Final Girls and ‘Mother’: Representations of Women in the Horror Film from the 1970s to the Present

by

Tiffany Basili

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Research)

Department of Art History
University of Sydney
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my husband, Nick, for supporting me through this whole process, and patiently
listening to me bang on about the patriarchy constantly. You’re one of the good ones.

Thanks to my amazing daughter, Samara, for being my cheer squad and inspiration.
Thankfully, you don’t have scary psychic powers like the other Samara – but if you did,
you’d absolutely use them for good, not evil.

Thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Susan Potter and Associate Professor Bruce Isaacs. Thanks for
taking me on Susan, and for watching Hellraiser, even though it’s really not your thing. And
thanks for getting me to the end, Bruce, and for all your support and belief in me.

Thanks to my extended family, Heli, Shaun, Venla, and Valo, you’re always my happy place.

Thanks to Melissa Hardie for always looking out for me and being ready to advocate for me
at the drop of a hat.

Thanks to my movie crew, Reg, Lauren, JJ, and Finn for watching some truly awful horror
movies with me (Reg, I’m so sorry I made you watch Sleepaway Camp!).

And finally, thanks to everyone who’s helped me through this, with babysitting, food, hugs,
encouragement, acting as a sounding board, ordering me to get to work, or all of the above:
Vivien and Louise, Maria, Mira, Matt, Greg, Steven, Chris, Katie, Kane, Kim A, Georgia,
Jessica, Kim W, Josephine, Ben, Emily, and Sonia.

This thesis has been proof-read by Heli Lääteelä-Tabone, who fixed minor spelling mistakes,
ensured footnote consistency and formatted the document. She has a Master of Arts by
Research in History (a thesis on medieval medicine and culture) and a Graduate Diploma in
Publishing.
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................4

Chapter One
The First Final Girls, and Tormented/ing Mothers: The 1970s Horror Film...............................11
  The Emergence of the Slasher Film and the Final Girl.................................................................14
  Motherhood in the 1970s Horror Film ............................................................................................23

Chapter Two
Misogyny, Madness, and the Spectre of Capitalism: The 1980s.................................................46
  The ‘Golden’ Age of the Slasher.......................................................................................................47
  Passive Wives, Domineering Patriarchs, and the Monstrous Mother: Family Life in the 1980s
  Horror Film....................................................................................................................................61

Chapter Three
The Reflexive Final Girl and the Mother Reclaimed: The 1990s to the Present.......................78
  The Impact of Wes Craven...............................................................................................................78
  The Final Girl after Sidney Prescott..............................................................................................86
  Horror Movie Mothers of the Twenty-First Century ....................................................................91

Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................108

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................109

Filmography .....................................................................................................................................113
Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) is overwhelmingly accepted in the scholarship as the delineation between the classical era of the horror film, and the modern.⁠¹ Classical horror films were characterised by an engagement with the ‘other’ as a threat to American or English Protestant values. The monsters in these films came from exotic locations, either the European ‘old world’ of decadent aristocracy and the Catholic Church, or jungles filled with unknown wildlife and the perceived threat of indigenous populations, and in the 1950s, space aliens who wanted to assimilate humans in the same way that the communists did. *Psycho* brought the threat into modern America, demonstrating that the handsome, if awkward, boy-next-door could in fact be a psychotic murderer. *Psycho* also introduced a new paradigm of female characters.

In previous films, women were strictly supporting characters, either the passive, dutiful wife or daughter, the foreign and animalistic temptress, or the fainting victim.⁠² In *Psycho*, however, there are three distinct characterisations of women, one of whom is the protagonist, and all three have a complexity and ambiguity missing from the earlier films, the sexual transgressor or ‘slut’, the plucky, virginal girl (who later becomes known as the ‘Final Girl’), and an absent but powerful Mother. Marion Crane, the protagonist, is coded as morally

