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Fears and the Female Circumstance: Women in 1970s Horror Films

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Fears and the Female Circumstance: Women in 1970s Horror Films

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Abstract

More than ever before, stories commenting on real female fears are invaluable to the natural social progression of film as an art form. The core female-centric themes in prominent 1970s horror films are: coming of age, sexual identity, domesticity, pregnancy, and reproductive rights. This thesis first employs empirical research as groundwork for analysis on specific film works by elaborating on expert opinion of the horror genre as well as its foundational elements. Thus, that analysis of the return of repressed fear(s), audience projection of monster and victim, and male gaze, applies to iconic 1970s horror films such as *Carrie* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Films that capture fear comment on universal themes of female perceptions, through specific visual and textual techniques and practices.

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Genre and Horror

In order to fully understand the themes/social commentaries within a piece of cinema, the specific film's genre as well as its accompanying characteristics, identifiers, and boundaries first need to be established. The method of classifying films to a genre has been debated since the art form's invention. Since many theoreticians within film scholarship could not agree on exactly how to categorize the genre of differing films, they agreed upon the compromise that works of similar features, actions, and patterns could define a genre (Altman 8,10). However, Rick Altman – a Comparative Literature in Cinema professor – observes that more often than not, many films that are included in a certain genre would also be excluded from that same particular genre because of specific opinions and connotations (7). For example, Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* is often the subject of genre confusion. Some theorists believe that it is a “thriller”, others a “horror.” This same clash of thought is what lends itself to the misclassification of films between genres.

Altman notices that his predecessors did not understand that genre does not merely classify an art form but is part of said art form because of its interpretive and influential nature, allowing Altman to create his own theories about genre classification. He analyzes a film through two defining characteristics in order to identify a piece of cinema or art and better qualify the genre: semantics and syntax. Rick Altman describes the fundamentals of semantics as, “...a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like ... The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged” (10). That is to say, syntax is the method and handling of how a film portrays the story. Since art constantly progresses through homage and rebellion, many different films can depict stories in an infinite number of ways while still

cradling themselves within a specific classification. Altman theorizes that “[t]he development of a specific syntax within a given semantic context thus serves a double function: it binds element to element in a logical order, at the same time accommodating audience desires to studio concerns” (15). Therefore, the dual process of analyzing the concrete and evidence of a film’s characteristics alongside how it is artistically manipulated allows for a well-defined critical lens on genre itself (Altman 12). When describing Horror and horror films, its definition, and modus in relation to theme and impact, it is important to distinguish what exactly is the foundation of its story through its semantics and syntax.

Horror and the “Monster”

Horror films are generally known to have a monster. First seen in early 19th-century literature (i.e. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), the basic understanding of horror perpetuates the idea of an inhuman menace terrorizing human victims. However, through how this basic idea is used and manipulated within the syntax of the story, it harbors a range of themes/commentaries on romance, scientific advancement, oppression, divine intervention, etc. These consequently further the definition of the “monster” in relation to the human experience (Altman 15). To put it plainly, the semantics of horror are usually seen as a monster and a victim, while the syntax is what specific fear the monster portrays.

And these methods of horror can include most anything: murder, supernatural, paranormal, psychological, mystery, body horror, etc. because what scares people always shifts depending on the social connotations with which the film is made. Carol Clover in her essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” birthed the idea of the *final girl*, which notably altered how scholars perceive gender in horror. She notes that “[o]n the civilized side of the [horror] continuum lie the legitimate genres; at the other end, hard on the unconscious, lie the

sensation or ‘body’ genres, horror and pornography, in that order ... the violence of horror reduces to and enacts archaic sexual feelings” (189). This interpretation of horror films is central to the cycle of female-oriented fears and portrayals to classic horror during the 1970s because it exposes how the ever-present “monster” or fear tortures its characters.

