] contrary to what has been otherwise communicated in the male-dominated realm of Hollywood film production. By closely reading the films according to film theoretical paradigms, I am able to tease out how women directors have subverted common tropes and embedded new meaning into them, changing the landscape of representation in the horror genre. My analysis will also help to connect multiple, disparate filmmakers across geographic, temporal, and industrial lines, putting them in dialogue with one another and effectively building a larger network of women-made filmmaking.

I also plan on utilizing other theories, both within and outside of psychoanalytic feminist theory, including post-colonial theories where appropriate. This pluralistic approach will help to expand the theoretical base of my analyses, fortifying a richer discussion of women-made horror and will also include scholarly voices that are otherwise outside of typical discussions of horror cinema. Intersectionality is an incredibly valuable tool for understanding the past and present landscape of woman-made

[168] Johnston, 36.

horror, so taking an intersectional approach to film theory (combining theories of gender with race, sexuality, and so forth) is an important methodological strategy that I adopt in my analysis.

F. Chapter Outline

As discussed briefly in my Methodology section, Chapter II, "Horror's Founding Mothers: Women in Proto-Cinema, Visual Avant-Gardes, and the Silent Era," takes an historical approach to women-made horror, providing an overview of the place of women in the construction of the horror genre in its earliest forms. Covering horrific imagery and themes at the cross-sections of a wide range of media, this chapter accounts for women as creators, molding the more recognizable components of the genre as we see it today, and as communicators who had an indelible role in the ways in which horror was discussed, understood, and therefore normalized in society at large. Importantly, the works created by these foundational figures—across temporal, geographic, and media lines—all have in common the unique ability to take otherwise commonplace images and subject matter (in and outside of horror proper) and give them new meaning. In other words, horror's "founding mothers," as I will argue, were transformative and radical figures, in that they had a hand in creating horror tropes and subverting them, challenging the very notion of what horror could be in the genre.

When considering this transformative role adopted by horror's founding mothers during the formative years of filmmaking, a number of questions related to the status of modern-day horror will emerge. What types of images and themes were developed by these creators? What external circumstances (industrial, cultural, and so forth) impacted

women-made horror? What makes their contributions unique, or separate from their male counterparts? In what ways did they challenge or subvert traditional notions of horror? Such questions will be teased out in Chapters III ("'Some Kind of Animal': Upending Monstrous Femininity in Women-Made Horror") and IV ("Monsters Inside and Out: Space, Place, and Women-Made Horror"). In total, these chapters cover six films that span a range of around 35 years and three continents, each taking on a variety of different aesthetic sensibilities, audiovisual techniques and, above all, approaches to the horror genre. Nevertheless, they share in common two important characteristics. Firstly, such examples of women-made horror offer new insights into the power and potential of horror,[169] experimenting with the genre in new and exciting ways. This leads to their second commonality—that is, their capacity for exploring the nuances, and oftentimes shortcomings, of the existing genre, laying bare the scaffolding of otherwise commonplace genre conventions, and the potential (and, sometimes harmful) shortcomings thereof. Often marginalized within the broader institutions of the film industry, criticism, and historical scholarship, these filmmakers are revolutionary in their interpretations of horror, and a discussion of their films is important for both broadening the horror canon in existing scholarship, as well as opening up new avenues of possibility for women in and around the film industry.

Chapter III, "'Some Kind of Animal,'" discusses three films: *Possibly in Michigan* by Cecelia Condit (1983), *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* by Sarah Jacobson (1993), and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Ana Lily Amirpour (2014). As I argue, each film upends horror tropes like monsters and slashers, all while subverting

[169] Special thanks to Shawn Shimpach for his help in articulating this point.

expectations and make statements about topics related to identity, power, and patriarchal norms. Using psychoanalytic paradigms, this chapter looks at the various horrors that have been aligned with the female body, and the ways that women-horror directors have transformed (and, perhaps, reclaimed) these monstrous images.

The next chapter, Chapter IV or "Monsters Inside and Out," looks at three films that take up the horrors of the everyday: Suzan Pitt's *Asparagus* (1979), Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* (1993), and Peggy Ahwesh's *Nocturne* (1998). As I explore throughout this chapter, horror emerges from the external, public sphere. Using concepts like Patricia Hill Collins' *matrix of domination*, I look at how the emerging threats posed within society are a biproduct of overlapping social, cultural, political, and historical control. In addition to showing the mental trauma and anguish brought about by societal control, these films also, importantly, show ways in which marginalized communities can combat these horrors, whether that is through creative expression, sexual liberation, or some combination of the two.

Lastly, my fifth and final chapter considers those films and media that I have left out of my analysis—whether there are drawbacks to my choice of films, what films I should have perhaps included (and excluded) from my study, and how I could have analyzed the films and directors differently. Likewise, I plan to discuss the broader implications of my research, looking at how this analysis can have applications to other areas of film and media studies. Future directions for the field—what we as film scholars can be doing to actively initiate discussions about marginalized content creators for instance—will also be laid out in this section. This chapter will lastly offer some final notes about the horror genre as it relates to women filmmakers, a reflection of sorts on

the project as well as the future of horror filmmaking (accounting for films up to the present day).

CHAPTER II

HORROR'S FOUNDING MOTHERS: WOMEN IN PROTO-CINEMA, VISUAL AVANT-GARDES, AND THE SILENT ERA

Scholar K. Charlie Oughton begins their discussion of women in silent filmmaking with the following prompt to the reader:

> [Imagine] you are the director of over 400 of the first films ever made and have work ranging from comedy to horror, yet your name is all but lost in time. The achievements are there, all the more impressive for having been completed in an era without the ease of production enjoyed today, and some have survived a century because people recognised their value. You, however, are ignored because of what amounts to little more than fashion. What's more, your successes are "given," by popular assent, to someone else.[1]

While a tad histrionic in style, Oughton does offer a valid point about the status of these pioneering women—that, when compared to their male counterparts, they are given little to no credit, their artistic contributions slowly fading into oblivion while more prominent filmmakers take their place. Indeed, the broader goal of this dissertation is to bring to light women-made horror, an area that, even in its contemporary iteration, is still undervalued in a scholarly context. What is even more perplexing about the status of women-made horror, as alluded to by Oughton, is the fact that earlier works made by female creators have been virtually wiped from the horror canon. Women, certainly, had a complex position in the burgeoning film industry, as described below, but that does not necessarily mean that *all* women were absent from horror film production. Where, then, are these early women of women-made horror?

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[1] K. Charlie Oughton, "When the Woman Shoots: Ladies Behind the Silent Horror Film Camera," in *Silent Women: Pioneers of Early Cinema*, ed. Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson (Twickenham: Arora Metro & Supernova Books, 2016), 241.

This chapter provides an historical overview of the place of women in the construction of the horror genre—namely, the so-called "founding mothers" of the genre, during its literary, artistic, proto-, pre-, and early-cinematic iterations.[2] Covering horrific imagery and themes at the cross-sections of a wide range of media, this chapter accounts for women not as creators, molding the more recognizable components of the genre as we see it today, and communicators who had an indelible role in the ways in which horror was discussed, understood, and therefore normalized in society at large. Importantly, the works created by these foundational figures—across temporal, geographic, and media lines—have in common the unique ability to take otherwise commonplace images and subject matter (in and outside of horror proper) and give them new meaning. In other words, horror's founding mothers, as I will argue, were transformative and radical figures, in that they had a hand in both creating horror tropes, and subverting them, challenging the very notion of what horror could be in the genre. Such radical tendencies extends into the modern day, where contemporary women horror filmmakers share in common the same tendency towards (re)creation and subversion in their films.

Beginning with a more general overview of the role of women in horror media, this chapter will then discuss two founding mothers in early cinema, namely, film pioneers Alice Guy-Blaché and Lotte Reiniger. While both worked separately, approaching the cinematic medium in varying ways, they were nevertheless crucial in the formation of the horror genre, even before "horror" was understood as a unified genre by

[2] "Pre" cinema in this case will refer to all media that came before the development of the cinematic medium. "Proto" cinema instead will refer to the earliest forms of multimedia that incorporate cinematic techniques like projection, movement, special effects, and synchronized sound. The two terms are not mutually exclusive; rather, pre- and proto-cinemas often ran concurrently with one another at various points in time.

audiences and critics alike. Closing this discussion are considerations of horror media from other creators, including Maya Deren, Mary Ellen Bute, and Claire Parker, as well as those artists experimenting with horrific imagery in modern art circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A. Emerging Horrors, Emerging Media

According to scholar Karen Ward Mahar, the landscape of the earliest days of cinema—namely, the decade leading up to the turn of the twentieth century—is one that was characteristically masculine: that is, marked by "doubly enhanced masculine associations, for not only was the equipment the focus of attention, but so, too, was the knowledgeable male narrator who explained and demonstrated it."[3] The burgeoning film industry, with its alignment with the "masculinized arena of applied science joined with the masculinized ethos of the marketplace,"[4] set a precedent for marginalizing female voices, both behind and especially in front of the camera. To be sure, women did have a limited, and later growing, role in many aspects of the early film industry, notably in those positions located indoors that required dexterity,[5] like in film processing, editing, and printing. Furthermore, the commercialization of the photographic medium, which prefaced (and, at times, ran concurrent with) the genesis of the cinematic medium, amassed a substantial female following, with women making popular the art of amateur photography by the turn of the century.[6]

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[3] Mahar, 10.
[4] Mahar, 11.
[5] Mahar, 24.
[6] In Mahar, 16. One could make the argument that there is a correlation between the growth of amateur photography and other visual media, and the rise of popular proto-

Nevertheless, when compared to their male counterparts, women did not prominently figure into cinematic and other related media production until the period marked by "the rise of the nickelodeon" on one end, and "the consolidation of the central-producer system" on the other.[7] This fact, compounded by the relative lack of extant information on the specific contributions that women made to pre- and proto-cinematic multimedia, makes it all the more challenging to provide an in-depth overview of those foundational female figures in the horror genre, let alone in early media as a whole. Indeed, women were present in the creation of pre-cinematic, graphic media, namely, photographic trends like spirit photography, death photography, and magic or trick photography.[8] Women also played an essential role in the colorization of photographic slides for magic lanterns,[9] technologies that formed the basis for phantasmagoria or proto-cinematic performances featuring horrific images. Yet, for all of the technological and aesthetic development witnessed during this era, women creators are, more so than their male counterparts, uncredited. Perhaps this lack of adequate credit towards women points to the rather uncustomary nature of indicating authorship, across gender lines, for popular visual media. In the context of home entertainment, for instance, Melanie Dawson offers that "conventional authorship or even a Foucauldian notion of 'author

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horror entertainments, like spirit photography, trick photography, and other visual illusions.

[7] Mahar, 26.

[8] Given the prominent role of women in the American Spiritualist movement, and the prominence of visual, photographic illusions (in both spiritualist and anti-spiritualist circles), it can be assumed that women participated to some capacity in this type of early horror media. For more information on women and spiritualism, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America*; Kathy Peiss, "Going Public: Women in Nineteenth-Century Cultural History."

[9] Mahar, 22.

function' is, for the most part, inapplicable to this market,"[10] with many types of media released anonymously to the public. Even prior to the advent of silent cinema, short cinematic experiments produced by women—or, on many occasions, co-produced by women and their male counterparts (spouses, relatives, and the like)—did not have proper credit, partly due to this trend towards anonymity, and partly because no proper documentation exists that assigns authorship to these texts.[11] Developing a thorough chronicle of women in pre- and proto-horror, due to the shortcomings in this historical record, can therefore seem like an impossible task. However, one way to alleviate this problem is to broaden the boundaries of what *exactly* can be defined as pre- and proto-cinema, moving beyond mere visual, photographic apparatuses and instead looking at a variety of media where women actively interrogated (narratively, thematically, and even visually) horror tropes. This practice both casts a wider net, so to speak, when considering the myriad ways that women have approached horror, and it also takes into consideration the many possible influences of the earliest horror directors, namely Blaché and Reiniger. These pre- and proto-cinematic areas fall into three categories: literature, theatrical entertainment, and visual modernisms.

Firstly, the area of Gothic literature, as a pre-cinematic influence on early horror cinema, is one that has been explored widely in scholarship, most notably in texts like Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* and, in a more feminist theoretical-driven analysis,

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[10] Dawson, 10.

[11] Scholars like Mahar have observed that women, in collaborative working relationships (making films with spouses, relatives, and the like), took on a "legitimate if often circumscribed role," identified only through their married name, or were dropped from credits altogether. See Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

Jack Halberstam in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Female authors in the eighteenth century onward have been dissected in countless analyses, both in literary and film studies. They are central to the popularization of the genre, having developed their own keen narrative and thematic voice in what some scholars have termed the "Female Gothic."[12] Studies of women in Gothic literature specifically, and Gothic literature in general, have been accused of taking liberties in defining the exact parameters of the genre, for instance, by collapsing the temporal and geographic peculiarities of Gothic literatures plural.[13] Yet, it is safe to say that the shared narrative and thematic tendencies within the body of Gothic literature—for instance, the invitation of "readers' fears and anxieties in highly stylized mystery-tales," as stated by Jarlath Kileen[14]—are important for differentiating the unique contributions of women from the body of Gothic literature as a whole. Moreover, the ways that Female Gothic writers have approached and subverted the Romantic literary tradition have important implications for how we can study women-made horror in the realm of early cinema. The Female Gothic is not particularly unique in the attention that it pays towards topics

[12] The term "Female Gothic" proves to be a widely contentious one. As Ellen Ledoux offers, the Female Gothic was termed in second-wave feminist circles in order to develop a solid, female canon of literature stemming from the Victorian period. However, as Ledoux and others have attested, this body of female authorship is often devoid of the actual "ideological diversity of women writers" (2), instead lumping all authors into one overly generalizable category of authorship. Discussions of the Female Gothic in this essay will take these critiques into consideration. For more information, see Ellen Ledoux, "Was there ever a 'Female Gothic'?," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 17042 (2017): 1-7.
[13] Jarlath Killeen, *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1825-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 1.
[14] Kileen, 2.

like sensationalism, the body, and bodily performance;[15] they have been widely examined through the corpus of Gothic literature as a whole. Yet, the Female Gothic's novelty stems from its ability to transform and subvert these topics as they relate specifically to the female body, portraying woman as having agency and ownership over their own bodies and, in the case of authors like late nineteenth-century author Edith Wharton, using female character and female-centric stories to self-reflectively critique, in Janet Beer and Avril Horner's words, "what is 'forever budding underneath'" in the Gothic tradition.[16] Like women-made horror in early cinema, the Female Gothic is also noteworthy for its alternative narrative structures (like concentric instead of linear narratives, breaks in continuity, and self-reflexivity),[17] characterization (where the female body, and specifically the liberated sexual body, is not aligned with "distasteful spectacle"),[18] and blatant integration of horrific elements (specifically, ghosts and the undead).

The eighteenth-century author Ann Radcliffe is one such example of this subversive way of approaching horrific elements. Radcliffe pioneered the Female Gothic, as well as the Gothic genre as a whole, thereby securing the title, according to Lauren

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[15] Yael Shapira, "Where the Bodies are Hidden: Ann Radcliffe's 'Delicate' Gothic," *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 18, no. 4 (2006): 454-455.
[16] According to Janet Beer and Avril Horner, Edith Wharton's texts used a combination of comedic elements like travesty, pastiche, and satire with traditional Gothic ghost stories, as well as expressions of a distinctly female sexual energy, to produce "meta-fictional commentaries that address issues of desire, power and narrative control (both cultural and literary" (285). In Janet Beer and Avril Horner, "'This isn't exactly a ghost story:' Edith Wharton and Parodic Gothic," *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 2 (2003): 269-285.
[17] Manuel Aguirre, "Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror, and Science Fiction," *Gothic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2008): 1-17; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality," *Modern Language Studies* 9, no. 3 (1979): 107.
[18] Shapira, 462.

Fitzgerald, of the "great inaugurator of the genre."[19] In Yael Shapira's assessment, the value of Radcliffe's fictions comes, in large part, from the ways that she freed herself from the ideological stipulations related to female behavior, of the "concept of 'delicacy' as a code that seeks to regulate female interaction with the body's verbal representations,"[20] in terms of both the agency that was granted to her female characters, as well as the agency that she herself obtained through the act of writing in the Gothic tradition. This agency, I argue, is bound to Radcliffe's explicit use of horrific elements, and the ways in which horror and the supernatural are explained away, a technique referred to (sometimes, in the negative) by Terry Castle as the "explained supernatural."[21] Radcliffe as a Gothic author was very much attuned to the horrors of the unnatural and the unknown, herself remarking that "[terror] and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them."[22] Ghosts, the supernatural, and the unexplained were all central to Radcliffe's brand of Gothic horror, and were indeed commonplace in a host of other Gothic fictions during the era. The "explained supernatural" in texts like *The Italian* (1797) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), conversely subverts the ghost trope by assigning a level of rationality—and, a sense of corporeality—to the supernatural, allowing Radcliffe to "incorporate ghosts into her text and at the same time

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[19] Fitzgerald cites Eugenia C. DeLamotte and Cynthia Griffin Wolff as two scholars characterizing Radcliffe as the "great inaugurator of the genre." In Lauren Fitzgerald, "Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies," *Gothic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 12, 17n19.
[20] Shapira, 454.
[21] Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120.
[22] Quoted in Shapira, 455.

qualify, and ultimately negate, their presence."[23] This incorporation of and approach towards horrific elements has a number of implications, such as an alignment with contemporaneous societal views on death and dying: that is, "both a new anxiety about death, and a new reactive absorption in mental pictures."[24] Radcliffe's preoccupation with ghosts, aside from articulating late eighteenth-century "antipathy toward death in all its aspects," also exposes the irrationality of this fear toward death, instead endorsing a "constant denial of physical death" where the spiritual realm can enter the corporeal not through supernatural processes, but through faculties of the mind.[25]

Importantly, the horrific elements that were the hallmarks of Radcliffe's Gothic fictions, despite being explained away, were nevertheless presented in such a way so as to normalize their presence; in other words, to borrow from scholar Terry Castle, the supernatural "is not so much explained […] as it is displaced. It is diverted—rerouted, so to speak, into the realm of the everyday."[26] As a result, the narrative spaces carved by Radcliffe in fictions like *Udolpho* lend themselves to a certain uncanniness, a level of peculiarity and unease that signals to the reader that, upon penetrating the surface of the everyday, rational society is not truly as it appears to be (as in *Udolpho*, where the boundaries separating the dead and alive are blurred—ghosts "may be of someone living

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[23] Shapira, 456.
[24] Castle, 130.
[25] A so-called "Radcliffian model of mourning" (Castle 1995, 135) is an interesting precursor to nineteenth century spiritualist beliefs endorsing "the notion that the familiar souls of the dead continued to dwell in a nearby invisible realm, invited communication with the living, and awaited a happy future meeting with those who had mourned them in this life" (131). This period is noted for its experiments with spirit photography and other spiritualist performances/media. While it is too highly speculative to assume that one directly inspired the other, the connection between Radcliffe's writings and such pre-horror media is hard to avoid.
[26] Castle, 124.

or dead"—and sometimes even the living take on the appearance of apparitions to the protagonist, Emily, at various points in the narrative.)[27] Such an approach to ghostly apparitions, therefore, adds a deeper level of horror to Radcliffe's texts: "distinctions between fantasy and reality, mind and matter, subject and object, break down,"[28] making subjective experience all the more untrustworthy and horrific. Furthermore, by permeating the fragile boundaries between the natural and the supernatural/unnatural, Radcliffe in effect breaks down ideological assumptions of Otherness, exposing what is on the "other" side,[29] as well as showing that the Other, rather than being outside of the boundaries of society as we see it, is instead on the inside, a part of our day-to-day lives. The uncanny in this sense takes shape in its liminal, paradoxical nature, its ability to be altogether present and absent, making it all the more horrific.

Radcliffe's uncanny is presented by using a number of different strategies. On the one hand, Radcliffe constructs characters with techniques akin to unconscious, mental formations, like displacement, condensation, and representation.[30] These Freudian processes take the form, textually, in ways such as (1) constructing characters whose physical attributes "mirror" and "blur"[31] into each one another; (2) introducing characters at later points in the narrative, when they are confirmed dead or disappeared at some prior point in time; and (3) having characters being spoken or thought into existence,

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[27] Castle, 123.
[28] Castle, 127.
[29] Aguirre, 5.
[30] It is no secret that Radcliffe's fictions predated Freudian psychoanalysis. Therefore, an important point to stress is that these textual strategies are similar to those dream processes described in the work of Freud, and that their commonalities are purely incidental.
[31] Castle, 126.

seemingly appearing out of thin air once other characters visualize them in their memories. On the other hand, Radcliffe's narrative structures inherently occupy the space of the uncanny through the process of suspending "causal order" and, consequently, placing "individuals in the no-man's land of an indefinitely extended threshold, a phantom territory which intrudes between action and result, between cause and effect, thus keeping the fugitives in a permanent betwixt-and-between condition."[32] This nonlinear narrative structure is not peculiar to Radcliffe, as many authors, male and female, have adopted this so-called "narrative chain of regressive norms,"[33] making characters move backwards, forwards, and sideways within the same narrative space. But, through techniques like "lengthened perspectives," interrupting and halting action, weaving together multiple storylines, and the like,[34] Radcliffe, at least in this point chronologically, is one of the first female authors to experiment with the passage of linear time. Beyond mere narrative innovation, the textual strategies honed by Radcliffe in her Gothic fictions also set a broader precedent for the ways in which horror was realized in fictional media, including pre-cinematic media. Ghosts and the supernatural, indeed, incite fear and fascination in the audience; however, the instability and irrationality of real life incite horror on an entirely different level, bringing the horrific into everyday life.[35]

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[32] Aguirre, 10.
[33] Aguirre, 8.
[34] Aguirre, 9-10.
[35] It is perhaps worth noting here that, alongside Radcliffe, another important female author created horrific, Gothic narratives: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818). According to Ellen Ledoux, Shelley and other writers belong to the so-called "male" gothic," in which "ghosts, devils and other supernatural phenomena demand a willful suspension of *disbelief* from the reader"

Theatrical entertainments, both in the private and public spheres, are a second pre-cinematic area that lends itself to the formation of the early horror genre. Scholars like Janet Wolff have often noted the blatant gendered lines that were drawn in nineteenth-century cultural circles, with women confined to the private, domestic sphere, unless otherwise accompanied by men in public arenas like pubs, coffee houses, and the theater.[36] Likewise, because of woman's inscribed place inside the home, and the overall barring of women from cultural and intellectual institutions, women were also limited in their "access to cultural production." That is, those women in wealthy circles were still patrons of the arts, but at a distance, donating funds to help sustain these art institutions but not actively participating in them. Moreover, the arts (and art education) were certainly a means to an end, so to speak, only existing so women could acquire "an honorable education."[37] Therefore, this apparent "culture of domesticity"[38] led to separation on a number of fronts: the physical and institutional separation of genders, the separation of socio-economic groups along gendered lines, and the separation of women from cultural production. This last point has a number of implications—representationally, stylistically, and otherwise. The broadest consequence of this gendered situation, according to Wolff, lies in the "narrow range of 'types' of women represented in fiction,"[39] of the ways in which female tropes were developed in the media, and how these messages recirculated norms within society. Again, the alignment

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(emphasis added; 2017, 3). I therefore have not included Shelley in my analysis, which instead favors the Female Gothic.

[36] Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

[37] J. Wolff, 24.

[38] J. Wolff, 13.

[39] Quoted in J. Wolff, 26.

of women with the home was prominent during this time, and women who crossed the boundaries of the public and private were often characterized as the "fallen woman"[40] in a number of visual media. Women, already possessing little agency in the types of images that were being produced during this time, were therefore locked into stereotypical roles ascribed by the dominant male society.

Arguably, while agency was denied in such visual representations of women in the nineteenth century, it was granted in new capacities in a host of other media, such as home entertainments and parlor games. For scholars like Dawson, home entertainments served as a valuable tool in nineteenth-century American life, challenging "middling ambitions for polite manners, for streamlined professionalism, and for genteel living, showcasing visions that extended beyond the comfortable circumstances of everyday life to celebrate displays of exaggerated, unsocial bodies."[41] In the case of women who actively arranged, promoted, and participated in home entertainment media, these performances were of particular value. As Dawson suggests, not only did these media offer a "specialized and fulfilling type of work that was once congruent with the social life of a class,"[42] but also, significantly, enabled women to, literally and figuratively, act out of their prescribed societal roles, all within the comfort of their own parlors. Women during these games would take on a host of different tasks—assigning roles to each player, designing the costuming and makeshift theatrical sets, interpreting how each story or game would be told, to name a few—that would indirectly assert their dominance during such leisurely games. But, above all, women as individual players were able to

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Dawson, 1.
[42] Dawson, 101.

take on character roles that were in stark contrast to their assigned, gendered roles in real life, in effect "remaking personal identity"[43] through exaggerated performances. These games would therefore blur the lines between class and gender, and would also, through performance, challenge the very notion of these boundaries, oftentimes in very discreet ways.

Women's agency in home media has interesting connections to the nascent horror genre. Namely, a popular variety of home entertainments involved plots featuring the grotesque, bizarre, and otherwise horrifying, encouraging participants to display their bodies in similar ways. Dawson offers that, common to these types of leisurely performances were (1) literary adaptations of popular proto-horror texts, such as the works of Edgar Allan Poe; (2) "isolated, shocking displays," such as prompts that instructed participants to contort their bodies into bizarre positions, or mimic mythical, monstrous figures; (3) "magic tricks and elaborate wordplay," which were common across public and private performances alike; and (4) tableaus and scenes depicting the savage Other, where grotesqueries were grafted onto racial minorities and indigenous groups.[44] Above all, these performance had in common the capacity for individuals to challenge the demands of self-presentation and control within mainstream society, to use the body to cross boundaries between normal and abnormal, and to explore the abstract spaces in-between. Grotesque performances in this regard were concerned with breaking expectations, challenging social norms, and deviating from unified social groups in order to gain bodily autonomy.

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[43] Dawson, 103.
[44] Dawson, 78, 80.

For female home performers, playing with the grotesque and horrific also meant dissecting and questioning the gendered stipulations on what can and cannot be done with the body. Much like Female Gothic authors, women in this instance were given the agency to "deliberately, playfully [work] against normative poses, transforming themselves into bizarre and unsocial spectacles."[45] Rather than crossing the social boundaries that separated male and female, public and private, women would subvert the very roles and expectations put on the female body and be rewarded for it, as many games rewarded "the player who most obviously [departed] from social, genteel behaviors."[46] Moreover, these horrific spectacles encouraged looking, not towards women as passive objects, but instead as ones who actively welcomed the act of viewing as a reciprocal interest, as a communal activity with the shared goal of experiencing the grotesque body. To be sure, performing, looking at, and being looked at "blurred the oppositional stances of viewing and being viewed,"[47] which had important implications for the ways in which the female body could be situated in pre-cinematic performance media. Those grotesque home performances enacted by women erased the boundaries between the normal and abject, a process of subverting tropes and images extending into women-made horror films. These women were not the sole creators of grotesque home entertainments, but suffice it to say they had enough creative agency in the ways in which these open narratives were presented and, most importantly, used the female body as instrument for creating horrific spectacles.

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[45] Dawson, 74.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Outside of home entertainments, several other pre- and proto-cinematic performances paved the way for the early horror genre, with women at the center of such displays. As mentioned previously, spiritualist media were widely consumed in the American context; in addition to spirit and trick photography, traveling spiritualist performances, like home seances, hypnotism and mesmerism, magic shows, and other live spectacles[48] were widely popular, existing somewhere in the interstices between the public and private spheres. These horror-themed performances incorporated women to varying extents; Anna Eva Fay, for instance, was one of the foremost spiritualist performers, incorporating feats of telekinesis, telepathy, and all-around supernatural forces into her acts.[49] Maggie and Kate Fox, known collectively as the Fox Sisters, rose to prominence through so-called "spirit rapping," traveling door-to-door for home performances involving, according to David Chapin, "spiritual manifestation and investigation that appealed to a nineteenth-century audience"—namely, explaining supernatural knocks, taps, and raps, otherwise explaining the unexplained through spiritualist means.[50] Even before the popularization of spiritualism, women figured heavily in horror-themed performances, in America and abroad, in the form of magic acts. Performing alongside their male counterparts in music halls, open-air gathering spaces, and private clubs and pubs, these female magicians "came forward in ever increasing numbers to present the whole spectrum of professional magical activity and, in

[48] Rhodes, 45-47.
[49] Rhodes, 46.
[50] David Chapin, "The Fox Sisters and the Performance of Mystery," *New York History* 81, no. 2 (2000): 161

some cases, to travel the world."[51] Much like the home performances playing with the grotesque and the horrific, these public and semi-public performances effectively broke down barriers dictating woman's bodily decorum, while also interrogating her place within the domestic sphere (after all, female performers were literally leaving the home to perform and travel in male-dominated spaces). Moreover, common to these magical performances in general were proto-cinematic innovations, like projected images, electrical effects, and other moving-image techniques.[52] Magicians like Vonetta would frequently use projections and other visual multimedia in their acts, which resulted, in this context, in her employment in the burgeoning film industry, in front of and sometimes behind the camera.[53] Women, by this logic, were at the forefront of innovations that would extend to early silent film, and their use of horrific elements arguably paved the way for experimentation with the grotesque and supernatural in adjacent visual media.

Lastly, visual modernisms developing prior to and at the turn of the twentieth century, in my opinion, played a unique role in the formation of early silent horror. As discussed in the previous chapter, movements like dada and surrealism can be characterized for their "juxtaposition of the banal and the sublime, pleasure and terror, dreams and life,"[54] with the two slightly overlapping due to their preoccupation with shock and fright. Visual artists outside of film, in this context at least, therefore had a

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[51] For more information on specific female magicians, see Amy Dawes, "The Female of the Species: Magiciennes of the Victorian and Edwardian Eras," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (2007): 127-150.
[52] Rhodes, 49-50.
[53] Dawes, 146.
[54] Carl Royer, B. Lee Cooper, and Diana Royer, *The Spectacle of Isolation in Horror Films* (Philadelphia: Haworth Press, 2005), 2.

special relationship to the horror genre. Emmy Hennings, for example, coupled the plastic arts with performance in order to represent ideas like the "loneliness, sadness, and oblivion" of postwar society, in pieces like *Puppen* (ca. 1916).[55] To extend the "shock techniques and disturbing tactics that Dada would develop," she offered an alternative to the superficiality of the modern world in her performances as Arachne, the "truth-speaking spider."[56] In a similar way, Sophie Taeuber accentuated her own contorted, grotesque bodily performance with the elongated, distorted paper masks of Marcel Janco[57] to produce, in Nell Andrew's words, "a hybrid of visceral abstraction" that "gives Dada's static art its most physical presence and realness, while also performing its drive toward disintegration and death."[58] These visual artists used horror-adjacent techniques as a response to modernity and all of its political and technological implications. For women artists working within and concurrent to the advent of silent cinema, such a response extended to the shifting role of women in modernity—their place in society, as well as their status as artists within these movements themselves (namely, in movements

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[55] According to Thomas F. Rugh, Henning's puppet work can be described as the following: "The three dolls […] slump and hang like marionettes. The doll in the center looms above the other two, its arms outstretched in cruciform shape; the one on the right kneels and gestures toward the central figure, shunning it as if it represented an evil power. The doll slumped in the lower left corner is lifeless and oppressed by the doll above. The faces are gaunt and frowning, their bodies angular." Thomas F. Rugh, "Emmy Hennings and the Emergence of Zurich Dada," *Woman's Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (1981): 3.

[56] In such performances with the Cabaret Voltaire, Hennings props her head in the middle of large, outstretched arachnid legs, becoming the thorax of a nightmarish human-beast hybrid. For more information, see Ruth Hemus, "Dada's Female Form: The Interventions of Five Women Artists, Writers and Performers in the European Dada Movement," Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2006, 42.

[57] For examples, see "Sophie Taeuber-Arp," Hauser & Wirth, accessed January 1, 2021, https://www.vip-hauserwirth.com/online-exhibitions/sophie-taeuber-arp/.

[58] Nell Andrew, "Dada Dance: Sophie Taeuber's Visceral Abstraction," *Art Journal* 73, no. 1 (2014): 29.

like surrealism, which opened a path for women artists more than any other movement of its time).[59] Most notably, many female avant-garde artists interrogated "a whole chain of signifiers" dominant in visual iconography, like "the infantile, primitive, unconscious, erotic, monstrous, excessive, abject, and insane."[60] Artists like Frida Kahlo,[61] Leonora Carrington, Claude Cahun, Marcel Moore, and others often took on representational strategies like the self-portrait in order to turn "to their own reality" and reveal "their rejection of the idea of woman as an abstract principle, and a substitution of the image in the mirror as a focal point in their quest for greater self-awareness and knowledge."[62] Placing images of the self into heightened, distorted environments and contrasting them with icons of death, decay, the bestial, and the visceral, these artists communicated personal, internalized states while, in some cases, critiquing the very visual language used by their male counterparts. While such implicit, yet pointed, statements about gender relations certainly were not the collective project of these female artists, horrific images and themes exploited in such artwork helped subvert the gendered conventions of society in their day. These types of representational strategies would later materialize both in concurrent avant-garde cinemas, as well as the broader, future landscape of women-directed horror.

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[59] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 43.
[60] Tirza True Latimer, "Equivocal Gender: Dada/Surrealism and Sexual Politics Between the Wars," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, eds. David Hopkins and Dana Arnold (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 444.
[61] Despite her claims to the contrary, Kahlo will be included amongst surrealists here, due to contemporaneous critics like André Breton and current art scholars labeling her work as "quintessential surrealist modernism." For more information, see texts including Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism;" Alyce Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary."
[62] Chadwick, 74.

B. Pioneering Filmmakers: Blaché and Reiniger

Prior to the so-called "cycle of horror" termed upon the 1931 release of Tod Browning's foundational horror adaptation, *Dracula*, according to David Annwn Jones, "earlier films which inspire fear as 'Gothic,' 'mystery,' 'fantastic,' and 'fantasy' works"[63] were common across silent filmmaking, becoming popular in the cinema of attractions, that pre-narrative era in which the technological capabilities of the new medium (the "thrill of display," in scholar Tom Gunning's words)[64] were favored over a cohesive storyline. Indeed, the concept of motion pictures was intrinsically bound to such early notions of horror, with the replication and projection of images, as well as the special manipulations of such images, itself deemed as having a terrifying tone. Horrific content was a popular feature across silent filmmaking, but unfortunately, most scholarship accounts for those contributions from men—whether they are from the surreal, effects-laden shorts of Georges Méliès, or from the broader oeuvre of seminal filmmaker D. W. Griffith, or even from male directors in larger cinematic movements like German Expressionism. The contributions of women, despite their neglect in the literature, are equally as important as their male counterparts. Just as women were seminal in pre- and proto-cinematic horrors, so too are they valuable in early cinematic horrors.

Take, for example, the films of Alice Guy-Blaché, a pioneer of filmmaking well beyond the horror genre. Considered to be the first woman filmmaker,[65] Blaché took on

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[63] David Annwn Jones, *Re-envisaging the First Age of Cinematic Horror, 1896-1934: Quanta of Fear* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 5.
[64] In Rhodes, 95.
[65] For all intents and purposes, Blaché can be considered the first female filmmaker on record. However, it is worth noting that Lois Weber also holds a distinction as among the

many roles in the emerging film industry, first working as secretary for Léon Gaumont's *Comptoir général de Photographie* and later establishing firm relationships amongst film engineers, camera operators, and marketing firms.[66] Her keen interest in the mechanics and industry of film would later lead to her desire to experiment with the art of filmmaking, asking permission from Gaumont himself to "write one or two little scenes and have a few friends in them"—in other words, to create one of the first (if not, the first) narrative films.[67] The result, *La Fée aux choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*),[68] revolutionized the ways in which films were structured, in part transitioning from a cinema of attractions (to borrow from Tom Gunning's theory) to fully formed narrative films, and significantly was one of the first experiments with material otherwise recognizable as fantasy. Fantasy, myth, and the fairy tale, according to Carroll, are all valid descriptors that, in a similar way to the more standard fare of the horror genre, entertain the same types of "naturalistic explanations of abnormal incidents."[69] By this logic, horrific elements present in early filmmaking are cut from the same cloth, so to speak, as fantastic ones. Fantasy can be understood as prefiguring horror, and while the former is not structured in the same way, nor does it elicit the same type of audience

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"firsts" in film history, as the first female filmmaker "of American nationality" (Slide 1986, 79 n. 1). Blaché therefore was the first, but not the *only* woman working in the film industry during this period.

[66] Anthony Slide, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy-Blaché*, trans. Roberta and Simone Blaché (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 15.

[67] Slide, 27. To be sure, Blaché assisted production on, and was responsible for the prints of, dozens of different films during her time at Gaumont, but never received full credit for them.

[68] The year of the film's release is up for debate. In some instances, Blaché herself lists the release year as 1896 (hinted at by the remark, "In 1896 unions did not exist;" 28). According to Slide, film historians like Francis Lacassin date the film at 1900, due to its placement in the Gaumont film catalogue (28, n. 1).

[69] Carroll, 16.

affective response as the latter, they overlap and can describe broader creative tendencies towards representing, and sometimes normalizing, unexplainable phenomena and the human imagination.[70]

La Fée aux choux is by no means a horror film, nor can it be considered amongst the larger body of films, both preceding and following it, that have been described as exclusively using horrific elements. It is, indeed, light-hearted and innocent fare, featuring a young couple who welcomes their newborn baby from the magical, titular cabbage patch. Nevertheless, *La Fée*—Blaché's earliest surviving film—is important to consider when outlining the director's larger tendency towards experimenting with the marvelous, something that she would approach throughout her career with editing techniques[71] and subject matter. This preliminary cinematic experiment would moreover lay the groundwork for a host of Blaché's other forays into fantasy, most notably in her American career with the establishment of her production company, Solax, in 1910. A number of films in Blaché's trajectory as director and producer, while marketed as dramas or thrillers, would stake a much larger claim in the fantastic, the marvelous and, later, the horrific. These films include 1912's *The Wise Witch of Fairyland*, whose so-called "strong mystic atmosphere"[72] are an extension of *La Fée*; *The Witch's Necklace*, also released in 1912, which despite being advertised amongst Solax's "big two-reel

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[70] Viktória Prohászková, "The Genre of Horror," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 2, no. 4 (2012): 132.
[71] Blaché describes the process of filming *La Fée* as one filled with experimentation, noting that she discovered "many little tricks" such as fast-forwarding, reversing, superimposition, fades, and double exposures (Slide 1986, 29). These techniques would prove valuable during her career, as she would employ such techniques in numerous films, like *Chez le Magnetiseur* (1898), *Le Statue* (1905), and *La Vie du Christ* (1906).
[72] "Coming [The Wise Witch of Fairyland]," *The Moving Picture World*, 1912, 544.

spectacular" melodramas, were marked by their use of magical possession and nightmares;[73] and *The Woman of Mystery* in 1914, a film praised (again, as a drama-thriller) for its "unusual air of mystery and adventure."[74]

These and other films in Blaché's venture into fantasy-horror are significant for their visual innovation, marked by their radically different visual and thematic approaches which were dictated, in part, by the tone and subject matter that the director was trying to achieve. No two films, ultimately, looked alike, and the diversity within Blaché's fantasy-horror oeuvre run the gamut from the melodramatic, the realistic, the light-hearted and childlike, and the psychologically and physically disturbing. Arguably, the most explicit of these films—and the film that single-handedly cements Blaché's status as early horror filmmaker—is 1913's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, adapted from the Edgar Allan Poe short of the same name.[75] Following the tradition of such Poe adaptations made popular during the silent era,[76] Blaché's interpretation of *Pit* utilized the same types of "gruesome" and "blood-curdling"[77] techniques as both Poe and his cinematic successors and was characterized in reviews, promotions, and even Blaché's

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[73] "Coming: Big Two Reel Spectacular Melodrama," *The Moving Picture World*, 1912, 1124.

[74] "The Woman of Mystery," *The Motion Picture News* (1914): 54. According to Gary D. Rhodes, Blaché's other films within the spectrum of horror-fantasy include *A Message From Beyond* (1912), *The Eyes of Satan* (1913), *The Case of the Missing Girl* (1913), *A Drop of Blood* (1913), *Shadows of the Moulin Rouge* (1914), and *The Dream Woman* 1914). In Rhodes, 113-114.

[75] Only the first of three reels exists of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and can be found at The Library of Congress, and (in varying qualities) on online platforms like Youtube.

[76] Much like his impact on horror literature, Poe's writings had a lasting impact on the fledgling horror genre in film. Not only was Poe adapted for the screen, but many of the plot devices and themes present in Poe's work were taken as inspiration by filmmakers. For more information, see Rhodes, 346-357.

[77] In Rhodes, 350.

personal accounts on the production of the film as a truly terrifying cinematic experience. Popularly quoted as having "great pleasures in observing the shivers and anguished sighs of the public,"[78] Blaché herself used language connoting fear, terror, and danger during the making of the film, which no doubt could have extended to the interpretation of the film by the trade press. "Contrary to general opinion," Blaché describes, "filming often offers real dangers. Mortal accidents are not rare. Fortunately we never had anything of the sort to deplore, as we judged that the best of films was not worth a man's life."[79] While downplaying the relative perils of filming, Blaché then somewhat contradicts herself, detailing ways in which, for instance, food was smeared on props and the bodies of actors in order to get live rats to crawl on their bodies (rats that would later try to escape, infesting the studio and quashing the attempts of Blaché's bulldog in eradicating them from the building).[80] The relative abjection taken into consideration when producing *The Pit and the Pendulum*—handling food waste and raw meat, employing copious amounts of live vermin—certainly constructs a mythos around the film that squarely situates it within the realm of horror. Reviews of the film broaden this alignment with the earliest forms of the horror genre, providing the discursive scaffolding for how these films were understood, talked about, and how they indirectly influenced audiences to react in the same way.