---


compromised from the outset, as the viewer is first introduced to her lying on a bed in only a slip and bra, while standing above her is a shirtless man who is dressing. Her lover, Sam Loomis, is reluctant to get married until he pays off debts, though Marion insists it does not matter if he can properly ‘provide’ for her. Seizing the opportunity presented by a drunk client of her boss’ arrogantly deciding to pay for a house in cash, Marion steals the money in an attempt to start a new life with Sam, thus compounding her sexual transgression with a criminal one. However, it is her sexual transgression, not the criminal, that results in her being murdered at the hands of Norman Bates. Norman’s sexual attraction to Marion causes him to disassociate and become ‘Mother’, who punishes him for sexual thoughts. Finally, Marion’s sister Lila, who is depicted non-sexually in comparison to Marion, with Sam, ultimately solves the mystery of Marion’s death. One reading might suggest that because Lila is ‘pure’, she survives this encounter with the monstrous Norman/Mother.

According to Carol J. Clover, Psycho is “the appointed ancestor of the slasher film [as]… the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman,” and that even,

[the Final Girl sequence too is prefigured, if only rudimentarily, in Psycho’s final scene… [with] Lila [as] the spunky inquirer… the one who first grasps, however dimly, the past and present danger, the one who looks death in the face, and the one who survives the murderer’s last stab.

The third, female figure in Psycho that has had a significant impact on the horror genre, is Mrs. Bates, the controlling, monstrous, but absent, Mother.

---

4 Clover, Men, Women and Chain Saws, 39.
In the 1970s, I argue, this trio of women characters established the dominant paradigm, though, notably, in the slasher subgenre, the importance of the ‘virgin’ and ‘whore’ is reversed. The rich complexity and inner life that the viewer experiences with the character of the ‘whore’, Marion Crane, in *Psycho*, in the 1970s horror film was reserved solely for the virginal, surviving character (henceforth referred to as the Final Girl). The ‘whore’ or ‘slut’ character, in turn, was relegated to a minimally characterised supporting role whose only importance was as a contrast to the superiority of the Final Girl, and to provide a body to be carved up by the murderer. This troubling impetus in the 1970s towards speedily punishing sexualised women was foreshadowed by the words of one critic who, upon reviewing *Psycho* at the time of its release, remarks, “[a] defect in the picture as a whole is that it takes too long to knife the blonde.”

In this thesis I examine a selection of horror films from the 1970s to the present, which is a period significant for being defined as the modern era of horror ushered in by the release of *Psycho*, which is considered a cultural watershed. I have chosen to focus on this period in order to deconstruct the ways in which the three feminine archetypes established in *Psycho* reflect and critique, often concurrently, the social and political perceptions and realities of women in their respective decades, and how these representations have evolved. The films I have chosen centrally and significantly represent at least one of the three dominant representations of female characters in the horror film that I argue were established in *Psycho*. In some cases, I will be retreading much analysed and critiqued material, such as Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976), and David Cronenberg’s *The Brood* (1979), though I will

---

attempt to keep these sections brief. However, it is necessary in my survey of the evolving characterisation of the Final Girl, the slut, and the mother figure in the modern horror film that I contextualise and historicise them by discussing the preeminent and much-examined works that refined these figures established in *Psycho*, and canonised them as the still recognised and accepted archetypes they are today. Similarly, in keeping with my focus on *Psycho* as the turning point from classical to modern horror, the films I have chosen are North American or English in origin, in order to maintain my discussion within the category of “American or English, Christian values”, and the safety or dangers therein.

Another conscious choice I have made in this thesis is to solely discuss horror films directed by men. Although there are many sophisticated and entertaining horror films directed by women, including but certainly not limited to Amy Jones’ *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), Kathryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark* (1987), Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000), Karyn Kusama’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), Jen and Sylvia Soska’s *American Mary* (2012), Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014), and Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020), I would argue that not only is there still a disproportionate number of male horror directors, but that a male director’s characterisation of women is fundamentally different to how a female director will characterise women. My work in this thesis is to interrogate if male directors are capable of representing women in horror films with complexity and nuance, thus examining films by female directors is outside the scope of this study.