The Psychology of the “Monster” and “Victim”

The true semantic base of horror, usually personified through a “monster,” is Sigmund Freud’s idea of the return of the repressed. In his book *The Uncanny*, Freud describes a presumed indescribable visceral experience of when reality and fantasy become augmented and transformed into each other. He dives into the repressed, and how its return is the essence of fear, and thus horror. The tie between all film, novels, and stories that invoke fear is how the one thing the character is running away from and trying to suppress, keeps coming back, which in turn haunts and torments the protagonist and supporting characters with the risk of death, insanity, lack of control, etc. (Freud 150). Clover quotes Freud saying ““And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which originally had nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness...”” (Clover 189). The atmosphere of dread surrounding the constant return of the repressed is the building block of horror films.

Yet, another semantic building block is the aforementioned *final girl* created by Carol J. Clover. Mostly found in the horror (syntactic “slasher”) film, the *final girl* is the lead female character that has been pursued and hurt by the repressed force (i.e. monster, killer, or inhuman being). After she observes all of the death, mutilation, and full effect of the repressed, she finally fights back. She is usually prudish, intelligent, resourceful, and ostracized from the norm. And yet, just like how the, usually, male murderer in slasher films does not wholly have a masculine

essence, the *final girl* is also not wholly feminine because of those exact traits. But rather, they feed off and oppose one another regardless of gender stereotypes (Clover 204;86). In Clover's words, the *final girl* "...is abject terror personified" (201). This balance of aggressor and experiencer also plays into the sexual differences and impulses between genders. The representation also is akin to male instincts concerning sexual violence and female instincts concerning victimization (Clover 206). She observes that:

Our primary and acknowledged identification may be with the victim, the adumbration of our infantile fears and desires, our memory sense of ourselves as tiny and vulnerable in the face of the enormous Other; but the Other is also finally another part of ourself, the projection of our repressed infantile rage and desire (our blind drive to annihilate those toward whom we feel anger, to force satisfaction from those who stimulate us, to wrench food for ourselves if only by actually devouring those who feed us) that we have had in the name of civilization to repudiate. (Clover 191)

This empathy for the repressed/villain allows us to examine immediate observations, stakes, and impressions when watching a horror film. Projecting onto each of the characters allows audiences to understand and notice why they have an interest in observing these kinds of stories.

Pleasure from Fear in Film

Since its creation, film has fascinated audiences through its stories. However, more often than not, those stories question the subconscious of the general public's perceptions of the prominent formula of thought, emotion, and judgment through the voyeuristic notion of watching them unfold in separated characters on a screen (Mulvey 834). Dr. Laura Mulvey is a prominent film theorist, specializing in a feminist point of view. She observes that the spectacle of watching struggle, conflict, defeat, and triumph invokes erotic images suppressed within audiences (833).

This objectifying and projecting nature of film, in Freudian terms, is called *scopophilia* which is the theory of people using other people as objects of their desire and fear under a controlled and enquiring lens. This sense of ego is the psychological root of the pleasure in narrative film (Mulvey 835). However, since film inherently filters real-world circumstances through manipulated imaginary with light, instrumental accompaniment, angles, and other artistic syntax, it thus is observed as an isolated and contained reality unto itself (Mulvey 836). All of this occurs within the darkness of a theater or viewing space, simulating the privacy of connection between the film and the individual audience member fulfilling that unconscious fantasy.

The Dominant Male Gaze of Females on Film

Under that umbrella, the majority of film in cinematic history is made by the dominant order, meaning: white males. The patriarchal norm is the gaze in which most audiences view films. Art is intrinsically spoken and seen through the director's voice and eyes. Because of the surplus of white male directors, the male gaze on the female gender is undeniably ever-present. In Dr. Mulvey's words: "The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle" (838). Mulvey also goes into depth about the origin of fear of females because of their differing genitalia. The psychological patriarchal fear of castration makes the female sex mysterious, confusing, and potentially dangerous since there is such a vulnerability surrounding it (Mulvey 833). Yet, through objectifying the female character and essence, that fear begins to dissipate. Objectifying people and/or a human experience allows for the fears attached to them to minimize and become less-than they previously appear. It is the same process of manipulating a misunderstood fear to become tangible and easily understood in the popularized white male gaze.