"The literary keynote of this work is suspense," writes a reviewer from *Exhibitor's Times*, "It is gruesome. It is harrowing […] The director even intensified the suspense by flashing every now and then the rescue party making its way through the

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[78] Slide, 73.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Slide, 72.

subterranean passageways, so that the spectators could not help oscillating between fear and hope. It had the genuine fascination of terror."[81] The language employed throughout the review communicates both the tonal quality of the film (the suspense, fear, and terror that the reviewer feels, and that the audience subsequently *should* feel upon viewing the film), and its visual qualities, of its alignment with the grotesque, and the altogether chilling or horrific. *Pit*'s horrors are discussed at an even greater length towards the end of the article, where the reviewer, despite lauding the film's intricate recreations of medieval Europe, had an almost visceral reaction to its scenes depicting torture:

> The one great drawback of this film portrayal was the entirely unnecessary torture scene. There was positively no legitimate reason for showing us the agony a woman on the rack, to say nothing of a man, to all outward intent, being actually racked. After the first shock is over, the spectator reminds himself that it is all pretense anyway, and that the incident consequently loses its real value for him.[82]

Underscoring the extreme brutality of the scene—which, to be fair, was relatively graphic for the time—this review clearly isolates the physical gruesomeness of the film's climactic torture sequence. It also pays considerable attention to the psychological thrills and chills woven throughout the film's overall narrative. Despite critiquing the heavy-handedness that Blaché took in her adaptation of the source text, the advantages of this extreme dramatization result in a final product in which the "cumulative intensity […] is overwhelming. It sweeps the spectator off his feet and deluges him, as it were, in a veritable maelstrom of horror. It does Poe justice, indeed."[83]

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[81] R.R., "'The Pit and the Pendulum,' A Study in Suspense," *Exhibitor's Times* (1913): 6-7.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

The physical violence and psychological horrors found in *The Pit and the Pendulum* were at the forefront of a variety of different contemporaneous reviews. *Today's Cinema News and Property Gazette*, the supplemental insert for *The Cinema*, for instance, applauds Blaché's interpretation of Poe's "indescribably weird atmosphere" and "diabolical cruelty practiced by priests in the days of the Inquisition."[84] They continue: "It depicts in a strongly impressive manner the mental and physical agonies endured by a man wrongly accused of theft," writes the reviewer, "It is a gruesome spectacle, but so beautifully presented that everyone must be impressed."[85] *The Bioscope*, moreover, observes that, despite some unintentionally comedic content—during "the spectacle of the monks gazing down at their monstrous work"—Blaché succeeded in creating "a grimly sensational drama"[86] that does justice to the horrific source text. W. Stephen Bush for *The Moving Picture World* echoes these sentiments, noting that the film effectively adds a coherent plot to "a succession of horrors," and that the actors "portray the emotions evoked by mental and physical tortures […] with complete success."[87]

It is clear that Blaché was lauded by a variety of critics for her blending of impressive (albeit over-the-top) visuals with renderings of complex psychological states. Indeed, the value of *The Pit and the Pendulum* comes from its "unabashed presentation of dramatic horror,"[88] one of the first of its ilk in silent film. However, the value of Blaché's contribution to the horror cannon—something that I find makes it all the more

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[84] "The Pit and the Pendulum and A Balkan Intrigue. Two Important Releases by the Capitol Film Company," *Today's Cinema and Property Gazette*, *The Cinema* (1913): 69.
[85] Ibid.
[86] "The Pick of the Programs: What We Think of Them," *The Bioscope* (1913): 321.
[87] W. Stephen Bush, "The Pit and the Pendulum," *The Moving Picture World*, 1913, 644.
[88] Rhodes, 350.

powerful as an entry into horror—is its experimentations with spectatorial alignment, of its blatant efforts to align the viewer with the perspective of the tortured in the film's infamous pendulum sequence. The years leading up to *The Pit and the Pendulum* can best be described as "the nickelodeon era," a period of around ten years where exhibition practices would dictate the types of films that were being made, as well as how they were being distributed. For Rhodes, the nickelodeon era marked a shift from trick films to "story films," those features with an increased reel length/running time and distinct tendency towards realism in the ways that subjects were presented.[89] Post-nickelodeon era, films were longer, with filmmakers expected to create narratives combining realistic storylines with thrills, chills, and excitement. Promotional and in-theater materials were crucial in heightening the tone of the films that they would accompany, setting expectations for the audience as they consumed films.[90] *The Pit and the Pendulum*, debuting in the interstices of the nickelodeon and post-nickelodeon eras, is arguably one of the first films to successfully use such ancillary materials, and is important for the distinct ways in which the film and its ancillary materials immersed its audience in the horrors of its plot.

According to Jones, lobby cards distributed during screenings of the film depicted key stills of the torture of the protagonist, Alonzo (Darwin Karr), framing these images in a way so as to "allow an intimate audience reaction to the prisoner's growing distress."[91] Rather than maintaining a safe interpersonal distance between the camera and the subject, Blaché positions Alonzo in intimately invasive ways—head tilted back towards the

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[89] Rhodes, 104.
[90] Rhodes, 109.
[91] Jones, 51.

camera, limbs outstretched towards the dark abyss of the pit[92]—providing the illusion that the audience, too, is trapped alongside the victim. In other lobby cards, Blaché's "oblong field of shot itself simultaneously [gives] us these voyeuristic close-ups of Alonzo *in extremis* and also [serves] as the fourth encroaching wall almost as an adjunct to his torture."[93] Even before the audience begins watching the film, their perspective is aligned with the victim of torture. With a few clever cinematic techniques (involving lighting, depth of field, and focal lengths, as described in surviving press materials), they are placed squarely into the realm of horror, or rather, the realm of psychological horror. In-theater supplementary materials, alongside reviews using a language of horror, help set up expectations for the audience of what they will see and how they should react to this cinematic content. For Blaché, such cinematic innovations were nothing new, with scholars like Wheeler Winston Dixon noting that the director pre-dated D. W. Griffith in her use of coherent, linear plots, multiple camera focal lengths, and even special effects like color tinting.[94] However, *The Pit and the Pendulum* would be one of the first times that Blaché would use such techniques for eerie, horrific effect. Coupled with ancillary materials, they heighten the film's horrific tone to an extreme. Such innovations point to the overall novelty of Blaché's film in the horror genre and her exhibition and promotional strategies in the early film industry.

Other innovations present in Blaché's adaptation of *The Pit and the Pendulum* are related to the creative liberties that she takes with the structure of Poe's narrative and the

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[92] Jones, 51-52.
[93] Jones, 52.
[94] Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Frame By Frame: Alice Guy-Blaché," University of Nebraska-Lincoln, September 27, 2010, video, 3:13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqlD7RLoNAI.

ways she situates the characters within this narrative. In the original source text, the storyline is more free-flowing and dream-like, having very little semblance to a traditional, linear narrative. Blaché, on the other hand, directly sets "the action during the time of the Spanish Inquisition and [adds] a narrative framework to establish reasons why the protagonist would be unjustly subjected to such cruel torture," according to Kevin Hayes.[95] Blaché also adds another dimension of interpersonal conflict to the plot, chronicling a love triangle between Alonzo, his lover Isabelle (Blanche Cornwall), and the rejected Pedro (Fraunie Fraunholz).[96] Indeed, Blaché maintains this dream-like (or, nightmare-like) structure in the torture sequences, for they provide an eerie break from reality that places the audience in the mindset of Alonzo. However, what is truly impressive about Blaché's interpretation of *Pit* is her ability to house this more abstract sequence within a larger, more realistic plot structure. This realism, rather than lessening its impact as a horror film, heightens it instead, displaying the horrors of the every day. In turn, Blaché broadens the definition of horrific elements, expanding the boundaries of cinematic horror that would have reverberations in contemporary sub-genres like psychological horror, psycho-thrillers, splatter and torture porn, and, as discussed in my third and fourth chapters, entries in women-made horror that have upended such tropes for radical, feminist means. Such experimentation with linear narrative had lasting

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[95] Kevin Hayes, "Alice Guy's 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1913)," *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 2, no. 1 (2001): 37-42, 37.

[96] In the midst of this narrative, Isabelle is falsely accused of being a witch by Inquisitors, who blame her in part for the disappearance of religious jewels, and vow to torture her accordingly. Not only does the inclusion of witchcraft further align it with the horror genre, but this plotline also mirrors the general tendency in American filmmaking to bring justice to those accused of witchcraft; that is, to prove that these women have been wrongfully accused. On the Isabelle plotline, see Jones 2018, 50; on the inversion of the witch trope in early horror filmmaking, see Rhodes 2018, 155-156.

influence on women-made horror, particularly in avant-garde circles explored in the next section.

The German animator Lotte Reiniger is another prominent figure in the landscape of silent cinema, and while many of her works feature light-hearted, childlike images and narratives, I argue that they have important implications on the overall development of horrific images in film. Reiniger and Blaché, on the surface, are radically different filmmakers: they worked in different media (the former employing animated cut-outs, the latter with traditional cinematic apparatuses); they rose to success in different countries, and in different time periods[97]; and, above all, whereas Reiniger as a filmmaker adapts "a Victorian pastime, the toy theatre, with its long and deep connection to flights of the imagination,"[98] Blaché took on a wide range of genres, and approaches to these genres, with a relatively firm stance in realism (or, at the very least, magical realism, as is the case with *La Fée*). Reiniger's work, therefore, is largely valued for its appeal to children in addition to adult audiences, while Blaché stakes no such claims.

Nevertheless, there are some important commonalities between the German animation pioneer, Reiniger, and the innovative French/American filmmaker, Blaché. To start, both Reiniger and Blaché began their careers in cinema by collaborating with other prominent male figures. Reiniger, for instance, frequented Berlin arts circles in the early 1920s, entering personal and professional relationships with the likes of Walter Ruttmann, Rochus Gliese, and, later, Paul Wegener, with whom she created some of her

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[97] There is, however, a bit of overlap in terms of when the two women worked: Blaché's career tapered off around the same time as when Reiniger's gained momentum, in the early to mid-1920s.

[98] Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 391.

first animated silhouettes for title sequences in films such as *Rübezahl's Hochzeit* (*Rübezahl's Wedding*; 1916), *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln* (*The Pied Piper of Hamelin*; 1918), and *Apokalypse* (*Apocalypse*; 1918).[99] Reiniger would later have lasting, professional relationships with the likes of Julius Pinschewer, with whom she would make a number of advertising films; Fritz Lang, who would commission (but, would eventually delete) animated sequences for *Die Nibelungen* in 1923; and, notably, Carl Koch, her future husband.[100] Unlike Blaché, Reiniger worked steadily in the film and television industries well into her old age. Like Blaché's successful beginnings as Gaumont secretary, Reiniger's start in silhouette animation led to her directorial success, where she would gain respect for her peers and eventually gain enough creative agency to make films on her own.

The second and perhaps most apparent connection between Reiniger and Blaché is their experimentation with fantasy, fairy tales, and the marvelous in their debut films. Much like Blaché's fantastical *La Fée aux choux*, Reiniger's first feature film, *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (*The Adventures of Prince Achmed*) in 1926, portrays a world that follows "a familiar fairy-tale trajectory"[101] featuring magic and the supernatural. Operating in "an *other* world, one that operates according to self-contained

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[99] Frances Guerin and Anke Mebold, "Lotte Reiniger," *Women Film Pioneers Project*, accessed May 30, 2020, https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/lotte-reiniger/.
For a complete listing of Reiniger's early silhouette contributions, see "Lotte Reiniger," *Filmportal.de*, Accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.filmportal.de/person/lotte-reiniger_c94c9327f5cc4ce8ac33debaf05e27e0.
[100] Via *filmportal.de*.
[101] Megan Ratner, "In the Shadows," *Art on Paper* 10, no. 3 (2006): 46.

but different laws,"[102] *Achmed* also contains a thrilling storyline in which the titular character must escape from the clutches of an evil magician and eventually free a benevolent fairy from a tribe of demonic beings.

What's unique about *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*—aside from the artistry with which Reiniger crafts her paper silhouettes—is the way that she incorporates horrific elements into an otherwise tame, family-friendly fairy tale. As critics like Frances Guerin and Anke Mebold have pointed out, Reiniger's animations could in fact be read as being "more suited to adult than to child audiences," with their source material (fables, myths, and other common stories) having subject matter implicitly "filled with contradictions, satirical commentary, and often, strong erotic undertones."[103] And, as mentioned previously, fantasy and the supernatural, for scholars like Carroll, have important connective threads to the horror genre, exploiting the same aesthetic and thematic content. Many sequences in *Achmed*, I argue, toe the line separating fantasy and horror and, while not wholly entering the realm of horror proper, contain horrific elements (supernatural, grotesque, and abject elements that can elicit fear), making it an important precursor to early horror cinema. As Marina Warner offers, Reiniger with *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* enters "a universe of different kinds of dark,"[104] playing with a number of different fears—both real and fictional, natural and supernatural—which cause it to enter the realm of horror in diverse and interesting ways.

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[102] Author's emphasis; Elinor Cleghorn, "In a Tiny Realm of Her Own: Lotte Reiniger's Light Work," in *Women Artists, Feminism, and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices*, ed. Lucy Reynolds (Camden: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 43.
[103] Guerin and Mebold, n.p.
[104] Warner, 402.

Critics picked up on similar traits upon viewing *Achmed*, largely using language that emphasized the fantastical, unreal world woven by Reiniger in her silhouettes. Hans Wollenberg in *Lichtbild-Bühne*, for instance, remarks that the storyline itself is "very bizarre," featuring figures like ghosts and monsters that, while frightening, are "particularly beautiful."[105] Describing the film as "one of the most interesting things of the kind ever produced," the English-language *The Educational Screen* also pays attention to the strangely beautiful way that otherwise monstrous contents are portrayed in the film, how "they vie in naturalness of movement, in grace and agility with those of the ordinary film."[106] A reviewer for the Viennese *Der Filmbote* further praises the "romantic winding path" that Reiniger weaves in her film, equipped with an "exciting, baroque-decorated love story of princes and princesses, battles and adventures, [ghosts] and magic."[107] Such horrific, supernatural elements are further emphasized in other publications, like in reviewer Willy Haas's discussion of the film, noting the film's contrast between "wit and grace" and a more grotesque portrayal of "strictly stylized" atmospheric details like churning winds, fog, and water.[108]

Reiniger's use of horrific elements extend well beyond the fairy tale dreamscapes found in *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*. Critic Rudolf Arnheim, for instance, goes as far as to say that the director's cut-paper techniques in films like *Doktor Dolittle und seine Tiere* (*Doctor Dolittle and His Animals*; 1928) are ideal in that the "imagination of

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[105] Hans Wollenberg, "Die Geschichte Des Prinzen Achmed," *Lichtbild-Bühne*, no. 104 (May 3, 1926).
[106] "In Berlin," *The Educational Screen* (January 1926): 180.
[107] "Die Geschichte des Prinzen Achmed," *Der Filmbote* 40 (October 2, 1926): 27.
[108] Willy Haas, "Lotte Reinigers Silhouettenfilm," *Lotte Reinigers Silhouettenfilm: Die Geschichte des Prinzen Achmed* (Comenius Film, 1926), 15.

a child can make a monster more frightening, an exploit more daring and extravagant […] than the literal representations in puppet or cartoon, which automatically limit and impoverish the visionary, fantastic mental imagery of the viewer."[109] While children are the focus of Arnheim's review, his notion—that animation heightens horrors in the mind of the spectator—can certainly be considered with audiences of all ages. In using animated silhouettes, Reiniger exaggerates the physical features of her fictional monsters, beasts, and other horrific creatures, thereby, to quote Rachel Palfreyman, reveling "in stretching and transforming skins, bizarre births and the unleashing of unknown and powerful beings dwelling deep within."[110] These techniques add a level of grotesquerie to seemingly real, natural objects and lend a sense of hyperreality to those entities that live in the depths of the imagination. As a result, Reiniger's films use exaggerated animations to bring to life those beings that, literally and figuratively, live in the shadows.

An unfortunate side-effect of Reiniger's use of horrific elements is the way that she ties them to the racialized Other. In other words, several of her pre-war films grotesquely exaggerate those physical features of characters (mainly, villains), so as to fit highly stereotyped images of South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Semitic peoples. Rachel Palfreyman observes that throughout her early career, Reiniger shows an "aesthetic engagement with the East,"[111] as evident in the types of stories that she tells, as well as the cultural-historic settings within which she sets her narratives. Moreover, these films

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[109] William Moritz, "Some Critical Perspectives on Lotte Reiniger," in *Animation: Art and History*, ed. Maureen Furniss (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15.
[110] Rachel Palfreyman, "Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's Die Abenteur des Prinzen Achmed," *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 1 (2011): 15.
[111] Palfreyman, 11.

arguably feature characters with heavy-handed, racially coded features—for instance, "the caricatured Chinese, the African features of her witches and goblins, the apparently exaggerated Semitic profile of [*Achmed*'s] enchanter himself."[112] While Reiniger would later abandon these conventions after leaving Nazi Germany, these racialized horrific elements point to a much larger trend mirrored by the animator, whether purposefully or otherwise, in representing non-white peoples. It is no secret that cinema and visual media at large often linked the image of the ethnic Other with that of the monster. Chinese people in particular, at least in an American context, were deemed "abnormal and thus threatening and even frightening"[113] because of their foreign appearances, customs, and beliefs. In some cases, the racial Other was deemed altogether unreal, where "the Other appeared coded as fictional"[114] due to their improbable, abnormal ways of living. Reiniger certainly extends these conventions of the racialized Other, assigning primitiveness and grotesquerie to antagonistic racial characters. Reiniger's films become even more impactful, her characters more monstrous, because they exist within "an 'other' fairy tale realm quite without regard for any social or historical reality."[115] Reiniger was not the first to exaggerate such features and code them as monstrous; because of her hyperreal silhouettes, however, they became even more exaggerated as

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[112] Warner, 401. One rather peculiar entry into Reiniger's oeuvre, 1928's *Der scheintote Chinese*, is an example of the blatant blending of horror with race. Set in ancient China, the film features faked deaths, and evil doctor, and an attempted hanging of a homeless man. The film grotesquely exaggerates the Chinese characters' features, particularly that of the doctor: his fingers are gnarled and wrinkled, eyes are slanted into extreme angles, and in one frame, his body is contorted to mimic that of a small monkey. For more information, see "Lotte Reiniger," *Filmportal.de*, Accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.filmportal.de/person/lotte-reiniger_c94c9327f5cc4ce8ac33debaf05e27e0.
[113] Rhodes, 256.
[114] Rhodes, 257.
[115] Palfreyman, 11.

racialized Other and as monstrous Other. While Reiniger was innovative in the way that she created her monsters, she also had a much more complicated relationship with race that cannot be ignored.

Blaché and Reiniger made valuable contributions to the visual look and feel of early silent horror. Additionally, their engagement with the avant-garde amplifies the horrific content in each of their films. For Reiniger, the avant-garde is realized through the medium of animation, and the ways that she incorporated color, rhythm, and movement within films like *Achmed*. As many accounts have offered, Reiniger was heavily involved with Berlin experimental animation circles, becoming acquainted with artist Hans Curlis, amongst others, in the late 1900s and participating in a German independent film association with Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and Asta Nielsen in 1930.[116] Reiniger was therefore familiar with film art's capacity to "transpose material forms into moving images […] and institute the dynamism of graphic forms as the '…basis for a new visual language,'"[117] which were the common goals of the avant-garde Absolute film movement. Importantly, the overly exaggerated silhouettes, with their fluid but non-realistic gestures, operate within "an *other* world […] according to self-contained but different laws";[118] the manipulation of form, movement, and time lends a sense of unease and uncanniness to the world of the film, therefore entering the territory of the horrific.

C. Beyond the Studio System: Deren, Bute, and Parker

[116] Cleghorn, 46; Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).
[117] Cleghorn, 47.
[118] Author's emphasis; Cleghorn, 43.

"When Lois Weber warned would-be female directors in 1927 that they would 'never get away with it,'" writes Mahar, "the age of the female filmmaker appeared to be over."[119] To be sure, as the Hollywood film industry expanded economically (with the rise of the studio system in the late-1920s) and technologically (with developments such as synchronized sound and the transition to color film), the number of opportunities for women behind the camera decreased significantly, with only one director, Dorothy Arzner, finding relative success during this transition.[120] Furthermore, as studios became "larger, centralized, and dependent on outside capital," different roles within the film industry became largely gendered, with women being pushed out by their male counterparts and placed instead in roles with less creative control.[121] The rise of horror as a unique, and altogether profitable, genre in the early 1930s, consequently, is a phenomenon credited in large part by male directors, for gender dictated the type of creative roles women could occupy and the types of films they could direct, if given the opportunity. Women, once "touted as artists" and argued as bringing "special talents to the screen," were now viewed as being intrinsically different from their male counterparts, their abilities constrained to so-called feminine dramas, like social-problem

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[119] Mahar, 204.
[120] Mahar, 205.
[121] Mahar, 204. According to Mark Garrett Cooper, factors like vertical integration, the rigidity of production roles (ultimately eliminating the pipeline that actors and screenwriters would travel to become directors), and the overall opinion that directing "would be men's work" (Cooper 2010, xvii), each helped to eliminate women from major directorial opportunities. Even studios like Universal Pictures, who were unique in their employment and promotion of a large number of women behind the camera, abandoned these progressive practices in favor of such industrial developments. In Mark Cooper, *Universal Women: Filmmaking and Institutional Change in Early Hollywood* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

films, serials and, above all, melodramas.[122] Horror, therefore, was a male enterprise, at least within the context of the studio system; women, on the outskirts of this industry, were defined "as suitable filmmakers *only* when the subject of was germane to women."[123]

Given the gendered discrimination of the Hollywood studio system, it would appear as if women's participation in the horror genre, during and after this industrial shift, is relatively scant. On the contrary, a number of women creators within avant-garde film circles experimented heavily with horrific elements, their contributions arguably vital to the expansion of the genre as a whole. For some, the use of horrific elements mirrors the playful, experimental tone of Reiniger. One such example is Mary Ellen Bute, whose work combines traditional animation, lighting techniques, music, and other visual effects[124] to reproduce a unique audiovisual language, like Reiniger and other Absolute Film proponents, and, in Bute's words, to create "a world of color, form, movement and sound in which the elements are in a state of controllable flux," with film thus becoming "a stimulant by its own inherent powers of sensation […] on the effect it produces."[125] Bute's films, along these lines, immerse the viewer fully within a sensory experience that heightens their affective response to a film. This is most evident in her

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[122] Mahar, 190.
[123] Author's emphasis; Mahar, 192.
[124] These include such experiments with light and movement, which reproduced "constant flowing forms" like "swirling liquids, clouds or circles" (which were created by common household items like mirrors, cellophane, kitchen tools, and jewelry). See William Moritz, "Mary Ellen Bute: Seeing Sound," *Animation World* 1, no. 2 (1996): 29-32.
[125] Mary Ellen Bute, "Light Form Movement Sound," *Design* (The Center for Visual Music Literacy), 1956.

1939 short animation, *Spook Sport*,[126] a "new type of film ballet" that combines traditional, popular horror visuals (like ghosts and so-called "spooks") with *Danse macabre*, a classical song and poem chronicling the activities of the undead on Halloween.[127] Bute, while not explicitly staking a claim in the horror genre, animates her abstract, neon-colored illustrations in such a way to as to both physically visualize sound[128]—in this case, the frightening tune of the *Danse macabre*— and lend a further sense of eerie uncanniness to otherwise inanimate objects. As indicated in its opening intertitle, the film depicts "the bewitching hour of midnight, [when] spooks and ghosts arise from their graves to cavort about and make merry."[129] Certainty, throughout the film, Bute expertly fulfills this description, layering darting, dancing, and morphing creatures on top of a foggy, mysterious midnight sky. The menacing and altogether unpredictable movements of the ghosts, spooks, and other creatures, which interact within a traditionally scary environment, therefore add a more horrific tone to the film. Bute then calls upon her audience to experience the film in a fully sensory way, encouraging their frightened, or at least uneasy, response to the content of her film. *Spook Sport*, beyond merely featuring horrific elements, amplifies its status as a horror film through its affective capacity.

For other artists, the combination of the avant-garde and horror genre harkened back to the foundational works of Blaché, borrowing from multiple genres and narrative

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[126] *Spook Sport* is oftentimes credited to animator Norman McLaren, who collaborated on some of the visuals for the film.
[127] Mary Ellen Bute, dir., *Spook Sport*, filmed 1939, Youtube, 7:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnLJqJBVCT4.
[128] Sandra Naumann, "Bute and Nemeth," https://maryellenbute.ima.or.at/cat3.html.
[129] Bute, *Spook Sport*.

techniques, as well as displaying, in tandem, physical and psychological horrors. Animator Claire Parker, together with husband and collaborator Alexandre Alexeieff,[130] paid similar attention to the horror genre, using the novel pinscreen, or pinboard, animation method in each of their films. In brief, this animation medium, invented specifically by Parker and Alexeieff, consists of thousands of small metal pins held upright and moved around by a roller system; when lit in different positions, shadows emitted from the pins created moving images that could be photographed.[131] The result of the pinscreen is rather distinct. In Maureen Furniss's assessment, not only does it afford a "wide variety of image types […] from abstract to representational, from realistic to stylized and from firmly modeled to softly amorphous" due to the positioning of the pins relative to the lighting apparatus, but these images also have an almost nightmare-like quality, becoming more "loosely constructed, blending into the [background] rather than being self-contained forms."[132] This then leads to a number of creative possibilities. In *Le nez* (1963), Parker and Alexeieff use these fluid movements to capture a variety of emotions on their characters' faces, seamlessly weaving between thriller, drama, and dark comedy in the process. In their earliest and most famous work, 1933's *Night on Bald Mountain*, the pinscreen effectively enters the realm of horror. Described by Arthur G.

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[130] Like Bute, Parker's films are often solely attributed to a male collaborator; in this case, Alexeieff is listed above Parker in their films' credits.
[131] Maureen Furniss, "Alternatives in Animation Production," in *Art in Motion, Revised Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 54. In 1973, Norman McLaren released a documentary in which Parker and Alexeieff demonstrate the technology and creative capacity of pinscreen animation amongst fellow animators. For more information, see *Pinscreen*, streamed in full by the National Film Board of Canada.
[132] Ibid.

Robson as "a nightmare, a *Walpurgisnacht*,"[133] the film takes inspiration from Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, and features a dizzying, chaotic montage of witches congregating on top of the titular mount. Like Bute, Parker and her collaborator combine the rhythm of a thrilling, sometimes chilling classical score with the fluid movements of horror characters; in *Bald Mountain*'s case, these include floating witches, grotesque animal hybrids, and shadowy, demonic creatures. Moreover, like Blaché's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *Bald Mountain* combines physical horrors (human and animal faces mutating into one another, bodies floating in mid-air, and so forth), with the psychological, focusing on tormented emotional states just as much as visual grotesqueries. Viewers are often shown innocent victims—or what appear to be innocent victims—grimacing and contorting in horror at the very sight of the witches' activities. Enveloped in "shadows and shine, positive and negative space, surface and depth, and above all else, the virtual and actual,"[134] the spectator is witnessing the victim's reactions but, because of the frequent lighting and movement techniques, the spectator is also left in a state of utter chaos. The film as a result, leaves the viewer in a perpetual state of horror, immersed in a "tragicomic story of life and death"[135] where confusion and mental anguish are at the forefront. *Night on Bald Mountain*, in its surreal imagery, aptly encapsulates the sheer terror of the source material—the Witch's Sabbath—and the eventual societal and physical persecution that accused "witches" would face as a result.

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[133] Arthur G. Robson, "Une Nuit Sur Le Mont Chauve - Film (Movie) Plot and Review," *Film Reference*, accessed April 20, 2020. http://www.filmreference.com/Films-No-Or/Une-Nuit-sur-le-Mont-Chauve.html.
[134] Alanna Thain, "In the Blink of an Eye: Norman McLaren Between Dance and Animation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 168.
[135] Robson, n.d., n.p.

Bald Mountain, as a result, has important implications for how trauma, and specifically women's trauma, can be represented on screen. A striking entry into women-made horror, Parker's animation combines horror and the surreal to chronicle the terrors of the everyday.

For others, using horrific elements in film followed in the longer tradition of visual modernisms outside of film, like in dada and surrealism. Maya Deren, one of the foremost figures in US avant-garde film circles during the 1940s and 1950s, is an interesting example of this, given her own tangential affiliation with surrealist filmmaking and her subsequent work in collaboration with fellow artists like Marcel Duchamp.[136] Deren's work across her career can be characterized by the themes of autobiography, modern subjectivity, and subconscious exploration, as well as her frequent experiments with movement and mobility (juxtaposing physical movements like dance with experimental, visual techniques) and, in her later works, explorations of Afro-Caribbean culture.[137] Importantly, a common thread through all of Deren's works is a fascination with dreams—not just the nonsensical, abstract imagery that is commonplace

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[136] Sarah Keller, "Done and Undone: Meshes of the Afternoon and Witch's Cradle," in *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 67. Deren "did not consider herself a Surrealist, she felt her art form [sic] was more controlled than allowed by the movement's original objectives using 'stream of consciousness'." (Philpot 2001, n.p.). However, the case has been made by both contemporaneous and current critics for surrealism, noting her tendency towards conveying "the Imaginary, to map the very psychic structures that predate and predetermine both the 'eye' and the 'I' […]" (Harper 2016, 290).

[137] Maria Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (1997): 25; Graeme Harper, "Maya Deren In Person in Expressionism," in *Expressionism in the Cinema*, eds. Olaf Brill and Gary D. Rhodes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 291; P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Catrina Neiman, "An Introduction to the Notebook of Maya Deren," *October* 14, no. 4 (1980): 4.

to dreamlike states, but also, in the words of Sarah Keller, the temporal "logic of dreamscapes" that takes shape in nonlinear narrative structures and the "emotional experience" that one may have with their dreams.[138] What has often been neglected from these discussions of Deren's use of dreams, however, is how it implicitly grafts onto the horror genre. In her most famous work, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943),[139] Deren constructs a dreamlike world—characterized by "collapsing and expanding of time and space, meticulous structure, mysterious symbology and imagery, and recursive, poetic logic"—which, as its narrative unfolds, quickly shifts into a nightmare-scape marked by violence, death, and an overall sense of disarray.[140]

This experimentation with psychological horror is expanded in Deren's incomplete film, *Witch's Cradle* (1944),[141] which combines dreamlike qualities (like the movement of inanimate objects, and repetition of actions and events) with actual horrific elements, like a beating heart, ritual magic, witches, and occult symbols (prominently, the pentagram painted on the forehead of actress Anne Matta Clark.[142] The result of Deren's combination of such horror tropes with the display of jarring psychological states is two-

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[138] Keller, 32.
[139] Like many of the artists discussed in this chapter, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is attributed to two directors; in this case, the film is directed by both Deren, and her then-husband, Alexander Hammid.
[140] Keller, 42.
[141] Several parts of *The Witch's Cradle* are lost, but in general, the film was not completed. This, according to some, is because Deren herself "must have surmised that [the film] did not or would not be successful at some point in the production" (Keller, 61).
[142] There are confusing inconsistencies as to the correct name of the actress playing Deren's witch. Sources like IMDb, for instance, list the actress as "Pajorita Matta;" other, particularly in reference to her artist son, Gordon Clark, use "Anne Clark Matta," "Anna Matta," and "Anne Alpert" in their records. For the purposes of consistency, I'll be using "Anne Matta Clark" (referenced in Sarah Keller's text) in my analysis.

fold. On one hand, the film immerses its viewers in a seemingly never-ending labyrinthine journey that constantly threatens the protagonist with literal and figurative stasis; vine-like strings frequently constrain the protagonist and her non-linear, non-resolute movements in time. On the other hand, in her exploration of magic and the occult related to the female body, Deren makes implicit statements about gender. As Keller offers, "the 'witch' invoked in the film's title both [wields] an excess of power and yet [is] always in danger of punishment for her brazen independence."[143] In other words, the use of horrific elements in *Witch's Cradle*, through the trope of the witch, communicates the fraught status of women as both "wielding an excess of power" and being "in danger of punishment for her brazen independence."[144] Indeed, Matta Clark's witch character oscillates between being powerful and powerless, eventually ensnared by a series of web-like ropes that appear in the empty gallery space. However, by the film's end, the witch reclaims agency through her magical powers: through the simple act of looking, she is able to set herself free from the ropes, a literal and figurative symbol of restrictive power in society, and redirect them towards the figural, oftentimes grotesque artworks that fill the halls of the gallery (perhaps a representation of the restrictive, "boy's club" in the modern art world). *Witch's Cradle* ultimately ends on a cliffhanger, with Matta Clark's witch once again cowering in fear over the ropes that twist across the gallery. Yet, this uncertain ending works to turn the witch trope on its head; rather than merely representing the woman-as-witch as a figure in constant persecution by her male counterparts, as was more or less common in the horror trope, Deren presents a witch that

[143] Keller, 66.
[144] Ibid.

is multi-dimensional, one that works to regain her agency and actively work against the inevitable persecution that she faces within society. At its core, horror is impactful because it encapsulates power dynamics, of the chaotic back-and-forth between dominance and submission that results, in mainstream iterations, in the latter. Deren, through her aesthetic reconceptualization of the witch trope, reconceptualizes horror as a genre, constructing a world in which the monster character is indeed complex, and the power struggle is one where there is no clear-cut resolution. Coupled with the distinct mythos surrounding Deren's own persona as an artist,[145] the visual and thematic experiments in *The Witch's Cradle* propel it into a distinct realm of horror, one that is extended in more contemporary iterations of the genre that reclaim the witch.

As I have discussed in this section, the works of directors like Bute, Parker, and Deren were located outside of the studio system, during a time that generally eschewed the creative input of women behind the camera. Other female directors like Ida Lupino, tangential to the Hollywood studio system, lent a unique perspective to the horror genre: namely, those filmmakers working in low-budget filmmaking and, in Lupino's case, television production. For many directors in general, working on the outskirts of big-budget, studio filmmaking proper—on "Poverty Row," in so-called B-Movie filmmaking, and even in non-mainstream, underground circles—proved to be advantageous, despite the fiscal and technological challenges that came with it. Low-budget filmmaking, according to Blair Davis, grew to become lucrative in contrast to their higher-budget, A-Movie counterparts by the 1950s and afforded a number of directors creative leeway,

[145] Rumors of Deren as a witch place her in a unique position with the horror genre, reinforcing "the image of Maya as an occult priestess, the exotic 'angle' of her story which most journalists still find irresistible" (Neiman 1980, 15).

encouraging different genres, topics, and aesthetic styles to be incorporated in such films.[146] This freedom, for lack of a better term, extended to women in the industry; women were re-introduced, to a certain extent, to creative roles within the filmmaking industry and in many cases were granted the same creative freedom as their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, the works of non-mainstream directors like Bute, Parker, and Deren were valuable for their expansion of horrific elements developed by other seminal female creators as well as their new interpretations of such content aesthetically and thematically. As I argue in this chapter, the trajectory of the cinematic medium—and all of the multi-media experiments surrounding it—is enriched by the contributions of women, who laid the groundwork for how we understand horror as a unique and popular genre. The creative contributions of these women—some prominent, some obscure, and some that were altogether anonymous—are indeed novel for their experiments with horror *as a genre*. In other words, they were preoccupied with how the genre (and, all of its earliest iterations) looked and felt, and how audiences could and should understand the content they were consuming. Later experiments came from affective response in particular: namely, how the spectator should react to and interact with on-screen horrific content. Slowly, horrific themes were also interrogated, as directors coupled visual experiments with subversive statements on society, gender, and the self.

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[146] Blair Davis, *Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 11-12. To be sure, most production companies had a creative stronghold over their directors, even those working with a lower budget. Nevertheless, a "new way of making films outside of the major Hollywood studios"—both in terms of production practices, and aesthetic choices—came to fruition during this time.

In this formative period, horrific elements were rather cut-and-dried; in other words, such women-made horror films mirrored more traditional horrific elements found in literature, folklore, the arts, and other media. Outside of mainstream filmmaking, and catalyzing in the postwar context, arguably, the horror genre got turned on its head, with women reversing, subverting, and offering unique alternatives to existing tropes. In the same way that horror's founding mothers were revolutionary in their development of the genre, women-made horror immediately following this period is radical in its reinterpretation of the genre, situating horror as a larger statement on topics like gender, sexuality, race relations, and the like. What, then, can we make of women-made horror in a contemporary context? What types of horrors are being explored, and how are they used as a communicative tool? What makes their contributions unique or separate from their male counterparts, if at all? All of this is touched upon in the following chapters, through a critical, and to a lesser extent historical, overview of several female horror media creators.

CHAPTER III

"SOME KIND OF ANIMAL": UPENDING MONSTROUS FEMININITY IN WOMEN-MADE HORROR

A dark, stormy night. The sudden flickering of a lamp—on and off, and on again. Shadowy figures lurking in the corridors. A taste for flesh. A taste for *human* flesh. Blood and viscera and dismembered body parts strewn haphazardly on the ground. Garish smiles peeking through thick clouds of smoke. Ghosts. Demons. Beasts. The undead. The deformed. Inhuman shrieks and howls piercing through the stillness of the night. A disembodied hand, stretching out to reach its next victim. A gasp. A scream. An eerie silence.

When considering *horror* as a stand-alone genre across media, a number of these and other thoughts presumably flood one's imagination. Surely, such notions of horror are warranted; as Stephen Prince offers, "any given horror film will convey synchronic associations" with an audience, with the most resonant aspect of the genre being its "confrontation with uncertainty, with the 'unnatural,' with a violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside."[1] Horror has been defined by and through such visual, aural, and thematic tropes, normalized within the very early cinematic experiments in my earlier discussion, and while there has some cross-genre experimentation, the argument stands that horror overall encompasses fear: a fear of the

[1] Stephen Prince, "Introduction: The Dark Genre and its Paradoxes," in *The Horror Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 2.

unknown, a fear of the interstitial, a fear of a "loss of humanity"[2] via unnatural transformation, decay, or death.

The monstrous images that have proliferated within the horror genre, for scholars like Creed, have been grafted onto the female body, with woman's sexuality, sexual difference, and bodily and reproductive functions coded as monstrous or abject.[3] Popular horror media, while having "fewer classic female monsters than male,"[4] is nevertheless preoccupied with sexual difference and, importantly for Creed, establishing enough physical and behavioral difference on the part of women so that they are feared and, ultimately, granted less agency within patriarchal society.

While Creed's and other scholars' claims about female monstrosity can be corroborated across the larger trajectory of horror in mainstream, Hollywood filmmaking, this is not the case, I argue, in women-made horror. Each of the three films that I discuss in this chapter—*Possibly in Michigan* by Cecelia Condit (1983), *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* by Sarah Jacobson (1993), and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Ana Lily Amirpour (2014)—upends horror tropes like monsters and slashers, all while subverting expectations and making statements about topics related to identity, power, and patriarchal norms. Using psychoanalytic paradigms, this chapter looks at the various horrors that have been aligned with the female body and the ways that women-horror directors have transformed (and, perhaps, reclaimed) these monstrous images.

A. When the Woman Bites Back: *Possibly in Michigan* and Female Cannibalism

[2] Prince, 3.
[3] Creed, 7.
[4] Creed, 4.

"Sharon attracted violent men," declares the narrator in Cecelia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan*. "Strangely, she had a way of making the violence seem like it was their idea."[5] Debuting in 1983, Condit's experimental short indeed places violence at the fore, the spiritual successor of the artist's previous film, *Beneath the Skin* (1981), which builds a grotesque world contrasting "grizzly [sic] scandal" with "female adolescence […] derailing spectators and interpretation alike."[6] Moreover, the violence practiced (and, as many can argue, endorsed) by the film's protagonists, plus its setting in 1980s suburbia, easily situates *Michigan* amongst the myriad blood-soaked, gore-driven "slasher" films popular during its release. *Possibly in Michigan*, at first glance, situates femininity with monstrosity, following what Creed describes as "an illustration of abjection"[7] from its alignment with death, cannibalism, and the enjoyment derived thereof. Yet, when giving the film a deeper look, Condit instead upends the images and themes that have been traditionally aligned with Creed's so-called "monstrous feminine," instead giving women agency and power *through* their monstrosity. Rather than displaying women as those figures who must be feared, Condit in *Possibly in Michigan* transforms women from the objects of horror to autonomous bodies that, to paraphrase Patricia Mellencamp, put on and undo "societal prescriptions and taboos regarding women's" gendered roles in society. A semi-linear, dream-like flow of images, sounds, and story beats, told from the perspective of the female leads, *Michigan* also subverts the very narrative and thematic

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[5] Cecelia Condit, dir., *Possibly in Michigan*, filmed 1983, Youtube, 11:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLJNSD3H5sg.
[6] Patricia Mellencamp, "Uncanny Feminism: The Exquisite Corpses of Cecelia Condit," *Framework* 32 (1986): 112.
[7] Creed, 10.

hallmarks of the horror film, therefore becoming a radical example of feminist filmmaking in the process. *Possibly in Michigan* also initiates broader dialogues about domestic violence, trauma, and memory, ideas that will be explored in this analysis.

Cecelia Condit has been working in video art since the early 1980s, having "a consistent presence on film-screening circuits for decades."[8] Throughout her career, Condit has been fascinated with grim subject matter and the layering of seemingly disparate types and styles of media production. The aforementioned *Beneath the Skin*, Condit's point of entry into avant-garde video production, is exemplary in this regard, combining spoken-word, rhythmic voice-over monologues, original music, layered video projections, distorted and manipulated film footage, and montages juxtaposing animate and inanimate objects. Based on the true story of Condit's ex-partner—who would secure infamy by murdering and mummifying his lover—*Beneath the Skin* is never truly, visually graphic;[9] it leaves the heinous acts of her ex-lover to the viewer's imagination. But, through the multi-layered aesthetic landscape of the film, a sense of looming dread—ultimately leading to the horrific discovery of the decaying, mummified body—is communicated throughout the film. "Let me tell you what a nightmare that *that* was," the anonymous narrator, suggested to be Condit herself, prefaces in the film's introduction,

> Most of the time, it just feels like the news extravaganza that it was. That I got real [sic] obsessed with the story, like it captured my imagination! It doesn't usually feel real. But some days, it really feels like it happened, that I really did know him. That there really was a body in his *closet*! And then, I feel really angry at him! Not for what he did to her, if he killed her, because that's between

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[8] John Chiaverina, "How This 71-Year-Old Video Art Pioneer Became a Tik Tok Star," last modified November 7, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/t-magazine/possibly-in-michigan-tiktok-artist.html.

[9] One exception to this is the series of black-and-white shots of decaying bodies (cited as "photographs of the mummies of Guanajuato"), footage carried over into *Possibly in Michigan*.

> them, but for what he did for *me*! And I keep asking myself, just as though I'm kinda *haunted*, did he do it? Did he kill her?[10]

Plagued by the memory of the murdered and mummified girl—as represented through clips of skulls, epileptic seizure patients, and a woman being dragged, repeatedly, out of her bed—Condit-as-narrator reveals "instances of violent spectacle" that align the female body both with the grotesque, carnival body,[11] and the threat imposed by female monstrosity. Surely, the pure horror of the gruesome violence enacted by the lover-killer towards his victim looms large throughout *Beneath the Skin*; "but there was something really strange that had just happened," the narrator recalls. "That this guy who I'd been seein' for the last four years…the police just found a body in his apartment, and that it's been mummified and decapitated and wrapped in plastic, and stuffed in a trunk where he's kept her for the two years."[12] Yet, the female body, in this case, lies deep within the interstices of life and death, health and illness, wholeness and mutilation. Through the spectacle of the murder case (through news sources and friendly gossip amongst onlookers like Condit), it is on full display, transgressing the boundaries between public and private. The murder victim, rather than inciting pure sympathy, instead simultaneously incites horror and dread, a figure that exposes both the grim realities of death, and the materialization of the violent mental state of her killer. The mythos of the murdered girl—an interesting call-back to the ghost in Female Gothic fictions, evoking

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[10] Cecelia Condit, dir., *Beneath the Skin*, Filmed 1981, Youtube, 11:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcXEJbWkLWE.

[11] Referencing Mikhail Bakhtin and François Rabelais, Patricia Mellencamp notes that the grotesque body is one that opens, erupts, and secretes, exposing the interior (whether literally or figuratively) to the exterior. The carnival body is an extension of this—a spectacle where "an indivisible body [is] without inner/outer, self/other polarities in which the exterior is inauthentic, merely a cover-up" (112-113).

[12] Condit, *Beneath the Skin.*

the "supernaturalization of everyday life"—becomes a haunting presence in the film, a grim reminder for the spectator of the realities of horror, in a film rife with imagery that is already haunting, grim, and morose. Drawing upon Freud's "The Uncanny," Laura Mulvey posits that death presents the dual problem of "a dread that the already dead might return to haunt the present from the past," and "the difficulty for the living subject, while accepting the inevitable, to imagine its own death at some unknown point in the future."[13] For Mulvey, mass entertainments—film included—present this sort of uncomfortable, uncanny feeling of the illusion of the dead, of a literal and figurative frisson[14] that the spectator might feel in seeing something that is, rationally, long gone, but comes to life on-screen. In *Beneath the Skin*, Condit certainly makes viewers aware of their own "primitive fear of death,"[15] and, through the mummified girl, almost forces them to align themselves subjectively with her rotting corpse. Death, in *Beneath the Skin*, becomes almost *too* real, an arguable exaggeration of the events and people that the film is based off of. Women, in this case, become a sort of spectral reminder of death, a monstrous reminder of human mortality.