In Chapter One I discuss the emergence of the slasher subgenre and the Final Girl in the 1970s, a figure that came to predominantly represent the ideal of girl/womanhood, a morally upstanding and quietly competent ‘good girl’, who stands in direct opposition to her peers, who in their carefree attitudes towards sexuality and responsibility reflect what conservatives believed were the epitome of the ‘new woman’ of the second wave feminist movement.
However, one of the films I will discuss, Bob Clark’s *Black Christmas* (1974), offers a positive and intentional engagement with feminist ideals.

I then examine the representation of the mother in the 1970s horror film, who is primarily either characterised as a suffering, grieving mother, or the monstrous mother, a direct evolution of Mrs. Bates. However, the films I examine complexify both the suffering and the monstrous mother. I will engage in an extended examination of William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973), whose mother character has been shunted in favour of the titular Exorcist himself, or her abject, possessed daughter. Here I will demonstrate that, in contrast to other scholarship on the film, not only is Chris McNeill a worthy character to focus on, but she is actually a radical representation of motherhood in a film deemed by most critics and theorists to be conservative, for despite being a single, non-religious, working mother, she is the central figure of sympathy in the film.

In Chapter Two I examine the figures of the Final Girl and mother in the 1980s horror film. Representations of women in 1980s media were predominantly a devolution from the 1960s and 70s. Susan Faludi argues that this was due to a backlash against the gains made by women in the 1970s through the feminist movement. Thus, the 1980s slasher film became even more markedly misogynistic than in the previous decade, and the mother character in horror films, who in the 1970s was allowed some nuance of characterisation, appeared in the 1980s as either the Madonna stereotype who is relegated to a supporting role (as opposed to the 1970s ‘good’ mothers who, while adhering to the grieving or suffering mother trope, were at least the protagonists of their narratives), or struck a perfect balance between being so broad a caricature of the monstrous mother as to make Mrs. Bates appear fully realised, and realistic enough that she was believable to those (predominantly male) viewers who would wish to use her as a way to dismiss all women as “crazy” or “unstable”. In this chapter I
examine films that utilise the Final Girl and mother tropes in both regressive and progressive ways, paying particular attention to Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser* (1987), which uses both the Final Girl and monstrous (step)mother figures to simultaneously highlight other films’ egregious misogyny, and to re/claim them as complex protagonists in their own right.

In Chapter Three I examine the figures of the Final Girl and the mother in horror films of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. I will argue that in the 1990s Wes Craven was responsible for something of a revolution in representations of both the Final Girl and the mother, with his *Scream* trilogy. Most famous for its metafictional acknowledgment of the slasher genre’s own rules and tropes and for its powerful stance on the Final Girl character, I will demonstrate that the trilogy is just as significant for its refiguring of both the absent ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers, wherein the Final Girl’s dead mother embodies both roles, and thus is allowed a complexity not afforded to her predecessors. I then examine a range of films in the following two decades that continue *Scream*’s revolutionary trajectory of both the Final Girl, and especially the mother, who has at last not only become the protagonist of her own films but is allowed a rich complexity that makes her both unlikeable and sympathetic, neither perfect, but neither a cackling caricature of the monstrous.

Finally, I conclude this thesis in a cautiously optimistic way, having demonstrated that the horror film, as directed by men, has developed in its representation of women. However, I can only remain “cautiously” optimistic, as I argue that this development of representations of women in horror films, concomitant with the broader gains for women in society through the feminist movement, is only a “start”, and a direct engagement with feminist values is an ongoing requirement in the horror genre. While my thesis focuses explicitly on films that demonstrate complexity in their characterisation of women, this is still the exception not the norm, because for every *Black Christmas, Full Circle, The Exorcist, and The Brood*, there is a
Halloween, Don’t Go in the House (Joseph Ellison, 1979), Carrie, and Mother’s Day (Charles Kaufman, 1980). For every Hellraiser, A Nightmare on Elm Street, The Stepfather, and Happy Birthday to Me, there is a Sleepaway Camp, Terror Train, The Burning, Hell Night, Flowers in the Attic, Mommie Dearest, Prom Night, and Fatal Attraction. And for every You’re Next, The Final Girls, The Others, The Ring, and Hereditary, there is a Don’t Breathe (Fede Alvarez, 2016), Black Christmas (Glen Morgan, 2006), Last House on the Left (Dennis Iliadis, 2009), I Spit on Your Grave (Steven R. Monroe, 2010), Evil Dead (Fede Alvarez, 2013), The Woman (Lucky McKee, 2011), Captivity (Rolan Joffé, 2007), Human Centipede II (Full Sequence) (Tom Six, 2011), and The Girl Next Door (Gregory M. Wilson, 2007). For every male horror film maker who is interested in advancing women’s representation in films, there are many others who do not care to engage with women at all, continuing to depict female characters in simplistic or overtly misogynistic terms, as monsters and victims with little in between. Thus, although my work in this thesis is predominantly concerned with examining those films with complex women characters, and though horror films tend to have more female protagonists and characters than other genres of film, I still conclude that female characters tend to be underdeveloped and oversimplified in comparison to their male counterparts.
Chapter One