1970s Horror in Western Cinema

To reiterate, the fundamental semantics of the horror genre include Freud's return of the repressed - which has been normalized as a monster or inhumane being - and has different syntactic contexts within the omnipresent generational fear of the film's creation. Additionally, since these films are predominately made by white males, they fit under the guise of the patriarchal gaze. During the 1970s era of horror filmmaking, many independently funded projects rebelled against corporate Hollywood of the Golden age during the 1950s (Olney 85). In fact, horror films owe their popularity to *exploitation directors* (meaning filmmakers who create stories that capitalize on a social, political, and cultural circumstances). This rescued the American film industry from collapsing onto itself after the "Studio film" age proved ineffectual (Olney 85). Due to the *exploitation directors*, films became relatable on a mass scale and had the potential to tackle real issues through artful expression.

Every generation in America gets the horror film they deserve – the syntactic fear, aversions, and indescribable quality that makes their skin crawl changes with the times. The social atmosphere surrounding a modern horror film provides introspection and thought in the audience. Along with that, 1970s horror films often employ an editing style that jolts the audience out of their habitual, resting rhythm. This allows the audience members to achieve their goal of escaping their own scary and harsh reality to focus on a fictional manipulated reality of horror, suspense, and inevitably, distraction.

Dread and fear come from what is not seen, building on the increase of editing into an emotional panic. Horror films during the 1960s-70s were based on the surrounding dread of the civil rights movements, student/youth riots, Vietnam war rebellions, and women's rights movements. This was a time where the whole world experienced the terror of reality and how

close it was to the home. Specifically, the 1970s became a cynical time in filmmaking because of the aftermath of the aforementioned counter-cultural revolution. The air of disillusionment abruptly came to a halt. And so, the vile inner workings of America were brought into the light.

Coming of Age and Sexual Identity

Female sexual maturity has been the basis of many stories, including horror films. Within the Horror perspective, specifically in alliance with Dr. Laura Mulvey's arguments, the lack of explanation and understanding as well as the simple mystery surrounding becoming a woman lends itself to a multitude of fears and objectifying coping mechanisms to those fears. Mulvey describes the allure of the female distress involving sexual maturity as a "fetishistic fascination" (834). The representation of the female "coming of age story" is personified through the male gaze and utilized as a tool of the universal male, and thus translated through female fear.

Carrie (1976)

The most prominent example of this representation of the evolving of the female form in Horror is Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). Throughout the film, the audience observes the humiliation of and contempt for the protagonist, Carrie White (Sissy Spacek), as she experiences the narrative's inciting incident of her first menstruation cycle. Her character is the quintessential prudish, ostracized, foreseeable victim that turns into the *final girl*. In this particular movie, the line blurs between victim and monster, good and evil, as well as Madonna and whore while displaying the voyeuristic nature of abusing the female body. The latter is particularly a popular way to categorize women in order to justify her character types and make her less fearful for male onlookers. That is to say:

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her

mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of film noir); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star). (Mulvey 840)

Carrie's character is the epitome of all the victimization and oppression of the female sex within the 1970s youth culture/high school setting. The fear and mystery blossoms from first her menstrual cycle and growing into her telekinetic powers, referencing the danger of female sexual maturity. The onset of true womanhood is a basic fear since changing symptoms of bodies and coming into a sexual identity is something that the general public identifying with the male gaze doesn't understand and thus fears. Secondly, that fear peaks when Carrie, the perceived vilified victim, justifiably smites her abusers, showing her true power as a fully actualized adult woman.