Whereas *Beneath the Skin* aligns femininity with fear (of the irrational, of death and decay, of a sort of warning to the female viewer that this violence, too, can "happen to you"), Condit's magnum opus, *Possibly in Michigan*, goes in a completely opposite direction, instead, as Courtney Duckworth insists, "transmuting women's violent and

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[13] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 37.
[14] Mulvey, 42.
[15] Ibid.

dehumanizing realities through grim humor."[16] In many ways, the two films are each other's aesthetic siblings,[17] using similar imagery, musical cues, and source material. Yet, *Michigan* can be considered as a unique artwork all of its own. The film opens to the sounds of a synthesizer-heavy, pop-driven 1980s tune, overlaying shots of a relatively empty shopping mall. Panning towards the mall's entrance, Condit's camera focuses on one of two protagonists, Sharon (Jill Sands), as she enters through the mechanized doors. Shots of mannequins and decorated storefronts are intercut with Sharon wandering through the mall, all while the chorus of "Animal Cannibal," the film's theme song (written and performed by frequent Condit collaborator, Karen Skladany, portraying Janice), echoes in the soundtrack: "I bite at the hand that feeds me / slap at the face that eats me."[18] Meanwhile, a mysterious, tuxedoed figure enters the mall—later revealed to be Sharon's stalker and ex-lover, Arthur—prominently wearing a plaster mask, its eyes glazed over, expressionless, while its mouth is permanently agape, shaped like a wide "O" stretching from the top of its lip, to the bottom of its chin.[19] The film then follows

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[16] Courtney Duckworth, "Laugh at the Face that Eats You: Cecelia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan*," *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism* 5, no. 2 (2017): http://cleojournal.com/2017/08/18/laugh-at-the-face-that-eats-you-cecelia-condit-possibly-in-michigan/.

[17] In an interview with Alix Breda, Condit considers *Possibly in Michigan* to be a part of the "Jill Sands trilogy," a reference to the actress portraying Janice, with whom Condit made *Beneath the Skin* and *Not a Jealous Bone*. In Alix Breda, "Tales of Violence and Friendship: A Conversation with Cecelia Condit," last modified September 7, 2019, https://celluloidsisters.com/a-conversation-with-cecelia-condit/.

[18] In Condit, *Possibly in Mighican*.

[19] Condit shares that she made *Possibly in Michigan* around the very masks—particularly, Arthur's mask—that are used in the film: "I found it in a dental office…This man that I was seeing [worked] in a dental office […] I was just roaming around and then I saw it in the corner in, like, trash, and I just remember, I just went, [gasps], 'It's alive!' And then I knew I could […] just the thought of that, men could always have their mouths open, ready to eat you." Cecelia Condit, FaceTime conversation with author, January 11, 2020.

Sharon and her friend Janice (having in common, "violence and perfume"),[20] chatting with each other in a sing-song manner about "mother's crazy sister Kate" while Arthur watches in the background.

Much like *Beneath the Skin*, *Possibly in Michigan* pieces together home videos, archival footage, and distorted video clips into a dreamlike montage told from the perspective of the two women, whose conversation (amongst each other, as well as a third, implied participant, the viewer) effortlessly weaves between the mundane, perfume, and the deeply horrific: Aunt Kate's killing and eating of the family dog. As the women attempt to leave the mall, Arthur inches closer and closer to the women, menacingly following them outside of the building to Sharon's home. It is revealed, through flashbacks juxtaposed with "Animal Cannibal," the extent of Sharon and Arthur's relationship: "How do I meet the strangest men? / They always seem to find me / Remember that time way back when I / kissed a guy who ate his women friends / Now only dogs will follow me."[21] "Here we go again," exclaims Skladany in the score—indeed, "here we go again," both for the women who experience violence at the hands of a murderous, male stalker, and for the spectator, who is plagued with the threat of seeing violence enacted towards innocent female victims. Decaying corpses; limp, lifeless women, flung about passively on the floor; and an unsettling attack on Sharon by an unmasked Arthur play off of one another in the film's violent, climactic second act, a dramatization of the domestic violence hinted at in *Beneath the Skin*.

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[20] Condit, *Possibly in Michigan*.
[21] Ibid.

However, *Possibly in Michigan* takes an interesting turn. As Arthur beats Sharon while giving her an ultimatum—either she be eaten straight away or have her limbs severed and "eaten slowly […] for love"[22]—Janice arrives to the rescue, shooting Arthur and saving her friend. In a sequence as gruesome as it is comedic, Sharon and Janice then drag Arthur's lifeless body into the kitchen, dismember him, and prepare his limbs into a feast, all while a jaunty tune plays in the soundtrack. The women celebrate their victory, clinking their wine glasses (filled with Arthur's blood) together, smoking, and even feeding their dog the scraps from Arthur's body. A vision of Arthur suddenly appears in the window, but the women do not fret; they snap their fingers and making him disappear. The film's conclusion exhibits even more dark humor; Sharon and Janice playfully toss Arthur's bones into garbage bags, throw them outside in bins, and casually wait for the trash collector to pick up the refuse. *Possibly in Michigan* ends with a final farewell to Arthur, featuring and extended shot of the garbage truck driving away, crushing the refuse inside of its hopper.[23]

Much like *Beneath the Skin*, Condit based *Possibly in Michigan* off of real-life accounts, recalling:

> I met a woman who was from Ohio that I met [sic] in New York City, and she said that she had a story […] she said that she was dating this boy, and that she was living in Ohio, and her mother thought that this was the *guy*, this was the guy she should marry. And then, the morning that she was going to fly out to Colorado to visit him, the national news […] there was an article about a man

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[22] Ibid.

[23] *Possibly in Michigan* debuted during a time where "moral panic around provocative art and culture" was at an all-time high. The film's final sequence, closing with a title card disclosing the film's funding by local and national arts councils, drew particular ire from conservative groups. *The 700 Club*, a long-running conservative, Christian television program, featured this finale, and the film overall, in its program, deeming it amoral. See Chiaverina, 2019.

> they found six women that this man had eaten, they had a picture of him, and it was *him* […] I wanted to keep true to that story.[24]

Indeed, *Possibly in Michigan* follows the testimonial, slice-of-life style of storytelling that is ever-present in *Beneath the Skin* and other works, like 1987's *Not a Jealous Bone*, in which Condit recalls the death of her mother, and in her video *I've Been Afraid*, in which the artist combines personal photographs with animated emojis to relay her most personal fears, of "women who have been afraid, including myself."[25] What is unique about *Possibly in Michigan*, deviating slightly from her first video yet setting the groundwork for a number of her works, is the way that she manipulates common tropes, both narrative and, importantly for this analysis, visual horror tropes. Condit, like those early founding mothers in cinema and beyond, does not stake an immediate claim in the horror genre; she has stated in a number of interviews (such as my own personal chats with the artist, as well as her interviews with John Chiaverina of the *New York Times*, Alix Breda from the website *Celluloid Sisters*, and Kirby Kellogg of the blog *morbidlybeautiful.com*) that she does not enjoy horror films. Condit has made it clear, instead, that her work explores, exploits, and reclaims the feeling of fear, caused by both internal and external sources. Yet, horror is intrinsically bound to fear—for one to feel fear, they must experience something horrific, as rationalized by horror scholars across disciplines. Therefore, *Possibly in Michigan* occupies an interesting space within the horror genre, one that is marked by the sharing of those things that haunt women and the subversion of expectations about monstrous femininity.

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[24] Cecelia Condit, FaceTime conversation with author, January 11, 2020.
[25] Cecelia Condit, email message to author, March 26, 2020..

One way that Condit experiments with the horror genre is through her use of the fairy tale, something common amongst the likes of Blaché, Reiniger, and other horror pioneers discussed in the previous chapter. Condit, speaking to Alix Breda, offers that she "has always been enticed by women's collective dreams and how they relate to fairy tales and the dark woods where untamed memories live."[26] The triangulation between fairy tales, nightmares, and memory is surely a common occurrence as, according to Robin S. Goldberg, "fairy tales and the mythology of a culture are derived from dreams that are then retold and elaborated by others with only those 'that portray universal conflicts and fears becom[ing] tales that have an ongoing presence and significance.'"[27] Furthermore, Dawn Heerspink, writing within the context of wartime media, notes that fairy tales can "reaffirm certain values in the reader's mind" due to their potential as purveyors of social norms and "allow for a projection of real individuals and situations to be enacted in an interpretive way [moving from] the 'allegorical into the representational.'"[28] As storytelling vehicles, then, fairy tales work as a type of "trauma transmission," to borrow from William Peat Jr., as well as an "antidote to trauma,"[29] bringing to light the very internal, and sometimes subconscious, hauntings within an individual.

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[26] Breda, 2019.
[27] Transcribed in Michele A. Muñoz, "Fairytales and Trauma [Presenter: Robin S. Goldberg, Ph.D.]," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 68 (2008): 302.
[28] Dawn Heerspink, "No Man's Land: Fairy Tales, Gender, Socialization, Satire, and Trauma During the First and Second World Wars," *Grand Valley Journal of History* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3, 5.
[29] William Peat Jr., "The Labyrinth of Good Intentions: Transmitting Repressed Trauma via Fairy Tales," *Emerging Voices* (blog), 2009, https://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/132/127.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between the horror genre and fairy tales is significant due to their similar fascination with "enchantment, magic […] uncanniness, and wonder."[30] Additionally, according to Cristina Bacchilega, the "generic complexity" of the fairy tale—that is, the ease with which "fragments and tale types" of the fairy tale can be mixed, remixed, and transformed—has the advantage of "weaving together various coded expectations" found in other, preexisting genres.[31] It is all too common, by this logic, for the fairy tale to take on the various story and aesthetic conventions of alternate genres, resulting in a type of hybridity that impacts the various ontological domains with which the spectator interacts with the story world and, relatedly, how various "meanings, values, and affects" framed within this world can be rationalized.[32] This generic hybridity, or perhaps mutability, lends itself to alternative narrative strategies: for example, a move away from neutral, omniscient, and authoritative narrators[33] towards those immersive, subjective, and sometimes unreliable ones. Furthermore, the flexibility of fairy tale narrative lends itself to a type of spontaneity and even non-linearity that, for Karin Sanders, "includes a variety of forms excluded from common sense: the marvelous, the absurd, and the dream-like."[34] Fairy tales, in other words, present a number of alternative visuals and ways to tell a story and communicate ideals to its audience.

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[30] Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed?: Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 77.
[31] Bacchilega, 112-113.
[32] Bacchilega, 114.
[33] Hilary S. Crew, "Spinning New Tales from Traditional Texts: Donna Jo Napoli and the Rewriting of the Fairy Tale," *Children's Literature in Education* 33, no. 2 (2002): 78.
[34] Karin Sanders, "The Romantic Fairy Tale and Surrealism: Marvelous Non-Sense and Dark Apprehensions," *Romantik: Journal for the Study of Romanticisms* 3, no. 1 (2014): 36.

If we consider the fairy tale in the same way as Peat Jr.—that is, as a strategy towards treating objects and events with "an important, benign perspective to horrific [events], showing how we deal with trauma and tragedy over time without having to relive all of the gruesome details"—then, when grafted onto the horror genre, it becomes an even greater, and perhaps transgressive, tool for catharsis, for finding "release from the nervous agitation and traumatic experiences" stored within memory.[35] It is certainly true that horror as a stand-alone genre has the capacity to "show that which can not otherwise be shown; to speak that which can not otherwise be spoken,"[36] thereby having a hand in (re)presenting trauma on-screen. Moreover, horror maintains the same aesthetic and structural flexibility as the fairy tale, with its tendency towards generic hybridity exposing the rigid "definitions and delimitations"[37] present in mainstream media. When coupled with the fairy tale—or, perhaps, when taking on the formal qualities of the fairy tale—the horror film takes on new transgressive potential, which leads back to the question of *Possibly in Michigan*.

Possibly in Michigan resembles a relatively familiar story structure; (1) the first act introduces characters, spaces, and places, (2) the villain makes his first appearance, which carries over into the film's climactic second act, and (3) conflict is resolved in the third act. However, the film is blatantly dreamlike in tone; arbitrary close-ups, extended montage sequences, and other stock film footage repeatedly interrupt its flow of narrative action. Likewise, it is a tale that is intertextual (a story told in dialogue with other stories,

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[35] Peat Jr., 2009; Sanders, 2014.
[36] Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema: Historical Trauma, and National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 5.
[37] Hawkins, 26.

memories, and cultural artefacts) and intersubjective (a story told largely through Sharon's recollections, but also through Janice, and the unnamed female voice-over narrator). The visual/narrative complexity of the world constructed in *Possibly in Michigan* and the "existence of competitive authorities and the awareness of multiple traditions"[38]—a tradition found in both fairy tale fictions, as pointed out by Bacchilega, and in feminist filmmaking practice—further heighten its horrific content, materializing, and ultimately making more tangible the trauma faced by the two characters. The film subverts the expectations of traditional storytelling while offering new avenues for exploring and dissecting the horror genre.

Critics have noted Condit's clear alignments with fairy tales, with Marita Sturken of *Art Journal*, for instance, observing that *Michigan* "often alludes to childhood fantasies of Little Red Riding Hood and The Three Little Pigs."[39] Moreover, in a press release for Condit's artist talk and screening at the Electronic Arts Intermix, *Possibly in Michigan* specifically is lauded for its "dissonant fairy tales set in a grotesquery of suburban America […] the effect is something of a surreal waking dream."[40] Video artist and curator Mary Lucier of the CUE Art Foundation describes Condit's work as dealing with "that part of the female experience—whether inculcated, remembered, or mythical—that invokes witches, nervous breakdowns, neurasthenia and despair."[41] In a 2019 review, Orit Gat of *frieze.com* notes the lasting resonance and relevance of Condit's

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[38] Bacchilega, 27.
[39] Marita Sturken, "Revising Romance: New Feminist Video," *Arts Journal* 45, no. 3 (1985): 275.
[40] "Cecelia Condit: Artist Talk and Screening," *Electronic Arts Intermix*, June 7, 2017, http://www.eai.org/supporting-documents/956.
[41] Mary Lucier, "Cecelia Condit," last modified 2008, https://cueartfoundation.org/cecelia-condit.

fairy tale fiction: "The content of *Possibly in Michigan* […] is a dark fantasy delivered in an aesthetic that is legible to these tweens and teens from the filters and themes that repeat on Tik Tok."[42]

Indeed, the most explicit way that Condit's film alludes to fairy tale fictions involves the imagery invoked in the film: namely, in the film's second act, when Sharon enters her home, only to be attacked by her stalker, Arthur. Arthur, this time donning a wolf's mask,[43] explicitly mirrors the visage of the so-called big, bad wolf in the aforementioned "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Three Little Pigs" and menacingly follows Sharon into her home. Unlike the wolf in "Red Riding Hood," however, Arthur shows great aggression while breaking and entering, throwing a worm-covered rock into Sharon's window and forcing himself into the space. Arthur's distorted voice enters the soundtrack—"The better to eat you with, my dear!," a call-back to the fairy tale—but instead of literally consuming his victim, as in the source text, he combines this physical violence with implicitly sexual aggression, pushing her to the bed and waving a rather phallic-looking knife towards her body.[44] Additionally, the ways in which Sharon is

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[42] Ori Gat, "How Cecelia Condit's Video Art Became a Viral Curse for Teens on TikTok," last modified July 26, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/how-cecelia-condits-video-art-became-viral-curse-teens-tiktok.

[43] "He had used so many masks to disguise himself that he had forgotten who he was, who he'd known," declares the narrator, as Arthur flashes by the screen in masks resembling a rabbit, donkey, frog, pig, and eventually, wolf, the last of which he settles on upon entering Sharon's dwelling. In Condit, *Possibly in Michigan*.

[44] Graham Anderson notes that "Little Red Riding Hood" is based on a Greco-Roman tale in which a community in southern Italy practiced an annual tradition of offering "a virgin 'bride' to a local spirit." The virgin was left alone in a temple, awaiting on a bed, with the ultimate fate of being sexually assaulted by the spirit, "depicted as dark and terrifying *and wearing a wolfskin*" (author's emphasis; 2000, 94). It may be argued, then, that the sexual underpinnings of the Riding Hood tale are adequately mirrored in Condit's film. For more on fairy tales, see Graham Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000).

framed during this sequence—in inserts where she is laying down, with her long hair extending behind her, and roses surrounding her head—also make important visual parallels to fairy tales: namely, those tales of otherwise passive, perpetually slumbering female figures like Snow White, whose pale skin and rosy red lips are grafted onto the Sharon character, and Sleeping Beauty (or *Dornröschen*) who, in the original text, must be awakened by a male suitor, lest she die alone.[45] So too does the threat of being alone, of abandoning the "right guy" no matter how threatening or controlling he may be, appear in *Possibly in Michigan*. "Arthur longed for that sexual scent that smelled like home," the narrator declares upon Arthur's intrusion into Sharon's home, "He imagined himself a frog, transformed into a Prince Charming. He felt, the moment he kissed her, he would become the man she would want him to be." Sharon, from Arthur's perspective, would be better off dead than single, a fool for not choosing him as her "Prince Charming," a development that echoes the same types of rhetoric communicated through the fairy tale.

It is clear, by watching *Possibly in Michigan*, that the fairy tale figures heavily in the ways that the story, characters, and visuals are structured. However, it is in the film's final act—the killing of Arthur—that positions the film squarely in what Laura Mattoon D'Amore describes as "vigilante feminism," a common feature within the contemporary, revisionist fairy tale in Western media. For D'Amore, vigilante feminism appears in texts like films, young adult literature, and comic books and refers to taking the law into one's own hands, whether it be through violence, magic, or reactionary behaviors as a

[45] Modern European iterations of Sleeping Beauty also include the threat of sexual violence. See Anderson, 46.

whole. The ultimate goal of this type of feminism, enacted by female characters, is for protection: "their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence—such as sexual assault, abuse, and trauma."[46] As D'Amore explains, vigilante feminism most often appears in new interpretations of the fairy tale, a story device which, as suggested above, conforms to rigid beliefs on gender roles, power structures, and dialogues between the two. Vigilante feminism, borrowing from scholar Cathy Lynn Preston, blurs the "genre frame, and, in doing so, variously work[s] to maintain, reproduce, transgress, or shift associated with the older fairy-tale textual tradition,"[47] thereby obtaining agency and working towards a new status within a fictional world.

In the case of *Possibly in Michigan*, rather than allowing Arthur-as-wolf to simply overpower and consume Sharon-as-Riding Hood,[48] Condit instead leaves space for this vigilante feminism to occur. That is, Janice—ever present in the background, aiming a loaded gun towards Arthur—shoots and kills Sharon's assailant, embodying a "specific kind of physically powerful feminism in which women can take care of themselves in ways, often violent, that allow them to protect themselves from the danger that lurks around every corner."[49] Moreover, Arthur's killing is a clever reversal of the original source text, a type of revisionism that "is also reflexive, indicating a version of feminism that itself performs as an outlaw, outside the boundaries of feminist praxis that is rooted

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[46] Laura Mattoon D'Amore, "Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions," *Marvels & Tales* 31, no. 2 (2017): 387.
[47] D'Amore, 388.
[48] "The [Charles] Perrault version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is the first available example of the modern tale, and also the best known […] Not until the Grimms does there appear to be a happy ending […]" (Anderson, 92).
[49] D'Amore, 388.

in peace and the eradication of systems of power and dominance."[50] An interesting call-back to Pinedo's postmodern horror film, the vengeful, vigilante feminism practiced in *Possibly in Michigan* "seeks social equality between men and women by reappropriating the tactics of a traditionally violent masculinity for feminine ends."[51] This, for D'Amore, "translates to the performance of a violent fantasy of feminism" that considers the sometimes misogynistic tropes found in the tradition of fairy tales, and finds a way "to participate in a literary and media culture that valorizes the militarization of girls and women as a mechanism by which to forcibly claim justice from a social and legal system that has systematically failed to meet their needs."[52] Violence and terror, therefore, are integral parts of the society in which Sharon and Janice occupy, and the horrors of the everyday, rather than being resolved through a traditionally happy ending, must be met by equally horrific means.

The closest connection that *Possibly in Michigan* arguably makes to the horror genre is through the motif of cannibalism, whether through the violent-sexual appetite of Arthur towards his female victims or through the film's climactic finale where the two women feast on their stalker. Cannibalism, undoubtedly, has been commonly employed within horror fiction, tracing back to the literary arts: in particular, the American Gothic novel, which often drew upon the confluence of "autobiography and imagination" and "nineteenth-century [American] press and literature," which made spectacle of real-life tales of cannibalism like the infamous Donner Party of the late 1800s.[53] More often than

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[50] D'Amore, 390.
[51] Ibid.
[52] D'Amore, 391.
[53] Rhodes, 27, 263.

not, cannibalism has been tied exclusively to the figure of the Other, namely, the black and indigenous Other. For scholars like W. Arens, in the North American context, indigenous peoples have been falsely tied to claims of consuming humans due to "'deft hands' and 'fertile imaginations' of both anthropologists and others,"[54] arguably stemming from harmful rhetoric from white, European settlers. Additionally, in the Australian context, the myth surrounding indigenous cannibalism—a real, if not tangential, component of aboriginal folktales, warped through colonial discourses—was integrated early on into representations of these peoples, subsequently, according to Geoffrey Partington, extending to the "rationalization for denying indigenous Australians their rights, occupying their land and destroying their culture."[55] Black individuals, in American literature and early film media, fared just as terribly as these indigenous communities; often used as a way to further their reputation as primitive and inherently inferior to their white counterparts, the black cannibal trope was seen as impure, grotesque, and above all, threatening to the sanctity of white, Western society.[56]

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[54] Thomas S. Abler considers Arens' argument on indigenous cannibalism, particularly in Iroquois communities, in his essay "Iroquois Cannibalism: Fact not Fiction." However, Abler makes some rather interesting claims in his essay regarding Arens' anthropological work (for example, claiming that Arens "attacks the entire profession of anthropology" with his study; 1980, 309-310), which should be taken with a grain of salt, for lack of better terms. Nevertheless, Abler's essay is important in summarizing the work of Arens on indigeneity and cannibalism.

[55] Geoffrey Partington, "Cannibalism: A White Colonist Fiction?," *Quadrant* 52, no. 5 (2008): 89. A deeper exploration of indigeneity will be laid out in the next chapter, in relation to Tracey Moffat's *beDevil*.

[56] Rhodes, 263; Coleman, 51. Beyond anthropological treatises, popular literature, and film, racialized cannibalism appears in the visual arts as well. For more information, see Thomas B.F. Cummins, "To Serve Man: Pre-Columbian Art, Western Discourses of Idolatry, and Cannibalism;" Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*; and Michael J. Schreffler, "Vespucci Rediscovers America: The Pictorial Rhetoric of Cannibalism in Early Modern Culture," amongst others.

Cannibalism, therefore, becomes a tool for exploring and communicating "a series of social anxieties" about racial difference, furthering narratives about racial Otherness in popular media broadly, and horror media in particular.[57]

The Other as cannibal in horror media has intersected with a variety of different, similar tropes within the genre. On the one hand, cannibalism often materializes in the form of the zombie, that interstitial, horrific beast that toes the line between life and death, wholeness and the incomplete. Stemming in part from the stereotyping of "religions of Africans and African-Americans by generating narratives about voodoo," \ zombies in horror fiction operate according to Aalya Ahmad as "grey go-betweens between subaltern and supremacist, black and white, selves and others, lurching over borders as inexorably as they break through farmhouse walls."[58] Zombies are not only created through a sort of primitive, mystical, black magic, thereby marking them as representative of the racialized Other. They also expose white, Western fears: they invade and occupy a space within "established systems of order,"[59] exposing the innate permeability of social boundaries, and, through their literal and figurative consumption of bodies, threaten to infect the seemingly stable roles occupied by such bodies in patriarchal, capitalist society. The fear of zombies, essentially, is a fear of society being eaten away, a fear enacted by the racial Other.

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[57] Elizabeth Young, "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in 'Bride of Frankenstein'," *Feminist Studies* 17, no. 3 (1991): 403-404; Rhona J. Berenstein, "White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films," *Film History* 6, no. 3 (1994): 315.
[58] Rhodes, 264; Aalya Ahmad, "Gray is the New Black: Race, Class, and Zombies," in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lens (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 132.
[59] Ahmad, 137.

To be sure, *Possibly in Michigan* positions cannibalism in a very similar way to zombie narratives, sans racial underpinnings. Borrowing from Creed, Sharon and Janice can be read as occupying the same space as zombies, those abject, undead beings that "highlight the 'fragility of the law' and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction"[60]—in this case, heterosexual monogamy as represented through the character of Arthur. *Possibly in Michigan* makes an even more convincing connection to cannibalism, however, through the figure of the vampire. Vampirism has been a popular avenue taken up in horror film scholarship, intersecting with a broad swath of topics ranging from colonialism, race and cultural studies, to queer representation, feminism, and the gender binary.[61] Notably, scholars like Jack Halberstam have made the important connection between the vampire-as-cannibal and racial-sexual identity in the Gothic novel, observing in part that "the vampire is a figure for both a metaphoricity gone wild (it represents too much) and for the loss of metaphoricity (it represents only itself)" (*metaphoricity*, in this case, referring to the one-for-one equivalence between two beings, in addition to the embodiment of one being as another).[62] And, in the case of Creed, who dedicates one chapter of her analysis in *The Monstrous Feminine* to vampirism, the female vampire "is doubly dangerous. As well as transforming her victims into blood-sucking creatures of the night (she does not necessarily destroy her victims), she also threatens to seduce the daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles."[63] For Creed, the type of cannibalism enacted by

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[60] Creed, 10.
[61] A quick search for the terms "vampires" and "representation," for example, on Google Scholar will lead to hundreds of results, which for brevity, will not be noted here.
[62] Halberstam, 156.
[63] Creed, 61.

the female vampire—or, more aptly, the "lesbian vampire," a term the scholar uses rather exclusively in her discussion—connotes an animalistic sense of abjection that eschews "the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct"[64] as well as overall proper, cultural and religious dictates about the body.[65] The female vampire uses cannibalism as a strategy, therefore, for enacting social-sexual taboos, posing a greater threat to the stability of Western, patriarchal societal norms.

In *Possibly in Michigan*, there are no explicit references to this type of cannibalism—true, Sharon and Janice drink Arthur's blood in the film's conclusion, sipping the bright red liquid from ornate wine glasses, but they do not sport the traditional imagery associated with this horror trope at any point in the narrative. One could, however, make a valid case for the connection between the two characters and female vampirism, subsequently linking them to the monstrous feminine. Firstly, much like Creed's discussion of the vampire, which underscores the trope's clear mediation between human and animal (Creed herself likens vampires to snakes and wolves, the latter of which ties to another horror trope, the werewolf), *Michigan* also makes those connections between woman and animal. Intercut amongst shots of Sharon and Janice (and, of course, the other, somewhat unseen yet ever-present character, Aunt Kate) are images of animals, notably dogs, arguably harkening back to Creed's discussion of

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Creed also makes important connections regarding vampirism-cannibalism with menstruation. In addition to the blatant tie between blood (vampirism) and biological processes (menstruation), Creed observes that the vampire is "a prime case of abjection" because it releases blood, a cultural taboo lying in filth, bodily fluids, and the threat of decay. For more information see *The Monstrous Feminine* in general, and "Woman as Vampire: *The Hunger*" in particular.

"myths and symbolic associations"[66] of the female vampire, as well as the animalistic impulses that this type of monstrous creature exhibits. Additionally, the carnality of the women's behavior, of dismembering and consuming the flesh of another human body, is paralleled to images of dogs eating raw meat, associating with a form of abjection rooted in "blood, oral sadism, bodily wounds and violation of the law."[67]

Secondly, the type of cannibalism referenced in *Possibly in Michigan* that draws parallels to Creed's feminine vampire, and ultimately, the monstrous feminine, invokes Creed's discussion of gendered looking relations. In the horror film, rather than being the direct object of gaze, and direct object of desire, the female body instead "controls the sadistic gaze"[68] towards male victims, essentially becoming a point of identification for the viewer that is aligned with horror and the abject. Moving beyond portrayals of the so-called "mother of plentitude whose gaze meets the infant's as it asserts her presence and her power" (quoting Gaylyn Studlar), the monstrous feminine invokes destruction and death, a primal fantasy involving "images associated with weapons, bodily disintegration in one form or another, blood, an array of abject bodily wastes, pain and terror."[69] The female gaze therefore becomes a cannibalizing gaze, one that calls upon fears of "domination, castration and death."[70] This line of argumentation can be grafted onto the world of *Possibly in Michigan*: by returning Arthur's murderous gaze, Sharon and Janice literally and figuratively laugh in the face of terror, wielding the power to destroy and, in the words of Mellencamp, "the power to discomfit, the power that is […]

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[66] Creed, 64.
[67] Creed, 71.
[68] Creed, 153.
[69] Creed, 153-154.
[70] Creed, 155.

to pose a threat."[71] Sharon and Janice are afforded the ability to look and, significantly, are also given the ability of the "perverse, masochistic aspects of the gaze"[72] that at face value solidifies their monstrosity.

Yet, as the film's narrative unfolds, Sharon and Janice's cannibalism is not a dangerous practice, nor does it signal the same negative connotations with monstrosity that potential critics like Creed would endorse. Rather than interrupting the social order through abject behaviors, cannibalism-abjection is instead a powerful weapon of self-defense against the horrors of and within patriarchal society. Arthur, as it is clearly communicated in the film's second act, is the real monster in question; he invades and attempts to assault the innocent Sharon, akin to the metaphorical wolf of the Red Riding Hood tale. Sharon and Janice, therefore, instead of transforming into blood-thirsty socio-cultural abominations, become "each other's apotropaic allies,"[73] using cannibalism as a tool, rather than a weapon, towards their stalker. To quote Courtney Duckworth, the representation of women in *Possibly in Michigan* lays in stark contrast to that in *Beneath the Skin* in the way that it treats its female characters: "*Possibly in Michigan* asks: What if *Beneath the Skin*'s narrator and murderer became accomplices? […] *Possibly in Michigan* draws from revisionists like novelist Angela Carter. 'The girl burst out laughing: she knew she was nobody's meat,'"[74] So too, I would argue, does Condit's film reverse the trope of cannibalism—Sharon and Janice resort to eating human flesh not to frivolously commit a hideous crime (against heteronormativity, against Western

[71] Duckworth, 2017; Mellencamp, 108.
[72] Creed, 154.
[73] Duckworth, 2017.
[74] Ibid.

patriarchy), or to partake in the abject gluttony of cannibalism, or assert some kind of sexual power against their male counterpart. *Possibly in Michigan* instead displays the horrors of the everyday, an "elusive feeling of chaos and confusion, a funny yet unfunny realization that this male/female interaction is doomed,"[75] with cannibalism as an unfortunate, yet empowering, solution to this lingering state of despair.

Cecelia Condit's work post-*Possibly in Michigan* focuses on a number of interrelated topics, albeit without the same type of grotesque fantasy and morbid underpinnings as this magnum opus. As she offers in an interview with Emily Eddy, Condit's art is connected by the longer thread of self-exploration, of "exploring who I am—all while keeping my head down." "When I discovered video," the artist explains, "my need to tell stories found a home. Video also allowed me to work free from the baggage of history, and traditions where I felt I might be excluded."[76] Arguably, it is through this self-exploration where Condit taps into uncovering those all-at-once disparate yet shared experiences of womanhood: of abuse, of trauma, of marginalization, of disappearance, of the nightmares that bring those otherwise subconscious feelings to the surface. From aging and death (*Annie Lloyd* [2008], *Pulling Up Roots* [2015]) and familial tension (*Suburbs of Eden* [1992]), to the uncanny processes of memory and imagination (*All About a Girl* [2004], *Little Spirits* [2005]) and even environmental abuse (*Why Not a Sparrow* [2003]), Condit places such lived experiences, and cruelties of lived experiences, at the forefront of her work. It is in *Possibly in Michigan*, I attest, that most successfully underscores such horrors and allows the viewer to experience, and revel in,

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[75] Sturken, 277.
[76] Emily Eddy, "VDB Asks…Cecelia Condit," last modified August 2019, https://www.vdb.org/content/vdb-asks-cecelia-condit.

retaliation towards these horrors. Sharon, Janice, and now the viewer are encouraged to bite at the hand that feeds, slap at the face that eats—to borrow from "Animal Cannibal"—dissecting the real and fictive horrors around them.

B. "I Could Just Kill a Man!": Sarah Jacobson's *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* (1993) and Underground Horror

"See the horror of righteous dismemberment! Feel the triumph when sexist pigs are wasted! Hear the screams of terror! Join Mary, America's favorite female serial killer, who kills off dumb men."[77] Such is the tagline of *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, the 1993 film debut of acclaimed underground filmmaker Sarah Jacobson that combines grainy black-and-white footage with cacophonous layers of sound and experimental editing techniques like montage. The film, inspired by the real-life "dumb things guys do,"[78] offers an often exaggeratedly comedic look at one young woman's revenge against her male abusers, as she kills them off, one by one, with reckless abandon. *Serial Killer* is clearly inflected by the pop culture that saturated Jacobson's formative teenage years, those female-driven teen flicks and rom-coms like *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985), *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986), and *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) that featured, in Jacobson's words, "women [who] are in control of their destiny and their lives."[79] What makes *Serial Killer* even more compelling, however, lies

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[77] "I Was a Teenage Serial Killer," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0158666/.
[78] Steven Chean, "Sarah Jacobson's Big Camera," *Film Threat Video Guide* 10 (1994): 67.
[79] Marc Madenwald, "'If I Could Just Kill a Man!' Filmmaker Sarah Jaconbson is Making People Sit Up and Take Notice," *Essential Cinema: Journal of Independent Film* 1, no. 1 (1993): 7.

in its treatment of another, more sinister pop culture reference: the serial killer or slasher, a central figure within the horror genre that, by and large, has been coded as masculine and created largely from a male perspective. *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, as Jacobson herself has offered, is novel because it leaves room for a female perspective,[80] which is otherwise absent in most mainstream horror films, while toppling the very notion of the serial killer trope, putting in its place a female anti-hero who uses violence towards catharsis and self-expression. This analysis explores the ways that Jacobson reconceptualizes horror through alternative, aesthetic means (vis-à-vis underground and Riot Grrrl filmmaking) and, importantly, through its subversion of the female serial killer or, as horror scholars have put it, the female monster-slasher.

Marc Madenwald prefaces his interview with Sarah Jacobson by describing the former Bard College student as having "a lot to say, but nobody seemed to be listening." Adding "decibels to the definition of boisterous, a stereotype [Jacobson] has come to terms with and gained sovereignty over," Madenwald describes the film- and video-maker's small but impactful oeuvre as such, deeming her debut, *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, a powerful and progressive inversion of horror tropes in films like Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*.[81] Undoubtedly, Jacobson's career, beginning when she studied at Bard, and later at the San Francisco Art Institute, can be best defined as provocative, alternative and, yes, boisterous. After transferring to SFAI, she became a student of pioneering underground video artist, George Kuchar, best known for filming with little to no budget, and exploiting taboos like "frank homosexuality and violent,

[80] Chean, 6.
[81] Madenwald, 5-6.

offbeat humor."[82] In addition to being a mentor and staunch advocate for the young director, Kuchar was influential in the types of art that Jacobson would create—namely, low-budget, experimental films. Jacobson recalls in a discussion with Mark Taylor and fellow video-maker Liz Canning that, with Kuchar in mind, she would learn to balance her creative vision with limited technical sources and budget: "This is totally with George Kuchar's help, because he's the master at making anything out of anything […] just this punk aesthetic, I'm not going to let anything stand in my way. I'm just going to do it however it needs to be done."[83]

With a budget of only $1,600, borrowed equipment from SFAI and fellow artists,[84] and actors who virtually volunteered to perform on-camera,[85] *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* is a testament of Kuchar's influence, with the opening and credits boldly declaring that the film was "written, directed, shot, and edited" by Jacobson. *Serial Killer* tells the tale of Mary (Kristin Calabrese, sometimes listed as Kristen Bree

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[82] Alex Kies, "Remembering Sarah Jacobson, the badass filmmaker that brought Riot Grrrl sensibility to theaters," last modified January 8, 2020, http://52.37.9.210/arts/remembering-sarah-jacobson-the-badass-filmmaker-that-brought-riot-grrrl-sensibility-to-theaters/566790221. Speaking with Marc Madenwald, Jacobson describes Kuchar as beyond the avant-garde: "I don't know. It's weird. It's like divided into camps. It's like there is the avant-garde camp and then the George Kuchar camp […] Either you're an artist or you have a sense of humor kinda thing." In Madenwald, 5.
[83] Mark Taylor, "Two Women on the Verge," *Film Arts Foundation Newsletter* 16, no. 5 (1993): 20.
[84] In her interview with *Film Threat* magazine on making films like *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* and *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, Jacobson states: "Before now I could make films so cheaply that I could just make them out of my own pocket. My last film I did I made for just $1600 and that was over a long period of time so it was pretty easy for me to save the money. I only shot a scene a month. Now that I'm working on my first feature I'm just trying to get everything for free. I'm scamming incredibly." J.D. "Weekly Weird News and Filth." *Film Threat: Idol Threats* 18 (1994).
[85] Dana Reinoos, "The Riot Grrrl Films of Sarah Jacobson," last modified September 13, 2019, https://hyperallergic.com/517374/the-riot-grrrl-films-of-sarah-jacobson/.

Calabrese), a teenage girl who is introduced in the film's opening caressing the dead, bloodied body of an unknown young man.[86] Shot entirely in black-and-white, with a grainy, distorted look suggesting low-budget video equipment, *Serial Killer* follows closely as Mary, adopting the titular "serial killer" moniker, travels around town, finding and killing men with whom she has had intimate (mostly, sexual) relationships. These murders, however, are not performed at whim; the unnamed man at the film's opening reveals that he has cheated on and abandoned his romantic partner; another one of Mary's sexual partners refuses to wear a condom; and a passerby sexually harasses her on the street. Mary's life of crime gets turned on its head when she stumbles upon a murder-in-progress, this time performed by a man (identified in the closing credits as simply "Henry, the Serial Killer Boyfriend")[87] who claims he only kills other heterosexual men—"it's the only way that I can find…reaction to the…white dominating male society, patriarchal…it's the only way I can get back at it"—rambling further with stories of his childhood with an abusive uncle. Attracted to and sympathetic of Henry's situation, Mary forges a relationship with her new killer counterpart; a montage of the two shows their daily exploits like cooking, reading the newspaper, and casually torturing unsuspecting victims.

Mary's idyllic life with Henry comes to a screeching halt when her newfound partner in crime brings home a new victim: a young woman, bound and gagged, whose boyfriend was killed in the park by Henry alone. Confused and enraged—"I thought you

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[86] A news report, played on the film's soundtrack, describes the man as "dead from a single gunshot wound in the chest […] clad in only boxer shorts and boots, and no identification was found."

[87] This may be a cheeky wink-and-nod to the slasher, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986), although Jacobson has never identified this as such.

only killed [other] straight men?"—Mary bludgeons Henry to death with a handheld vacuum cleaner, as the innocent girl shrieks in the background, and is later set free. The next day, Mary is approached by a vagrant, who tries to make her feel better by striking up a friendly conversation. "I've been carrying this around," the vagrant announces to Mary, as he holds up a grotesque crucifix adorned with a dark, top-hatted skeleton posed in a similar way to the crucified Christ. Mary laughs, later admitting, "I've just killed the only man I've ever loved. I mean, not just him. I've killed nineteen men, one for every year I've ever lived. When I was a kid, my dad abused me…he tried to touch me. It hurts!" Much to Mary's dismay, the vagrant proposes that she was abused because she was "such an attractive, strong woman…he couldn't resist;" Mary then breaks his liquor bottle and attempts to stab him. "I can't believe this!," Mary screams,

> Every time I tell someone, they say it's my fault! It's not my fault, I didn't do it! I don't have to be ashamed! No one wants to listen to my story, and then I get this anger that I'm not allowed to express because it's not right for a woman to have any rage. You can have your fucking James Dean image and be a hero to society, and I have just as much pain, if not more, and no one can even look me in the eye and say I'm sorry![88]

Mary suddenly comes to her senses, gathering her thoughts and realizing that she doesn't have to kill anymore; instead, she decides to tell her own stories of trauma from her own perspective. "I'm gonna tell them anyway, you can't keep me quiet!"[89] Mary exclaims, grabbing her knapsack and walking away, as the vagrant watches her from a distance.

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[88] Sarah Jacobson, dir., *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, filmed 1993, Youtube, 25:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB0oW7peR94.
[89] Ibid.

Described by Ed Halter as a "key film of the [1990s] angrily subversive underground cinema,"[90] *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* has been met by both contemporaneous and current critics with an overall positive response. Halter, speaking of Jacobson's film in the director's obituary in *The Village Voice*, characterizes it as "righteously chill-inducing"[91] and, certainly, many other reviewers picked up on the same horror terminology when describing *Serial Killer*. "The film is about a young woman who is fed up with the stupid things men do and just ups and kills them," writes Mark Taylor of the *Film Arts Foundation*. "It has such wicked energy and wild, fearless creativity, that I couldn't stop talking about it."[92] Patrick Macias in his brief review of the film for the *San Francisco Examiner* echoes this sentiment, asserting that *Serial Killer* is an "off-kilter feminist slasher movie that defied [his] expectations at every turn."[93] Likewise, Lisa Marie Bowman, in her 2019 review of the film, agrees that, while the "gore effects are (deliberately, I assume) over-the-top and cartoonish," it succeeds in its provocative and relatable content. "Whatever legitimate complaints can be made against the acting and cheapness of the production," Bowman asserts, "there's something deeply cathartic about Mary's revenge […] This is an unapologetically angry film and perhaps not for everyone. For students of underground and experiment [sic] cinema, however, it's a must see."[94]

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[90] Ed Halter, "Sarah Jacobson 1971-2004," last modified February 17, 2004, https://www.villagevoice.com/2004/02/17/sarah-jacobson-1971-2004/.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Taylor, 8.
[93] Patrick Macias, "If YO! picked the Academy Awards," *San Francisco Examiner*, 1994.
[94] Lisa Marie Bowman, "Film Review: I Was a Teenage Serial Killer (dir by Sarah Jacobson)," last modified February 13, 2019, https://unobtainium13.com/2019/02/13/88842/.

Furthermore, many critics picked up on the film's marked influence from B-movies, of which Jacobson herself has admitted her affections in interviews. "Back in the winter of 1990 I was an intern at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and they'd show a lot of cheesy movies like *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T*, the original *Gun Crazy* and biker films, she said. "There's something exciting about them, a certain spontaneity. They're sort of an open arena for experimentation."[95] Indeed, the Walker Art Center, the very inspiration for Jacobson's work, would describe *Serial Killer* in similar terms, noting that it "applies a B-movie aesthetic to contemporary feminism."[96] Such an aesthetic, which includes "grainy black-and-white film, out-of-sync non-diegetic sound," as in addition to its "unfettered violence," helps solidify its status within underground filmmaking and, importantly, helps amplify its horrific content.[97] Jacobson's own mentor, George Kuchar, described the film as a collection of "visual and aural atrocities that chews the film to bits and spits it in your face for maximum message output."[98] Additionally, Willow Maclay offers: "To become a serial killer because of how shitty men are is the fantasy, but Jacobson inverts that narrative with real horror and tragedy […] Any woman who has experienced Mary's horror can find resonance and reassurance with every slice of her blade."[99] Echoing this sentiment, Steven Chean asserts that the "gritty and frequently unsteady" camerawork in the film, amongst other techniques, adds to the

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[95] Chean, 67-68.
[96] "Film/Video, August 1993.", *Walker Art Center*, accessed via New York University's Special Collections Library, 2020.
[97] Laura Vogel, "I Was a Teenage Serial Killer," *The Nose Magazine* 19 (1994): 56; Reinoos, 2019.
[98] "Film/Video, August 1993."
[99] Willow Maclay, "My Secret: *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*," *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism* 5, no. 2 (2017): http://cleojournal.com/2017/08/18/my-secret-i-was-a-teenage-serial-killer/.

film's overall sense of grotesquerie and unease. "And that's the beauty of Jacobson's style […] an unusually complex assemblage of visual and audio that forces the viewer to sort out the grisly events."[100]

Jacobson's affinity for and mastery of B-movie techniques helps propel *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* into the realm of transgressive horror. After all, as Sconce has outlined in his discussion of cinematic subcultures and "trash" aesthetics, horror as a genre, and the B-movie as an underground movement, are part of the larger group of paracinema, an "articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history."[101] I would argue that *Serial Killer* is even more potent as a transgressive horror film through its alignment with another, longstanding underground movement: the Riot Grrrl, a group beginning in punk rock circles in the early 1990s that expanded considerably into print media (like zines and other indie publications) and visual media. According to scholars Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, the Riot Grrrl movement grew out of the need to "demarginalize the role of women in the convention [the International Pop Underground Festival] and in punk rock,"[102] helping these women to regain agency within an otherwise white, male movement while reclaiming the term *girl*, and all of its negative connotations, in society at large.