The First Final Girls, and Tormented/ing Mothers: The 1970s Horror Film

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) ushered in the modern era of the horror film, but scholars such as Robin Wood\(^1\), Tony Williams\(^2\), Christopher Sharrett\(^3\), and Douglas Kellner\(^4\), argue that horror’s ‘golden age’ began in the late 1960s and lasted through the 1970s, until its decline in the 1980s.\(^5\) The 1960s and 1970s were a time of social and political upheaval in the United States of America, including the March on Washington, and assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963; the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965; the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968; the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War over the 1960s and 1970s; the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s; the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision regarding women’s constitutional right to abortions in 1973; and the second-wave of feminism in general. Wood argues that the “great period of the American horror film was the period of Watergate and Vietnam because “the genre required a moment of ideological crisis for its full significance to emerge, the immediate cultural breakdown calling into question far more than a temporary political situation”.\(^6\)

---


\(^5\) Evaluations of the 1980s horror film as predominantly reflecting that decade’s political and economic climate of conservatism and capitalistic greed is discussed in Wood, Williams, Sharrett, Kellner, amongst many others. For a more general discussion of the cult of materialism in 1980s America, see Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 158-162. I will also discuss 1980s politics and horror in Chapter Two.

However, one significant civil rights success from the 1960s and 1970s that was not represented in the horror films of these decades (with some exceptions, which will be discussed shortly), were the gains made by women through second-wave feminism. The representation of women in the horror films of the classical age was predominantly as a chaste, feminine maiden, or a faithful and feminine wife. Wood argues, “from [The Cabinet of Dr.] Caligari to Psycho, women have always been the main focus of threat and assault in the horror film.” Gérard Lenne writes, “[s]uch is the place of women in the fantastic: indispensable, but relegated to the rank of a minor role. Perfect as a tearful victim, what she does best is to faint in the arms of a gorilla, or a mummy, or a werewolf… An exquisite and pathetic figure endlessly shrieking either from fear or from the pain of torture, she satisfies the sadomasochistic phantasmagoria that is part and parcel of all fantastic films…” Lenne is referring to the damsels in distress of the 1930s and 40s Universal and RKO films, and the Gothic revival of Hammer Studios. Wood’s statement, “from Caligari to Psycho”, is one that sounds hopeful of the fact that perhaps this treatment of women in horror films has changed. However, if anything, for all the improvements and complexities over the subsequent decades for women characters in horror, the 70s added yet another dimension of misogyny to Lenne’s “exquisite and pathetic figure”, for if a female character is no longer necessarily a “minor role”, victim, virgin, Madonna, or scopophilic object in the horror films following Psycho, she now displays behaviours particularly associated with the social gains made by second-wave feminists (such as greater economic and sexual independence), as a representation of the proscribed girl- and woman-hood that must be punished and humiliated.