The cinematography of *Carrie* as she discovers her first period is quite sexualized, reaffirming that womanhood and sexual identity is the root of the fear in this classic horror film. By concentrating on the comfortable, private, and vulnerable activity of washing one's own body in the shower, the audience both sees the exploitation of the naked female form as well as the fear that comes with it. After she discovers her first period and frantically seeks help, all of her other classmates chastise her by throwing tampons, pads, and other feminine products at her doubled over in a corner. They quite literally shove her worst fear into her face. The gym teacher calms her down and gets some of her blood on her gym shorts, which the male principal notices as the teacher is making her case about the abusive behavior towards Carrie. For a drawn-out moment, he cannot listen to the gym teacher's argument and instead is encapsulated by the fear of blood and womanhood. This establishes the menstrual cycle and onset of female adulthood as the ever-present villain, monster, and return of the repressed.

Carrie's mother Margaret White, played by Piper Laurie, solidifies this fear by imposing her every will and fear about the female responsibility and sin of intercourse on her daughter. Religion and particularly celibacy are major obstacles the protagonist is influenced by and also pushes through. The mother believes that womanhood itself is a great sin Carrie brought upon herself by misbehaving and sinning in other ways during her life. The male gaze from the director is also extremely present through Carrie's character's opposite persona, Chris (Nancy Allen) who is the most popular girl in the school and major instigator that eventually pushes Carrie over the edge into a perceived danger. When Chris and her popular jock boyfriend Billy Nolan (John Travolta) meet in his car, the camera, as Billy's point of view shot, lingers on Chris's breasts and objectifying her body. Later on in the scene, when Chris denies Billy sex, he loses interest, distances himself, and angrily huffs in his seat. His line is that something is wrong with Chris to deny his advances. She feels the blaring need to be wanted and loved, and thus seduces him into attacking Carrie with the infamous bucket of pig's blood at the prom.

The abuse of the female form, return of the repressed female maturity fear, and male gaze are extremely prevalent in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). The title character's distress and pain allow the audience to fixate on Carrie's journey as the victim that turns into the personified danger and mysterious threat of female adulthood. That fear of sexual maturity with women thus become objectified, manipulated, and contorted in order to make sense of it to the general audience member living in the patriarchy.

Domesticity and Suburbia

Another female-oriented fear and portrayal in classic horror films involves the concept of the "home." During the 1970s in America, a surplus of World War II veterans, *baby boomers*, and emerging families established their lives within the suburbia model in order to allow for

more living space (Lukic and Pandzic). Marko Lukic and Maja Pandzic, authors of “Dreading the White Picket Fences: Domesticity and the Suburban Horror Film.” They articulate that after WWII, women began to possess the role of domestic housewife among this new paradigm, but the expectations and boundaries pressed upon them represses their own sexuality and desires. In that way, suburbia trapped them like a monster against which to rebel.

Although suburbia aims to be a utopia, women quickly became the designated flawless, domesticated wife and home-maker as influenced by the representation of nuclear families on now-popularized American television broadcasting (Lukic and Pandzic). The woman’s identity was synonymous to the home’s health, cleanliness, and achievements, which then translated to the accompaniment and accessory to her husband or male family member (Lukic and Pandzic). Gillian Rose, a British philosopher and sociologists comments on her study of American suburbia in the 1970s as discounting the experience of women within the domestic environment. She observed that “For many women, home is a place concealing patriarchal power relations and can, in extreme cases, be related to domestic violence and sexual abuse” (Rose 53). The stifled desires felt by women led to a feeling of trapped, which in a circumstance where that wasn’t given attention or listened to, could be precarious. That is to say, suburbia and the concept of the home became a threat and consequently a setting for horror films.