Riot Grrls are noteworthy for a number of different reasons; per Rosenberg and Garofalo, the Riot Grrrl movement is much angrier, more in-your-face, and altogether

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[100] Chean, 68.
[101] Sconce, 372.
[102] Quoted in Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, "Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within," *Signs* 23, no. 3 (1998): 810.

more concerned with the personal, rather than the public, than the second-wave feminism that preceded it.[103] Second-wave feminism, indeed, was a common breeding ground for a number of budding Riot Grrrls, with many either born or coming of age during the second wave's genesis in the 1970s. Yet, as Melissa Klein offers, out of fear that they would either be "branded as fanatical 'feminazis' or because they see feminism not as a growing and changing movement but as a dialogue of the past that conjures up images of militantly bell-bottomed 'women's libbers,'"[104] these young women often hesitantly embraced this iteration of feminism. Coupled with the second wave's inattention towards race and sexuality,[105] as well as a shift in focus towards "the importance of having individual voices heard rather than a concrete political message,"[106] Riot Grrrls, riding atop the third wave feminist movement, sought radical (sometimes, violent) alternatives to respond to patriarchal society's continued marginalization of women across multiple identity groups.

On the other hand, the significance of the Riot Grrrl movement lies in its emphasis on self-expression: that is, of creating music and other media that

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[103] Ibid.
[104] Melissa Klein, "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community," in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, eds. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 207.
[105] Despite beliefs to the contrary, race is still a looming issue in the Riot Grrrl movement: "The fact that the vast majority of girls involved in Riot Grrrl are white and middle- to upper-class has caused outsiders to deride the movement and some of those involved to dissociate themselves from it. Although there has been much discussion of race as an issue within Riot Grrrl and society in general, no one seems to have conceived any viable solution to the racial homogeneity of Riot Grrrl" (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998, 811). For a deeper interrogation of race and Riot Grrrl, see Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival."
[106] "Riot Grrrl: The Feminism of a New Generation," Mt. Holyoke, accessed December 20, 2020. https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/websf07.htm.

communicated personal struggles with issues like rape, domestic violence, body image, and broader socio-political institutions that leveraged agency against women. Stemming from the DIY-aesthetic of punk and indie rock scenes throughout the 1970s and 1980s, which challenged "conventional notions of authenticity, greatness, and aesthetic value,"[107] Riot Grrrls created their own media products to further express their own anxieties about the world around them, in addition to networking with other Riot Grrrls in the process, forming a unique community with like-minded individuals. And, this penchant for self-expression allowed women to break into the public sphere; as Klein suggests, domains like the punk rock scene, despite being anti-establishment and underground, opened up spaces for men to make all of the "noise," literally and figuratively, relegating women to "sideline roles such as fan or girlfriend"[108] in the process, isolating them behind the scenes, and behind the stage. The Riot Grrrl movement opened up the possibility for women to participate counter-culturally, like their male counterparts, but also communicate their anger and overall dissatisfaction towards a world that had otherwise forced them into the margins. Anger, aggression, and acts of rebellion, otherwise considered a "male province,"[109] became instruments that Riot Grrrls could use and share amongst one another, bringing their experiences, finally, to the forefront.

[107] Klein, 216.
[108] Klein, 211.
[109] Klein, 212.

Aesthetically, Jacobson's *Serial Killer* is pure Riot Grrrl; the film's score features prominently the music of punk band Heavens to Betsy,[110] and the character of Mary, through the masterful performance of Kristin Calabrese, is portrayed as loud, brash, sexually liberated, and fiercely independent. Sporting a weathered leather jacket, wildly curly hair, and a nose piercing, Mary exhibits the effortless cool of the punk and grunge scenes, a visual contrast to some of the other, unnamed women in the film, who have more traditionally feminine and mainstream clothing styles. Additionally, to borrow from Dana Reinoos, the film's obvious low budget, fast-paced editing, and experimental, montage-like editing style effectively result in an "adrenaline shot of riot grrrl rage. [*Serial Killer*] eschews plot for pure feeling, offering a distinctly feminine language of the forbitten ecstasy found in not shutting up and not backing down."[111] This so-called *feminine language* is key to the effectiveness of *Serial Killer* as Riot Grrrl film, for its emphasis on the unique experiences of women, namely Mary, speaks to the aims of this music/media movement. Not only is Mary's day-to-day life chronicled in the film—at times, in a way that it intimately close (with the camera filming her with close proximity, sometimes at her side, sometimes even at eye- or shoulder-level)—but her past traumas are featured heavily in the film's narrative. Importantly, these traumas are told through Mary's *own words*, loudly and clearly, without censorship. Mary, throughout the film, has been victimized at the hands of a plethora of men, ranging from her father to her brother (who is shown at the film's opening, and is mentally and emotionally abusive to

[110] Other musicians featured on the soundtrack include underground punk band Gas Huffer, singer Steve "Garth" Hermann and, interestingly enough, former musician and cult leader Charles Manson.
[111] Reinoos, 2019.

Mary) to the men she casually encounters on the streets. Mary comes to terms with this trauma, ultimately regaining agency, both verbally, as she monologizes to the homeless man at the film's conclusion, and physically (sometimes, comically so), in her casual murders of male victims. Mary's openness and explicitness throughout *Serial Killer*, therefore, helps "acknowledge that female pain exists, [taking] down a culture of toxic masculinity that denies women power and pleasure,"[112] a hallmark of Riot Grrrl media.

Mary's extreme, almost hair-trigger violence towards the men in her life is, indeed, an extension of the brash, anarchistic Riot Grrrl movement. The graphic violence that is the centerpiece of *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, performed at the hands of the teenage protagonist, effectively reappropriates the serial killer trope and consequently subverts the horror genre in the process. Certainly, the serial killer has been commonplace to horror, as well as several sub-genres under the umbrella of horror, since earliest days of film, with infamous murderers like Jack the Ripper entering the popular consciousness in features like *Waxworks* (*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*; Paul Leni, 1924), for example. While the serial killer film reached the height of its popularity during the 1980s[113] and has continued to capture the international imagination through miniseries, true crime TV shows, and podcasts, a number of iterations of this character have appeared throughout film and can be arguably classified into one of two broader categories. Firstly, serial killers have been portrayed through a more realistic lens,

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[112] Katie Duggan, "Weird Weekend 2019: Killing the Patriarchy in a Sarah Jacobson Double Feature," last modified September 1, 2019, https://filmdaze.net/weird-weekend-2019-killing-the-patriarchy-in-a-sarah-jacobson-double-feature/.

[113] Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil Greek, "The Compulsion of Real/Reel Serial Killers and Vampires: Toward a Gothic Criminology," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 10, no. 1 (2003): 44.

having some sort of "connection to 'true' stories of how these [killers] became transformed into the monstrous figures they became;"[114] films such as Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and *Frenzy* (1972), and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), ushered in a trend of introducing serial killers based (loosely or otherwise) on real-life people, their threat coming from their everydayness, their ability to assimilate into mainstream culture. For scholars like Leonard Cassuto, the realistic serial killer is a radical example of "human mechanization: he's an apparently interchangeable social cog, a man who looks and acts like everyone else except for the fact that he repeatedly kills other people."[115] On the other end of the spectrum are the serial killers so rooted in fantasy that they blend into other fictional characters, most notably the vampire or superhuman slasher. These serial killers, while still embodying "chaotic forces that, from the perspective of everyday life, strike seemingly at random,"[116] differ from their human counterparts in their physicality; they are visually striking, taking on a vaguely human appearance (consequently eliciting some sort of "uproarious disgust" on the part of the viewer),[117] and they use their bodies or extensions of their bodies, like "knives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws,"[118] to kill their victims, adding to their horrific nature. Consequently, the supernatural serial killer appeals to both the collective taboo of seeing and interacting with the abject and, per Brian Jarvis, the "modes of desire

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Leonard Cassuto, "The Cultural Work of Serial Killers," *Minnesota Review* 58, no. 1 (2002): 221.
[116] Pinedo, 105.
[117] Clover, 89.
[118] Clover, 81.

and domination, the obsessive violence, wastefulness and irrational excesses"[119] that guide modern consumerism.

Whether human or superhuman, the serial killer figure has been consistently, and characteristically, described in gendered terms: those popular human serial killers, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, are almost exclusively white and male, and across horror scholarship, serial killing has been coded as masculine. This masculinization of serial killing has a number of different implications. According to Nicola Rehling, for instance, white masculinity has become fertile ground for ruthless murders to occur, for it is a "rather empty, depleted identity, which, in the serial killer, produces a chain of violent acts intent on attaining a form of subjectivity that remains ever elusive."[120] This emptiness, for lack of better terms, becomes a broader commentary on the status of white heterosexual maleness in Western society, their murderous behavior the logical next step in exerting and further preserving their gender identity. As Caroline S. Picart asserts, the masculine serial killer's actions are ultimately "naturalized as males simply doing things that are natural to men (e.g. violence, domination) who have stepped slightly out of the rules of acceptable behavior." She continues,

> In other words, men who violate social norms/laws are seen merely as untamed or uncontrolled men. Male serial killers may be detested as aberrant, but the audience often ambivalently views the male serial killers' skill of tracking, trapping, and physically overcoming their prey as skills that normal or real men are supposed to have as men (no matter how far these actions are criminalized). Within the popular imaginary […] male serial killers are seen as brilliant [and] possess traits that are desirable even if these skills are used for evil.[121]

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[119] Brian Jarvis, "Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture," *Crime, Media, and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2007): 342.
[120] Nicola Rehling, "Everyman and no man: white, heterosexual masculinity in contemporary serial killer movies," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 49.
[121] Caroline Joan Picart, "Crime and the Gothic: Sexualizing Serial Killers," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 2.

The serial killer, by this logic, represents the "gender anxieties of (hetero)sexual murder as 'the serial killer kills off the 'feminine vulnerability' in himself when he kills women, and thus proves himself a man.'"[122] Yet, the majority of horror scholars have offered that the serial killer, rather than exerting those masculine traits upheld within a patriarchal society, instead can be coded as feminine and therefore an abject deviation from gender norms. Carol J. Clover's study on the slasher film is the linchpin for such analysis of serial killers, as she makes the bold observation that the genre welcomes oscillation between masculine and feminine poles. That is, while the slasher sometimes takes on a male appearance, and elicits some form of identification from the violent agency that they wield in the film's first half, they are feminized by the film's conclusion: the serial killer "ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual, is spiritually divided ('the mother half of his mind'), or even equipped with vulva and vagina."[123] Therefore, the slasher sub-genre, in Clover's assessment, presents a never-ending "gender-identity game," one in which "the categories masculine and feminine, traditionally embodied in male and female, are collapsed into one and the same character."[124] Similar observations have been made by Harry M. Benshoff, who offers, in the same vein as Robin Wood, that monster-slashers can be "understood as racial, ethnic, and/or political/ideological Others, while more frequently they are constructed primarily as sexual Others (women, bisexuals, and homosexuals)."[125] Monster-slashers, often confined to "shadowy spaces: at worst caves, castles, and closets, and at best a

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[122] Picart and Greek, 42.
[123] Clover, 94.
[124] Clover 103, 107.
[125] Benshoff, 118.

marginalized and oppressed position within the cultural hegemony,"[126] exhibit a type of perverse fascination with death, decay and, above all, predatory sexuality, the latter of which is a hallmark of homophobic discourses within dominant, patriarchal society. Male serial killers, like their supernatural counterparts, are presented in a similar way, possessing a type of "non-phallic masculinity and/or sexual deviance"[127] that disturbs the patriarchal social order and are therefore coded as threateningly homosexual.

What, then, can be made of the female serial killer? Amidst the influx of serial killer narratives focusing on, for instance, charming yet sinister characters like Hannibal Lecter in numerous productions[128] and Patrick Bateman in the novel-turned-film *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), as well as so-called "white trash" characters like Mickey in *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994),[129] female serial killers have occupied a unique position within the popular consciousness. Picart offers that serial killers like Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003)[130] have been portrayed as

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[126] Benshoff, 127.
[127] Rehling, 2007.
[128] Including *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986), *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001), *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002), and the *Hannibal* television series (2013-15).
[129] Niciola Rehling defines the white trash serial killer as a character trope hinging on the derogatory term "white trash," a "non-dominant form of whiteness that undermines notions that white identity is necessarily 'the primary locus of social privilege and power.'" The white trash serial killer "is demonized through the deployment of crude stereotypes of white, working-class, rural masculinity and played off against the middle-class whites whose lives he threatens." In Rehling, 2007.
[130] *Monster* is noteworthy because it is directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, yet it presents Wuornos in a way that is contradictory to the aims of many directors that I've discussed thus far. *Monster* and other films falling under the umbrella of horror prove the point that not *all* horror films directed by women are women-made horror, and they can instead subscribe to the same harmful stereotypes perpetuated in other mainstream, Hollywood films.

"strange, alien creatures and, often, beings beyond redemption,"[131] with Wuornos in particular representative of the belief that women who kill are inadequate, failing at heteronormative femininity as prescribed by patriarchal society. Rather than being heralded for their cunning, murderous abilities or natural charm, like their male counterparts, female serial killers instead have a "lower prestige ranking,"[132] often portrayed as physically grotesque and socially inept. A number of films centering on the female serial killer have offered alternatives to this characterization, like Cindy Sherman's 1997 debut *Office Killer*, which focuses on the fraught relationships between women in a corporate setting, the gruesome murders a result of interpersonal tensions and corporate downsizing, amongst other things.[133] And, across many female serial killer films, their motives do not hinge solely on their incompetent gender expression but instead on past traumas, like physical abuse.[134] Yet, still, for Creed, the female serial killer belongs to the broader categorization of the monster-slasher, a trope that represents the "male fear of castration"[135] and elicits fear through her ability to castrate, as well as her castrated appearance. The female slasher, in Creed's view, helps to reinforce "a view that woman is deadly and dangerous and/or they are playing on the spectator's fascination with the relationship between sex and death—particularly for the male."[136]

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[131] Picart, 2.
[132] Picart, 3.
[133] Dahlia Schweitzer, "Another kind of monster: Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 52 (Summer 2010), https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/schwitzerOfficeKiller/index.html; Jarvis 2007.
[134] Picart, 8.
[135] Creed, 125.
[136] Creed, 127-128.

In an interview with Marc Savlov, Sarah Jacobson has acknowledged *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*'s use of the serial killer trope, stating explicitly that the film is a response to the popular horror/crime films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. "That's what *Serial Killer* was, you know?" Jacobson remarks,

> A reaction to the serial killer chic that was so "in" at the time. I thought it would be fun to kind of turn the tables on it all. You had all these guys going, "Yeah! Kill the girl! Kill the girl! [and] it was like, "Hey, why don't we just kill the guy!" But only the stupid ones, because, you know, not all guys are bad. Some of my best friends are men.[137]

Not only does Jacobson's film provide an alternative to the so-called "serial-killer chic" in the popular culture during this era, but the character of Mary, in my view, is in direct contrast to the female monster-slasher as outlined by Creed and other scholars. It is true that Mary, as she navigates the world around her, embodies such a fascination with sex and death, per Creed's theory; her murderous behavior is often triggered by sex, as evident in the scene in the film's opening, explicitly featuring intercourse between her and her eventual victim. Mary is open with and comfortable in her sexuality, with her brother (rather aggressively) telling her that she's too promiscuous, that she's "probably gonna get pregnant, by some fucking asshole that you've been seein' […] What do you want, another fucking abortion? You need to find a *man*, and you need to have some kids!"[138] Mary, by these standards, is further seen as a monster—she possesses a fatal sexuality and does not fulfill the traditional, heteronormative standards of monogamy and childbirth, having evidently aborted her unborn child. Yet, Mary's slashings are motivated by *inappropriate* sexual behavior, like unwanted catcalls on the street,

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[137] Marc Savlov, "Girls, Sex, and Movies: Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore," last modified March 20, 1998, https://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/1998-03-20/523064/.
[138] Jacobson, *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*.

unprotected sex, and rape. Moreover, Mary, despite her resistance against monogamy—she kills Henry, the one man who could promise some semblance of a traditional, heteronormative relationship—is not portrayed as socially inept or having a "lower prestige ranking," as described above, due to her failed relationships. Instead, she is street-savvy, modern, perceptive and, above all, relatable, a character whose murderous rampages give "credence to the struggles women face" in real life.[139] While outrageously exaggerated, Mary's murderous outbursts in *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* are an outlet for her to express and understand her own past traumas, rather than merely being behaviors that signify her failed femininity. For the audience, her violence invites introspection on the personal, internal level, but also on the collective injustices within patriarchal society.

"My story exists whether anyone's gonna listen to me or not," Mary exclaims at the end of *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*. "You know, I'm gonna do something worse! Whether you want to ignore me or invalidate my stories…I'm gonna tell them anyway, you can't keep me quiet!"[140] This promise of healing, of trauma, of communicating that which is otherwise suppressed by society, is extended in Sarah Jacobson's follow-up *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997), the director's first and only feature film given her untimely death in 2004.[141] *Mary Jane* follows a similar trajectory to *Serial Killer*,

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[139] Maclay, 2017.
[140] Jacobson, 1993.
[141] Ed Halter, "Sarah Jacobson 1971-2004," last modified February 17, 2004, https://www.villagevoice.com/2004/02/17/sarah-jacobson-1971-2004/. Jacobson would fail to achieve the same success of *Serial Killer* and *Mary Jane* as the 1990s came to a close. She would make music videos, behind-the-scenes featurettes, and a full-length documentary called *The Making of Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (2000). Yet, none of these projects would gain traction, and she instead wrote for blogs on *IndieWire* and *Punk Planet*; worked behind-the-scenes for TV networks like Vh1 and

featuring the lives of rebellious, sexually liberated, oftentimes angry young women as they come-of-age and "gain control over their bodies and desires."[142] "One of the reasons I made the movie was because I really wanted to tell guys what I liked about sex, instead of just saying 'It's different for girls,'" Jacobson recalls to Mark Savlov. "I wanted guys to see it from a girl's point of view and kind of understand women and not be embarrassed about it […] Ultimately, I'd just like the film to open up a whole side of women's sexuality that just isn't there right now."[143] Certainly, Jacobson across her film career has, in her words, opened up a new manner of representing women, and in *Mary Jane*, she features young women with agency over their bodies, voices, and stories. *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* sets the precedent for this feminist mode of filmmaking and is radical in how it reconceptualizes women's place in horror, moving beyond characterizations of woman as hapless victim, or woman as blood-thirsty monster. Horror becomes a tool for expressing pain—"I have just as much pain, if not more!" Mary cries—and in Jacobson's *Serial Killer*, this pain is communicated loudly, clearly, and with conviction.

C. Reconsidering the (Female) Vampire in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Amirpour, 2014)

Oxygen; and taught filmmaking at community colleges. According to Alex Kies, in the time leading up to her death Jacobson attempted to develop a feature-length film loosely based off of the *Fabulous Stains* documentary, but this project was not fulfilled. See Kies, 2020

[142] Duggan, 2019.

[143] Savlov, 1998.

"I'm bad," utters The Girl, the mysterious, vampiric titular character of director Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), spoken with a type of breathy, yet forceful bite characteristic of her voice throughout the film's narrative. The atmospheric, black-and-white horror film, often referred to as "the first Iranian vampire spaghetti western,"[144] indeed puts those who are deemed "bad" at the forefront. Drug dealers, prostitutes, addicts, vagrants, and cross-dressers populate the aptly named Bad City, the semi-fictional city[145] at the center of *A Girl*, an area marked by clear socioeconomic disparities caused, in many ways, by the looming presence of oil refineries. Clearly borrowing from the ever-present vampire trope in horror media—Amirpour has cited author Anne Rice as an inspiration, and critics have noted the film's visual references to F. W. Murnau's 1921 film *Nosferatu*[146]—*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* depicts, in large part, a type of senseless, blood-thirsty carnage that is all too common to the vampire film. Floating ominously each evening from street to street, The Girl at first glance occupies a similar role as the abject female vampire, a creature that for Stacey Abbott has come to "represent the barbaric and archaic world that resists the

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[144] Charlie Lyne, "A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night: 'the first Iranian vampire western'," last modified July 24, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jul/24/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-dvd-blu-ray.

[145] The film was shot in Taft, a small city bordering the San Joaquin Valley in California; Bad City is modeled after Tehran, Iran. In Angela Watercutter, "Meet the Woman Who Directed the World's Only Iranian Vampire Western," last modified February 5, 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/02/girl-walks-home-alone-at-night/.

[146] Watercutter, 2014; Nick Schager, "A striking vampire film deserves to be among the Best Cinematography nominees," last modified January 9, 2015, https://film.avclub.com/a-striking-vampire-film-deserves-to-be-among-the-best-c-1798275387.

civilized and the modern," as well as a type of sexual threat lying in "its difference from a phallic 'norm.'"[147]

But what is so interesting and altogether transgressive about Amirpour's so-called "vampire western" is the way that she topples these tropes about the female vampire with such ease, in essence providing an image of the vampire throught the character of The Girl, who is altogether modern and empowered and, quoting Shadee Abdi and Bernadette Marie Calafell, finds such "empowerment in her quietness and her ability to blend in."[148] It is true that The Girl incites some sort of fear, but this feeling is coupled with a sense of sympathy—for being an outsider, for being perpetually alone—which in turn encourages the audience to align themselves with the monster. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, therefore, provides a highly complex vision of monstrosity that breaks the otherwise rigid boundaries of a traditional vampire film, initiating broader conversations about identification, marginality, and belonging. Coupled with its minimalistic style and influences from Iranian culture, *A Girl* further reconceptualizes the otherwise rigid aesthetics of Hollywood horror.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night is the debut feature from British-born Iranian-American Ana Lily Amirpour, a filmmaker who, in the years leading up to the production of the film, was a relative unknown in the film industry. Graduating from UCLA's prestigious film school, and having a keen interest in telling stories through film as a

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[147] Stacey Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 2; Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 25.

[148] Shadee Abdi and Bernadette Marie Calafell, "Queer utopias and a (Feminist) Iranian vampire: a critical analysis of resistive monstrosity in A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 4. (2017): 363.

child, Amirpour flexed her filmmaking skills in such outlets as the Berlinale Talent Campus, resulting in the production of the short, *A Little Suicide*, in 2012.[149] In the years leading up to *A Girl*, Amirpour continued making short films and even developed two feature-length scripts that unfortunately never came to fruition, in part due to poor management, and in part from her own creative struggles. Speaking with *Fast Company*'s Jeff Beer, Amirpour describes the frustrations she faced as an artist, stating plainly that she was simply "doing it the wrong way"—

> You're changing the script here and there, writing for this actor or that actor, or for this money or that film fund or whatever. That's a stupid, completely ridiculous way of being creative because it's goal-oriented and creativity is really about yourself and finding something, and you can't find something if you already have an end or destination in mind.[150]

Amirpour would eventually "find something" through *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the idea for which stemmed from the director's own love of pop-culture vampires, teen flicks, fantasy movies from the 1980s, and an overall sense of the macabre. Additionally, Amirpour would take her own personal experiences into consideration, dwelling on the loneliness and lovelornness that she had experienced in years past[151] and, to some extent, her own sense of identity in America. "The world has

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[149] Jeff Beer, "Director Ana Lily Amirpour's Guide To Filmmaking And "Back to the Future" Approach to Creativity," last modified November 21, 2014, https://www.fastcompany.com/3038883/director-ana-lily-amirpours-guide-to-filmmaking-and-a-back-to-the-future-approach-to-creativ; "Berlinale Talent Campus: A Little Suicide," Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.berlinale.de/en/archive/jahresarchive/2012/02_programm_2012/02_filmdatenblatt_2012_20124481.html#tab=filmStills/.
[150] Beer, 2014.
[151] Ana Lily Amirpour, "Know Thyself: Ana Lily Amirpour on the Question "Why" and A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," *Moviemaker*, November 18, 2014, https://www.moviemaker.com/know-thyself-ana-lily-amirpour-a-girl-walks-home-alone-night/.

become a vagabond," describes Amirpour, "We're all mushing into a big stew […] The notion of what nationality I am or the film is is becoming more murky the more I talk about it."[152] The undercurrent of *A Girl*, therefore, is misfitting; as she bluntly states to Stephen Saito, "I love all the outcasts and rejects," in all aspects of the term.[153]

The seeds planted during the earliest phases of development and production culminated into the final cut of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, debuting at the Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2014. As is the case of many films during the festival, *A Girl* would catch the attention of larger production companies, namely, actor Elijah Wood's SpectreVision,[154] which would become one of the largest endorsers of the film. Amirpour's debut also took audiences by storm, sharing company with another blockbuster entry into the women-made horror cannon: Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*, an Australian domestic thriller tinged by the paranormal.[155] The similarities between Amirpour's and Kent's horror films move well beyond their release date[156]—the two

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[152] Jeffrey Bowers, "Behind the Scenes of 'A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night' - Part 2," last modified December 4, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en/article/3b7wj9/behind-the-scenes-of-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-part-214.

[153] Stephen Saito, "Interview: Ana Lily Amirpour on Finding Her Own Path With "A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night," last modified November 23, 2014, http://moveablefest.com/interview-ana-lily-amirpour-on-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night/.

[154] Watercutter, 2014.

[155] "You won't believe this," writes Wesley Morris of *Grantland*, "but Kent's isn't the only horror film out now that's bent toward Polanski and expressionism by a rookie female director." In Wesley Morris, "No-Man's-Land: Reese Witherspoon's 'Wild' and the Best Indie Horror of the Year," last modified December 5, 2014, http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/wild-babadook-reese-witherspoon-review/.

[156] *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *The Babadook* shared the same festival circuit, both appearing at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2014, and being featured amongst a handful of other films at "New Directors/New Films," an annual program created by the Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Scott and Dargis 2014). *The Babadook* would, however, gain more spotlight than *A Girl*, becoming

films were both debuts for their respective directors, were based on short films and other small-scale projects in their directors' early careers, and received large amounts of financial backing through crowdfunding sites (Amirpour's on IndieGoGo, and Kent's on Kickstarter). Moreover, the two would occupy a very similar space within the overlap of feminist filmmaking and horror filmmaking. While Amirpour has not explicitly staked a claim in either—she offers that "the film can be feminist if that's what people think"[157]—critics and audiences alike have noted Amirpour and Kent's similarities in their interrogation of feminist themes, like the subversion of societal roles along gendered lines.[158] The two films deviate, however, in their aesthetic approach to such themes: while Kent's *The Babadook* has a clearer story arc, with a familiar narrative structure and relatively satisfying final act, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* does something all the more experimental, and subversive, with the horror genre.

Set in the aforementioned Bad City, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* follows the tales of two characters, both relative misfits within the larger fabric of the crime-riddled town. At one corner is Arash (played by Arash Marandi), a hard-working, youthful man whose good looks and attire mirrors the James Dean-like teen idols of Hollywood's past. Arash works a number of odd jobs—including handywork for a young socialite, Shaydah (Rome Shadanloo)—in order to help earn a livable wage to take

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nominated for a variety of different critics' choice awards and gaining infamy within the LGBTQ+ community for the fictional Babadook character.

[157] Watercutter, 2014. Amirpour has gone on the record to say that she has not made a horror film: "Do you think it's a horror film? If there's a vampire in the story, you're in a certain realm. But I think it's more like a John Hughes film than it is a horror film" (Saito, 2014).

[158] Jake Hinkson, "Take Back The Night: A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," last modified February 27, 2015, https://www.tor.com/2015/02/27/movie-review-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night/.

care of his father, Hossein (Marshall Manesh), who is heavily addicted to opiates, and is seen throughout the film as being too incapacitated to properly function. Hossein is quickly revealed to have owed a significant sum of money to a local drug lord named Saeed (Dominic Rains), who seeks revenge by steaking Arash's most prized possession, a vintage car. At the other corner is The Girl (Sheila Vand), revealed early on to be a vampire (despite no such mention of the term anywhere in the film's dialogue) who lurks the city streets late in the evening. The Girl is, in many ways, an amalgam of different, fictional vampires, while all at once maintaining an appearance and demeanor all her own. She is perpetually youthful, and even more so lonely and lovelorn, a callback to modern vampires like Eli in the 2008 Swedish film *Let the Right One In* (and, later, the American remake, released in 2010), and the ethereal Adam and Eve in Jarmusch's 2013 film *Only Lovers Left Alive*.[159] And, like the stereotypical vampire characters of film, television, and myriad Halloween costumes, The Girl takes on a familiar appearance: sharp fangs, pallid skin, and a long black cloak floating behind her. However, this is not merely a plain cape—rather, it is a chador, a common female garment in the Muslim faith that, akin to a hooded shawl, covers the hair and neck and, with striking effect, flows down and grazes the surface of the ground.

The fact that The Girl dons traditional attire throughout *A Girl* is not the only update to the vampire trope; she is modern and effortlessly cool, riding skateboards with ease, wearing thin black eyeliner, and having a passion for popular and indie music. Above all, The Girl is unique for her penchant for revenge—a type of revenge that is not

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[159] Sheila O'Malley, "Reviews: A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," last modified November 21, 2014, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-2014.

entirely explained in the narrative but nevertheless materializes in her targeted killings of the men of Bad City: specifically, drug addicts, vagrants, wanderers, and the deplorable drug dealer Saeed. Harkening back to a sort of vigilantism hinted at in *Possibly in Michigan* and *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, The Girl selects her victims for their questionable moral character: in the case of Saeed, his criminal activities, as well as his extreme violence towards women like Atti (Mozhan Marnò), a prostitute who makes frequent appearances throughout the narrative. "Are you a good boy?" chants The Girl, a sort of rhetorical question (posed specifically to a small homeless boy wandering the streets) that perhaps expresses her underlying motivation throughout each killing. Yet, despite these relatively targeted killings of the men of Bad City, The Girl expresses a type of pointed frustrated discontent towards her female counterparts, neither showing sympathy towards the plight of women like Atti nor feeling extreme hatred towards them, as she does in the case of Saeed and others. The Girl is in a perpetual state of unbelonging, feeling no kinship with any of Bad City's inhabitants.

Arash and The Girl's paths cross two times during the film: once, after The Girl kills Saeed and leaves his home, silently signaling to Arash that his foe is dead, and that he can reclaim his stolen vehicle; and a second time, which sets off their mutual infatuation with one another, after Arash has taken too many drugs at a Halloween party. Sporting a familiar Dracula costume, Arash stumbles into The Girl in a daze, unable to walk or even comprehend how to return to his home. The Girl, feeling a sense of confusion—towards Arash's display, as well as her conflicting feelings towards the stranger—wheels Arash safely to her home on her skateboard, realizing that he is indeed a "good boy" unlike the many men who she comes across on her nightly haunts. It is

then that their relationship grows; Arash and The Girl become intimate. Arash becomes truly smitten with The Girl and attempts to start a romantic relationship with her, despite her hesitancy throughout.

Sometime later, Hossein spirals out of control, attempting to kill the family cat, Masuka, and delving further into heroin usage and illicit sex with Atti. Knowing the pain and destruction that Arash's father is causing, The Girl violently attacks and kills Hossein, disposing of his body with the help of Atti and eventually rescuing the beloved Masuka. Upon this discovery, Arash offers to run away with The Girl, leaving both of their lives as misfits in Bad City to start anew, together as a couple. The film then ends on an unclear note; Arash and The Girl get into an argument while driving, causing him to momentarily pull over and attempt to leave the vehicle in disgust. Arash quickly changes his mind, and reenters his car, continuing their trip to nowhere.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night was met with widespread critical acclaim scoring, amongst other reviews, a 96%, "Certified Fresh" rating on the popular review site, rottentomatoes.com,[160] with critics widely praising the film for its stylish, sleek visuals, harkening back to films by Jim Jarmusch and genres like neo-noir and the spaghetti western.[161] Described by critics like Sophie Monks Kaufman of the blog *Little*

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[160] This score refers to critical reviews, from national and international news sources. *A Girl* received only a 75% audience score on the site (*rottentomatoes.com*).
[161] Tim Robey, "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night review: vampires, Iranian-style," last modified May 21, 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night/review/; Kiva Reardon, "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night: A refreshing vampire tale," last modified January 23, 2015; https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-a-refreshing-vampire-tale/article22579824/; Cary Darling, "Movie review: 'A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night'," last modified December 26, 2014, https://www.star-telegram.com/entertainment/arts-culture/article4819530.html/.

White Lies as "a mosaic of shimmering fragments [brimming] with stylized qualities,"[162] many critics agree on the film's supposed coolness and—particularly impressive for a feature debut from a relatively unknown filmmaker—inventiveness in its juxtaposition of traditional horror tropes alongside a "dark, moody style, pulsating soundtrack, and offbeat love story."[163] "Amirpour has found her own funny, smart expression for teenage-bedroom loneliness, romantic isolation and a kind of perpetual emotional exile" writes Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*. "This film is just occasionally a bit too cool for school—but mostly cool enough, which is very cool."[164] Wesley Morris of *Grantland* continues this sentiment, noting that the director has "got a handle on drollery and vibrant framing. This movie is funny and hot […] Amirpour is having a Polanski moment. She's enjoying the conflation of comedy, death, and sex."[165]

This minimalistic, so-called "too cool for school" approach to the vampire film is, for many critics, one of the drawbacks of *A Girl*, with many critics noting the relative pretention of the film's visual style and, as a result, hollowness of its storyline. "Writer-director Ana Lily Amirpour displays an eclectic range of stylistic influences," remarks Ben Sachs of the *Chicago Reader*, "but for all the visual ambition, this doesn't add up to

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[162] Sophie Monks Kaufman, "Review: A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," last modified May 21, 2015, https://lwlies.com/reviews/girl-walks-home-alone-night/.
[163] David Lewis, "'A Girl Walks Home Alone' review: Stylish Iranian vampire," last modified December 4, 2014, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/A-Girl-Walks-Home-Alone-review-Stylish-5935022.php.
[164] Peter Bradshaw, "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night review – vampire in a veil stalks Iran," last modified May 21, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/21/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-review.
[165] Morris, 2014.

anything terribly substantial."[166] Kaufman of *Little White Lies*, despite her overall enthusiasm in describing the film as "a monochrome Iranian vampire skater movie," stresses that the film is more style than substance. Writes Kaufman: "The critical problem is that there is no energy in the playing [with genre ideas]. Scenes are slow to the point of stasis. The only pulse comes from satisfying, eclectic music selections […] It's a slick pose and not much more."[167] The film is "shot in a woozy black-and-white widescreen that recalls a lot, but expresses a little," declares arguably the film's harshest critic, Ignatiy Vishnevetsky of *The AV Club*:

> *A Girl* is best appreciated as a kind of cross-cultural papier-mâché sculpture, with a surface pasted with signifiers and quotations and a hollow interior shaped like Iran. In other words, it's something for affect-and-absence-minded media studies types to chew on, provided they can get past the fact that, for much of the movie, nothing happens, and it's not the rigorous, locked-in nothing of the long-take art film, but the slow-motion, music-montage nothing of the artsy American indie.[168]

Certainly, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is best characterized by its slower pace and sort of aimless narrative structure, a film about "nothing," so to speak, that is more ambient and surreal than it is tense or dramatic. Amirpour explains in a self-penned piece for *moviemaker.com* that the film, indeed, draws upon a real-life sense of loneliness, of wanting to "find real intimacy" in the filmmaking process and communicate this longing through the "vampire's invented mythology."[169] Moreover, Amirpour offers in an interview with Jeffrey Bowers of *vice.com* that the minimalism and

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[166] Ben Sachs, "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," last modified 2014, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night/Film?oid=15941672.
[167] Kaufman, 2015.
[168] Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, "The vampire fantasy A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night is an interesting bore," last modified November 20, 2014; https://film.avclub.com/the-vampire-fantasy-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-is-1798182132.
[169] Amirpour, 2014.

dreamlike qualities at the heart of the film speak to her outlook on filmmaking as a whole:

> You know, it's creating your own universe, like a fairy tale. Those are the movies I loved, like *NeverEnding Story* [sic] and *Legend*. All the movies I love are like fairytales in a way. Making a world is like being inside a dream. There's no loyalty to the real world. Fuck the real world. You're not going to a movie to understand the real world directly. You're in a movie to understand real emotion. It can be anything you want.[170]

I would also argue that this atmospheric, almost fairy tale-like presence characterizing the world of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is what truly makes the film an avant-garde horror film, one that, like Condit before her, challenges the temporal logic and overall narrative economy of traditional Hollywood filmmaking in one corner, and horror filmmaking in another. Indeed, the film has been placed by critics like Amy Taubin of *Film Comment* squarely within the realm of "art/horror," making it stand out, from an industry standpoint, from "close to 1,000 movies" that opened theatrically for at least one week" in 2014.[171] This alignment with the "art" portion of art/horror is a result of a number of different strategies on the part of Amirpour: the aforementioned slow narrative progression; an indistinct spatial and temporal landscape (while we are cued in on the film's locale, Bad City, we don't quite know where it is located, nor are we told when the actions take place, and over what time they unfold); an artful *chiaroscuro* lighting scheme, coupled with askew camera angles; the use of a montage-style editing; and, in many scenes, the random insertion of clips outside of the main narrative (for instance, shots of Rockabilly, a character in female drag, dancing on the streets with a balloon). When considered together, these elements can be likened to what Akira Mizuta

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[170] Bowers, 2014.
[171] Amy Taubin, "If a Tree Falls…," *Film Comment* 51, no. 1 (2014): 40.

Lippit describes as "exergue, ex-cinema."[172] Akin to the "paracinema," or a strain of filmmaking that eschews media specificity and instead lies outside of traditional filmmaking practices—a cinema "without organs, without bodies, or rather with multiple bodies and parts of bodies"[173]— exergue ex-cinema draws attention to the very cinematic medium of which it operates alongside. Put another way, exergue ex-cinema takes familiar bits and pieces of the language of cinema, "often quoting cinema in excerpt and extensive revision, secondary revision,"[174] and makes something new and radical with it. In the case of *A Girl*, Amirpour takes those traditional genre markers and heightens, distorts, and modifies them through surrealistic temporality/spatiality, a minimalistic aesthetic style, and a relatively unconventional narrative structure. As a result, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* joins a "diverse and often mutually incompatible avant-garde […] *outside the major studios and the dominant film industry*."[175]

It is this minimalism—a common sticking-point for a number of critics of Amirpour's film—that is of particular relevance in its alignment with the avant-garde and, to an extent, its status within feminist filmmaking. Minimalism in experimental film practices has been explored by a number of scholars. One such example is from theorist Susan Sontag, whose discussion of slow or "reflective" cinema in relation to filmmaker

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[172] The term *exergue* comes from Derridan-Nietzschean theory, referring to a trace, frame, or title of a particular work that is wholly separate from its original creation (often, something that is inscribed after the fact, like a signature or watermark), yet becomes an intrinsic part of said creation over time. See Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 4.
[173] Not to be confused with Sconce's paracinema, which is discussed in Chapter I and earlier in this chapter. Lippit, 5.
[174] Lippit, 6.
[175] Author's emphasis; Ibid.

Robert Bresson's oeuvre points to the capacity for minimalism in avant-garde films to evoke contrasting feelings of "'disinterestedness' and reflection" in the viewer.[176] Moreover, in works like "The Aesthetics of Silence," Sontag asserts that silence (literal, communicative silence on the part of the audience, as well as a metaphoric silence in emptiness, or bare-bones simplicity, or even blatant destruction) becomes a rhetorical tool at the artist's disposal, used to radically interrogate the "sensuous experience of art" and confront "the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way."[177] From a feminist perspective, experimental minimalism functions in a very similar way; according to Noel Carroll, this style interrogates, dissects, and analyzes the very nature of generic narratives, opening up the possibility for a variety of different points of view to come through, "reminding us that, though the modal status of narratives —perhaps particularly visual ones—feels like some kind of necessity, it is really, with respect to fictional constructs, nothing more than a matter of possibilities carefully staged and advanced from a repertoire of contingent choices."[178] While this outlook is relatively bleak, it nevertheless points to an important project adopted through feminist minimalism, to simultaneously "tell us something about the nature"[179] of broader narrative traditions and interrupt said narratives with unique, subjective vantage points.

Of course, minimalism appears not just within the context of experimental, oftentimes feminist art practices; it is also important in many strains of horror

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[176] Quoted in Matthew Flanagan, "'Slow Cinema:' Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Exeter, 2012.
[177] Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," *Styles of Radical Will* 3 (1989): 39.
[178] Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 349-350.
[179] Carroll, 348.

scholarship. In their discussion of the widely popular *Paranormal Activity* film series, for instance, Leslie A. Hahner, Scott J. Varda, and Nathan A. Wilson offer similar perspectives on the radical capacity of a minimalistic film style. Just as minimalism exposes and breaks down the taken-for-granted structures of film and other media, so too does horror minimalism—in this case, "realism, subtlety, reliable heroes—but not gore," supplanted by a lower budget and status outside of Hollywood filmmaking—simultaneously deploys and breaks down generic horror conventions, in effect destabilizing "the simple roles and resolutions of other horror films."[180] As a result, horror minimalism "renders ambiguous the distinctions between subject and object, sign and referent" and, in many ways, blurs the lines of identification and affective response on the part of the viewer. Moving beyond classical modes of horror spectatorship, minimalistic horror entrenches "the audience within or [liberates] them from the play of abjection," allowing them to align with multiple, sometimes abject or monstrous, subject positions.[181]

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night achieves the same type of goals as minimalism in avant-garde filmmaking broadly and minimalist horror in particular. As indicated above, the visual elements of the film are decidedly pared down; the streets of Bad City are stark and empty, contrasted by the cold, heavy machinery of the oil refineries that dot the landscape. Even the more lavish spaces, like Saeed's lair, maintain a balance between

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[180] Anthony Breznican, "The 'magic elixir' for a horror film," last modified October 14, 2009, https://www.pressreader.com/usa/usa-today-international-edition/20091014/282132107503083; Leslie A. Hahner, Scott J. Varda, and Nathan A. Wilson, "Paranormal activity and the Horror of Abject Consumption," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 5 (2013): 366.
[181] Hahner, Varda, and Wilson, 364, 366.

luxury and simplicity that makes his wealth more accessible, and therefore more realistic, as compared to drug kingpins in traditional, big-budget Hollywood films. The look of the film, overall, is uniquely flat; like The Girl's bedroom walls, which are covered in a collage of music posters, characters are juxtaposed on top of one another on the same focal plane, a jarring visual technique that collapses the perceived interpersonal difference between people and objects and therefore makes their interactions callous and at times aimless. The only depth given to the film, visually, is through *chiaroscuro* lighting, echoing a type of shadowy eeriness characteristic of the horror genre but also contributing to its simplistic, greyscale color palette. True, the film is shot in black-and-white, but the prop design is also, one could argue, black-and-white as well; The Girl sports a black-striped shirt underneath her chador, with many other characters wearing muted, dark colors. In addition, the décor throughout each of the locations maintains a monochromatic palette. A stark contrast from the vibrant, at times technicolor appearance of a number of trendy vampire films, *A Girl* adopts minimalism to root its narrative in reality and make the world of Bad City that much more horrific in the process.