Halloween (1978)

John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) preys on how a small suburban neighborhood provides a false sense of safety. The catalyst in the film is the return of a repressed fear: the serial killer Michael Myers, played by Tony Moran, who creates immense violence uncharacteristic to the perfect, innocent family town. And, along the lines of Carol Clover’s analysis of the monster and *final girl*, there are definite oppositional forces, characteristics, and confrontations

straightforwardly found in the slasher syntax of Horror. Laurie Strode (Jaime Lee Curtis), the *final girl*, exhibits all the quintessential features of hyper-intelligence, resourcefulness, prudishness, and reclusiveness. More importantly, she exemplifies the female responsibility, fear, and oppression within the domestic sphere.

The very moment that Laurie is introduced, she is both visually and textually given immense female responsibility directly involving the concept of the home. To begin with, she is seen with a stack of books on her way to school when her father (i.e male counterpart figure) requires for her to run an important errand for him: to go give the keys to the Myers' house so he can show it to potential buyers. Secondly, Tommy (Brian Andrews) a child in the neighborhood (and yet another male counterpart) incessantly asks Laurie what they are going to do when she babysits him on *Halloween* night. Third, and finally, Laurie's friends Annie and Lynda (Nancy Kyes and P.J. Soles, respectively) chastise Laurie for always sticking to her responsibilities, playfully ostracizing her. In this simple opening sequence, Laurie is obliged to two male characters involving stereotypical seen matriarchal duties, scholarly responsibilities, and anti-sexual or common high school activities.

The feigned incorruptibility of suburbia, represented through the overarching domestic circumstance, crumbles when Laurie is targeted by Michael Myers. Later on into their chase sequence, after Myers has murdered all of Laurie's friends and his mission becomes to destroy her, Laurie's maternal instincts kick in and she prioritizes saving Tommy and another neighborhood kid Lindsey (Kyle Richards) over herself. She gives them a stable safe place as she poorly hides in a closet. Myers finds her, attacks her, and fails due to Laurie's *final girl* premise of fighting back with a wrathful vengeance comparable to a protective mother bear. Or, more simply, as a woman within the confines of suburbia. Carpenter's and Debra Hill's script structure

in *Halloween* demonstrates how Laurie's returning of her repressed fear concerning Michael Myers mirrors the trapped fears of a suburban housewife (Lukic and Pandzic). Lukic and Pandzic observe that when, "...Michael enters the house and kills [Laurie's friends] off one by one, [he is] metaphorically serving as Laurie's released anger that had been building up due to the repression of her own desires under the weight of both external norms (boys considering her too smart) and internalized patriarchal consciousness (docility, dutifulness, self-deprecation)" (Lukic and Pandzic). The need to get out of a threatening home situation and the inability to do so only intensifies the repression of that threat, which gives it a more weighted contribution to the trapped feeling of domesticized women.

Motherhood and Pregnancy

The responsibility, vulnerability, and fear revolving motherhood and pregnancy also have a basis in Horror. There are innumerable variables shrouded with mystery where physical danger and complications, miscommunications, and transformations can pose threats of varying degrees. It is, in short, a tangible fear based in the unknown. Defining, understanding, and manipulating that unknown fear creates powerful moments that Dr. Laura Mulvey describes as the *mirror phase*. Its context in film can best be compared to the connection between mother and child with the emotional gravity of the audience onlookers. She describes this *mirror phase* as the "...moment when an older fascination with looking (at the mother's face, for an obvious example) collides with the initial inklings of self-awareness" (Mulvey 836). By watching and looking through film, individuals have the first recognition of the world and ability for introspection just like newborn children encountering their new surroundings.