Minimalism is most effectively used in the film's pacing, which at times grinds to an unnerving halt and, in the process, amplifies its on-screen horrors. The clearest example of minimalism comes from Saeed's fateful interaction with The Girl; after encountering The Girl alone in an alley, Saeed mistakes her for a prostitute and demands that she enter his home for a night of debauchery. Adorned with animals both alive (in a fish tank) and dead (taxidermized on his wall), Saeed's lair displays his full control over victims, trapping them in an endless chain of drug addiction and debt that eventually

leads to their untimely demise. Having stalked him in earlier scenes, The Girl is hip to Saeed's tricks, executing a revenge plot that is carefully calculated and, at least from the viewer's perspective, slow-moving. Contrasting the upbeat techno music in the background, Saeed flows in slow-motion across the space, an editing trick that distorts his forceful, pumping exercises and menacing dance moves, stripping them of their power in the process. This slowness is suggested to be from the perspective of The Girl, carefully watching his every move and, effectively, pinpointing the exact moment that she decides to strike. However, her attack is delayed; the audience is kept on the edge of their seats for an uncomfortably long amount of time, forced to watch Saeed's foolish dancing (which is momentarily edited to normal speed) and The Girl carefully stalk around the room. After some time, Saeed carefully strokes The Girl's cheek, only for the vampire to gruesomely bite off his finger and drain him of his blood. The Girl leaves his flat, unperturbed, stealing some belongings in the process.

This sequence is clearly meant to build suspense for the viewer and give insight into The Girl's violent activities as a vampire. Yet, this sequence achieves the same effects as horror minimalism, drawing attention to the very basics of fear while at the same time deconstructing them for the audience. Moreover, by having a slower pace, the film augments the horror of The Girl's attack, asking viewers "to remain on the edge of their seats waiting for the next scare."[182] Importantly, this sequence makes the audience all the more invested in the horrors of the attack; they are forced to watch this violence unfold on screen and, importantly, have to share the same perspective at The Girl as she carefully watches Saeed dance amongst his expensive belongings. The slowness of this

[182] Hahner, Varda, and Wilson, 368.

scene and others suggests that The Girl experiences reality in the same type of painstakingly slow manner and, by portraying the world around her in such a way, *A Girl* makes the audience do the same. Such minimalism, as a result, opens up the potential for multiple subject positions, the most terrifying of which is a clear alignment with the monster herself. The film explicitly calls for the viewer to see how The Girl sees, and experience reality in a similar way, becoming all the more subversive in the process.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, while an American production inflected by Iranian culture, nevertheless occupies a unique space within the larger context of the Iranian horror film. According to Hamid Naficy, Iran's cinema history begins sometime around the early 1900s, with the production of documentaries and eventually feature films reaching their apex during the 1960s and 1970s. The religious and geo-political turbulence faced by the nation during the Iranian Revolution would eventually cause the filmmaking industry to come "virtually to a halt," bound to an increasing sentiment towards cinema as "a morally offensive and an ethically corrupting Western influence."[183] Despite this stance against cinema, filmmaking in Iranian culture became a lively tradition all on its own, garnering increasing critical and audience acclaim across national borders.[184] While many genres have remained popular within the storied history

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[183] According to Naficy, many Islamist leaders "did support cinema but only if it was not 'misused'—if it was used to teach and highlight the 'Islamic values'." In Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic," *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 3 (1995): 548.

[184] An expanding amount of research has been dedicated to Iranian cinema, the bulk of which is beyond the scope of this project. For further reading, consult texts such as *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema, and Music* by Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy; *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* by Negar Mottahedeh; and *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* by Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, amongst many others.

of Iranian cinema, horror films have had a smaller and relatively more complex trajectory. As critics like Zahra Khosroshani have offered, horror is "less popular amongst Iranian filmmakers,"[185] in large part from the heavy censorship sanctioned through the industry, in addition to the proliferation of broader fundamentalist beliefs against horror-adjacent topics like demons, magic, and the supernatural. For scholar Pedram Partovi, despite the impact of "secular reform movements" on "popular religion, there viewed as an obstacle to national progress," so-called religious heresies prevalent in the horror genre "hold relevance for many elements of society […] and are essential to people's understandings of cosmology and anthropology in Iran." Only a handful of films over the past three or four decades have cemented their status as horror film proper in Iran,[186] one of the most popular being Mohammad Hossein Latifi's *Khabgah-e dokhtaran* (*Girl's Dormitory*, 2004). Even in this instance, the horrific elements of the film (such as the frequent use of jinn, or demonic, supernatural creatures common in folklore) are undercut, according to Partovi, focusing instead on "investigating and answering for the behavior of jinn"[187] and an interest magnifying the spiritual practices of young Iranian women. The horror genre in Iran, by this logic, is an anomaly, developing in response to the growing popularity of horror in other cultures.

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[185] Zahra Khosroshani, "Vampires, Jinn and the Magical in Iranian Horror Films," *Frames Journal* 16 (2019): 3.
[186] By this I refer to Pedram Partovi, who remarks that "there have only been a handful of attempts at making films widely recognized and explicitly promoted as horror cinema in Iran […] any momentum these films generated for the advancement of an Iranian horror cinema was not sustained, perhaps due in part to the irrelevance of the horror genre as a challenge to widely accepted notions about the structure and organization of the universe." In Pedram Partovi, "Girls' Dormitory: Women's Islam and Iranian Horror," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (2009): 195, 202.
[187] Partovi, 200.

The horror genre, instead, is more common in the films of the Iranian diaspora, where notable filmmakers like Babak Anvari in *Under the Shadow* (2016) "explore social issues in Iran without the constraints of the Islamic Republic's laws" while featuring more explicit visuals and themes at the core of the genre.[188] Importantly, these diasporic texts interrogate in-betweenness: across several Iranian horror films (and films outside of horror), there is the blatant exploration of what Homi Bhabha describes as "spaces that 'provide terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.'"[189] Spurred by emigration post-Iranian revolution, this consideration of "diasporic experience, dispersion in space, orientation towards the homeland, and boundary maintenance,"[190] is often explored through literal, grotesque difference—through the figure of monsters, the undead, and other abject entities. Furthermore, several entries into the Iranian diasporic horror canon amplify the in-betweenness felt by Muslim women in both post-revolutionary Iran and in the Iranian diaspora. This, as Shrabani Basu offers, materializes in the use of the veil (head coverings including the chador, burqa, and hijab) as horror object, a technique that amplifies anti-Islamic aggressions and serves to stereotype "the idea of the 'normative' in a multicultural society,"[191] with those embracing the veil as harmful residues of such norms. Importantly, the veil in this context makes diasporic women a double Other: firstly, as a

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[188] Khosroshani, 3.
[189] Quoted in Khosroshani, 3.
[190] Quoted in Emily Edwards, "Searching for a Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Iranian Diaspora in 'Persepolis,' 'Shahs of Sunset' and 'A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night'," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics, and Innovation* 3, no. 3 (2017): 6.
[191] Shrabani Basu, "The Foil and the Quicksand: The Image of the 'Veil' and the Failure of Abjection in Iranian Diasporic Horror," *Cinema* 9 (2017): 76.

blatant marker of gendered difference in Muslim society, and secondly, as an indication of a culture deemed threatening by Western society. The veil, from this perspective, becomes "an element of the root culture, forced and defamiliarizingly foreign, but nevertheless a part of the 'self' which [women] have inherited but do not choose—an element of horror, a nightmarish possibility,"[192] leading to a type of physical, as well as psychological, displacement on the part of Muslim women.

This type of intersectional misfitting—a feeling of not belonging on gendered, geographic, cultural, and even religious lines—is expounded even further when paired with horror tropes like the ghost, the undead and, in the case of *A Girl*, the vampire. In the case of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, The Girl's hybrid identity as a young, veiled, Iranian vampire woman results, at face value, in her total alignment with the monstrous feminine, posing an inescapable threat[193] that lies outside of the borders of patriarchal society and lurks ominously within it, a fly on the wall of the inner workings of Bad City. In addition to being not quite human, she is also not quite Iranian, having a keen fascination with American popular culture and music, zipping around the city streets on a skateboard, her flowing chador hovering over the board and exposing her hip, plainclothes attire underneath. She does not quite adhere to traditional gendered roles, either, at least within the context of post-Revolutionary Islamic society; she becomes antithetical to traditional notions of women as being "confined to the ideologically safe domain of the home"[194] and infiltrating the inner workings of the corruption of Bad City.

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[192] Basu, 78.
[193] Basu, 82.
[194] Naficy, 551.

She is not passive, helpless, or voiceless; instead, she becomes "something which is disruptively incongruous"[195] and monstrously abject.

Nevertheless, the film opens up a radical potential for The Girl's in-betweenness, carving out what Abdi and Calafell describe as a "queer utopia":[196] that is, an imagined third space, lying at the intersections or borders between belonging and unbelonging, in which those who occupy a hybrid or non-conforming identity can live and thrive. For Abdi and Calafell, this queer utopia draws from a rejection and ultimate reclamation of space based upon the ever-evolving identities that are performed by those who "constantly shift positions" whether literally, as those who move across national borders or who disidentify with heteronormative sexual practices or, importantly, figuratively, like those monstrous creatures "not 'beholden to the rules or laws of the real world.'"[197] By this logic, "the queer utopia of [*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*] is predicated upon reimagining a superhero as a vampire, or monstrous feminist."[198] The prime example that these scholars utilize in their imagining of the queer utopia is the reconceptualization of the chador as superhero cape, an article of clothing that signifies The Girl's interventions into toxic masculinity and misuses of power. I take this one step further by arguing that *A Girl* constructs a queer utopia, and therefore subverts the negative connotations of in-betweenness with monstrosity, through spaces such The Girl's flat and, later, Arash's car—sites in which the two characters can misfit together, so to speak, and actively embrace their hybrid identities.

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[195] Basu, 85.
[196] Abdi and Calafell, 359.
[197] Abdi and Calafell, 362.
[198] Abdi and Calafell, 363.

The Girl's apartment has been discussed earlier in this section but bears repeating here. Emblazoned with a collage of posters and adorned with twinkle lights and a disco ball, the flat is both a shrine to the character's love of non-Iranian culture and is one representing her "ultimate social exile"[199] from Bad City, a place otherwise dictated by rigid (albeit askew) social categories like drug dealer, prostitute, and street urchin. In the film's first act, the apartment is marked by conflict between "a space for reinvention and deterritorialization" and "a space of nightmarish stasis," bringing to life an "endless search"[200] that The Girl, and many others in diasporic communities, face through their in-betweenness. Her flat, in this regard, is already coded as queer through its temporal and cultural misfitting, but it is then transformed into a queer utopia when Arash is invited inside. Arash is a fellow misfit, sharing the same affinity towards pop music and culture and, as we see in earlier scenes, is simply inserted into a life of crime by circumstance; he has no desire to follow in the same footsteps of drug lord Saeed or drug addict Hossein, instead moving back and forth between these worlds just to get by. Once The Girl embraces Arash—first, on the street after his party, and then later, and much more meaningfully, in her flat—they are bonded with one another, creating a third space together where "multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity."[201] Consequently, their shared marginality points to an active rejection of the norms stipulated by Bad City, their queerness facilitating a newfound sense of re-belonging.

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[199] Edwards, 20.
[200] Edwards, 21.
[201] Abdi and Calafell, 365.

Both Arash, and to a lesser extent The Girl, have an innate drive toward "a future perfect of performativity that gestures to a thing done or imagined and 'a thing projected forward.'"[202] This is embodied through the queer utopia of Arash's car, a vintage model painstakingly tended to by the character and retrieved for him from Saeed by The Girl. Literally representing mobility, the vehicle also serves in a similar manner to The Girl's apartment—a relic of a past American culture that further disconnects him from his peers in Bad City. When Arash invites The Girl on a date, welcoming her into his vehicle in order to chat and listen to music, he also invites her to share a "diasporic membership" with him, a space where they can find comfort through their marginality. [203] The Girl initially rejects his advances, turning away after he gifts her earrings and bluntly explaining, "I've done bad things. I'm bad. You don't know the things I've done." By the end of the film, though, The Girl recognizes her intimate bond with Arash and, after having a hand in Hossein's killing, agrees to run away with her newfound comrade, driving off into the metaphorical sunset in a final act of liberation from the confines of Bad City. The car, already a microcosm for the type of unbelonging felt by Arash throughout the film, becomes even more instrumental for he and The Girl, in Edwards' words, to find "a room of one's own, where one has a voice."[204] A broader metaphor for the exilic, Iranian experience, as is the case for many other diasporic horror films, Arash's car and The Girl's flat are also representative of what Abdi and Calafell term a

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[202] Abdi and Calafell, 367.
[203] Edwards, 21. Arash invites The Girl on a date with a hand-written letter, signing his name as "Dracula." This is both a cheeky nod to their first encounter (where he dons a Dracula costume), and a device to implicitly connect him to vampirism, as he occupies the same liminal, arguably monstrous position as The Girl.
[204] Edwards, 22.

"resistive monstrosity"[205] that come together to build a queer utopia. The transgressive power of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, therefore, lies in the ways that it shifts the definition of monstrosity, crafting a vampire that "gains an audience's 'sympathy and identification' not in spite of being a vampire, but 'but because of it [becoming] that of the 'rebellious outsider (belonging to a) persecuted minority.'"[206]

A final, related point to consider when examining *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* concerns the intersections between vampirism and the "flaneuse," a concept coined in part by Janet Wolff drawing from the notion of *flânerie*, or the aimless wandering within urban modernity associated with "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent."[207] In Wolff's account, this transformation of the public sphere often featured the fictional "flaneur," a male stroller who has "a freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others."[208] By this logic, the modern man has the ability to be both absent and present, having the power to both look and call attention to the look, thereby having a distinct type of agency that women ultimately lacked. As discussed in the previous chapter, women were confined to the private sphere, having very limited socially sanctioned experiences of modern life. Such societal expectations, for Wolff, changes when we consider the flaneuse, the female counterpart of the flaneur who, like her male counterpart, was afforded freedom to a certain extent by an ever-changing economic landscape—women, according to Wolff, "clearly *were* active and visible in other ways in the public arena."[209] But, unlike the flaneur, the flaneuse was not

[205] Abdi and Calafell.
[206] Abdi and Calafell, 360.
[207] Quoted in J. Wolff, 35.
[208] J. Wolff, 38-39.
[209] J. Wolff, 45.

able to have a "solitary and independent" life, unable to wander aimlessly and, importantly, not able to have the same type of invisibility as the so-called modern man.[210] Despite their relative low profile in public spheres like working environments, the same privacy and autonomy were not possessed by the flaneuse.

The flaneuse in fiction, as Wolff suggests, is hyper-visible, predicated in some regards by the higher social status of her male counterparts and, in several other instances, by her position on the margins of society: "the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim,"[211] amongst others. This is where the vampire enters the equation; broadly, the figure of the vampire in many contemporary texts exhibits the same type of *flânerie* as the nineteenth-century modern man, wandering the streets and toeing the line between visibility and invisibility within an ever-changing urban landscape. According to Stacey Abbott in their discussion of vampirism in film, when coded as female, the vampire "[takes] back the night," embodying modernity "through her absorption of new technologies" and "embracing the delirium that signifies" the urban.[212] One negative consequence of the vampiric flaneuse is her equation with the "inscrutable or dangerous," her "command of the nightmarish urban locale" which essentially "not only enables her to embrace her vampirism but also to appropriate a place for herself, both within the urban landscape as well as in discourses around the modern flaneur."[213] In other words, the vampiric flaneuse is able to circumnavigate a sprawling urban landscape *sans* accompaniment from a male counterpart, experiencing the city

[210] Ibid.
[211] J. Wolff, 41.
[212] Abbott, 147.
[213] Abbott, 150.

alone and transforming the gendered boundaries, communicated by fictions and through societal norms, between public and private spheres. As a result, the vampire's uninhabited *flânerie* has dangerous implications, at least within horror fictions; like the *femme fatale* in film noir, the vampiric flaneuse becomes a threatening manifestation of hypersexuality which, in Creed's discussion of this trope, is an extension of the "phallic woman," a character represented in relation to phallic power and who has the ability to demonstrate "her dangerous power and its frightening results" and then destroy it.[214] Moreover, as discussed in relation to *Possibly in Michigan*, the relative ease with which the vampire mediates the boundaries of patriarchal society, paired with the motif of blood, points to a form of abjection that represents a "fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection, where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together."[215] Therefore, the female vampire is an object of horror that represents the dangers of the female body and the dangerous implications of women within the modern cultural sphere.

Conversely, Amirpour reconceptualizes the vampiric flaneuse in a similar way to her construction of queer utopias: by aligning the viewer's sympathies and ultimate identification with The Girl, a perpetual misfit whose violence is a symptom of her position on the periphery of the corrupt Bad City. And, while The Girl "symbolically castrates"[216] Saeed during their fateful meeting, in a similar way to Creed's discussion of the phallic woman, she does not assert the same types of hypersexual behavior as this character trope, only experiencing real (albeit, hesitant) sexual intimacy with Arash. Not

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[214] Creed, 157.
[215] Author's emphasis; quoted in Creed, 62.
[216] Abdi and Calafell, 363.

does she align herself, aesthetically, with the female vampire; that is, she dresses modestly, acts in an introverted manner and, along the lines of Abbott's discussion of the modern vampire, is aligned with the modern and hip. She is linked to contemporary trends despite traversing in a temporally indistinct setting.

Moreover, The Girl as vampiric flaneuse wanders the evening streets to right the wrongs, so to speak, of Bad City's societal ills, in the process connecting to and protecting its victimized women, themselves exhibiting the same types of dangerous hyper-visibility, hypersexuality, and marginality as fictional flaneuses. This is best exemplified in The Girl's relationship with Atti, a character whom The Girl follows at several points in the film and retrieves jewelry that Saeed stole from her. "You're sad," The Girl remarks to Atti during an awkward encounter one night. "You don't remember what you want. You don't remember wanting. It passed long ago. And nothing ever changes."[217] Due to The Girl's liminal status, she is able to vocalize and respond to Atti's disgust with her own social positioning, herself stuck in the same marginalized state. Atti does not know what to make of The Girl—"So, what are you?" she asks The Girl, plainly—but she "is not disturbed by the Girl's monstrosity" instead accepting her for who, or what, she is.[218] Moreover, The Girl's transgressive *flânerie*, and her relative vigilantism, extend to Atti in their murder of Hossein; after accompanying the lonely and strung-out Hossein one evening, Atti is injected with heroin against her will, collapsing helplessly on her male suitor's bed. The Girl senses Atti's danger, and quickly springs to action, fatally attacking Hossein. Atti, while horrified, covers for The Girl, helping hide

[217] Amirpour, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*.
[218] Ibid.; Abdi and Calafell, 364.

and drag the corpse and instructing her newfound ally to flee Bad City. The Girl helps Atti, ultimately, reclaim her agency, and the two share in a "disruption of the patriarchal realities that many Iranian and Iranian-American women adhere to."[219] The two are encouraged to identify with each other, and the audience, too, is encouraged to identify with the vampire flaneuse, a reversal of both the "classic misogynist duality, of women as idealized-but-vapid/real-and-sensual-but-detested" common to the flaneuse and the typical "extreme mode of masochistic viewing" in the horror film.[220] In their murder of Hossein, Atti and The Girl also take back the night themselves, to borrow from Abbott's assessment of the modern vampire film, creating a "moment of resistance" that further solidifies *A Girl*'s subversive tone.[221]

Preceded by a long, tracking shot of Arash standing in a shadowy corridor—a visual motif common throughout the film—*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* concludes with The Girl solemnly inviting Arash into her flat, the two of them agreeing that they should, once and for all, escape Bad City together. Silently, save for the diegetic tinkling of musical jewelry box, The Girl packs her belongings and accompanies Arash and Masuka the cat into his car. Arash suddenly, and hastily, pulls over, taking one final glimpse of the city that has so clearly made him feel like he does not belong. Reentering the car, The Girl avoids contact with her new companion, nervously but almost wistfully staring out of the window until Arash plays an upbeat cassette on the car's sound system. The song, called "Tribe," indeed characterizes the so-called tribe that Arash and The Girl make amongst one another; the two knowingly lock eyes together, finally becoming

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[219] Abdi and Calafell, 364.
[220] J. Wolff, 43; Creed, 154.
[221] Abdi and Calafell, 368.

copacetic with one another and embracing their identities as misfits. They drive off into the night's sky, the glow from their headlights carving their path in the dark, desert landscape.

"I do like flipping the script," Amirpour states in an interview with Virginie Sélavy for *Electric Sheep*,

> but it's about something else. In this world, with all these people and all these countries and all these places, we come up with systems on how to exist as people […] But with all of us, if you start peeling it back like an onion there's weird, weirdo, weird shit inside all of us. And if you get into the inside, and see the weird shit, usually it calls to question the system that's on the outside, and that's what I find interesting.[222]

Certainly, Amirpour has extended this notion of flipping the script, with her next directorial pursuit, 2016's *The Bad Batch*, melding the Western and horror genres to create a chaotic, dystopian world filled with cannibalism, cult worship, and overall extreme violence.[223] Additionally, Amirpour's work on television series like *Legion* and the 2019-20 adaptation of *The Twilight Zone* has also cemented the director's position as a radical force in the horror/sci-fi genre, coupling an experimental visual style with complex interpretations of themes like racial relations, fame, and surveillance. This unique take on horror is largely indebted to the foundation laid in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, both through its upending of genre conventions and its reimagination of the vampire. The monstrous, as Amirpour communicates in her film, is a reflection of

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[222] Virgine Sélavy, "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night: Interview with Ana Lily Amirpour," last modified May 19, 2015, http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/2015/05/19/a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night-interview-with-ana-lily-amirpour/.

[223] While received negatively by most critics, *The Bad Batch* has been lauded for its striking visuals and representation of differently-abled persons (namely, its lead character, who is a double-amputee).

society, of all of us who do not quite belong within the confines of patriarchal society. Rather than soliciting fear, the vampire elicits empathy, a sort of understanding that moves beyond spatial and temporal boundaries. For this reason, *A Girl* occupies an important place in women-made horror in that it breaks apart, interrogates, and refashions the genre in new and exciting ways.

D. Conclusion

Possibly in Michigan, *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* all occupy three radically different temporal, geographic, and aesthetic moments in filmmaking. Condit's *Michigan* is a vivid snapshot of the outrageous 1980s, set in midwestern suburbia to a synth-heavy score and bathed in bright-red blood. *Serial Killer*, Jacobson's ambitious 1990s debut, is raw and gritty, encapsulating the underground and punk movements with its unrefined yet stunning camerawork, editing, and distorted musical score. *A Girl* is sleek and modern, with Amirpour exploring the borderlands between nations, between communities, and between social strata.

For all of the differences that the three films have from one another, a number of similarities emerge. As expressed throughout this chapter, *Michigan*, *Serial Killer*, and *A Girl* provide transgressive alternatives to mainstream horror tropes, like the cannibal-animal, monster-slasher, and vampire, while reconceptualizing the role of women within this genre. Rather than portraying women as dangerously monstrous, sexually deadly, horrifically grotesque, or even hopelessly victimized, all three films put multi-faceted women at the forefront—women who sometimes embody all four of these characteristics simultaneously. The characters at the heart of these films have complex interpersonal

relationships and, at times, relationships with their own bodies. Through horrific elements, they are able to navigate their own selves and the world around them. This world, bolstered by patriarchal norms, is often cruel and restrictive, but through extreme means, like violence and cannibalism, they are able to break down such boundaries and negotiate their own identity in the process.

Moreover, the three films explored in this chapter each have in common the theme of trauma, whether physical, sexual, mental, or some combination thereof. As our female protagonists—Sharon and Janice, Mary, and The Girl—are able to come to terms with their own, at times non-heteronormative, identities, so too are they able to come to terms with, and share openly, the traumas that they have faced at the hands, oftentimes, of men. Such trauma is communicated from their own first-person perspective; the literal horrors that they have faced in their past lives are grafted onto fictionalized horrific elements such as monsters, blood, and gore, and, as suggested above, monstrous behaviors like murder help articulate (admittedly, in an odd way) feelings and experiences that they are unable to express with words alone. *Possibly in Michigan*, *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* are revolutionary in the way that they have approached film visually, aurally, and stylistically. However, they are even more important and valuable in the ways that they have reappropriated horror and woman's place within it.

CHAPTER IV

MONSTERS INSIDE AND OUT: SPACE, PLACE, AND WOMEN-MADE HORROR

When you walk outside of your home, what do you see? What do you feel? *How* do you feel? For some, the simple act of navigating the world around them is mundane at best. The sun shining down on the trees. The crisp breeze gently caressing the grass. The sounds of birds chirping. Perhaps even the flow of traffic and busy people down a bustling city street. Yet, for others, the world around them is a truly frightening place. What's otherwise a warm ray of sun becomes a white, blinding light, simultaneously casting a harsh shadow on what lurks around the corner. Flora and fauna team together to become an inevitable and unpredictable threat as well as a cruel reminder of the cycle of life and eventual death that plagues humanity. The streets and walkways of the modern metropolis, once a glistening symbol of modernity, now signal the destruction and desecration of mother earth, replacing natural resources with cold metal and smoggy air. Bustling metropolises shift from markers of modernity and connectedness to ones of isolation, coldness, and above all, difference.

Instead of focusing on those characters and physical tropes at the heart of the horror genre, this chapter looks to the ways in which society itself—namely, mainstream patriarchal society—is depicted as horrific, becoming the monster that the subjects of women-made horror must combat in their respective narratives. For scholars like Vivian Sobchack, the horror film is a unique genre that, since its earliest iterations, questions the structures that undergird modern society; horror, along with science fiction, deals with "a

grand-scale chaos that threatens the 'order of things,'" both in terms of natural and social order.[1] The ways in which horror films have addressed these concerns have varied across time. Typically, as laid out by Wood and discussed in my first chapter, the horror film has depicted the monstrous Other (whose identity has changed from "period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments")[2] as disrupting the social balance. The monster, in these films, is ousted by the horror film's conclusion, with normalcy, for lack of a better term, eventually restored.

In opposition to Wood's analysis, a handful of scholars have pointed out that, that society, rather than monsters threatening the stability of society, is the true object of horror. Thomas Fahy for instance offers that contemporary American horror filmmaking explores modern-day fears related to technological advancement, illness, and war, and our overall "longing to find meaning in a chaotic, fragmented, and often violent world."[3] Moreover, Prohászková observes that the horror genre manifests "what the society suppresses by cultural conventions [and expresses] a disagreement with the political and social situation and anxieties of oppression and tyranny."[4] My analysis here takes inspiration in part from this pre-existing research, looking at three women-made horror films that take up the horrors of the everyday and the external. Suzan Pitt's *Asparagus*

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[1] Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 172.
[2] Quoted in Harry M. Benshoff, "The Monster and the Homosexual," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 123.
[3] Thomas Fahy, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of Horror* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 3.
[4] Viktória Prohászková, "The Genre of Horror," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 2, no. 4 (2012): 141.

(1979), Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* (1993), and Peggy Ahwesh's *Nocturne* (1998) explore spooky and threatening environments that serve as metaphors for the horrific nature of modern society. Most importantly, however, they also depict disturbed mental states that have been caused by societal ills and have been grafted onto the external, making the world around them that much more horrifying. As I will explore throughout this chapter, the external and public world is filled with a variety of different threats, each emerging from an interconnected web of social, cultural, political, and historical control. This matrix of domination, borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins, poses a lasting influence on the protagonists of the three films, specifically impacting how they see or conceptualize the world around them, and causing mental trauma and anguish in the process. What makes the films valuable is the fact that they show ways to combat this societal control, through techniques like storytelling (*beDevil*), creative performance (*Asparagus*), and sexual liberation (all three films, more or less, but predominantly *Nocturne*).

A. Suzan Pitt's *Asparagus*, Surrealism, and the Horrors of Interiority

Critic Jeffrey Bowers, in his blog series on experimental short films aptly called "I'm Short, Not Stupid," describes animator Suzan Pitt's 1979 film *Asparagus* as part of a "peculiar adventure in the art of short moving pictures." He tells the reader, in rather crude terms: "There's always something beautiful and intelligent at work in *Asparagus* and I find something new upon every viewing. Pitt believes the film should be *felt* rather than strictly interpreted, so please leave comments on how you *feel* about fondling,

shitting, and deep throating the asparagus dicks."[5] Bowers is not alone in his assessment of the film, its legacy steeped in its unusual images, hypnotic score, and, yes, invitation to audiences to *feel* the film, rather than simply, passively, watching it from the comfort of their seats. *Asparagus*, like so many of the artist-animator-filmmaker's pieces, can best be described as idiosyncratic, "collaging narratives from smaller segments" that are seemingly unrelated and, in the process, "questioning the possibilities of cinematic structure, penetration into the work, the spectator position."[6] As a result, this abstraction leads to a host of possibilities as to what the film really *means*, beyond mere abstract themes related to gender, sexuality, and the creative process.

Critics like Marie Ketzscher have concluded that *Asparagus* makes much broader statements on "the importance of autonomous, self-chosen sexual desire and the reality-changing quality of art."[7] While I agree with this overall assessment, I argue that the film is a pointed commentary of patriarchal society itself and the ways that it stipulates gendered norms and behaviors that confine the social Other (in this case, cisgender women) in the process. Drawing upon notions of bodily geography, this analysis shows how *Asparagus* challenges the strict binaries of public-masculine and private-feminine by showing a female protagonist who, after being confined to interior spaces (like the mind and the domestic sphere), learns to bypass these boundaries and express herself creatively

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[5] Author's emphasis; Jeffrey Bowers, "I'm Short, Not Stupid Presents: Asparagus," last modified January 31, 2013; https://www.vice.com/en/article/av4zpz/im-short-not-stupid-presents-asparagus/.

[6] "Animafest Zagreb Lifetime Achievement Award Winner – Famous Artist Suzan Pitt," *Animafest Zagreb: World Festival of Animated Film*, October 29, 2018, http://www.animafest.hr/en/2019/news/read/29th_world_festival_of_animated_film_animafest_zagreb_lifetime_achievement_award_winner_famous_artist_suzan_pitt.

[7] Marie Ketzscher, "GoCritic! Shorts Review: Suzan Pitt Retrospective at Animafest Zagreb," last modified June 17, 2019, https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/373919/.

in the process. *Asparagus* takes its cues from female surrealist artists as well as Pitt's avant-garde and underground contemporaries, but what makes it truly unique is its exploration of the horrors of society, or more specifically, the horrors of a rigidly heteronormative, patriarchal society.

Suzan Pitt began her work as a visual artist upon finishing her studies at the University of Alabama and Cranbrook Academy of Art, taking up painting, printmaking, and other graphic arts in the mid-1960s.[8] In Pitt's words, her experiments in both painting and animation work hand-in-hand: "My painted images seem to have a past and a future and through animation I could imagine and dramatize their stories."[9] Indeed, her animated works, beginning with *Crocus* in 1971, have a distinctly painterly quality to them; as critics like Chris Robinson and Haden Guest have noted, Pitt's images appear as if "they were in arrested movement," emphasizing image "surface and texture" and using bold, striking colors to add depth to the worlds she created on screen.[10] Part of this artistic sensibility came from the ways that she created each of her animations, with some of her earliest films made with a "handheld 8mm camera; transferring some 200 drawings

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[8] Richard Sandomir, "Suzan Pitt, Wildly Inventive Animation Filmmaker, Dies," last modified June 21, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/arts/suzan-pitt-wildly-inventive-animation-filmmaker-dies-at-75.html. In addition to animating and painting, Pitt also found success with large scale multimedia installations, theatrical performances, mixed media theater and operatic performances, and fashion design. In Dan Sarto, "Famed Painter and Animator Suzan Pitt Dies at 75," last modified June 18, 2019, https://www.awn.com/news/famed-painter-and-animator-suzan-pitt-dies-75.
[9] "Bio," *Suzan Pitt*, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.suzanpitt.com/bio.
[10] Chris Robinson, "Suzan Pitt, Influential American Director Of Animated Films, Dies At 75;" last modified June 18, 2019, https://www.cartoonbrew.com/rip/suzan-pitt-influential-american-director-of-animated-films-dies-at-75-175886.html; Haden Guest, "Fever Dreamer: Suzan Pitt's Feminist Fantasias," last modified November 13, 2019, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6683-fever-dreamer-suzan-pitt-s-feminist-fantasias.

onto film."[11] She continued this practice throughout her career, combining hand-painted images and cut-outs with stop-motion animation and, in the case of *Asparagus*, Claymation and even live action elements.[12] Furthermore, Pitt's animations maintain their painterly qualities in the way that they present, and represent, reality to the audience. As Pitt explains to Simon Jablonski, her approach to making films is one that is, intentionally or otherwise, "above reality." "I really work in a between-mind area, daydreaming," says Pitt. "I'm a big daydreamer. I love being alone and letting my mind play […] My films come from when I'm walking or sitting or staring or whatever. Over time I've built up a way in which my mind ponders ideas."[13] This in-betweenness—between reality and dream (and nightmare), life and death, live action and illustration—lends itself to a visual abstraction that offers an alternative to traditional, mimetic portrayals of daily life. It also encourages the audience to think and see in alternative ways. Moreover, this painterly abstraction brings Pitt's internal and emotional states to the forefront, welcoming the spectator into the otherwise closed-off world of the mind.

This creative strategy in part has been often compared to the style of painter/writer Leonora Carrington who juxtaposed strategies like self-portraiture with the visual language of surrealism to communicate mental states and break from some of the gendered representational traps found in everyday society. According to Janice Helland,

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[11] Jackie Leger, "Suzan Pitt: An Animator's Journey," *Animation World Magazine* 1, no. 11 (1997): https://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.11/articles/leger1.11.html.
[12] The Museum of Modern Art describes the full scope of her animation techniques: "A master practitioner of hand-drawn animation and early cinema techniques, including painted cut-out, stop motion, Claymation, matted cel, and multiplane camerawork […]." See "An Evening with Suzan Pitt," Museum of Modern Art, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/2525.
[13] Simon Jablonski, "Suzan Pitt: Visitation," last modified March 29, 2012, https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/1862/suzan-pitt-visitation.

Carrington worked with a "special iconography" in stark contrast to her male peers, whose visual and literary experiments with surrealism "displayed a strong interest in erotic violence, misogyny, and woman as object or muse."[14] For Helland, Carrington's work fits easily into the "surrealist mode of rebellion,"[15] as she often focused, at least in her written work, on women who break free from societal norms and cultural traditions, exposing their repressed sexual desires in the process. Later on, Carrington focused more so on the intricacies of the inner workings of the mind, as well as an "esoteric realm that included magic and mysticism in conjunction with a supreme or deified female figure,"[16] the latter of which combined dream-like imagery, references to myth and legend, and female divinity. Across all of her works was the notion of woman as "active, as protagonists, rather than as they are more commonly presented in surrealism, as passive or submissive figures or even as victims."[17]

What is most important to consider about Leonora Carrington is her frequent connection between woman and the bestial—in some cases aligning the image of woman with the image of animals like horses and oxen, and in other cases portraying female sexuality through animals, making the visual metaphor that their sexuality is inherently carnal. In contrast to the work of many of her male peers, this link between femininity and bestiality is not abject or perverse, instead materializing as empowering and even natural. For many scholars, Carrington's penchant towards horrific portrayals of woman-as-animal served a valuable, creative purpose. Kristoffer Noheden, for instance, observes

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[14] Janice Helland, "Surrealism and Esoteric Feminism in the Paintings of Leonora Carrington," *Canadian Art Review* 16, no. 1 (1989): 53-54.
[15] Helland, 54.
[16] Helland, 57.
[17] Helland, 60.

that these images were most prevalent during Carrington's mental health crisis and, by working through this crisis with art, she was able to "see a pattern in the signs that overwhelmed her, and so reach new insights that allowed her to interpret them. In this way, her trials became charged with meaning in a manner that allowed her to use them as raw material for further knowledge about herself and the world."[18] Key to this assessment of Carrington's work is imparting knowledge *about the world*: in using horrific elements, Carrington picks apart those otherwise taken-for-granted gender norms that pervade visual culture at large, exposing their flimsiness and offering empowering, sometimes taboo, alternatives in the process. Furthermore, the dark subject matter of many Carrington pieces—frequently emphasizing, for instance, human-animal transformations and cannibalism—both conveys "certain autobiographical elements" and, importantly, "mocks human and societal limitations":[19] in other words, the very limitations that dictate gender roles, sexual behavior, and other behavioral expectations. Horror, across Carrington's art, becomes the tool with which the artist can magnify and critique society at large, a strategy that has certainly been adopted in modern women-made horror.

Despite Carrington's disinterest in film, one could argue that the artist's work has important connections to the cinematic medium. As Lora Markova and Roger Shannon point out, Carrington's career in the visual arts literally intersected with her contemporaries' careers in the cinematic arts; Carrington was close friends and

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[18] Kristoffer Noheden, "Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Initiation Symbolic Death and Rebirth in Little Francis and Down Below," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 53.
[19] Annette Shandler Levitt, "The Bestial Fictions of Leonora Carrington," *Journal of Modern Literature* 20, no. 1 (1996): 65.

collaborators with Mexico-based artists Luis Buñuel and Alejandro Jodorowsky, and her career developed alongside the surrealist film movement.[20] Significantly, Markova and Shannon argue that Carrington's career behind the scenes—in costume design, art directing, and scenic composition—inflected her work behind the canvas, so to speak. Carrington's larger oeuvre evokes "a network of intermedial and intertextual translations between her creative expressions across artistic disciplines."[21] In other words, the images and themes developed in Carrington's career overlapped in such a way so as to form a complex dialogue with one another, forming an intricate web of image, text, and sound. Carrington's individual pieces communicate with and borrow from one another, creating an illusion of movement akin to the succession of still frames and sounds in the cinematic medium. By this logic, Carrington's work is inherently cinematic without belonging to the cinema at all.

So, too, does Pitt utilize horrific imagery to make sense of the world around her, and throughout her artistic career, she has created a network of images and themes that constitutes a much larger commentary on sexuality, femininity, and the creative process. Like Carrington, Pitt also constructs her stories laterally; taken individually, her films have little coherence and rely instead on mood and feeling. When taken as a cohesive whole, however, they form a complex narrative that immerses the viewer in the animator's personal, inner life. Such spectatorial engagement can be attributed in part to

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[20] Lora Markova and Roger Shannon, "Leonora Carrington on and off Screen: Intertextual and Intermedial Connections between the Artist's Creative Practice and the Medium of Film," *Arts* 8, no. 11 (2019): 3-4. Carrington and Pitt's career trajectories closely mirrored one another, with the former living and working in Mexico for most of her adult life, and the latter working in both Mexico and Guatemala as a Fulbright Scholar recipient ("Bio," suzanpitt.com).
[21] Markova and Shannon, 12.

the aims of Expanded Cinema, a movement in which Pitt took an active part in the 1970s and led to her exhibition at the 1980 Venice Biennial and, in the same year, large-scale art installations at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. In adopting the techniques of Expanded Cinema, Pitt was able, both literally and figuratively, to place the viewers into her dreams, letting them experience first-hand what she sees, and importantly, what she feels.[22] I would argue, however, that Pitt's work more closely mirrors that of Carrington and the surrealists than Expanded Cinema artists, manifesting unimaginable horrors and hallucinatory delusions[23] and allowing the audience to partake gradually in such horrors. Spanning from the mundane to the extraordinary, Pitt's films chronicle the intricacies of day-to-day life from a variety of different perspectives—from that of a mother and wife during the evening hours (*Crocus*), to the depression and eventual spiritual healing of a young girl and an ailing doctor (*Joy Street* [1995] and *El Doctor* [2006], respectively), to the "heavenly hell of ending life and death" (*Visitation* [2011]).[24] Pitt, across her animations, explores the horrors of the everyday, exposing those elements of life that are otherwise neglected or taken for granted and amplifying them to the extreme.

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[22] In brief, Expanded Cinema challenges the traditional mode of film spectatorship, encouraging active audience participation through the combination of film projection and performance art. For Pitt, Expanded Cinema involved the blurring of boundaries between live-action and animation, at times including "real people as cartoons, experimental imagery from rear screen projection, and drawing on soundtracks." See "Expanded Cinema,"*Monoskop*, accessed February 1, 2021, https://monoskop.org/Expanded_cinema; "Art Term: Expanded Cinema," Tate Modern, accessed January 15, 2021; https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/expanded-cinema; Jackie Leger, "Suzan Pitt: An Animator's Journey," *Animation World Magazine* 1, no. 11 (1997).
[23] Noheden, 45.
[24] "Visitation," *Suzan Pitt*, accessed December 12, 2020, https://www.suzanpitt.com/visitation.

While the horrors of the everyday is a common theme throughout Pitt's career, no other film has quite the impact as her magnum opus, *Asparagus*.[25] Opening with Japanese *kana* lettering on a stark black background, *Asparagus* begins its surrealistic tale with a woman's high-heeled foot stepping through a large, orange circle, with a green snake slithering down her limb and tracing the outline of the shape at the center of the screen. A cacophonous, almost jazz-like score emanates from the soundtrack, with horns and strings screeching in the background. The film's structure is less a coherent linear narrative and more a stream-of-consciousness flow of images that chronicle the day-to-day happenings of our faceless, nameless protagonist. As the snake crawls around, its tongue forming into our director's name, the circle irises in to the protagonist's dwelling, which seems to overlook a spooky beachside locale. Curtains billow into the room, and the camera pans over a cluttered table filled with nautical-looking lamps, cosmetics, paint supplies, and a small picture frame, of which our main character reaches from off screen and holds up to the camera. The once-still image springs to life, a hand reaching across to turn on a vaginal-shaped lantern that illuminates both the photograph and the room itself. The lantern is then moved to a wall sconce on the main character's bathroom, and in a lingering shot, she is shown to defecate into her toilet. The grotesque scene—with a tight close-up of the character's rear end squatting on the toilet bowl—is rendered even more bizarre, with large asparagus stalks, instead of fecal matter, excreting from the woman's anus. As a dreamy, distorted synth score plays in the background, the fecal

[25] *Asparagus* was completed over a four-year period, and predominantly consists of 35mm hand-painted cel animation. In Penelope Bartlett, "On the Channel: Asparagus and Eraserhead," The Criterion Collection, July 18, 2017, Video, 4:31, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4740-a-match-made-in-midnight-movie-heaven.

asparagus suddenly floats upwards from the toilet, forming letters that spell out the film's title framed by an array of swirling flowers.

The woman's hand reaches to flush the toilet, making the vegetables swirl out of frame, and the camera pans across her apartment. The rooms are inhabited by strange artwork, like busts of almost inhuman creatures, and the walls of the living area, unlike her bedroom, are painted floor-to-ceiling in shockingly bright red paint. We see our protagonist sitting alone in the room, her back facing the camera, and then she gets up and walks towards one of her walls. Rather than being a solid fixture, the wall itself is revealed to be a curtain; she pulls it back and exposes a grandiose garden of flowers, vines, oceanic algae and reefs, and a smattering of other types of greenery. This garden moves in front of the main character as if it is on conveyor belt, exposing even more unusual plants to the audience, eventually stopping on the titular vegetables, which grow phallically into the sky. In one of the film's most noteworthy sequences, the protagonist's legs are shown from the window (as she looks on from her living room) slowly approaching the asparaguses. Stepping carefully amidst the plants, she reaches down and suggestively strokes one of the stalks, vanishing quickly into the night. The woman then walks away from the window and, while sitting down at a table, flips the switch on what appears to be a full-sized replica of her dwelling, the same vaginal light fixture shining on each of the rooms. The camera zooms into a replica of the very room that our protagonist is sitting in, repeating the same actions—walking towards the dollhouse, turning on the light switch—in an eerie loop.

The woman's hand reaches into the room, picking up a tufted red chair and holding it up to the audience; it briefly turns into asparagus and is placed back into its

original position. In an iris in the right-hand corner, the woman's hand is shown grazing a series of odd, distorted masks, later revealed to be one part of a larger closet filled with costumes and other elaborate disguises. The character picks up a mask and affixes it to her face; the frame rips wide open, transitioning into another sequence in which a series of objects and indeterminate shapes float magically into her handbag. The majority of these objects, like the asparagus at the heart of the film, are phallic in nature (a cigar, long worms, and snakes dominate this sequence) but some are coded as feminine, like a doll's dress and various flowers. The woman closes her bag and leaves her flat, walking past different storefronts (a sex shop, a gun shop, and a toy shop, in that order) and arriving at a theatre.

A host of audience members, portrayed in Claymation, enter the theatre and gather to their seats, waiting for a show to begin. Curtains rise, one after the other, as the woman waits backstage in the wings. As the last curtain raises, an ocean scene, akin to the film's opening, is revealed, with fake water flowing amongst large cliffs. The musical score swells to a chaotic pace, juxtaposing screeching strings and synths with a waltz-like piano riff. The clay audience watches in amazement, and in the shadows, the woman sneaks into the aisles, her expressionless face/mask scanning the crowded room. The watery scene transforms into a black-and-white vortex of sorts, swirling and captivating the audience even further. Amidst the vortex, our protagonist runs backstage, handbag in tow, and she approaches the mechanical scaffolding that structures the whirlpool on stage. Crouching down, she opens her handbag, and all of the items that once floated inside escape, sucking into the spiraling set and reaching the clay audience. The red, tufted chair from her apartment swirls towards the crowds, as the ever-present

snake slithers in mid-air; the audience is altogether transfixed and horrified, grabbing at the objects that float at them from the stage. More and more items hurl past the audience, and the woman, after seeing the chaos that she has caused, leaves the theater in a taxi. She sadly removes her mask half-way, revealing that her face is totally flat, having no features. As she leaves, the asparagus and some of the other objects follow her cab, and once she removes her mask, they float around her in the apartment. Now nude, she opens her wall/window, and fellates one of the stalks of asparagus. Each head movement causes the stalk to turn into a different object—a stream of water, a flesh-like curtain, a piece of folder black paper, a stream of pill-like confetti, a tuft of hair, a mix of stars and glittery shapes, and eventually the asparagus stalk, fading to black and cuing up the film's closing credits.

Both reviewers and Pitt's artist contemporaries have widely praised *Asparagus*, a film that has become a calling-card, so to speak, for the acclaimed animator-director. Animator John Canemaker has described the short as "extraordinary […] one of the most lavish and wonderous shorts ever made." He continues,

> *Asparagus* is an overwhelming visual experience not easily described. Basically, it is a 19-minute visual poem dealing with a woman artist's creative process and rites of passage. It is not a narrative, but rather a series of episodes full of obsessively detailed, lush, and sensual imagery. The audience becomes hypnotized, voyeurs peeping in on a private dream.[26]

Other noteworthy critics, like B. Ruby Rich and Diane Jacobs, have echoed this sentiment, with the former famously calling the film "one of the most important works of imagination seen in some time, filled with every possible animation technique, all exquisitely rendered, all calculated to produce incredible wonder in the heart of the

[26] John Canemaker, "Suzan Pitt: Moving, Changing, and Animating," *Funnyworld*: 16.

viewer" and the latter describing Pitt simply as "one of the most adventurous animators working in America today."[27] Experimental filmmaker Janie Geiser, speaking with *The New York Times*, further endorses the visionary status of Pitt's *Asparagus*, noting that the "sumptuous color, the sense of observation, the sensuality and the details in each painted frame were like nothing I had ever seen. The film was like a fever dream; and like a fever, it was contagious."[28] "Suzan Pitt conjures up a distinctive, passionate, hushed vacuum of sexual and artistic metaphor," write Suzanne Buchan and Andres Janser. "Pitt skillfully folks multiplane cartooning, tabletop sets with puppets, and sophisticated bi-packing optical effects, into a *tour de force* rendering of a performance space as a dream."[29]

Perhaps the most insightful reviews of *Asparagus* come from Amos Vogel who, in "Missionary Positions" and "Stalking 'Asparagus,'" hints at Pitt's use of abjection, grotesquerie, and nightmarish horror in her already noteworthy experiment with cinematic surrealism, as highlighted above. In "Missionary Positions," Vogel describes the short as a "powerful erotic allegory of the creative process," noting that the value of *Asparagus* lies in the way that it "violates taboos of defecation and oral sex in a manner that integrates these acts into expressions of high art."[30] And, in "Stalking 'Asparagus,'" Vogel emphasizes that the "eerie 'plot' breaks with conventional narrative codes and assumes and almost mythical character," making it an extraordinary, sensory experience

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[27] Quoted in "Asparagus," *Suzan Pitt*, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.suzanpitt.com/asparagus.
[28] Sandomir, n.p.
[29] Suzanne Buchan and Andres Janser, "The Anxious Pencil," *Trickraum:Spacetricks* (Museum Für Gestaltung: Christoph Merian Verlag), 2005.
[30] Amos Vogel, "Missionary Positions," *Film Comment* 18, no. 3 (1982): 74-75.

from start to finish. "The story, the score, and the measured tempo evoke a haunting patina of subdued, barely contained 'nostalgia' for a wished-for-past that may never have existed," writes Vogel, "the sadness of a very modern déjà vu of alienated dissociation. […] Its straight-forward, hence graphic portrayals of certain 'unspeakable' human enterprises reconfirm, by their attendant shock effect, the continued existence in our society of strong visual taboos, despite assertions of 'freedom of the screen' and 'liberation from inhibitions.'"[31]

Such an "extraordinary, sensory experience" has been compared, by a number of critics, to that of the films of David Lynch, whose work has transfixed audiences with his attention towards the eerie, grotesque, and bizarre. Indeed, Pitt and Lynch had a tight-knit relationship in the earliest years of their respective careers in film and video/animation, with *Asparagus* filling a double-bill with Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) in the midnight movie circuit in San Francisco in the late 1970s.[32] "When I met David Lynch it was at the time our films were running together," Pitt remarks to Simon Jablonski. "He's a genius, not everything he's made is great, but he really is a great artist. *Eraserhead*, to me, is one of the greatest films ever made, it's fantastic, but then that's just my taste."[33] Beyond their interactions as contemporaries, critics like Guest have offered that Pitt's and Lynch's films have overlapped aesthetically and thematically, sharing "a postmodern uncertainty of historic time, a sense of pastness folded into a floating present and similarly expressed through evocative settings that meld elements

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[31] Amos Vogel, "Stalking 'Asparagus'," *Film Comment* 17, no. 3 (1981): 78-79.
[32] Sandomir, 2019; "An Evening with Suzan Pitt." In her discussion of the films' exhibition history, programmer Penelope Bartlett describes *Asparagus* as the "perfect *amuse-bouche*, if you will, for *Eraserhead*." In Bartlett, 2017.
[33] Jablonski, 2012.

from different periods: thirties Deco meets fifties Googie meets Memphis-style retro-futurism."[34] Lynch's oeuvre, beginning with *Eraserhead*, is characteristic for its in-betweenness—both for its blending of seemingly disparate film genres, visual styles, and cultural references and for its ability to move effortlessly, back and forth, across reality and fantasy, day and night, dream and nightmare. Akira Mizuta Lippit argues Lynch's films are a "perpetual mystery" because of this in-betweenness—the audience is never clued in on where and when Lynchian narratives unfold—but are all the more novel for their "transgressive visuality," their "ability to look across worlds and to connect and enter those worlds […] by looking into them."[35] Arguably, Lynchian in-betweenness also lends itself particularly well to the horror genre. In *Eraserhead* as well as the series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991; 2017) and his 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*, for instance, Lynch creates a "hypnotic atmosphere of dread" that envelops the viewer with an endless, seemingly nonsensical barrage of "music, song, sound, colour visual patterning, gesture and performance," to quote Robert Sinnerbrink.[36] Lynch's films therefore give off a sense of the uncanny, an eerie feeling of familiarity that, consequently, triggers sudden affective responses on the viewer, like fear, shock, repulsion, and anxiety—even without directly referencing horrific elements that traditionally elicit these emotions.[37] Likewise,

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[34] Guest, 2019.
[35] Akira Mizuta Lippit, "David Lynch's Secret Passages," last modified February 13, 2012, https://www.flowjournal.org/2012/02/david-lynchs-secret-passages/.
[36] Robert Sinnerbrink, "Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (2012): 151, 162.
[37] It is true that Lynch, in some instances, *does* explicitly draw upon the horror genre, featuring *chiaroscuro* lighting, monstrous/abject characters, and at times repulsive scenes of birth, death, and sexual intercourse/assault. For instance, according to Lindsay Hallam, *Fire Walk with Me*, the 1992 cinematic successor to *Twin Peaks*, "employs a series of horror techniques, particularly in the use of sound to unsettle and scare the viewer and put them in the place of [the] protagonist" (2018, 27). More often than not,

the same types of sensory assault placed on the viewer are also experienced by the characters in the films themselves: the interpersonal distance between the real world (the viewer) and the fantasy world (the protagonists) is deliberately shortened, and the audience is removed from the protective barrier, for lack of better terms, separating them from such fictional horrors,[38] becoming motivated to experience the same emotions as the characters on screen. Lynchian films, therefore, are horrific because they wade into the unknown, and force the viewer to do the same.

Suzan Pitt, in animations like *Asparagus*, is similar in her engagement with horrific elements and uncanny in-betweenness.[39] Yet, for Haden Guest, Pitt's films differ radically because of their tone, their avoidance of the "angst" of Lynch's films and gravitation instead towards empowerment and redemption. As Guest offers,

> In stark contrast to the oozing, shameful, queasy sexuality in *Eraserhead*, Pitt's boldly frank and almost joyous display of the woman's body leads to a climax in which the woman opens her Pandora's carpetbag to release a strange flock of winged creatures and effulgent objects, letting loose her imagination in a gesture that lyrically affirms the artist's generous, giving role. The final, now-iconic image of the woman fellating the asparagus goes further still by perversely and playfully offering her assertive act as transformative and creative […] a passage into another realm.[40]

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however, these references to horror proper are less straightforward, and are at times coupled with tropes from other genres, like melodrama and comedy. Arguably, then, Lynch does not make *horror films*, but rather films that are horrific.

[38] Russell Manning, "The Thing About David Lynch: Enjoying the Lynchian World," in *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, eds. William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 61-76.

[39] Pitt and Lynch are share a background in painting; Lynch, like Pitt, began his film career by bringing his two-dimensional paintings to life through animation. Lynch's first film, *Six Men Getting Sick* (1966), is a "short continuously looping animation of six grotesque human figures vomiting" (in "David Lynch").

[40] Guest, 2019.

Moreover, I would argue that *Asparagus* does simply more than wade into the unknown, like the films of her counterpart Lynch. Borrowing from Sharon Couzin, Pitt's work is an example of "avant-garde feminist films which are embedded with numerous political issues," and "acknowledges the difference of being a woman—that is, what it is to be a woman—and then integrates consciousness into [her] art."[41] Pitt has offered in interviews that she aims to create a Jungian dream landscape where images are "pregnant," with each component giving birth to the next.[42] Such psychoanalytic reference points (certainly a wink and a nod to Carrington) have been the primary mode for analyzing *Asparagus*: namely, the ways in which it portrays "the relationship of inner life with outer world"[43] as well as validates repressed, female sexual desire. However, an even more compelling interpretation of *Asparagus* hinges on gender, geography, and mobility: in other words, the ways in which Western society has dictated gender roles based on space and place. Going back to my discussion in Chapter III, Janet Wolff argues that, upon the turn of the twentieth century, there were simultaneous shifts in the

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[41] Sharon Couzin, "An analysis of Suzan Pitt's Asparagus and Joanna Priestley's All My Relations," in *A Reader in Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 73.

[42] Bartlett, 2017. This goal is achieved from looping, where scenes seem to replay and regenerate over extended periods of time. Looping is one technique used across experimental film and video art, with the "rejection of narrative and continuity, of 'one damn thing after another'" used to "counter narrative progression and extend time indefinitely" (Elwes 2015, 119-120) and comment on the nature of the cinematic medium as a whole. Experimental animation has also exploited the film loop with the same sense of inquiry into "cinema's fundamental elements" (quoted in Green 2013, n.p.), this time focusing on the ways that animation techniques feign the illusion of "life, interest, spirit, motion, or activity" (Ibid.) to inanimate objects. See Catherine Elwes, "Film as Film," in *Installation and the Moving Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 104-128; J. Ronald Green, "The Re-Emergence of the Film/Video Loop," *Millennium Film Journal* (2012): 30-39.

[43] Couzin, 77.

structuring of modern urban society and the role of women in this society. The separation of "public" (work, politics) and "private" (the home) spheres, as well as the "cult of domesticity"[44] cultivated during this period, caused women to be designated to the private sphere. This also led to the general topics of movement—being able to traverse freely out in public, as well as between public and private spheres—becoming gendered as well, with mobility, and therefore modernity, largely linked to the male body.

While these rigid categories have eased slightly over time, the connection between space, place, and gender still lingers; Tim Cresswell notes that the "private realm has been associated with stability, rootedness and femininity [and] the public realm has been described as fluid, mobile, and masculine."[45] Conversely, male bodies have been commonly understood, in Robyn Longhurst's assessment, as having "secure (autonomous) bodily boundaries,"[46] with female bodies, and all of their bodily functions (menstruation, childbirth, and the like) signifying irrationality, insecurity, and therefore untrustworthiness, resulting in confinement within the private sphere. For theorists like Luce Irigaray, when the female body is expected to move, it is often based off of transactional expectations on the part of the male body, for "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity."[47] By this

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[44] J. Wolff, 13.
[45] Tim Cresswell, "Embodiment, Power and the Politics of Mobility: The Case of Female Tramps and Hobos," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 2 (1999): 178.
[46] Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2000), 2.
[47] Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, eds. Ian Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 65.

logic, gendered difference is almost intrinsically bound to mobility—the female body is understood relative to her male counterparts in terms of when, where, for whom, and with what frequency she is expected to move in society.

In *Asparagus*, such issues of mobility and gender are clearly the case for our faceless, nameless protagonist. Throughout the film, she is bound to the private, domestic sphere, moving from her bedroom, to her bathroom, to her den and garden, and eventually back to her bedroom. Such movement is marked by the distinctly feminine realms of irrationality and abjection, and she is shown, in surrealist grotesquerie, freely defecating and vomiting in various rooms of the home. And, at least in the first two acts of the film, our protagonist's movement is suspended in time, as indicated by temporal loops; in one sequence, for instance, she repeatedly flips the light switch on her doll house, triggering a zoom outward to a full shot of the toy, then a zoom into the toy house's den, and then a zoom once more to her flipping light switch.[48] Such looping is a clever device signifying the feelings of confinement on the part of the protagonist. Like the similarly unnamed main character of Deren's *Witch's Cradle*, the character at the heart of *Asparagus* is literally, physically stuck in one place, with feelings of horror arising from the inability to move and lack of control that she feels in the private sphere.

Only until *Asparagus'*s protagonist compartmentalizes her thoughts, feelings, and artistic ideas—literally represented in the bag of tricks, for lack of a better term, at the film's climax—is she able to finally break free from the endless motion loop in her

[48] In addition to representing a "fetishistic involvement with personal and domestic objects" (Couzin 1997, 76), the doll house serves as a microcosm for the protagonist's confinement in the private sphere. She has little autonomy in her home, and even less control over the doll house, which she passively watches over in the evening hours.

apartment. On her personal website, Pitt describes that *Asparagus* is a larger allegory for the creative process, wherein the main character takes "on the role of the magician/artist [who] ushers the viewers through her search for the essence of the creative forces which rule and drive our existence."[49] Indeed, the protagonist's journey is one of creative discovery and, in turn, self-rediscovery; her handbag contains objects both realistic and surrealistic, and, by (literally and figuratively) compartmentalizing these items, she is able to discover her own creative capacity and, in turn, share it with the world around her. Importantly, however, once the main character is able to rationalize and compartmentalize such emotion-objects—like dancing figures, taxi cabs, vulvar flowers, and phallic cigars—she is liberated from the confines of her mind and, eventually, the private sphere. Typically, according to Cresswell, fluidity and movement in the urban landscape were concepts broadly coded as masculine, yet creative processes like writing allowed women to reclaim movement as a feminine practice, legitimizing "the freedom that came with their mobility" at the turn of century.[50] So, too, does our protagonist regain mobility through creative means, and in her eventual performance, so to speak, in the Claymation theatre, she solidifies her artistic, and therefore personal, independence to a much broader audience.

Yet, our protagonist's freedom comes at a price; she is forced to wear an unusual mask before exiting her home,[51] and, as she traverses the city streets, she is met with the

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[49] In "Asparagus."
[50] Cresswell, 179.
[51] A common theme in feminist theory is feminine masquerade, which involves "the activity of gendering as enactment and acting-out." Quoting Mary Ann Doane, Pamela Robertson notes that "'a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity, in other words, foreground the masquerade' in order to 'manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image'" (1996, 12). Yet, in

intimidating sights of sex shops, gun shops, cigar shops, and toy shops. Up until this point in the film, it is the protagonist who is seen as an object of horror, reveling in her own bodily secretions and, like the movie monsters of horror films past, forced to hide at the margins of society. As she crosses geographic boundaries, however, we are exposed to the real horrors of *Asparagus*, which are the rigid gender roles and expectations that have become all but normal in patriarchal society. The store's window dressings are shown in startling detail, with their objects reaching out to grab at or scare the protagonist as she briskly walks by, while, in the toy shop, two baby dolls look on with eerie delight, separated by gendered pink and blue bed sheets. These window displays are a haunting reminder to the protagonist of her place in the world—she must forever remain in her home, confined to the domestic sphere with an ultimate expectation of bearing children. Nevertheless, she walks with more determination towards her destination, the theatre, where she breaks free from societal expectations and liberates her thoughts and desires publicly. Irigaray states that it is "useless, then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expect to surprise them. They have returned within themselves."[52] Our protagonist, by the end of the film, ends this cycle of needless repetition and makes herself—her desires, her fears, her dreams—loud

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Asparagus, the main character takes on a form of masquerade that more closely represents male drag, that is, the mask she wears has rather masculine features. This may signify a number of things, from Pitt's fascination with what Bartlett describes as the film's fascination with a "dual sexuality" (2017), to Couzin's interpretation of the film as an exploration of the "loss of identity accomplished by the destructive effects some women feel because of their desire to merge totally with a partner" (1997, 75), or even the more general aims of feminist theory, in exposing the arbitrariness and unnaturalness of gender norms (Robertson 1996, 12).

[52] Irigaray, 64.

and clear, once and for all. She is finally afforded the same freedom in movement, and therefore expression, as her male counterparts.

And still, by the film's conclusion, our protagonist has returned back to her home, the very place that confined her creative and sexual capacities in the first place. However, she is able to traverse freely from the private and internal, to the public and external spheres. Opening a large, windowed door, she walks in the nude around her phallic-asparagus garden, a location, like the city streets, otherwise closed off to her in the film's first act. She acts with reckless, sexual abandon, fellating the asparagus, exhibiting the same kind of physical and emotional freedom that she gained from her theatrical performance. The asparagus stalks, representative of the obstacles that she faced throughout the film, are finally conquered, rendered into a pile of confetti, a clump of hair, a stream of water. Neither she nor her femininity should be considered horrific; instead, it is the world around her, and the gendered norms therein, that present tangible, yet conquerable, horrors.

Suzan Pitt's *Asparagus* is just one part of a much longer career that experiments with themes like identity, sexuality, and emotional turmoil, using horrific elements as a tool for amplifying these themes. As I argue, her films are strikingly horrific; the aforementioned *El Doctor* and *Visitation* come to mind here, with the former exploiting visceral body horrors and the latter portraying the world as a stark gray, distorted nightmare-scape. The last film before her untimely death,[53] *Pinball* (2013) is tonally and thematically horrific, bouncing back and forth between distorted, figural bodies with

[53] Pitt passed away in 2019 after battling pancreatic cancer. See Sandomir, 2019; "Suzan Pitt Obituary," *Legacy*, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/suzan-pitt-obituary?pid=193260081/.

dizzying speed, its soundtrack cacophonous and, at times, panic-inducing. Yet, for all of Pitt's visual experiments, none can compare—visually, sonically, thematically—with *Asparagus*, a study of the inner workings of an artist and, more significantly, of the harsh realities that women face in patriarchal society at large. Society, as painted by *Asparagus*, is frigid, dangerous, and altogether intimidating. Moreover, the gendered norms stipulated in patriarchal society, while flimsy at best, are all the more horrific because they have the capacity to entrap, ensnaring those who fall outside of the boundaries of these norms. The ability to make contact with the world, to paraphrase Pitt,[54] through movement and mobility is therefore a way to combat such societal horrors.

B. "They Hear 'Em, but They Can't See 'Em:" Uncovering the Hidden Monstrosities of Colonialism in Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil*

"It is hard to deny that Australia has a racist past," Graeme Turner bluntly begins in his analysis of Australian indigenous representation, "and it is only now coming to terms with a racist present […] Given the relationship between the ideologies of a culture and its representations of itself in film, it is hardly surprising that racism still structures the representation of Aborigines in Australian film."[55] Turner's assessment of the status of Australian cinema and the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders is indeed correct, with scholars like Kim Bullimore remarking on the continued legacy of filmmakers, following in the footsteps of visual and literary artists, to rely upon a "dense

[54] Jablonski, 2012.
[55] Graeme Turner, "Breaking the Frame: The Representation of Aborigines in Australian Film," *Kunapipi* 10, no. 1 (1988): 135.

history of racist, distorted and offensive" representations.[56] Furthermore, in many instances, those indigenous voices have been wiped from discussions of early Australian films altogether, with some scholars remarking on the rare, if not nonexistent, interactions with *any* portrayals of non-white characters in Australian media.[57] This precarious situation is akin to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses in her seminal "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she, in part, observes that the postcolonial situation coheres "with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization,"[58] simultaneously forcing subjects to "unlearn" their own privilege and tacitly accept imperialist ways of thinking. Indigenous Australians, through their abjection and silencing in mainstream Australian filmmaking, therefore take on this same "subaltern" position, feeding into "a *collective* fantasy symptomatic of a *collective* itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a *collective* imperialist enterprise."[59]

While this so-called collective imperialist enterprise is true of the cinema of Australia's not-so-distant past, indigenous representation is breaking new ground particularly in the horror genre. This chapter will explore Tracey Moffatt's 1993

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[56] Kim Bullimore, "Media Dreaming: Representation of Aboriginality in Modern Australian Media," *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 6 (1999): 72.
[57] For example, according to scholar Ian Anderson's personal accounts, the first accessible representation of Tasmanian Aboriginal people was in the 1992 documentary *Black Man's Houses* by Steve Thomas. His prior experiences "of reading and watching film did little to [assist] in the process of developing a confident sense of identity." In Ian Anderson, "I, the 'hybrid' Aborigine: Film and Representation," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1997): 4-13.
[58] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 90.
[59] Author's emphasis; Spivak, 92.

Australian horror film *beDevil*, a foundational text in the growing sub-genre of indigenous horror filmmaking. As I argue, the film, in addition to being transgressive in its narrative structure and visual style, is also subversive in the way that it situates its Aboriginal/Torres Straight Islanders within Australian society at large. Eschewing what Alan McKee describes as an Otherized portrayal of indigeneity as "literally fatal: associated not only with death, but viciousness, savagery, cannibalism,"[60] Moffatt instead weaves together a series of narratives that positions Australian society as truly horrific, literally consuming indigenous identity and wiping those voices away from modern memory. Taking a cultural studies approach in addition to a feminist-psychoanalytic one, this chapter examines how the film, to quote Catherine Summerhayes, "challenges and bewilders […] through her drifting, non-stereotypical characterizations"[61] of indigeneity in particular, and the racialized Other in general, within contemporary Australian society. Drawing upon contemporaneous reviews, critical analyses, and interviews from the artist herself, this chapter looks to the broader dialogues within and around the film about the haunting presence of colonialism. It also examines the ways that the horror genre becomes a tool for materializing such experiences for marginalized, indigenous voices.

After graduating in the early 1980s from the Queensland College of Art, Tracey Moffatt began her career in the photographic arts. The main thread connecting her body of work together in photography, as described by Hannah Fink, involves a disruption in the narrative tradition—that is, the dismantling of "the conventions of storytelling,

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[60] Alan McKee, "'The Aboriginal verson of Ken Done…': Banal Aboriginality in Australia," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 194.
[61] Catherine Summerhayes, "Haunting Secrets: Tracey Moffatt's beDevil," *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2004): 19.

paradoxically by using artifice alone to tell her tales."[62] In other words, Moffatt adopts otherwise taken-for-granted hallmarks of storytelling—namely, linearity and the typical "dramatic curve"[63]—and breaks them apart, at times juxtaposing images out of temporal order that encourages the viewer to read them in nontraditional ways. This strategy is evident in one of Moffatt's most famous photo series, *Something More* (1989), in which the artist frames her subjects in hyper-staged, storyboard-like blocks but displays each photograph without limitations; curators are instructed to place the images in whichever order they choose, in either a grid or linear display and, likewise, the viewer is urged to experience them in whichever order they choose (up-and-down, left-to-right, and so forth). Alternating between black-and-white and color photography, *Something More* also plays with pastiche, a device wherein multiple images and story tropes are ripped "from their context and [repositioned] in new compositions that interrogate their fragments and their origins."[64] Importantly, for Sarah Smith, pastiche hinges on accessibility—that is, using elements familiar to the viewer, so that they have a frame of reference for interpreting these images, and using these images in order for the artist "to

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[62] Hannah Fink, "Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia," last modified 2004, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/335.1989/.
[63] Sarah Smith, "Lip and Love: Subversive Repetition in the Pastiche Films of Tracey Moffatt," *Screen* 49, no. 2 (2008): 212.
[64] "About the Artwork: Tracey Moffatt Something More #1, 1989," Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, accessed December 15, 2020, https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/1992.144.1/; Smith, 211. The color photographs in the series have been produced using Cibachrome print, a technique involving prints being "enlarged directly onto reversal colour [sic] paper," where the "dyes are incorporated into the emulsion on the paper instead of being formed chemically" (National Portrait Gallery [London, UK], n.d., "Cibachrome print"). The resulting images are highly saturated, crisp, and richly textured, especially when capturing fabric and object textures.

position herself in relation to them."[65] This strategy further upends the very conventions that dictate who is allowed to tell stories and at what capacity they can tell these stories from opposing perspectives.

According to Waleed Aly, in *Something More* Moffatt draws upon images from "Australian art history with its references to the paintings of Russell Drysdale and Albert Namatjira and the 1955 film *Jedda*,"[66] as well as stereotyped images of femininity and the racialized Other. In so doing, Moffatt's pastiche recognizes the value of dominant storytelling practices—namely, those common to the Hollywood film industry and within the larger, male-dominated spheres of Australian painting and cinema—while also problematizing the at times harmful images proliferating in these media. In its most well-known photograph, *Something More #1*, an indigenous woman (portrayed by Moffatt herself) stares off wistfully into the distance, donning an Asian-inspired dress while a white woman, smoking a cigarette in a revealing white nightgown, looks on in the midground. In the background, a number of passersby ogle the women—two white children, obscured with a motion blur implying speedy movements; a man dressed in traditional Asian garb and a conical hat; and, hidden in the shadows of a cabin, a large greasy man who focuses his camera lens on the two women's backsides. Combining a

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[65] Smith, 211.

[66] Waleed Aly, "Historyonics: Tracey Moffatt's Something More," produced by ABC Radio National, *RN Drive with Patricia Karvelas*, August 7, 2013, Podcast, MP3 Audio, 00:09:40, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/drive/historyonics3a-tracey-moffatt27s-something-more/4872010. Russell Drysdale was an Australian artist whose work can be generally characterized through harsh, reddened landscapes of Australian deserts. Albert Namatjira was an Indigenous Australian artist who, like Drysdale, used colorful palettes in his portraits of the Australian wilderness. *Jedda* is a film directed by Charles Chauvel and marks a turning point in Australian cinema, a market otherwise dominated by Hollywood imports. The color film depicts the lives of two Aboriginal characters, and lends a sympathetic ear to their plights in Australian society.

number of different "components from a shared cultural memory of B-grade cinema and pulp fiction"—through characters like the "beautiful ingénue […] the trashy blonde and the Chinese boy-next-door"[67]—Moffatt holds a metaphorical magnifying glass over those taken-for-granted conventions within such visual, storytelling practices and, in doing so, destabilizes them. Her mixing and remixing of a variety of different images, along with her self-portrayal of the racially stereotyped protagonist, allows for the possibility of multiple new voices to be heard—indeed, providing "something more" in the larger scope of visual storytelling.

To a related extent, Moffatt's works present a pointed commentary on the indigenous experience in Australia. However, the artist herself has taken issue with being positioned in such a way, time and time again showing "an avowed ambivalence about being categorized as an Indigenous artist."[68] "I can't control what critics think," Moffatt offers in a 1998 interview with Coco Fusco. "Australia is multi-cultural and it is completely natural for me to represent that mixing of races. I've always done that without trying to make some grand statement about race."[69] By this logic, it would be unfair to characterize Moffatt's body of work, *Something More* included, as solely a statement on her own experience as an indigenous woman or as a larger statement on race as a whole. However, I would argue that her multi-cultural sensibilities—the mixing of

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[67] "About the Artwork: Tracey Moffatt Something More #1, 1989."
[68] Fink, 2004.
[69] Coco Fusco, "Tracey Moffatt by Coco Fusco," *Bomb Magazine* 64. Moffatt herself has somewhat of a multicultural background, having been raised by a white family after her Aboriginal mother put her up for adoption; her father, whom she had never met, was also white. See Samantha Selinger-Morris, "The Secret Lives of Tracey Moffatt," last modified July 30, 2005, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-secret-lives-of-tracey-moffatt-20050730-gdls0e.html.

European white, indigenous, and sometimes Asian iconographies—place a spotlight on the lingering and sometimes silent impact of colonialism in the Australian continent, contributing to a movement in the 1970s and 1980s towards reexamining "the historical archive and at historical representations of colonial history" by indigenous artists.[70] One of the primary ways in which she does this, across several of her photo installations, is by taking realistic, mundane snapshots of everyday life and presenting them in such a way so as to emphasize their horrific, at times violently aggressive underbelly. In *Mother's Day 1975*, a photo from the series *Scarred for Life* (1994), a woman is turning her head away from the camera, her face blurry from the abrupt movement. The caption reads: "On Mother's Day, as the family watched, she copped a backhander from her mother." This domestic terror continues in installments like *Birth Certificate, 1962*, in which presumably the same woman defeatedly rests her head on a bathroom sink and, "During the fight, her mother threw her birth certificate at her. This is how she found out her real father's name." And, in *Heart Attack, 1970*, a nude man whisks a small child into an empty bedroom—"She glimpsed her father belting the girl from down the street. That day he died of a heart attack." In each of these instances, the indigenous subject is rendered passive at the literal and figurative hands of some oppressive figure (in many instances, one who is white and male), a physical manifestation of the specter of colonization looming over non-white, non-European communities.[71] While not explicitly

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[70] Aly, 2013.

[71] Even in instances where physical violence is not present, colonization lurks in insidious ways. *Job Hunt, 1976* depicts a young Aboriginal man with a suit and tie, with the caption: "After three weeks he still couldn't find a job. His mother said to him, '*maybe you're not good enough*'," which can easily be read as, not *white* enough. Likewise, photos like *Charm Alone, 1965* and *Telecam Guys, 1977* make reference to traditional, Euro-centric physical features, as believed to be more desirable or attractive than

staking a claim in horror proper, this photoset from *Scarred for Life* reveals the "small yet traumatic humiliations of daily life,"[72] exposing the horrors of white-on-indigenous oppression still felt, despite any progress on the contrary.

Moffatt makes more explicit claims in horror—and, namely, the horrors felt by the colonial subject—in her photo series *Laudanum* (1998), a nineteen-piece black-and-white collection set in part in the early nineteenth century. Combining techniques like photogravure or photoglyphic engraving[73] with effects like overexposure, superimposition, and lens distortion, the photographs have a characteristically spooky feel, having a similar visual impact as early trick photography. In *Laudanum 3*, for instance, a figure of a woman in period-specific clothing appears to sit alongside a mysterious, nude figure, whose visage is duplicated in the lower third of the frame—ghostly in appearance, these characters are incredibly washed-out and over-exposed, and are translucent to the point where their features are barely visible to the naked eye. Likewise, in *Laudanum 12*, two frames are juxtaposed side-by-side, one of a house in the forest and the other of a *chiaroscuro*-lit figure whose sinewy hands creep to the top of the frame in an interesting visual parallel to the iconography of the 1922 horror film *Nosferatu*. Consequently, the *Laudanum* series situates itself squarely within the visual

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indigenous ones (captioned as "His brother said, '*crooked nose and no chin—you'll have to survive on charm alone*'" and "Later, her sister said, '*the Telecam guys told me I was far more attractive and vivacious*'," respectively).

[72] "About: Scarred for life," Art Gallery of NSW, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/128.1996.1/.

[73] "About: Laudanum," Art Gallery of NSW, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/83.1999.16/. Both photogravure and photoglyphic engraving are one in the same and refer to a technique akin to intaglio. In this process, a photographic negative is transferred onto a separate copper plate, and the resulting image is printed through etching.

tradition of horror, replicating the "pleasures and pains of dream, fantasy, nightmare, and subjugation"[74] common across the genre.

Significantly, however, it is not merely the aesthetic style of the photos that lend themselves to the horror genre: their subject matter is horrific in and of itself, portraying a white woman and her indigenous maid in compromising situations of torture, sexual assault, and physical humiliation. Much like *Something More*, *Laudanum* places viewers in a position where they are watching slices of everyday life—moments that are almost embarrassingly personal and private, decidedly relegated to domestic spaces behind closed doors. Unlike *Something More*, *Laudanum* explicitly portrays those moments of racialized violence, situating viewers in an uncomfortably close, yet passive, position alongside the subjects. *Laudanum 4*, for instance, features in one of its frames a compromising image of an indigenous person[75] being forcibly held down by an unknown figure, their limbs intertwined with one another in a fit of chaos. In another instance, in *Laudanum 17*, viewers are positioned from outside of the house, as suggested by rod-iron window rails segmenting the frame; a woman (presumably, the same indigenous woman common throughout the photo set) is unconsciously slumped down on the floor, as another woman, with her back to the camera, ominously lurks in the background. Even more entries in the *Laudanum* series show an indigenous woman in varying states of undress, in varying compromising situations—poked and prodded by her white counterparts; bound, gagged, and incapacitated; and at times lying nude and unconscious across the house.

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Many sources have interpreted this figure as being either indigenous, or of mixed-race descent (that is, Asian and white, or indigenous and white).

As a result, the *Laudanum* series portrays what E. Ann Kaplan describes as the "legacies of internal colonialism in Australia in the past as well as the present."[76] Despite Moffatt's deliberately open way of presenting race—after all, as mentioned earlier, the artist encourages the audience to read her work in a variety of different ways—her work in this photo series is novel in its representation of "intercultural colonial relations in all their ambivalence and eroticism," in Kaplan's words.[77] On the one hand, "ambivalence" in this sense draws from Homi Bhabha's consideration of the fetishistic mode of identification on the part of those victims of colonization, a "crucial splitting of the ego which is represented in [Frantz] Fanon's description of the construction of the colonized subject as effect of stereotypical discourse: the subject primordially fixed and yet triply split between the incongruent knowledges of body, race, ancestors."[78] By this logic, the colonized subject all at once identifies with their own nation/ethnicity of origin, the nation/ethnicity of their colonizer (through oftentimes aggressive means, like guilt, discrimination, and violence), and a third, "pseudo-scientific, typological, legal-administrative, eugenicist"—that is, stereotyped—version of themselves. Consequently, the colonized feel a constant, internalized push-and-pull, eventually resulting in an even deeper indoctrination into racist discourses.[79] On the other hand, Kaplan's "eroticism"

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[76] E. Ann Kaplan, "Psychoanalysis and Ideology as Signified in the Staircase: Nancy Meckler's Sister, My Sister and Tracey Moffatt's Laudanum," *The Communication Review* 6, no. 4 (2003): 308.
[77] Kaplan, 310.
[78] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), 115.
[79] Bhabha, 116. According to Abdennebi Ben Beya's assessment of Bhabha, colonial ambivalence "carefully establishes highly sophisticated strategies of control and dominance; that is, while it is aware of its ephemerality, it is also anxious to create the means that guarantee its economic, political and cultural endurance" (2017). Therefore, ambivalence points to the overall artifice of racial difference that has been created in cultural, social, and political discourses in white, patriarchal society. See Abdennebi Ben

alludes to Robert Young's "colonial desire," described by David G.A. Castle as a process akin to ambivalence in its structuring of colonial dominance, but this time with a greater emphasis on sexuality, on the desire "for a kind of hybridity, miscegenation […] in constant tension with the disgust of the alien, inferior other."[80] Colonial desire, in this instance, represents the collapsing of racial boundaries through sexual behaviors and the building of even stronger boundaries between colonizer and colonized, where the latter become deviant, inferior, and altogether Othered. Sexuality, through eroticism and colonial desire, becomes a stronger tool with which the colonizer can wield power against the colonized subjects.

Yet, the "hierarchical power relation"[81] between colonizer and colonized is far more complicated than its surface would suggest. To be sure, the indigenous subject and all of the injustices that she endures haunt the fictional world of *Laudanum* like a ghost—her visage is diffused, translucent, and hovers unnaturally within the frame, serving as a vivid reminder for both her captor and the audience of the psychosexual violence that she has endured. And, if Bhabha's (and Kaplan's) notion of ambivalence is considered, a split identity characterizes the indigenous subject in the photo series. She is marked as Other, cast off by her white captor and forced into menial housework while at the same time fully and forcefully integrated into her colonized environment; indeed, she adopts the same identity markers as her white counterpart by donning period-specific, Victorian

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Beya, "Mimicry, Ambivalence, and Hybridity," *Emory University* (blog), last modified October 2017, https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/mimicry-ambivalence-and-hybridity/.

[80] David G.A. Castle, "Book Review: Robert J. Young – Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race," *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate* 4, no. 2 (1996): 135.

[81] Kaplan, 309.

clothing. However, for as much as the two women in *Laudanum* represent a harmful, chaotic sexual relationship, their intimacy "breeds a transgressive nonnormative desire that the dominant ideology producing the structure would implore."[82] Sadomasochistic at best, their relationship calls attention to the persistent and, at times, normalized effects of Australian colonialism. Towards the end of the series, it is shown that there is "no clear outcome"[83] between the two women; they are trapped in an eternal nightmare-scape marked by violence, passion, and despair. So too is the viewer trapped in this same state, effectively forced to acknowledge such experiences that are arguably felt in the present day. *Laudanum*'s power as a horror text, therefore, comes from its nuanced portrayal of the colonial moment and, like Moffatt's other works, situates the indigenous experience alongside myriad other experiences within the Australian context.

Which brings out discussion to *beDevil*, Moffatt's 1993 feature directorial debut and the first film directed by an Australian Aboriginal woman.[84] Previously, Moffatt experimented with the cinematic medium in shorts like *Nice Coloured Girls* in 1987 and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* in 1989. In both films, Moffatt extends the same types of aesthetic strategies present in her photographic work: specifically, the motif of the barren Australian outback in *Night Cries*, and a documentarian, almost anthropological approach to filming her subjects in *Girls*. Images of Australia's colonized past—black-and-white illustrations of shipping ports interspersed with violent slaps and tugs of anonymous indigenous women in *Girls*, candid snapshots of the protagonist's fraught relationship

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[82] Ibid.
[83] "About: Laudanum."
[84] "Bedevil," *Women Make Movies*, accessed June 20, 2020, https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/bedevil/.

with her white mother in *Night Cries*—pair with modern-day footage of city streets and popular musical soundtracks to create a complex tapestry of the female indigenous experience in Australia and the systemic imbalances of power that go along with it. Additionally, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* and *Nice Coloured Girls* come with a subversive twist; the indigenous women at the heart of both films regain control from their white abusers, whether that means turning on an adoptive, neglectful mother (in *Night Cries*) or taking financial advantage of slimy, male suitors (in *Girls*). In *beDevil*, Moffatt takes a similar approach, combining documentary-like footage, interviews, and theatrical staged scenes set across Australia's diverse landscape (the outback, swamps, rural neighborhoods, and an urban cityscape) to produce multiple narratives of oppression, abuse and, eventually, a reclamation of control. *BeDevil* does this, unlike Moffatt's other films, through the strategy of horror.

BeDevil is divided into three parts, each telling a tale laden with ghosts and the supernatural. In the first part, titled "Mr. Chuck," two middle-aged characters—an Indigenous man (Rick, played by Jack Charles) and a white woman (Shelley, played by Diana Davidson)—recount stories from their childhood wherein the ghost of an American soldier, the titular Mr. Chuck, haunts their rural neighborhood. Alternating between staged flashbacks and in-person interviews, the characters and their stories deviate drastically from one another. Rick, interviewed from a jail cell, recounts his experiences as a reluctant caretaker of two younger siblings—he shields them from abuse at the hands of his step-parents, navigates the harsh swampland of their dwelling, and even introduces them (sometimes, as practical jokes) to ghosts like Mr. Chuck that haunt the swamps. Shelley, on the other hand, lives in suburban bliss, her home carefully

decorated with antiques. She recalls her family's role in the colonization of the swampland, and how they essentially demolish the area to create a movie theater. Their stories eventually converge during one fateful morning, after a young Rick has destroyed and looted the theater after hours. Young Shelley and her brother look on as each of the children is beaten by their parents, their blood running down into the drainpipes; all the while, the ghostly face of Mr. Chuck appears, looking squarely at the camera (and, in turn, the audience). Later on, Rick returns to the abandoned movie theater, this time falling through the floorboards and being pulled by the ominous Mr. Chuck—"It stank worse than shit, and it was *down there*," recounts the man—"And it was licking my feet. And it was gripping my legs. And it's…tongue was all over…my feet."[85] The face of Mr. Chuck appears once more, rising forth from the muddy water, closing out the sequence.

The film then transitions to its second part, "Choo Choo Choo Choo," which, of the three segments, is *beDevil*'s most horror inspired. Much like "Mr. Chuck," "Choo Choo Choo Choo" is framed, in part, with documentary-like interviews, first with a group of indigenous women, who are at the center of the sequence's story, then with an Asian-Australian man who works at a cultural center for a small Brisbane town, and then finally with a white man named Mickey, who grew up in the town. As the man tells us, a young, blind girl was accidentally killed as she was walking on the train tracks; this has become somewhat of an urban legend for the town, as the man, and all of the extras who are captured in tracking shots, instinctively mime out the poem, "Choo, choo, choo, choo!

[85] Tracey Moffatt, dir., *beDevil*, 1993; Mitchell ACT, Australia: Ronin Films, 2016, Vimeo, 1:27:00.