On the other hand, that discovery of the unknown lends itself to people attempting to demystify the experience by conjuring explanations in order to make sense of the world in line

with their comfortability threshold. Barbara Creed, an acclaimed culture and cinema critic, devises the concept of the *monstrous feminine*, which comments on how women are portrayed on film. Most of the stories that involve women refer to the characters' reproduction and maternal purpose (7). Moreover, that specific recurring character is usually:

...constructed as a negative force, she is represented in her phantasmagoric aspect in many horror texts...the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia that threatens to give birth to equally horrible off spring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path...it is the suggested presence of the gestating, all-devouring womb of the archaic mother which generates the horror. (Creed 27)

In this observation, Creed argues that the *scopophilia* of maternal and female figures maligns with villains, monsters, or a repressed fear. The archaic mother she references is a semantic characteristic of every horror film: representing death, threatening human existence, and holding the blame for the present-existing pain in the story. Just as remarkable as a life is given, that same life could be taken away by its creator: the birth mother. And so, that chance of danger forms a general fear of the women who have the power to give the "gift" of life and consciousness (Creed 28). However, the equal unknown of the birthed child promotes fear. Without knowledge of the true nature of a child, there is close to no way of seeing, communicating with, and experiencing the life harbored inside a female body.

Rosemary's Baby (1968)

A prime example of that type of body horror is in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Its cultural context builds on the two aforementioned female-oriented fears into the pinnacle of exploitation, manipulation, and sexualization. Usually, and especially in America during the early 1970s, women are sometimes measured by the success they have raising and

protecting their children (Oh 62). If they fail at completing those tasks, their life loses its meaning since their family lineage fizzles out (Oh 62). Motherhood in the cinema is both shown as wicked as well as celebratory and virtuous (Oh 60). Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow) represses the returning horror that her new child – conceived under disturbingly curious and unknown circumstances – may have something wrong about him/her/they/it. Initially, Rosemary's husband Guy Woodhouse (played by John Cassavetes) pleads for them to have a child, to which she reluctantly but eventually happily agrees to. One night, he questionably drugs her and another unidentified figure comes into their bedroom to inseminate her. There is much unseen and unspecified about this sequence. Yet, under the circumstance of horror, the audience can feel the responsibility of motherhood is forced upon Rosemary in an appallingly nonconsensual manner. This brings up so many questions of authority, want, and role of women to fit into the patriarchal desire/norm. From that violation of trust and her physical body, Rosemary's baby begins to impair her health and wellbeing (also serving as a metaphor), which prompts interference from her new neighbors to bring her a dubious drink. The entire time, everyone diminishes her experiences, symptoms, and suspicion by taking advantage of her trust.

Eventually, Rosemary sees a different doctor not recommended at the advice of her husband or neighbors. To her discovery of the true mystery and risk of her pregnancy, its surrounding air of illusion dissipates as Rosemary begins to see the horror of the situation. After her child is born, Rosemary doesn't see it, touch it, or hold it. But instead, it is given to the neighbors. She later finds that her husband and neighbors are involved in a satanic cult where they simply used Rosemary's body as a vessel to bear their new prophet, the son of Satan. Having her purpose completed, they have virtually no use for her except to raise the "monster-like child" along their teachings of the cult. Rosemary is left understanding just the magnitude of

betrayal, abuse, manipulation, extortion, and objectification she experiences while gazing at her child she has an obligation to fall in love with as its mother.

The maternal role is often villainized, but can also be victimizing the woman who experiences it. However, the body horror of the vulnerable unknown, commentary on the purpose and role of womanhood, and the fascination with it are all akin to how females and female fears are portrayed on horror films.

Conclusion

Specifically, female-oriented fears surrounding coming of age and sexuality, domesticity, pregnancy, and motherhood are represented through voyeuristic abuse of the female form facing that returning repressed fear. The male gaze is closely tied to those horror films, however all audience members, directors, and film artists have their own lens to see the world and stories. That gaze, the impact of looking and watching has a gravity and intensity to it, with which the general public is infatuated. bell hooks, a renowned black female artist, film critic, professor, and social activist, recounts her experience as a child with looking in relation to the cinema and its effect: “[We, as an audience, are] Afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze. There is power in looking” (hooks 247). Ever since humans first gaze at the world as infants, we use stories to make sense of it all. Horror, especially, uses stories to make sense of real human fears. That means that the textual and visual evidence found in horror films utilize create a space for these social observations and real human female fears

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