They hear 'em, but they can't see 'em."[86] For the indigenous women, however, this urban legend is reality. Told in flashback, and acted out on a soundstage, the members of their family go about their daily lives, until the menacing sounds of a forthcoming train haunt them in the night. Other strange phenomena—like *Min Min lights*, or mysterious flickers of light, as well as odd outbursts from the family patriarch—plague the family, leading the group to believe that something supernatural is following them. These suspicions come true one evening as the family matriarch, Ruby (played by Moffatt herself), puts her children to bed. She notices something strange in the distance and moves outside towards the railroad tracks bisecting her property. Suddenly, she is blown away by a forceful wind, accompanied by loud, mechanical sounds—the sounds of clanging railroad tracks. She crawls towards the tracks, putting her head on the rails; horrified, she runs away, only to be greeted by the ghost of the little girl, walking alongside her.

This moment leads to the final part of the film, "Lovin' the Spin I'm In," the most experimental and complex unit in *beDevil*. In this sequence, the patriarch of a wealthy family of Greek immigrants, Dimitri, plans to purchase and renovate a decrepit warehouse owned by a Torres Straight Islander named Imelda. Under pressure from his business associates, Dimitri forcefully evicts Imelda, and all of her tenants from the property, including a man cross-dressing as Frida Kahlo, serving in some scenes as a "Greek chorus" of sorts, watching and commenting on the action from a distance. What Dimitri doesn't know, and what his son Spiro soon finds out, is that Imelda is mourning the loss of her only son, Bebe, who with his lover Minnie were brutally murdered for

[86] Ibid.

their illicit love affair. Bebe and Minnie's relationship is shown in flashbacks, where the two communicate through dance and, in the present day, as ghosts, bathed in red light and haunting the bereaving Imelda in the evening. Intercut with these sequences are Spiro's dream-like flashbacks of his upbringing in the neighborhood (and Dimitri's fraught working relationship with Imelda), Frida Kahlo speaking gibberish to an imaginary character, Imelda praying and chanting, and the scene of Bebe and Minnie's murder. Dimitri eventually evicts Imelda and her housemates, and "Lovin' the Spin I'm In" concludes with Frida sneaking out of the warehouse, relighting the candles at the makeshift memorial for Bebe and Minnie. The spirits of the deceased couple then possess each member of the immigrant family: first, Spiro, who is invited to dance with the couple in the red-hued warehouse; Dimitri, who sleepily wanders in the warehouse the following morning; and the businessmen, who are unable to stop their car from spinning out of control. A group of Spiro's young friends follow the car, taunting them in the process.

Due to the film's limited release in theaters, little information survives on its critical and commercial reception.[87] Scholar Glen Masato Mimura, in their analysis of the film, aptly fleshes out some of the gaps in *beDevil*'s incomplete reception history, noting that the film was widely praised by critics in Australia and the film festival circuit in Canada. As Mimura offers, a handful of reviewers praised Moffatt for her artistic integrity: that is, her refusal to move into the mainstream film market in favor of

[87] According to *beDevil*'s Wikipedia page, the film received widespread positive reviews from critics, but was a commercial flop. However, there is no other information to corroborate these claims; all links cited in the page are broken.

"presenting moving and still images together in the space of art."[88] Such loyalty to avant-garde and experimental art practices, however, came at quite the cost for Moffatt; despite the many critics who heralded *beDevil*, there were just as many who panned the film for its non-traditional narrative structure, surreal imagery, occasionally muddled themes, and overt Australian references that may get lost on international audiences. Critic Adrian Martin, for instance, gave the film a total of one-and-a-half stars, remarking that it "is overly schematic and pre-programmed […] Maybe Moffatt is one of those artists—like some of the old American film directors discovered by the French auteurists of the '50s—who would be better off not listening too closely to her critical admirers and exegetes."[89] Mimura further offers anecdotes of critics storming out of festival audiences due to their frustration with the film, noting the film's abrasiveness with "little or no sense of drama."[90] Perhaps these mixed reviews are the reason why broader audiences, especially in the United States, were not exposed to the film, securing its status as a somewhat radical entry into experimental filmmaking.[91]

Moffatt's brand of filmmaking in *beDevil*, while clearly not for everyone, is novel in a variety of different ways: its re-appropriation of the documentary genre; its

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[88] Quoted in Glen Masato Mimura, "Black Memories: Allegorizing the Colonial Encounter in Tracey Moffatt's beDevil (1993)," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 20, no. 2 (2003): 112.
[89] Adrian Martin, "Reviews: Bedevil," last modified 1999, http://www.filmcritic.com.au/reviews/b/bedevil.html.
[90] Mimura, 112.
[91] Another reason for the film's limited success arises from its apparent "lack of narrative closure," due in part to the order in which the three acts are ordered. Per Catherine Summerhayes: "Production manager Anthony Buckley commented on how he thought the order was 'wrong,' and that 'Choo Choo Choo Choo' should have been the closing story, as it is this story that certainly presents the highest degree of narrative closure" (18). See Catherine Summerhayes, "Haunting Secrets: Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil*," *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2004): 14-24.

innovative use of POV shots, wherein the viewer is directly addressed by characters in each scene and therefore fully immersed in the story; and its melding of linear and non-linear narrative structures. Above all, Moffatt's *beDevil* is uniquely situated in the midst of Australian cinema's much broader, albeit turbulent, history with the horror genre. As Mark David Ryan observes, the rigidity of protocols within the Australian film industry and the cultural policies that have informed the industry have, in the past, left little room for commercial filmmaking endeavors. Driven towards the preservation of "high" art, and for presenting a uniquely Australian experience—emphasizing social realism in an effort to preserve "Australian culture, character, and identity"[92]—Australian cinema has therefore left little room for lower-brow genres, especially horror, to thrive. Certainly, so-called "Ozploitation" films in the 1970s and 1980s[93] stood out amongst a mass of comedy and indie dramas that proliferated in the market, both at home and abroad. In the twenty-first century, horror filmmakers like Jennifer Kent (mentioned in the previous chapter), James Wan (of the hit *Saw* franchise), and Greg McLean (director of the *Wolf Creek* franchise) have gained international recognition for their innovative takes on the genre. Yet, in the years leading up to *beDevil*'s release, Australian horror was something of a rarity,[94] with Mark David Ryan observing that filmmakers were denied funding in large part because their films did "not carry the label of prestigious cinema,"[95] therefore

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[92] Quoted in Mark David Ryan, "Whither Culture? Australian Horror Films and the Limitations of Cultural Policy," *Media International Australia* 133, no. 1 (2009): 44.
[93] Ibid.
[94] According to Ryan, by "1994, Australian horror and horror-related films had been estimated as a filmmaking tradition producing a total of 80 films," and "from the silent era of film to the present—from the identification of a total of 70 new Australian horror productions released from 1993 to 2007 not captured in previous surveys—Australian cinema has produced a horror tradition of over 150 films" (44).
[95] Ryan, 48.

becoming unproduced, underproduced, or relegated to something of B-movie infamy. *BeDevil*, by this logic, is an anomaly; it has many of the identifying features of a horror film (ghosts, paranormal activity, and the like) but had the unique luxury of being subsidized by the Australian Film Finance Corporation as part of the 1992 Film Fund and was selected to screen at the Cannes Film Festival's "Un Certain Regard" program in 1993.[96] The value of Moffatt's film subsequently lies in its use of horror as a tool with which to retell the experiences of indigenous Australians, bringing to light the literal and figurative haunting specter of colonialism within the nation.

Horror occupies an interesting place within the context of Australian indigenous media, namely film/video and literature. Indeed, those elements that have become commonplace within the horror genre as a whole are integral to Aboriginal Australian mythology. As Bruno Starrs offers, "there are fascinating stories—handed down orally from one generation to the next […] informing wide-eyed youngsters of bloodsucking, supernatural entities that return from the grave to feed upon still living blackfellas [Indigenous Australians]."[97] While the specific type of horrific elements—monsters, shapeshifters, ghosts, humanoids—vary depending on their geographic location, they

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[96] *BeDevil* was made "with the aid of a $1.8 million grant from the Australian Film Commission" (Robertson 2016); Moffatt was amongst a handful of other artists and writer-critics that was approached by the commission in the early 1990s to make films that would bring attention to and heighten the profile of the Australian film industry worldwide. These films include Ross Gibson's *Dead to the World* (1991), Susan Dermody's *Breathing Under Water* (1992), David Perry's *The Refracting Glasses* (1992) and Laurie McInnes' *Broken Highway* (1993). See Kate Robertson, "The Spectre at the Window: Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* (1993)," *Senses of Cinema* 81 (2016): https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2016/beyond-the-babadook/tracey-moffatt-bedevil-1993/; Martin, 1999; Ronin Films, "beDevil: When the Unexplained Happens," Press Kit (1993), https://www.roninfilms.com.au/get/files/13490.pdf.

[97] Bruno Starrs, "Writing Indigenous Vampires: Aboriginal Gothic or Aboriginal Fantastic?." *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* 17, no. 4 (2014).

nevertheless have in common unique social functions related, in Christine Judith Nicholls' words, to "the maintenance of life: that of instilling into young and old alike a healthy respect and commensurate fear of the specific dangers, both environmental and psychic, in particular places."[98] Such tropes have crossed over into contemporary media in part with the purpose of bringing those indigenous traditions and experiences into the forefront, creating a "cultural matrix foreign to a European audience" that prominently features the myths and cultures of Aboriginal culture.[99] Horror in indigenous media, in this context, therefore becomes a new way of preserving such culture, while communicating it to new audiences.

Most importantly, however, horrific elements have been used in indigenous Australian media—the so-called Aboriginal Gothic, to be exact—as a reversal of both mainstream Eurocentric horror tropes and of otherwise hostile Australian media that, in years past, cast indigeneity squarely within the realm of horror. On one hand, as Gerry Turcotte offers in "Re-mastering the Ghosts: Mudrooroo and Gothic Reconfigurations," Aboriginal Gothic "hijacks" common horrific elements, like vampires and ghosts, and disfigures them "through satire, parody, and other forms of ritual dismemberment,"[100] consequently exposing and reconfiguring the structure of horror itself. On the other hand, indigenous horror and the Aboriginal Gothic serve the related, important function of repositioning monstrosity in traditional Australian fictions (and, the popular genre of

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[98] Christine Judith Nicholls, "'Dreamings' and place – Aboriginal monsters and their meanings," last modified April 29, 2014, https://theconversation.com/dreamings-and-place-aboriginal-monsters-and-their-meanings-25606.
[99] Starrs, 2014.
[100] Gary Turcotte, "Re-mastering the Ghosts: Mudrooroo and Gothic Refifigurations," University of Wollongong Faculty of Arts – Papers (Archives) 2003, 2.

the Australian Gothic) from the indigenous Other to the white colonizer. Australian fictions, whether in literature or on-screen, have had the notorious distinction of situating indigeneity across a harmful, for lack of a better term, representational spectrum.

One end of this spectrum, for scholars like Suneeti Rekhari, involves "filmic representations of […] Aboriginal characters who are 'figures of the imagination' and perceived as being distortions of actuality."[101] By this logic, indigenous bodies become unusual, relegated to the margins of mainstream society and understood "to be better off either assimilated completely or being destroyed."[102] The other end involves making indigeneity the site of horror, per McKee, whether portraying indigenous characters as "spiritual and anti-technological"[103] and therefore monstrously savage, or aligning the Australian outback with "grotesque or ghostly qualities"[104] ultimately grafted onto its indigenous inhabitants. For Bullimore, Australian media have often fallen into the trap of a "dense history of racist, distorted and offensive representation of Aboriginal people in Australia" rooted in the nation's colonial history.[105] Returning to Starrs, in horror media these stereotypes come to the forefront, painting portraits in which the indigenous body is

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[101] Suneeti Rekhari, "The 'Other' in Film: Exclusions of Aboriginal Identity from Australian Cinema," *Visual Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2008): 125.
[102] Rekhari, 126.
[103] McKee, 8.
[104] Gerry Turcotte, "Australian Gothic," University of Wollongong Faculty of Arts – Papers (Archives) 1998, 5.
[105] Bullimore, 73. According to Geoffrey Partington, despite the fact that abject behaviors like cannibalism were a part of Aboriginal "Dreamtime" stories (and, was altogether frowned upon in these communities), "colonists may have formed an exaggerated idea" of the extent of such behaviors, forming in part an image of the aggressive, indigenous Other that justified their colonization. Even "many progressive academics began to express fears that claims of Aboriginal cannibalism, true or false, caused distress to the Indigenous and strengthened white racism" (2008, 88). This arguably contributed to the image of indigeneity as monstrous, seen across Australian media.

ostensibly "sub-human, from a psychoanalytic point of view, [even symbolizing] the dark side of the British settler, but who, in the very act of his being subjugated, assures the white invader of his racial superiority, moral integrity and righteous identity."[106] In indigenous horror and the Aboriginal Gothic, horrific elements are used to show this dark side of the British settler, to "mis[use] the conventions of the Gothic to disorient and to make clear that the predatory monster—the Gothic terror—is white social policy,"[107] to borrow from Turcotte. In using mainstream tropes like ghosts and paranormal activity, indigenous horror films simultaneously accomplish several things; they allow "for the materialization of memories on the part of those Aboriginal Australians and Torres Straight Islanders who have suffered displacement" through past and contemporary colonization efforts, and they gesture "towards spectres produced by a violent encounter with colonialism that 'ghosted' Aboriginal peoples in real terms—either through exterminating practices, or in political processes such as *terra nullius* where it was argued that they had never quite existed."[108] Horror amplifies conditions of colonialism, underscoring the ways in which white colonizer is an insidious monster in indigenous life, but also lets those artists and creators announce that "I'm here" and "I exist" despite—and sometimes because of—the horrors pervading the everyday.

Moffatt's *beDevil* as such is an extension of indigenous horror, bringing such marginalized voices to the forefront while offering alternatives to the traditional

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[106] Starrs, 2014.
[107] Turcotte, 11.
[108] Corinn Columpar, "At the Limits of Visual Representation: Tracey Moffatt's Still and Moving Images," in *There She Goes: Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond*, eds. Corinn Columpar and Sophie Mayer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 154; Gary Turcotte, "Spectrality in Indigenous Women's Cinema: Tracey Moffatt and Beck Cole," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43, no. 1 (2008): 9.

dichotomy of indigenous/monster white/hero so common within the landscape of Australian (horror) media. It is clear in all three acts of the film that Moffatt, to quote Summerhayes, "accesses and reassesses past perceptions of social categories," thereby producing an "assault on racial and gender-based stereotypes" otherwise present in mainstream Australian media.[109] Moreover, in acts like "Mr. Chuck" and "Choo Choo Choo Choo," Moffatt takes up familiar horror tropes like ghosts and the supernatural—two elements rooted in the Gothic mode of storytelling—and reimagines them as part of the modern indigenous experience, a materialization of the latent traumas felt by Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders through colonization and assimilation efforts in the postcolonial context. In "Mr. Chuck," for instance, the literal specter of the deceased military man lives in the depths of the swamplands, arising from the floorboards of the movie theatre and aggressively snatching young Rick's legs.[110] It is clear throughout the act that Mr. Chuck poses an immediate, physical threat; his body is obscured with clouds of heavy smoke, his face caked in mud to the extent that his features are rendered into a harsh, grey blob, and he taunts the audience by spitting dirty water into the camera. For Rick and his siblings, Mr. Chuck is always there, always lingering around their dwelling and the movie theater (perhaps because of his death at the site several years prior) and, significantly, only haunts these indigenous children. Shelley and her family members, meanwhile, are detached from the Mr. Chuck hauntings and more broadly from the abuse

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[109] Summerhayes, 19.

[110] Rick is characterized as a trickster: in the act's opening, he is shown to prank his younger siblings by faking an attack from Mr. Chuck, and even in his old age, Rick laughs frequently and menacingly at his interviewers. Rick at first glance could be seen as an unreliable narrator-figure, but his stories are overall corroborated through the actual attacks he and his siblings encountered in the swampland.

that the children face both at home (from their parents) and in society (from the taunts and teases of white construction workers in the swampland). As an adult, Shelley recalls her friend Rick as casually (yet cautiously) as Rick recalls his encounters with Mr. Chuck—"I shouldn't say it, but I don't think his home life…" Shelley offers, her thoughts cut off by a slap of thunder[111]—yet the severity with which the indigenous children face such aggression is lost on Shelley, even in her old age. Shelley, like those white settlers in the swampland, carry on the legacy of colonization almost as a token of a simpler time; several black-and-white photos of her past life adorn the walls of her home, just as posters of old military films line the interior of the new movie theater, a novelty from Australia's not-so-distant past. In contrast, Rick in adulthood bears the scars of colonization and subsequently the hauntings of Mr. Chuck; his skin is covered in self-fashioned tattoos and bloody wounds and, occasionally, tattoos that attempt to mask his bloody wounds, like those on his forehead and ankles. Colonization and its socio-political remnants—like "state-mandated internment and adoption"[112]—are felt by Rick on a visceral level and, rather than being the distant memory of some bygone era, manifest themselves into the very real, and very threatening Mr. Chuck. Mr. Chuck ultimately represents "fears and themes which are endemic in the colonial experience: isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and fear of the unknown,"[113] an alternative site of fear from traditional, Australian Gothic texts.

"Choo Choo Choo Choo" uses the trope of the ghost to reconfigure Australian horror and indigeneity, albeit with a slightly more positive spin; the act itself is

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[111] Moffatt, 1993.
[112] Columpar, 156.
[113] Turcotte 1998, 1.

bookended by joyful singing, large swaths of extras gleefully miming the poem for the so-called "train story," and our Brisbane tour guide enthusiastically sharing odds and ends from the small town across several landmarks, like an antiques shop. Nevertheless, the remnants of a brutal, colonized past still linger for Ruby and her family, in a similar way to "Mr. Chuck." Ruby's family is haunted by two interrelated entities. The first, and most menacing, is the blind girl's ghost, who only visually appears in the act's closing shots but is omnipresent for the indigenous family at the heart of the story. "Man, she used to drive me crazy when she'd come!" the older Ruby recounts to the viewer, and certainly, Ruby and her family are driven to the brink of insanity at several points in the narrative. To quote Mimura,

> The young Ruby hears unusual sounds; glimpses of a wig of hair sliding off the porch; senses someone or something nearby as she pulls down the laundry. Behind her back, an arm swings teasingly around the corner. And Ruby also hears the invisible train periodically rushing by, flanked by the ghost […] killed on the tracks.[114]

For the modern-day citizens of the town, the blind girl's ghost signifies a horrifically fatal accident that, in a darkly humorous way, became their claim to fame, fostering a quaint tourism industry that inadvertently further colonizes and marginalizes indigenous peoples. For these indigenous peoples, however, the blind girl is a ghastly reminder of white colonization efforts and an unfortunate glimpse of an equally harmful postcolonial present. This leads to the second specter that terrorizes Ruby's family: the *Min Min lights*, or those unexplained natural phenomena that persistently follow the family in the dead of night. Originally an integral component of indigenous folklore, *Min Min lights* appeared increasingly after the settlement of white Europeans in the Australian

[114] Mimura, 120.

outback.[115] According to Dipanjana Mukherjee, the lights themselves have been believed to be "the spirits of their [Aboriginal Australians'] dead ancestors risen from their graves"[116] so that they can avenge the atrocities that settlers committed against their communities. In "Choo Choo Choo Choo," the *Min Min lights* certainly are a reminder to Ruby's family of Australia's colonized past, but also of the situation that they face decades later, in their day-to-day lives, as they live in relative squalor on the actual outskirts of the Brisbane town. Moreover, for the adult Ruby, memories of those *Min Min* lights transform "the magical years of her young adult years into the present-day, derelict site she revisits,"[117] another stark reminder of the institutionalized inequalities leveled against indigenous communities in a postcolonial Australia. The *Min Min*, as "unreconciled energies [that] disturb the peace,"[118] together with the ghost of the blind girl, advance Moffatt's subversion of traditional horror tropes as related to indigeneity, showing that true monstrosity, in fact, stems from the systemic disenfranchisement and eventual silencing of indigenous peoples across time.

Yet, Moffatt's approach to horror, and the horrors of colonization, is far more multi-faceted than at face value. This point is most evident in *beDevil*'s final act, "Lovin' the Spin I'm In." According to Cynthia Baron, "Lovin' the Spin I'm In," even more than "Mr. Chuck" and "Choo Choo Choo Choo," shows

> how the racial polarities at the heart of Australian protection policies, implicitly designed to eliminate Aboriginal people by assimilating them into white culture, open onto other damaging polarities: the lovers have died because their union

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[115] Dipanjana Mukherjee, "Min Min Light: The Elusive Phantom-Lights of the Australian Outbacks," last modified May 20, 2019, https://www.ststworld.com/min-min-light/.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Felicity Collins, "Disturbing the Peace: The Ghost in beDevil and The Darkside," *Critical Arts* 31, no. 5 (2017): 112.
[118] Ibid.

> transgressed tribal boundaries; the teenager who is sympathetic to the lovers' plight is shunned by other boys because he is Greek; the last remaining inhabitant of the warehouse haunted by the lovers' ghosts is a Frida Kahlo cross-dresser who has been ostracized because he has transgressed conventional gender boundaries.[119]

Certainly, as Baron as described here, "Spin" is significant for its radically different visual style (it eschews pseudo-documentary filmmaking in favor of something more heavily stylized and staged) and intersectional approach in representing race relations in modern-day Australia. Recalling Patricia Hill Collins in her seminal work on inequality and social reform, intersectionality refers broadly to "a particular way of understanding social location in terms of crisscross systems of oppression" according to "race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age."[120] Intersectionality, in Collins' discussion, therefore considers the multiple organizations of power that overlap to develop, enforce, and legitimize systems of oppression, and how these systems create "different kinds of lived experiences and social realities."[121] The key to intersectionality is subjectivity and plurality—no two individuals experience such oppression in the same way, and these experiences hinge upon the varied connections between race, class, and gender. While Collins' discussion of intersectionality reflects experiences of black femininity, it can be easily understood within other contexts—namely, the experiences of those characters in "Lovin' the Spin I'm In."

As Glen Masato Mimura offers, this final act "delivers both diverse social-cultural representations as well as a critique of multiculturalism"[122] which, in my assessment,

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[119] Cynthia Baron, "Films by Tracey Moffatt: Reclaiming First Australians' Rights, Celebrating Women's Rights," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1.5 (2002): 155.
[120] P.H. Collins, 7.
[121] P.H. Collins, 8.
[122] Mimura, 117.

aptly translates into a portrait of systemic, intersectional oppression in modern day Australia. Breaking from overly simplistic binaries like white/non-white, European/non-European, male/female, "Spin" presents characters that encompass multiple identities that have been leveraged against them within society at large. In addition, the hierarchies that otherwise separate the characters at the beginning of the act—Dimitri and his family at the top, Imelda in the middle, Bebe and Minnie at the bottom, Frida somewhere lingering beyond the margins entirely—collapse by its finale. They all have outsider identities, all subject to the whims of Australian developers who plan on demolishing the land for their own business endeavors. Even Dimitri and Spiro, who are white-passing[123] and yield a larger amount of power in the neighborhood, are still at the whims of big business, in the case of Dimitri, and at times hostile, taunting peers, in the case of Spiro. Moffatt in "Lovin' the Spin I'm In," in effect, "looks across and into the social boundaries that mark the 'differences' between cultures and other groupings of people that are distinguished by society,"[124] showing the intricacies and sometimes hypocrisies of Australian race relations.

Like "Mr. Chuck" and "Choo Choo Choo Choo," "Spin" utilizes horror tropes like ghosts and the supernatural to extend its critique of colonial and post-colonial Australian society; in "Spin," such horror tropes display what Collins describes as *matrices of domination*, or the "overall organization of power in society" that "has a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression"[125] that guide power

[123] Dimitri and family are Greek immigrants but are noticeably darker in skin tone than many of their contemporaries and do not have Eurocentric facial features. They therefore stick out, for lack of better terms, in the neighborhood and are overall racially ambiguous.
[124] Summerhayes, 23.
[125] P.H. Collins, 8.

dynamics across multiple identity categories. Much like intersectionality, matrices of domination cannot be reduced to one, singular identity category; they are found at the convergence of a host of identities, with no two individuals sharing the same experiences. (As Collins notes, "it would be one-dimensional to say that any one group is more oppressed than another.")[126] The ghosts at the heart of "Spin" are representative of broader race relations in modern Australia, a residue of restrictive policies such as assimilation and discrimination efforts towards indigenous Australians, as well as anti-immigration efforts prohibiting non-European immigration into the nation. Yet, the ways that these ghosts interact with their human counterparts vary widely, depending largely on social strata and gender.[127] For characters like Imelda, the ghosts of Bebe and Minnie are a reminder of several things: the exile that she and her indigenous family have repeatedly faced at the hands of white settlers, and a somewhat fond memory of the traditions and customs that have otherwise been left behind through displacement. The ghosts themselves are represented through the motif of red—whether bathed in red light, appearing in puffs of red smoke, or floating in the wind like a thin scarf through the

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[126] P.H. Collins, 10.

[127] See, amongst others, "Changing Policies Towards Aboriginal People," *Australian Law Reform Commission*, August 18, 2010, https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/recognition-of-aboriginal-customary-laws-alrc-report-31/3-aboriginal-societies-the-experience-of-contact/changing-policies-towards-aboriginal-people/; Calla Wahlquist, "Australian governments have failed Indigenous peoples, says Oxfam," "Australian governments have failed Indigenous peoples, says Oxfam," last modified April 11, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/apr/12/australian-governments-have-failed-indigenous-peoples-says-oxfam. While Australia has had a host of restrictive immigration laws dating back to the 1800s (as related to immigrants from Asia), the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 is of particular value here, as it "effectively stopped all non-European immigration into the country and that contributed to the development of a racially insulated white society." For more information, see "White Australia policy," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed October 15, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/event/White-Australia-Policy.

foliage of the "bush"—possibly signifying the indigenous blood spilled by white colonizers and/or the sacred indigenous color that "represents fire, energy and blood—'Djang,' a power found in places of importance to the Aborigines."[128] On the other hand, for characters like Dimitri and Spiro, the ghosts appear to suppress any type of upward mobility in the neighborhood; Bebe and Minnie's spirits foil Dimitri's plans to move forward with his business, severing his relationship with the rest of the developers. Towards the end of the act, Spiro, like his father, becomes trapped in the warehouse and forced to dance (perhaps into eternity) with the ghosts of the dead lovers. The ghosts, in Dimitri and Spiro's case, prevent them from fully assimilating into white, Australian society, securing their status as immigrants, and therefore as unbelonging to their chosen home. "Lovin' the Spin I'm In," like Collins' theory, "motivates us to look at just how [identities] are constructed at the expense of others,"[129] with its horror content serving the broader function of showing the continuing and multi-faceted ramifications of white settler colonialism in the Australian context.

Returning to Spivak, Bart Moore-Gilbert summarizes that the theorist's

> principal concern is the degree to which the (post)colonial subaltern, in particular, enjoys agency, an issue which she characteristically explores in terms of whether subalterns can speak for themselves, or whether they are condemned only to be

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[128] Nadia Phillips, "Aboriginal Culture | Sacred Colours," last modified November 21, 2017, https://www.aboriginalartuk.com/post/2017/11/21/aboriginal-culture-scared-colours#:~:text=The%20sacred%20Aboriginal%20colours%2C%20said,%2C%20Red%2C%20Yellow%20and%20White. One could make the case that "red" in this case is a clever play on the Redfern Park Speech of 1992, delivered by the then-Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, who made an official declaration of the nation's wrongdoing towards indigenous Australians. Conversely, "Redfern" also refers to an urban indigenous development at the heart of Sydney, which has often been described unfavorably as a black "ghetto." For more information, see W.S. Shaw, "Ways of Whiteness: Harlemising Sydney's Aboriginal Redfern," *Australian Geographical Studies* 38, no. 3 (2000): 291-305; F. Collins, 108.

[129] P.H. Collins, 10.

> known, represented, and spoken for in a distorted fashion by others […] The conclusion reached by "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is unequivocal; there is "no space" from which subalterns can "speak" and thus make their interests and experience known to others on their own terms.[130]

It is clear, however, that films made by, about, and for indigenous Australians—a tradition that brings to light the "perspectives, experiences, storytelling traditions, and thus 'core values' of the Indigenous characters at their center"[131]—prove Spivak's assumptions about sub-alterity incorrect. Indeed, films like Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* represent indigeneity on their own terms. They offer keen insight into the visual and aural traditions of these groups otherwise placed at the margins by white Australian society and, significantly, provide narrative, aesthetic, and thematic alternatives to mainstream, Western cinematic conventions that allow for such marginalized ways of understanding the world to come to the forefront. Audiences in general may not initially "get," so to speak, what Moffatt is doing in her magnum opus; as she says in an interview with Anna Rutherford, "I don't believe in having to talk down to [audiences]. I don't want to make my films simplistic, assuming that people can't understand them unless they are simple […] I think it is patronising to assume that people are not going to understand your work."[132] Yet, by taking such popularized horror conventions and repackaging them alongside multiple voices, multiple texts, and multiple stories, Moffatt is able to truly let the subaltern speak and let audiences hear and work to understand their voices in the process.

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[130] Bart Moore-Gilbert, "Spivak and Bhabha," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Hoboken: Wiley, 2000), 452.
[131] Corinn Columpar, *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film* (Carbondale: SIU Press, 2010), xii.
[132] Anna Rutherford, "Changing Images: An Interview with Tracey Moffatt," *Kunapipi* 10, no. 1 (1988): 154.

C. Horror and Bodily Agency in *Nocturne* (1998) by Peggy Ahwesh

"When I asked who the murderer might be, a voice told me that it was not you," recounts the main character at the heart of *Nocturne*, artist Peggy Ahwesh's 1998 experimental video short. "I repeated the sacred principles I'd given myself as a gift, established on the basis of my own errors. Anger makes me free to speak, and to speak is to make fiction."[133] A seminal figure in the "minor cinema" movement according to Tom Gunning,[134] Ahwesh has traversed a host of media forms, including film excerpts, found footage, video installations, and, in the case of pieces like *She Puppet* (2001), videogame play. Ahwesh has described her own work as "deeply subjective and responsive to specific stimuli, people and processes" and, for critics and audience alike, her films are valuable for their "visual disjunction, their narrative implication, and their nod to popular culture."[135] Indeed, Ahwesh as an artist is commendable for her acute knowledge of high and low culture; like Pitt and Moffatt before her (or, perhaps, at the same time as her),

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[133] Peggy Ahwesh, dir., *Nocturne*, filmed 1998, Vimeo, 28 mins., https://vimeo.com/user2889626. *Nocturne* is often credited as a collaboration with Margie Strosser.

[134] Gunning defines "minor cinema" as a form of avant-garde filmmaking that extends the project of "minor literature," a movement defined by Deleuze and Guattari as privileging the "deterritorialization of language," the "political element," and the "collective value" (Hwang 2011, n.p.). In film, this translates to "the end of the 'international style' in avant-garde film," a "cinema of restriction," and the "return to montage and the 'narrative' of images'" (Gunning 1989, 2-3). Gunning includes Ahwesh with a number of other experimental film and video artists who practice minor cinema: Nina Fonoroff, Peter Herwitz, Mark Lapore, Lewis Klahr, and Phil Solomon. In Tom Gunning, "Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Lapore, Klahr, and Solomon," *Motion Picture* 3, no. 1-2 (1989): 2-5.

[135] Jenelle Troxell, "Neither Day Nor Night: Peggy Ahwesh's Palestinian Essays," *Framework* 52, no. 1-2 (2017): 232; Vera Dika, "The Light of Day/The Heat of Night" Peggy Ahwesh at Times Square," *Millennium Film Journal* 62 (2015): 7.

she incorporates both familiar and obscure visual references, tongue firmly planted in cheek, to investigate how society shapes gender expectations, interpersonal relationships, and the role of the subject. And, like the fellow filmmakers discussed in this chapter, she pools from one specific source to do so: the horror genre. As this analysis will show, *Nocturne*, one of the director's most earnest engagements with the genre, uses visual and aural horrific elements to show how the gendered female body is socio-culturally constructed. Importantly, these horrific elements open up the possibility for women to reclaim corporeal agency, a feat otherwise absent in the very material that she's borrowing from in her film. The female body is presented in *Nocturne* as uninhibitedly able to move, touch, explore, desire, and yes, *kill*, navigating through, and eventually destroying, the intricate systems of power keep it in check. This section, after exploring Ahwesh's larger body (no pun intended) of work, analyzes how *Nocturne* assigns so-called "corporeal weight" to its female bodies on screen, through horrific elements and, to a lesser extent, the woman-as-animal metaphor.

Peggy Ahwesh is an artist who has been working in film and video that has earned a place within contemporary experimental film circles since the 1980s with the debut of works like *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1983),[136] *The Fragments Project* (1985-1995), and *Martina's Playhouse* (1989). Included amongst the productions of fellow

[136] *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* consists of *Verité Opera*, *Paranormal Intelligence*, and *Nostalgia for Paradise*. The title of the series matches Stan Brakhage's *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), which was perhaps inadvertent on the part of Ahwesh. As she remarks to Scott MacDonald, who brings up the similarities between the two projects, "Are his Pittsburgh films actually called 'The Pittsburgh Trilogy'? I'd forgotten that. Hmmm, I might have known that back then." In Scott MacDonald, "Peggy Ahwesh," *Millennium Film Journal* 39/40 (2003): 4.

feminist filmmakers like Su Friedrich, Abigail Child, and Leslie Thornton,[137] Ahwesh's work is noteworthy for its frequent interrogations of topics like subjectivity, gendered performance, cultural experience, and the role of women in home and family. Certainly, such ventures into feminism are deliberate on the part of the filmmaker, who has remarked both in artist's statements as well as interviews that she "came of age in the 1970s with feminism, punk and amateur Super 8 movie making."[138] "Feminism has evolved over the decades and I would say that I have practiced many feminisms in my life," Ahwesh offers to Hyemin Kim. "To put it in my own terms, without too much emphasis on the label, I would say I have always featured women's identity and agency in my films: A female perspective with performers that show the uncodified world of women and as a stand-in for my own experience."[139] What sets Ahwesh's work apart from her contemporaries, however, is her mixing of various filmic forms and styles. Commonly referred to as a *bricoleur*, Ahwesh according to Janelle Domek is noteworthy for her distinctive combination of "narrative and documentary styles, improvised performance, Super-8 film, found footage, digital animation, and Pixelvision video."[140] This type of experimental *bricolage*, aside from being visually striking, is effective because it places such feminist concerns in motion, pulling together a host of media

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[137] Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes, "Peggy Ahwesh dossier: Introduction," *Screen* 55, no. 4 (2014): 490.
[138] "Feminist Artist Statement," Brooklyn Museum, accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/peggy-ahwesh.
[139] Hyemin Kim, "Peggy Ahwesh: 'An Essay Film is the Doubt, Consideration, Sense of Falling and the Thinking Out Loud," last modified April 13, 2019, https://desistfilm.com/peggy-ahwesh-an-essay-film-is-the-doubt/.
[140] Janelle Domek, "Film Portal: Nocturne by Peggy Ahwesh," *Facets* (blog), October 20, 2015, https://facets.org/blog/exclusive/watch/film_portal/film-portal-nocturne-by-peggy-ahwesh/; "2002 New Works (Program Catalogue)," Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed October 1 2020, https://www.eai.org/supporting-documents/9/t.7097.35.

techniques and pop cultural references to investigate "cultural identity and the role of the subject."[141] Specifically, Ahwesh uses multi-media as a tool for interrogating "women and cultural experience,"[142] those normalized, otherwise taken-for-granted gendered expectations that are communicated through the images and sounds we regularly consume. By breaking apart the very media that shape power relations and gender norms, Ahwesh subsequently "stands against invisibility and media stereotypes,"[143] granting agency, and in films like *Nocturne*, physical autonomy, to those bodies at the margins of patriarchal society.

Alternating between crisp, black-and-white film with the aforementioned grainy Pixelvision,[144] *Nocturne* opens mid-scene on a rather gruesome sight: a woman, somewhere deep in the forest, is dragging the corpse of a nude man across the ground. As she struggles to move the body (played by Bradley Eros)—at times hunching on all fours and pushing it forwards—the scene abruptly comes to an end, cutting rapidly between scenes of nature like a flock of birds and a spider creating a web. "Beneath the beauty of nature's world there is one single and ugly truth," a narrator, presumably from a generic nature documentary, states over the image-track, "life must take life, in the

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[141] "Peggy Ahwesh," Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.eai.org/artists/peggy-ahwesh/biography.
[142] Domek, 2015.
[143] Troxell, 228.
[144] *Nocturne* was shot on both film and Pixelvision, a short-lived video recording technology "conceived specifically for children," where around ten minutes of footage could be recorded "directly onto a standard audio cassette." While a relative failure on the commercial market, Pixelvision would prove to be popular amongst experimental film circles, given its "distinctive—grainy, spectral, colorless—textures." The Pixelvision sequences in *Nocturne* can be easily identified, as they have a different aspect ratio, and a much different image texture, than the scenes shot on film. See "Flat Is Beautiful: The Strange Case of Pixelvision," *Film At Lincoln Center*, accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.filmlinc.org/series/flat-beautiful-strange-case-pixelvision/.

interest of life itself. It is a mistake of arrogance to equate size with significance, for the less visible one's enemy, the more powerful his threat."[145] Intercutting between several, otherwise mundane shots—phone lines, electrical transmitters, a parrot squawking—the film then focuses on our protagonist (played by Anne Kugler), the same woman seen repeatedly dragging the male corpse. "I came to know that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference," the woman recalls in voice-over while she is attacked by her lover, who is suggested to be the corpse from earlier in the film, "and that the only true opposite of fantasy is pain. But I am certain that no one can be more human than *me*. No one can be more human than *this*."[146]

Combining eerie, layered sounds with footage shot in reverse and insects scampering across the floor, *Nocturne* then continues with its most frightful sequence, showing the protagonist walking aimlessly through her home, almost retracing her steps that night for the audience. As she floats across the "long, dark corridor" of her home, the woman flails around almost helplessly, her nightgown billowing in the wind and her limbs caressing the dimly lit walls of the hallway. Day breaks, and the next morning the woman walks through a field of tall grass, picking flowers peacefully, as if the events from the night prior had not happened. The woman arrives at her friend's home (Karen Sullivan) who, while complimenting the flowers, begins a lengthy diatribe on "Medieval heresy," the basis of a project she's been working on extensively. Speaking of the Cathars, who were a religious sect in constant conflict with the Catholic Church, her friend explains how they believed that "the world was created by the devil," going into

[145] Ahwesh, *Nocturne*.
[146] Ibid.

detail on their religious beliefs, social structure, and rituals and traditions. Ever so casually—while arranging the flowers in a vase and cutting fruits—her friend details the Cathars' eventual massacre; they were "burned at the stake" for their alternative belief system. Our protagonist, listening intently, accidentally slices her thumb while cutting an apple; she sucks the blood from her finger, while her friend in the background discusses the Cathar's "strange sexual practices."[147]

"I got this gift for you," the friend gleefully announces, sliding an elaborately decorated giftbox towards the protagonist's hand. Inside is an equally ornate dagger, one that looks "dangerous," according to our lead character. Later that evening, she envisions being attacked by her lover, who ruthlessly chases and whips her throughout her home. Blending sex with violence, our lead has memories of being beaten, which shift to memories of passionately kissing her abuser. Caressing his naked body as he sleeps, she explains in voice over:

> He seeped into my body like a beautiful toxin. It was your strangeness, your irony, that so captivated me. Who knows what cruelties and deceptions you nurtured just for me. Who knows with what subtle poisons you nourished my blood. The proof that you are real, and not just my fantasy, is that when the time came, you simply weren't there for me. I secretly always knew that you would escape me in the end. And so I tried to make your betrayal mine.[148]

With the very weapon that was gifted by her friend, our lead stabs and kills her lover/abuser, slashing his throat on her bed, the location of many evening attacks. Someone knocks at her door; it turns out to be the friend, worriedly asking, "Are you afraid to die?" to which our lead responds in the negative—"No, should I be?" "Girls are like caterpillars," her friend announces, "to be butterflies when the summer comes, but

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.

now, they are grubs and larvae. Don't you see? Each with their peculiar propensities, necessities, and structure."[149] Our protagonist stares off, her visage intercut with footage of the same grubs and larvae that have said propensities and necessities that turn into butterflies. *Nocturne* concludes with our lead dragging and placing her lover's corpse into a shallow grave, shoving dirt haphazardly onto his nude body. Flashbacks show her stabbing not the lover's body, but her *own* body; walking through the grassy field, she picks a bouquet of flowers, and walks slowly off into the distance.

Described by Ahwesh herself as a "a psychological horror film built on the conflicts of a woman tortured by the ambiguity between reality and illusion, dream and desire,"[150] *Nocturne* has been praised by critics for its use of horrific elements, namely, in its use of surreal editing effects and layered soundscapes that produce an eerie atmosphere. Fred Camper, calling the film "a grotesque spoof of horror films," applauds Ahwesh for her ability to intertwine "past and present, reality and fantasy; she also mixes full frame footage with smaller, fuzzier frames […] The images seeming to deteriorate like the lover's corpse."[151] Despite calling her work "volatile and overstuffed," JB Mabe affirms that Ahwesh's film "is a blunt and brutish horror story […] with some shards of rhetoric about nature, flesh, murder, mortality, and desire, then a haunting return."[152] Moreover, Leo Goldsmith, of the contemporary blog *Not Coming to a Theater Near You*,

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[149] Ibid.
[150] "Peggy Ahwesh."
[151] Fred Camper, "Dark Shadows: Recent Avant-Garde Films," last modified January 28, 1999, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/dark-shadows-recent-avant-garde-film/Content?oid=898274.
[152] JB Mabe, "Additional Online Recommendations: Films and Videos by Peggy Ahwesh (Experimental)," last modified 2020, https://www.cinefile.info/cine-list/2020/05/29/060420?rq=Nocturne.

describes in length the film's effective use of horrific effects, noting that, "rather than simply seeming campy, the lo-fi horror stylings of Ahwesh's film add to an uncertainty about what we're seeing, even if (as Ahwesh claims) the plot is not especially convoluted." He continues:

> Pastiche is one of the principal weapons in Ahwesh's filmmaking arsenal, and *Nocturne* deepens its spectator's disorientation through a heterogenous soundtrack that expressively mixes language and sound effects […] *Nocturne* is a psychodrama of co-dependency and guilt, and in many ways this use of pastiche as the film's structuring element engages in a similar psychic struggle as that of the protagonist […] It is an internalization of the language and imagery of horror as much as it is a reaction to it, and in this way it both murders and is haunted by its influences.[153]

Indeed, Ahwesh's use of pastiche is a deliberate one; she has remarked that she makes "pastiche of many things" in a similar way to underground video artists like Jack Smith.[154] In *Nocturne*, the use of pastiche is a broader reflection of Ahwesh's fascination with, and work in, the genre of horror.[155] In an interview with Scott MacDonald for *Millennium Film Journal*, Ahwesh asserts "I *love* violent horror movies." She explains further:

> I love the excessiveness of them. I don't want to be violated literally—but I like excessiveness, completely over-the-top-ness, of the game and all my deadman movies [*The Deadman* trilogy, beginning in 1990] are horror movies. I like the

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[153] Leo Goldsmith, "Nocturne," last modified October 23, 2009, http://w.notcoming.com/reviews/nocturne/.

[154] "If I had to pick an experimental filmmaker whose philosophical method I borrow, it would be Jack Smith, although he's one of the most *irritating* performers and filmmakers I've ever known. Just unbelievable." In MacDonald, 8-9.

[155] In 2015, Ahwesh's work was included with Cecelia Condit's in "TerrorVision: Spine-Tingling Signals from the EAI Vault," a film program highlighting experimental horror. The program also featured the videos of Cynthia Maughan, Michael Smith, Takeshi Murata, Tony Oursler, and George Kuchar. This goes to show that Ahwesh has (rightfully) secured her place within the horror canon, as well as avant-garde film/video circles. For more information, see "TerrorVision: Spine-Tingling Signals from the EAI Vault," Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed October 10, 2020, http://www.eai.org/supporting-documents/904/a.5768.35.

> Italian 70s horror movies especially. In terms of my fantasy life, I find horror films very liberating. I'm into preserving the distance between my real life and the movies, both when I go to the movies and when I make them.[156]

Speaking with Hyemin Kim for *desistfilm.com*, Ahwesh clarifies her admiration towards the genre, asserting that, although she is against literal violence towards women, she gravitates towards the "experience of the hyper-real, fantastical and often absurd scariness and volatility in the movies […] the over-the-top extreme that gets the heart racing."[157] In addition to her personal love of horror, Ahwesh began her career in film and video with one of the masters of horror, fellow Pittsburgh native George A. Romero. Ahwesh, while working as a programmer for Andy Warhol's famed art venue, the Mattress Factory, developed a friendship with the horror director, whose work she would screen during the gallery's weekly film series.[158] Such kinship transformed into a working relationship, and, in the early 1980s, Ahwesh had a brief apprenticeship with the director in productions like 1982's *Creepshow*.[159] "For me, he's an important model for how to make independent personal films," Ahwesh recalls with Scott MacDonald. "I liked that he was a genre filmmaker and able to penetrate the popular psyche in a really profound way. I liked that he's a populist […] Working with George was really fun."[160]

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[156] MacDonald, 23.
[157] H. Kim, 2019.
[158] Hyunjee Nicole Kim, "'I keep you out of male fantasy:' Peggy Ahwesh and *The Deadman*," *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism* 5, no. 3 (2017): http://cleojournal.com/2017/12/19/keep-male-fantasy-peggy-ahwesh-deadman/.
[159] Gorfinkel and Rhodes, 490; H.N. Kim, 2017.
[160] MacDonald, 3. During her stint with Romero, Ahwesh reportedly also forged a relationship with another horror icon, Stephen King. According to John David Rhodes, on the set of *Creepshow* Ahwesh "recalls that she was 'assigned to entertain Stephen King's son and played 'Dungeons and Dragons' with him." In John David Rhodes, "Great Directors: Peggy Ahwesh," *Senses of Cinema* 29 (2003): https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/ahwesh/.

The impact of Romero's work, as well as of the horror films she adored, is twofold. On one hand, across her video work, Ahwesh engages with what Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes describe as "the tropes, themes and generic conventions of low genres and B-movies, commingling their ecstatic pleasures with confrontations with philosophy and discourses of subjectivity and ideology."[161] Having an almost encyclopedic knowledge of horror, B-movie, and popular culture tropes affords Ahwesh the ability to penetrate the very systems of knowledge production that are prevalent in these media, exposing their (oftentimes flimsy) ideological underpinnings in the process. On the other hand, Ahwesh, like Romero, takes on topics related to social class, gender, and, later in her career, race which, when presented through the lens of horror, "proposes cautionary, counteractive thoughts on contemporary human […] conditions" as well as embracing "questions on the vast atrocity of the othered lives across discursive and geographic boundaries," to quote Hyemin Kim.[162] In other words, Ahwesh uses horror to amplify the ever evolving and at times fraught power dynamics between "us" and "them," "familiar" and "Other" that are prevalent across societies, and by using a mix multiple different styles of horror (like the slasher, psychological horror, and the paranormal/ghost story), her films reveal the complex web of power that is applicable to a number of geographic, historical, and cultural contexts. The Othered body is one that is constructed over time, and across several ideological categories, and Ahwesh through her horror pastiche ultimately explores the nuances that these relationships hold.

[161] Gorfinkel and Rhodes, 491.
[162] H. Kim, 2019.

Two of Ahwesh's prior video experiments—*The Deadman* in 1989, and *The Scary Movie* in 1993—are exemplary of this use of horror pastiche to critique the cultural conventions pervading everyday life. *The Deadman*, a collaboration with Keith Sanborn that charts the "adventures of a nearly naked heroine who leaves the corpse of her dead lover in a country house," features the grotesque and surrealist prose of Georges Bataille with graphic, un-simulated sex, silent-era styled intertitles, popular music (namely, The Kinks' song "Sunny Afternoon"), and irreverent sound effects.[163] While not explicitly in the mainstream horror genre, Ahwesh in *The Deadman* combines her vast visual and aural vocabulary with her equally vast horror vocabulary—decaying bodies, ghostly presences, bodily fluids, and sexual violence are strewn across the narrative—in order to articulate a form of female desire that is otherwise deemed too transgressive for mainstream media. Hyunjee Nicole Kim notes that this materialization of abject desire effectively "fashions a cocoon from the void," that is, creating a "generative space […] for new explorations of [pleasure] and assertiveness in proportions so considerable they appear almost intoxicating; presented is a poignant mobilization of traditional images and notions of femininity disrupted by the grotesque and an ethos of reckless abandon."[164] I would take this one step further, arguing that the graphic content in the film opens up the possibility for a reclaiming of sexual agency and, more broadly, bodily agency, with

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[163] Quoted in "Catalogue: Nocturne 1998," *Film-Makers Coop*. Accessed November 12, 2020, https://film-makerscoop.com/catalogue/peggy-ahwesh-nocturne; H.N. Kim, 2017. *The Deadman* is based off of the short story *Le Mort* (1967); together with *Nocturne* and *The Color of Love* (1994), which have equally grotesque source material (the former from a review of Mario Bava's film *The Whip and the Body*, and the latter from pornographic film prints), the film belongs to what Elena Gorfinkel terms the "deadman" trilogy. In Elena Gorfinkel, "Corpse, corpus, contingency: Peggy Ahwesh's 'deadman' trilogy," *Screen* 55, no. 4 (2014): 514-521.
[164] H.N. Kim, 2017.

horrific elements a primary (albeit, grossly exaggerated) way in which the female protagonist can break free from the norms of what a woman can and should do within patriarchal society at large.

The Scary Movie, while a bit tamer in subject matter, amplifies such horrific elements touched upon in *The Deadman*, with two young girls around the age of seven or eight interacting freely in a world that is almost exclusively constructed with horror tropes. Spooky sound effects and music similar to Bernard Herrmann's shrieking-violin *Psycho* score swell in *The Scary Movie*'s soundtrack, while the girls featured in the film wear Halloween costumes, their hands adorned with plastic, witch-like fingertips. The girls are shown in complete, reckless abandon, stomping on objects around the room and tinkering with musical instruments. The film itself lacks any coherent narrative—as if Ahwesh is simply filming the girls spontaneously on their playdate—but the arguable centerpiece of the film is the girl's physical examination of one another. Using real medical tools, alongside their clawed fingers and other toys, the girls inspect one another's bodies, measuring each other's heads, stroking their backs and arms with claws, and listening to their pulses with a doctor's stethoscope. As the girls explore one another's bodies, the horror sound-effects grow even louder, almost as if they are coming from within their bodies. Yet, the girls are not startled by their discoveries, instead acting content with their findings. Moreover, this type of discovery is not wholly innocent; they know what they are doing, and even look directly into the camera so as to reassure the audience that they are fully in control. Like *The Deadman*, *The Scary Movie* presents an environment where women (in this case, very young girls) maintain bodily agency; rather than being portrayed as monstrous or abject, as suggested by the scary rumblings in their

bodies, the girls' knowledge of and control over their bodies is shown as empowering. *The Scary Movie* is also novel for the ways in which bodily relations, and norms surrounding the body, are constructed. In Ahwesh's film, such expectations are presented at an early age, as familiar to young folks as the spooky objects that they so freely gravitate towards in their playdate. These expectations, as communicated in *The Scary Movie*, can be broken through rebellion and bodily expression.

The Deadman and *The Scary Movie* clearly maintain what Vera Dika describes as "a notable investment in the human body." In *Nocturne*, Anne Balsamo argues that such fascination with corporeality is taken to the extreme, confronting us "with the clash of the interior against the exterior, the past inside the present"[165] in the gendered, female body. Such an investigation of the ways in which the gendered body is situated in society is an extension of the project of many feminist scholars and feminist film- and video-makers. Balsamo offers further that feminist thinking has been largely preoccupied with issues related to the body and "taking the body seriously in terms of its gender, race, ethnicity, physical abilities, class position, and enacted corporeality."[166] For Balsamo, the most impactful feminism lies in an interrogation of "how the body is culturally constructed and not 'naturally' given." By this logic, feminist perspectives move beyond essentialist thinking, asking "the more interesting question, not what *is* the female body? but *how* is the body female?—i.e., that how is the body gendered through social, technological, and cultural relations."[167] This strain of feminist thinking involves an in-depth exploration of

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[165] Dika, 7.
[166] Anne Balsamo, "Feminism and Cultural Studies," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 24, no. 1 (1991): 64.
[167] Balsamo, 64-65.

the politics of representation: namely, how multiple texts can come together to form "a broader network of discourses on gender"[168] and the gendered female body, how these texts are representative of their conditions of production, and how representational strategies inherent to these texts normalize bodily conventions for the reader or viewer.

This line of feminist inquiry sheds light on "how society and text are interlinked, plaited together with one another."[169] The practical implications of such theoretical claims are two-fold. Firstly, as Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price conclude, the "body, then, has become the site of intense inquiry, not in the hope of recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgement of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment."[170] In other words, the body, rather than being one singular entity frozen in space and time, is instead complex and ever evolving, affording creators the ability to explore "identity in its formation, identity in its consolidation, and in its contestation and fragmentation," to borrow again from Juhasz.[171] Therefore, to quote Shildrick and Price, this dynamism ascribes "agency and transformativity to organisms/bodies works against the social devaluation of the body and its interior that contributes to women's (and others') oppressions."[172] Secondly, in Balsamo's words, a preoccupation with specific cultural conditions of production lends itself to an even deeper preoccupation with subjectivity and of the ways that "cultural

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[168] Balsamo, 56.
[169] Fanny Ambjörnsson and Hillevi Ganetz, "Introduction: Feminist Cultural Studies," *Culture Unbound* 5, no. 2 (2013): 128.
[170] Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, "Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 12.
[171] Juhasz, 6.
[172] Shildrick and Price, 47.

narratives get 'taken up' in the construction of the 'self.'"[173] For feminist filmmakers, this involves a number of techniques that embrace subjectivity, whether that means taking up a documentary strategy, filming their own biographical experiences using a first-person perspective, or exposing the "gender-based pleasures of voyeurism, pleasure, and sadism."[174] Like a number of film and video artists, some of whom were her contemporaries—Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, Sally Potter, the aforementioned Friedrich, Child, and Thornton, to name a few—Ahwesh approaches feminist filmmaking by seizing "on the performing body of her actors and collaborators in intimately staged dramas of confession, (re)enactment and generic conventions of excess."[175] In Ahwesh's terms, she captures her subjects as they are "performing themselves, like in [Andy] Warhol movies—with that kind of self-awareness […] It's this other kind of experimental space of self."[176] This type of uninhibited, free performance is prevalent in *Nocturne*, where our protagonist violently flails about, contorts her limbs in bizarre ways, and floats from room to room in an eerie, ghost-like manner. The protagonist's performance is further enhanced by the film's nonlinear narrative structure; since it is unclear whether events are occurring in the present or in flashback, her performance is free from temporal constraints, occurring spontaneously and as if they are happening at multiple points in time. By resisting the impulse to intervene "too extensively in her subjects' 'presentations' of themselves to her camera," Ahwesh grants her subject "corporeal weight," that is, a strongly physical and psychological presence

[173] Balsamo, 56, 60.
[174] Juhasz, 23.
[175] Gorfinkel and Rhodes, 491.
[176] Troxell, 252.

that invites the viewer to "engage reflexively" with the bod(ies) that they see on screen.[177] Consequently, *Nocturne* participates in an "enriched understanding of the relations of different media to the contingencies of reality, a reality that itself is subject to multiple levels of construction"[178] and, aligning with feminist filmmaking practice, actively prioritizes the female body, thereby reclaiming bodily agency.

Ivone Margulies in her discussion of film and the body argues that one way in which the cinematic medium fosters corporeal weight is by representing those "events that most stubbornly resist the notion of duplication because of their close association with the carnality of the body and decay, to represent realities such as possession ritual, animal sacrifice, torture, or physical disability."[179] By this logic, corporeal weight can best be achieved in many cases through those events that have "actual effects on reality and in particular the reality of profilmic bodies."[180] The horror genre, despite its celebration of visual and visceral excess, appears to strongly carry this tradition, serving as a "constant reminder of the actor's body, of its literalness."[181] While mainstream horror possesses "phallic imperialism and authoritative narrative structures"[182] that work to undermine female bodily autonomy (and, to a lesser extent, reduce a film's corporeal weight), we can look to those underground horror experiments to flip the script, so to

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[177] Elinor Cleghorn, "Technical revelations and material encounters: female corporeality in the work of Peggy Ahwesh," *Screen* 55, no. 4 (2014): 504.
[178] Ivone Margulies, "Bodies Too Much," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.
[179] Margulies, 1.
[180] Margulies, 1-2.
[181] Margulies, 18.
[182] Cleghorn, 504; William C. Wees, "Peggy's Playhouse: Contesting the Modernist Paradigm," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blatez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 291.

speak, by reconceptualizing such tropes that otherwise bind the female body within restrictive systems of societal power.

Such is the case of *Nocturne*, which "promiscuously" engages with and adapts horror texts to expose the genre's overall flimsy set of representational conventions and unmoor "the female subject from objectifying or disempowering genre prescriptions."[183] This reclamation of female bodily agency is established immediately from the film's opening sequence; our protagonist carelessly rolls her lover's corpse to a makeshift grave, his body nude and all the more vulnerable to the harsh elements of the outside world. Despite lacking control over her own body somewhat—mainly through her lover's ghostly presence in her home—she immediately regains it through acts of physical violence, strangling, stabbing, and slicing her lover, a blatant reversal of the slasher trope at the heart of the horror genre. By the end of the film, death becomes the vehicle for which the protagonist can once and for all free herself from the constraints of her abusive lover, disposing of his body to remove the physical traces of his power over her and, in a gruesome display, stabbing her own body to remove the mental and emotional remains of this power. To borrow from Domek, the protagonist kills not for the "sake of death and destruction" but for emotional liberation; she is eventually freed from "the boundaries of human existence,"[184] once and for all regaining agency in the process.

As its title suggests, *Nocturne* centers on those entities that lurk in the night; as explained above, they include the memories of the protagonist's lover that haunt her,

[183] Gorfinkel and Rhodes, 491; Cleghorn, 504.
[184] Domek, 2015.

mentally and physically, during the evening hours. However, the film also focuses on literal, nocturnal creatures, as well as those creepy-crawlies that thrive in the darkness—bats, spiders, worms, grubs, and other creatures, featured in grotesque detail in the film's cutaways. Domek offers that this natural imagery is a metaphor for the feelings of "survival and instinct"[185] that the protagonist feels throughout the narrative, and that her violent actions are therefore normalized as a natural and necessary means for staying alive. I would take this assessment even further; after all, as Donna J. Haraway argues, "Human and nonhuman, *all* entities take shape in encounters, in practices […] Many of these nonhuman partners and actors are not very natural, and certainly not original."[186] While Haraway places the nonhuman within the context of technology and technoscience, this observation can certainly apply to other areas; all creatures, regardless of species, exist within a complex system of relations that are "distributed and knotted together,"[187] with behaviors not merely existing as spontaneous or outside of one another but instead weaving together. Haraway reminds us that "what counts as human and as nonhuman is not given by definition, but only by relation, by engagement in situated, worldly encounters, where boundaries take shape and categories sediment."[188] Subsequently, static categories between human, animal, and nonhuman become dynamic, defined by and through one another's relationships in nature.

In juxtaposing human and animal/insect, *Nocturne* takes up Haraway's view of nature; there's no distinction between our protagonist and the bats and bugs with which

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[185] Ibid.
[186] Author's emphasis; Donna J. Haraway, "A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies," *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (1994), 65.
[187] Haraway, 70.
[188] Haraway, 64.

she is compared, transforming into a creature lying at the interstices between the two species. In other hands, this characterization would enter monstrous territories; yet, through Ahwesh's lens, this main character is empowered through her abjection, a symbol of "strength and longevity"[189] in the face of a threatening male presence, who turns out to be the real monster of the film. Furthermore, our protagonist, rather than merely acting instinctually, is navigating through an intricate web—akin to a spider's web—of social, cultural, and historical conditions that have placed her, and the gendered female body, into subordination. *Nocturne* borrows from a wide range of controversial, peculiar, and generally taboo source material: "Sheridan LeFanu's gothic quasi-lesbian vampire novel *Carmilla* […] the Marquis de Sade's dialogue on carnal pleasure, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*; readings about the medieval Cathari religious sect and the 'strange sexual practices they used for natural contraception,'" and so forth.[190] The protagonist, then, exists within a broader system where any unusual or non-heteronormative behavior is Othered; by killing her lover, she is attempting to break free from this vicious cycle and bring attention to those "silly and controvertible" conventions[191] that guide our everyday life. As her friend matter-of-factly reads in the film's conclusion, "Must a diviner part of mankind be kept in chains by the other? Ah, break those bonds, nature wills it!"[192] Indeed, through the act of murder, *Nocturne*'s protagonist breaks from her romantic and societal bonds, quite literally walking freely in the film's conclusion.

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[189] Domek, 2015.
[190] Goldsmith, 2009.
[191] Cleghorn, 504.
[192] Ahwesh, *Nocturne*. Taken from de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795).

"I think you have resistance to my work," Ahwesh remarks in her interview with Scott MacDonald,

> Perhaps you simply don't like it. Is it possible that the problem is that it's *so much* a female point of view—which includes that openness? There are people who don't like [my films] because there's no explicit authority telling them how to think about the images or structuring the material in a way that reduces it to formality. I *refuse* to do both those things. I just refuse.[193]

Across Peggy Ahwesh's work, this female point of view and its openness to interpretation are certainly at the forefront, with *Martina's Playhouse* (1989), *The Star Eaters* (2003), and *The Third Body* (2007) amongst the films taking traditionally female-gendered themes[194] and multiple different types of feminism to posit thought-provoking questions about how gender is positioned in society. Ahwesh's work is open to the spirit of interpretation; the artist herself states that she likes it "when a work involves the viewer in some kind of dilemma about how to read its meaning. I don't do it as a punishment, but it's a very exciting, ethical and philosophical place for me. My work is not supposed to be comfort food."[195] *Nocturne* is anything but comfort food, juxtaposing the female image with abject images of dirt and death, with sounds of screeching, incoherent babbling, and overall anguish. Yet, through this horror, *Nocturne* offers the possibility for agency and autonomy, a reversal of the symbols inherent to the genre specifically and to popular media broadly. The gendered female body is "free to speak," to once again quote *Nocturne*'s protagonist, and Ahwesh leaves it up to the audience to hear these messages removed from the filter of patriarchal society.

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[193] MacDonald, 12-13.
[194] "Peggy Ahwesh."
[195] MacDonald 2003, 17.

D. Conclusion

Much like the films discussed in Chapter III, the main works discussed here—*Asparagus*, *BeDevil*, and *Nocturne*—are aesthetically, geographically, and temporally distinct from one another. *Asparagus*, the most surreal of the bunch, uses experimental animation techniques to tell a tale of creativity and liberation. *BeDevil*, taking place throughout Australia in the early 1990s, positions marginalized, indigenous voices at the forefront, combining storytelling traditions with traditional horror iconography in a way that had never been seen before in the Australian film industry. *Nocturne* flips the traditional ghost story on its head, borrowing from underground filmmaking techniques and feminist theory to conceptualize trauma, nightmares, and bodily autonomy.

Comparing Pitt, Moffatt, and Ahwesh's films may appear, at first glance, like a difficult task. After all, they are films distinctly of their place and time: *Asparagus* features the bustling metropolitan landscape of urban America in the late-1970s; *beDevil* moves back and forth between the Australian outback and its newly gentrified neighborhoods in the early 1990s; and *Nocturne*, made in the mid-1990s, is set somewhere at home in rural America. However, three significant factors connect the films, cementing their status in the larger canon of women-made horror. First and foremost, the films discussed in this chapter are all uniquely experimental, taking on visual styles and, importantly, thematic content that are otherwise neglected in mainstream, Hollywood filmmaking. Borrowing from artistic movements like surrealism, expanded cinema, underground film, and the like, the films discussed in this chapter break from traditional aesthetic and representational norms, and, as a result, they offer fresh perspectives on horror.

Secondly, Pitt, Moffatt, and Ahwesh's works are arguably autobiographic or, at the very least, quasi-autobiographical. The films in question take on topics that are near and dear to their respective directors and oftentimes deal with traumatic events. By presenting first-hand accounts of events that have happened to them, or to loved ones, or even to those who occupy the same social-cultural space, these filmmakers are able to place their voices at the forefront, which is one of the main aims of feminist filmmaking practice in particular. Moreover, through these first-hand accounts of traumatic events, they are able to work through the multiple layers of trauma that they faced in their personal lives, with the films therefore acting as agents of healing.

Lastly, and most importantly, the three films discussed in this chapter deal with the horrors of the everyday and the ways in which societal norms have constricted and further marginalized those gendered, sexual, and racial Others. One of the primary ways in which society has done this constriction/marginalization, as these films have shown, is by limiting bodily autonomy, whether through colonization and gentrification, like in *beDevil*, or confining women to the domestic sphere, as in *Asparagus* and *Nocturne*. The three films show the potential for gendered/racial others to gain control of their bodies and move across space and time, breaking free from the physical and figurative shackles imposed on them by mainstream, patriarchal society. Furthermore, the films expose the taken-for-granted conventions in popular media that perpetuate these restrictive societal norms, exposing their flimsiness and ultimate harmfulness in the process.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

"I got really *confused*," recalls Alison Peirse during her virtual book launch for *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre,*

> I saw the poster for *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, and I was absolutely just *blown* away, but I was like, I need to know what this film is! I need to know all about this film, this film has to be mine! […] I'm really, really interested that a woman's made this, but I don't know how to frame it, you know, if I wanted to write about this, I'm not really sure what to do, and so I just carried on, I didn't do anything at the time, and I kept just watching over the next few years, so sort of 2014 to 2017, more and more films coming out, *feature films*, made by women […]. This is the golden age of women-directed horror, this is the new wave, and I'm like, I want to engage with this, but I don't have a framework! I don't know what to *do* with it! That's when I thought, there's nothing written academically that really helps me understand how I might historicize and contextualize and analyze the work, there's like, there's *literally*, there's nothing out there! *No one* has written about this academically.[1]

Women creators, as Peirse and moderator Laura Mee so aptly describe in their discussion of this 2020 book, tend to be largely "hidden or excluded" from the horror canon, partially from a tradition of film scholarship to privilege films made by men, and partially from the tendency to favor the director instead of producers, writers, editors, and

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[1] "BOOK LAUNCH: Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre - Alison Peirse," Youtube, October 12, 2020, Video, 1:27:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU-LiYa6Vx8. The description of *Women Make Horror* on the publisher's website makes this frustration abundantly clear, beginning with an uncredited quote that women "were never out there making horror films, that's why they are not written about—you can't include what doesn't exist." The book's description then counters this sentiment: "This is what you get when you are a woman working in horror, whether as a writer, academic, festival programmer, or filmmaker. These assumptions are based on decades of flawed scholarly, critical, and industrial thinking about the genre. *Women Make Horror* sets right these misconceptions. Women have always made horror." See "About this Book," Rutgers University Press, accessed March 1, 2021, https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/women-make-horror/9781978805118.

other roles, which were largely adopted by women.[2] Peirse, as so many other women in the field, therefore made an executive decision: "I'm just going to have to get on and do it *myself*." [3]

So begins the movement in horror scholarship that includes those voices who are understudied, underrepresented, and therefore "hidden" (to use Mee's term): those women behind the camera in various capacities. Peirse and her *Women Make Horror* contributors are just a small part of the growing number of researchers in the field of film studies to tackle the topic of female horror directors; for instance, the aforementioned *Bloody Women!* volume, co-edited by McCollum and Clarke, focuses on international contributions to the genre, looking at those creators at the "cutting edge," no pun intended, of horror filmmaking. Sonia Lupher, who lent her expertise to *Women Make Horror*, has developed an online compendium of female horror filmmaking, called *cutthroatwomen.com*. Described as "an edited database of women working in horror film production around the world,"[4] Lupher's site offers a mix of encyclopedic entries on women in all aspects of horror production, not just directing, as well as reviews of films and interviews with women actively working in the industry. *Cutthroatwomen.com*, like the edited volumes from Peirse, McCollum, and Clarke, have achieved the impressive

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[2] One important example of women working in horror beyond the director's chair is British film producer Aida Young. Working with UK's Hammer films, she oversaw the production of horror cult favorites like *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968), *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970), *Scars of Dracula* (1970), and *Hands of the Ripper* (1971), the latter of which chronicles Jack the Ripper's daughter (and her murderous rampages). Special thanks to Marty Norden for suggesting Young's films.

[3] According to Peirse, "Part of the canon formation comes from the choices made by the first wave of kind of horror scholars." In "BOOK LAUNCH: Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre - Alison Peirse."

[4] "About Cut-Throat Women," Cutthroat Women, accessed January 30, 2021, https://www.cutthroatwomen.org/.

goal of further bridging the gap "between the expansive academic community of horror scholars/critics and figures working in horror film production/exhibition through the vibrant and under-explored terrain of women's groundbreaking roles as creative makers and thinkers of horror."[5]

Peirse and others' consideration of women creators has ushered in a new wave of horror scholarship that considers "new blood"[6]—those individuals, films, national cinemas, and the like that have been kept out of discussions of the horror genre, whether purely by mistake or through harmful gatekeeping practices by scholars and fans who have dictated which films are "good" or "valuable" and therefore exemplary of the genre and worthy of our academic attention. As I have shown in this dissertation, I too am looking to expand the boundaries of the horror film canon, welcoming those voices that have been silenced, or gone unheard, for too long in the field. Horror, like so many popular genres, has hit peaks and valleys. It has weathered the storm of historical, cultural, and technological change; mutated and spawned into new sub-genres; and tested the limits of representation, spectatorship, and taste. The horror genre is constantly evolving, constantly redefining itself, constantly welcoming new and unique ways of looking at the world, of defining its namesake, *horror*. Women-made horror, then, is the next logical step for scholarly inquiry, and just as the genre is ever-changing and ever-innovating, so too should horror scholarship account for these shifts.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] "BOOK LAUNCH: Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre - Alison Peirse." Patricia Pisters' 2020 text, *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror*, also aptly fits this emerging field of scholarship.

At the time of this writing, my fellow scholars have failed to account for two important variables in women-made horror: those creators, or perhaps pioneers, prior to the 1970s and 1980s who were making contributions to the genre,[7] and those artists, both in underground and experimental film circles, who have included horrific elements in their works. Women, as I argue in Chapter II, have been working in horror far earlier than what has been outlined in film scholarship: some creators have gone unnoticed in favor of their male counterparts; some films are lost or fragmented, due to a lack of foresight or interest in preserving these materials; and some works simply exist with no clear author, no known date of publication, and no known provenance. Moreover, women artists working in experimental film and video have, as I explore in Chapters III and IV, been widely influenced by horror media, with their creations actively breaking apart, reassembling, and generally questioning the very representational mechanisms that undergird the genre. Yet, because they are experimental films—so far removed from the mainstream, Hollywood machine, or the dominant industrial configuration of their national cinemas—they have been characterized as *experimental* and only *experimental*, robbing them of their value across genres. My dissertation, rather than merely redefining the boundaries of *who* can be included in the horror canon, also expands the boundaries of the genre to reconsider *what* can be included in this canon, paving the way for more innovation in the field in the near future.

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[7] An uptick in scholarship on the UK's Hammer Film Productions, as well as on television series like *The Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* are two notable exceptions to this statement. Nevertheless, scholars have neglected to include those filmmakers from early half of the twentieth century, as well as those horror creators tangential to the film industry (like the visual and performing arts), who are pivotal in the development of the genre.

What this dissertation has attempted to show on its most basic level is that women-made horror is a valid avenue for inquiry into the horror genre at large, and that, despite gaps in the present literature that suggest otherwise, women's contributions are vast, valuable, and worth our study. Moreover, the term that I initially coined at the genesis of this project, *women-made horror*, is much more than a mere descriptor of a handful of niche experiments within the genre. Rather, women-made horror is a subgenre in and of itself, one that breaches geographic, temporal, and industrial lines and instead brings films together that have been made by women creators. All of the films and other artworks that I have discussed throughout this analysis are special in their own ways; they look, sound, and feel vastly different from one another, and significantly they serve as a metaphorical megaphone for their creators, amplifying their voices in ways that traditional horror films, and mainstream filmmaking practices, could never quite accomplish. Yet, for all of their aesthetic and thematic differences, these films share a host of commonalities that cement their place in women-made horror. Primarily, the films I have explored challenge the status quo, whether that status quo is representational, technological, or perhaps socio-cultural. Relatedly, women-made horror films are reconceptualizing tropes at the heart of the genre, rethinking what it means to be horrific, frightening, or scary in the times and places that their creators were producing these films. The horror genre is powerful because it holds a mirror to, and sometimes responds to, its conditions of production. Women-made horror is even more resonant because it challenges those things that society deems horrific, breaking down such rigid assumptions and, sometimes simultaneously, loudly and proudly expressing aspects of identity that are limited or censored in mainstream society.

Lastly, all of the works discussed in this dissertation build off of one another, with the ideas, images, and aesthetics of early women-made horror evolving into those of more contemporaneous entries into the genre. At the most basic level, certain women-made horror films simply would not exist without the others; without the pioneering animations of Reiniger, Bute, and Parker, we would not have the transgressive and visually stunning works of Pitt and, to a certain extent, the mixed-media experiments of Moffatt and Condit. Without a filmmaker like Blaché, as well as those early painters, performers, writers, and entertainers, women-made horror simply would not exist, or perhaps the development of the genre would not be as rich and diverse as it so clearly has been with their contributions. Beyond this notion, these films are in dialogue with each other, in ways that are interesting and worthy of academic inquiry. In Chapter II, I explored the formative years of women-made horror, considering how women got the ball rolling, so to speak, with the images, themes, and techniques that we can see in the present day. Despite existing at different moments in time, and in seemingly diverse strands of media, the creators in my second chapter cultivated a host of representational strategies that ultimately borrowed from one another. The types of images and approaches to creating those images in the works of surrealist and dada artists carried over into silent era film experiments; narrative elements in the Female Gothic were mirrored in phantasmagoria and home-based media, and then appeared in live-action and animated features in the earliest days of film, and so forth.

In Chapter III, I looked at three cases of women-made horror that, like many of these founding mothers, called monstrosity into question, reinterpreting gendered and sexist tropes like witches, cannibals, and serial killers. *Possibly in Michigan, I Was a*

Teenage Serial Killer, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* are, as I concluded, three different approaches to women-made horror: the synth-laden, ultra-80s visuals of *Michigan* stand in stark contrast to the 90s-grunge, Riot Grrrl aesthetics of *Serial Killer*, and both differ fundamentally from the ultra-cool, and ultra-slow, sensibilities of *A Girl*. All three, however, take up the questions of *what* is scary, *how* is it scary, and *why* are certain things privileged as scary over others. Moreover, the three films borrow from one another—inadvertently, to be sure—in the ways that they reconceptualize monstrous femininity. The female monsters in each film are independent, strong-willed, and attempt to right the wrongs of a world that has failed them in a host of ways, impacting their mental health and peace of mind. Such societal ills, as I discussed in Chapter IV, materialize into the monstrous, haunting the female protagonists at the hearts of these films in both the public and private spheres. *Asparagus*, *beDevil*, and *Nocturne* are, again, three distinct entries into the women-made horror canon: *Asparagus* is colorful, eerie, and altogether surreal *beDevil* is an extension of the raw and visceral tableaus of Australian life crafted by its photographer-creator; and *Nocturne* is sometimes spooky, sometimes unusual, and altogether shocking. Yet, the three films deliberately exploit the tangible horrors that marginalized Others face in their daily lives, and they exhibit nonlinear narratives that reveal how such individuals tackle these monsters through things like performance. Combined, the six films in Chapters III and IV offer alternatives to traditional understandings of horror, and more importantly they carve out space for those diverse voices, otherwise excluded by the industry or in academic inquiry, to be loudly heard by all.

A. Limitations

Reflecting on the dissertation process, I have discovered a number of limitations on the overall scope of, as well as my analytic approach to, women-made horror. First, while I have considered a number of films (and, in my second chapter, other horror media) that can be characterized as women-made horror, my analysis fails to include a wider range of works that align with this subgenre. In my original dissertation prospectus, I included several additional titles of films, videos, and streamed television shows. During the research phase, however, I somewhat overhauled this list. Many films were absorbed into smaller sections of chapters; for example, my original list included multiple films by directors Peggy Ahwesh, Cecelia Condit, and Suzan Pitt, but in the final draft, I opted to mention them in brief and not pay in-depth analytic attention to them. Moreover, a number of films were cut entirely, either because they were difficult to access, or because they didn't quite fit with the other films, or simply because I did not have adequate time to include them in the final draft. Films like Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), Issa López's *Tigers are Not Afraid* (or *Vuelven*; 2017), and Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's *Amer* (2009), amongst others, as well as the YouTube series *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* by Becky Sloan and Joseph Pelling (2011-2016), would have been ideal candidates for my discussion of women-made horror, but had to be unfortunately scrapped in my final draft. The genre is rapidly expanding, and therefore it is nearly impossible to account for all of its new entries.[8] The works that I have considered in this

[8] In 2020 alone, for instance, women-made horror entries included *Nocturne* (Zu Quirke), *The Other Lamb* (limited release in late 2019; Małgorzata Szumowska), *Atlantics* (another late-2019 premiere, that was released through Criterion in early 2020; Mati Diop), *Bulbuul* (Anvita Dutt), and *She Dies Tomorrow* (Amy Seimetz). Additionally, a wide variety of women-made horror is set to debut in 2021, like Nia DaCosta's much

dissertation are an important entry point into research on women-made horror and will hopefully inspire future scholarship that accounts for these and other media.

A related limitation of this dissertation relates to the question of gatekeeping, as mentioned above in my discussion of Peirse's *Women Make Horror*. That is, since I have chosen specific films that embody women-made horror over others, am I participating in the same types of narrow-minded definitions of what horror is and should be? Women, clearly, have always made horror, but has my exclusion of certain women, and certain films, undermined their valuable work? Am I unintentionally mirroring the same types of exclusionary, and altogether harmful, practices as scholars have done in the past by choosing some works over others? As I have mentioned above, my dissertation is the baseline for scholarship on women-made horror; the field is ever-evolving and ever-expanding, and the research that I have completed is one important contribution in this growing landscape. Furthermore, according to Peirse in her book's introduction, women-made horror is relatively "unknown territory"[9] for scholars, including myself. The scholarly infrastructure for women-made horror does not quite exist yet, and, as a result, the process of building a body of research has been slow, one that is bound to make some oversights in the process. Just like any new field of study, there is gradual progress, but

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anticipated *Candyman* remake. And, this list doesn't account for the arguable wealth of women-made horror that have been released independently, underground, or elsewhere online, like the videos of Leila Jarman and Janie Geiser. See "Horror Films Directed by Women (1966-2020)," *Mubi;* accessed March 1, 2021, https://mubi.com/lists/horror-films-directed-by-women-1966-2014; Brianna Spieldenner, "The Best Horror Films Directed by Women in 2020," last modified December 16, 2020, https://www.ihorror.com/the-best-horror-films-directed-by-women-in-2020/; "The Best Horror Movies of 2020, Ranked by Tomatometer," *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed February 1, 2021, https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-horror-movies-of-2020/.

[9] Alison Peirse, *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 7.

progress nonetheless, and I believe that this dissertation is a step in the right direction in working toward a larger body of research on women-made horror.

A final limitation echoes statements that I have made in Chapter I, which concerns the problem of the author, or *auteur*, when studying women-made horror. That is, this entire dissertation is predicated on the *women* aspect of *women-made horror*, and as one could argue, it has a number of implications about gender (just what makes these films *women-made*?) and authorship (why focus on women in directorial positions, when there are so many other women, outside of directing, who make horror?). There have been countless discussions of the role, and perhaps "death," of the director-author, with many taking aim at the presumed primacy of the director in early film studies. "Does the director's film still turn out great if he doesn't have writers to help punch up the dialog?" writes blogger Nathan Rohe on auteur theory. "Is the director's vision possible without a lighting team or a professional cinematographer? […] Art should not be restricted to this singular idea of what an artist is and it definitely shouldn't give directors an inflated sense of self-importance over all else."[10] I certainly agree with this statement as it applies to cinema at large and horror films by extension. Why can't we count women who are producers, or editors, or writers, or even costume designers in analyses of horror films? Who are we excluding when we focus solely on the director, and what scholarly, industrial, and creative implications does this practice have? As I have outlined in my first chapter, the study of female directors is a positive step towards better understanding the broader women-made horror movement, and it will leave room in the future for those

[10] Nathan Rohe, "This Is The Problem With 'Auteur Theory'," last modified January 20, 2018, https://www.theodysseyonline.com/the-problem-with-auteur-theory.

non-directing horror creators.[11] My approach to horror scholarship also leaves room, for instance, for research on horror creators who fall outside of the gender binary, who have multiple intersectional gender/sexual/racial/etc. identities, and who work even further outside of industries (notably, Hollywood) that otherwise privilege auteurism.

B. Future Directions and Practical Considerations

Since there is a treasure of women-made horror that has yet to be tapped into, moving forwards I would like to expand my research even further, analyzing those films that I had to cut for this dissertation and, finally, giving them the attention that they deserve. In addition to casting a wider net, in regard to the number of films analyzed, I would also like to take on alternate analytic approaches to the films themselves, studying them through varying theoretical lenses, beyond feminist and cultural studies. They include theories specifically related to identity and spectatorship, feminist film theories beyond Freudian psychoanalysis, and a deeper dive into strands of cultural studies like postcolonial theory. In addition, I hope to expand methods of data collection; for instance, I hope to conduct more interviews, with fans and filmmakers alike, to gain better insight into the motives behind women-made horror production and consumption. Expanding my scope will arguably pave the way for more thorough and innovation scholarship on this sub-genre, which at the moment is relatively lacking in depth.

[11] The films that I have selected for this dissertation have the relatively unique distinction of being created by women who take on multiple roles behind the camera: writing, designing, editing, and distributing their films. This poses interesting implications for, and arguments against, auteur theory proper, which I am interested in discussing in my future research endeavors.

During my research phase, I came across a wealth of online horror content: those memes, videos, songs, blogs, and other content that, in many instances, remix and reconceptualize existing women-made horror films.[12] Such (re)mediations are the next logical step in my scholarship. Like the oft-unnamed founding mothers in the visual and performing arts discussed in Chapter II, these amateur horror creators are redefining the boundaries of the horror genre, all while breaking new ground in how horror is created, communicated, and now shared across media platforms. The future of women-made horror, in my view, is indebted to online horror, and I would be remiss not to study them moving forwards.

Aside from writing about women-made horror, I also believe that the films I have included in this dissertation, as well as the possible alternate directions that I can take in cultivating a newer, larger body of films, are enough to constitute projects like film festivals dedicated to the sub-genre. Lupher's *cutthroatwomen.org* lists a substantial number of film festivals that showcase women in horror, like Vermont's Ax Wound Film Festival, North Carolina's Sick Chick Flicks Film Festival, the Etheria Film Night in Los Angeles, and even international fests like the Bloody Mary Film Festival in Toronto and the Final Girls Berlin Film Festival in Germany.[13] In the same vein as these events, I imagine developing a film festival—either local to Massachusetts, or regional in the Northeast—that celebrates those horror films made on the amateur level (from budding independent filmmakers, or even students interested in horror) as well as those active in

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[12] *Possibly in Michigan* is one prominent case in point, amassing a substantial cult following, especially amongst teenagers, on Tik Tok. See Gat, 2019; Chiaverina, 2019.
[13] "Active Festivals," Cutthroat Women, accessed January 30, 2021, https://www.cutthroatwomen.org/active-festivals.

the experimental and underground film circuits. Earlier in 2020, I was in casual conversation with Cecelia Condit, who was interested in showcasing her newest films at UMass and having a brief Q&A session about her work.[14] To accompany my proposed women-made horror festival, therefore, I would also like to incorporate some sort of small-scale conference or speaker series, which amplifies those voices behind the screen, and allows for active discussion amongst creators, fans, and scholars. Building a network of women-made horror filmmakers, in my opinion, is just as important as adding to the scholarly horror canon and helps prevent these creator's works from being lost in the genre shuffle.

A final direction that I envision for my dissertation involves my future in academia: that is, I plan on designing a special topics course on women-made horror. All too often, undergraduate and graduate film courses fall into the same traps as horror film scholarship, cycling through the same well-known and often over-studied films created by male directors. I foresee a radical change in teaching about horror film that accompanies such a shift in studying and analyzing horror films—including those genre-bending, and genre-blending, horror films directed by women in other national cinemas, or in underground or experimental film circles. In my budding career as a scholar-educator, I want to incorporate the films that I have analyzed in this dissertation, as well as women-made horror media more broadly, into my course design, creating either a stand-alone class on women-made horror, or situating women-made horror alongside those films traditionally included in genre-based special topics classes. In this way, I am

[14] These plans were unfortunately squashed by COVID-19 restrictions.

practicing what I preach, as it were, in terms of redefining the canon, encouraging my students to do the same.

In hindsight, the dissertation process has taught me a number of invaluable lessons, the greatest of which being able to roll with the punches when gathering and analyzing data, and throughout the writing process. At the time of the completion of my dissertation, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the various restrictions that have come with it, will have persisted for well over a year. Scholars like me have been isolated from their peers, from their families, and, from a research perspective, from libraries, archives, and other data collection sites. Particularly in the case of silent-era film scholarship, extant objects of study have yet to be properly digitized, with in-person research being the only way of accessing these materials. At the beginning of this project, for instance, I planned on accessing many materials—like reviews and film prints—through the Library of Congress, and, as my research advanced, further opportunities in New York (via New York University) seemed a viable way of accessing even more research materials. Yet, as travel restrictions tightened and appointments were cancelled, these opportunities diminished. Over the past year, however, I have found unique and fruitful workarounds for these obstacles, remarkably establishing emergent, professional relationships with librarians and archivists alike. This dissertation, therefore, has afforded me the opportunity to be an innovative scholar, which will have vast implications for the rest of my career.

On a more personal note, the process of studying women-made horror has yielded some expected, and altogether healing, effects for my mental and emotional health. Halfway through the writing process, I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder, which resulted from a childhood filled with emotional and, on rare occasions, physical abuse. Never before had I been able to process and compartmentalize the trauma that I experienced so many years ago, until seeking professional mental health. At the same time, the more I dove into women working in and around horror, the more that I realized that I am indeed not alone, that creators have dealt with their own unique traumas and have expressed them in radically creative, beautiful ways. Their isolation, their literal and figurative scars, their feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy, manifested into horrific elements. By interrogating and subverting otherwise taken-for-granted tropes at the heart of the genre, they are able to perhaps make sense of their trauma, make it more accessible, and make it a bit more conquerable. Women-made horror, as I have discovered, is so much more than being visually or thematically radical; it's about taking back the narrative, and the course of their own life, in a distinctly radical way.

It goes without saying that horror is here to say; it has exceeded the expectations of industry insiders, naysayers, and at times fickle audiences whose tastes change at a startling rate. As I have argued in this dissertation, women-made horror, too, is *here*—it's always been here, lurking behind the shadows, and with any luck it will always be here, so long as there are stories to tell and seats to fill. Filmmakers, viewers, scholars, and the like have been truly bitten by the demon of cinema, to repeat Blaché's quote, and as my work has shown, women horror filmmakers are persistently sinking their teeth into the genre.

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