---

9 Lenne, “Monster and Victim”, 35.
Thus, even in the 1960s and 1970s, the ‘golden age’ for subversive and ideologically progressive horror films\(^{10}\), the subversiveness and questioning of the ideological status quo did not extend to an alternative representation of women, for at worst, these films actively punish women, or at best they do not really engage with women at all. No matter how progressive, and even radical, George A. Romero’s critique of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War and choice of a person of colour as the protagonist in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Barbra, the main female protagonist of the film, almost immediately falls into a catatonic stupor from which she emerges only long enough to rush into her now zombified dead brother’s arms (a lack of female characterisation and agency which Tom Savini rectifies in his 1990 remake). No matter how subversively critical of the institution of family, middle-class complacency, and economic and social inequality in American society Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) are, the audience must still endure the graphic brutalisation of women in order to receive that message. Although there are male victims in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and although Sally does survive, her survival consists of her being beaten and ridiculed, escaping briefly only to be recaptured, and her final escape leaves her as traumatised and hysterical as Barbra, or even Fay Wray “fainting in the arms of her gorilla” in *King Kong* (1933), for that matter. In other words, in these subversive, ideologically progressive films, women are still nothing more than superficially characterised victims. The films may provide a critique of many social ills of contemporary America, but misogyny and sexism are not included. I will now turn to the emergence in the 1970s of a subgenre of horror that is centred

---

on women, and is particularly guilty of alternately idealising and punishing specific
behaviours in women, the slasher film.

**The Emergence of the Slasher Film and the Final Girl**

The slasher film emerged during the 1970s and constitutes one of the most significant horror
subgenres. The slasher is a direct evolution of *Psycho*, in that it has adapted the basic
character archetypes established in *Psycho*, of a sexually-repressed male killer, a sexually
active young woman, and a virginal “good girl” who ultimately survives the killer. Slasher
films, with of course exceptions, follow a fairly narrow narrative trajectory: a sexually-
repressed psychopath armed with a phallic weapon punishes frivolous and sexually active
teenagers, until the one sensible and abstemious girl of the group either escapes, or turns the
murderer’s phallic weapon back on them. There are many ways in which the representation
of women in these films, particularly as regards femininity and female sexuality, are
reprehensible. The female characters in the majority of slasher films are not complex or
nuanced. They are either shallow, facetious girls whose main concerns are their appearance
and sex rather than study or work, or they are the designated survivor (dubbed the “Final
Girl” by Carol J. Clover), and thus practical and competent, and more boyish than boy-
crazy.

The point-of-view shot of the stalked characters from the perspective of the murderer,
employed in both *Psycho* and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), reaches its apotheosis

---

12 The designation of these traits as either desirable or undesirable are a function of the gender norms I am
discussing in this thesis, not a belief to which I myself subscribe. In fact, it has been refreshing to see alternative
representations of femininity depicted in films since this period, few and far between as they are. One example
is Jake Kasdan’s *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017), where the typical high school “hot girl” concludes the
movie only having been ‘cured’ of her selfishness (as in fact is the “jock”), and her interest in makeup and
appearing attractive is not designated as undesirable at all, just one of several options open to girls and women.
13 *Peeping Tom* makes extensive use of the point-of-view shot, as the premise of the film is that a murderer who
is also a photographer mounts his camera with a knife and a mirror, in order to film his victims as he kills them,
in the slasher film, particularly in the film considered by many scholars to be the true originator of the slasher concept, following in *Psycho*’s footsteps, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Robin Wood argues that “[i]f nothing in *Halloween* is new, everything testifies to Carpenter’s powers of assimilation (as opposed to mere imitation): as a resourceful amalgam of *Psycho, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, The Exorcist* and *Black Christmas, Halloween* is cunning in the extreme.” The opening scene is a formal innovation of significance to the horror film, and has left an important legacy.

The opening scene has been discussed and dissected in many academic texts over the years, so I will only briefly discuss it here, as it is also outside the scope of this work’s central thesis. The opening scene of *Halloween* takes the scopophilic and voyeuristic impulse of both *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* and elevates it to an intense five minutes of film that many have tried to imitate in the years following, but it is unmatched in its unflinching intensity and shockingness. This opening scene takes the form of a one-take point-of-view shot, from the perspective of an unknown figure, who stalks and then murders a teenage girl with a knife, just after the girl has sex with her boyfriend (who is notably allowed to leave without being similarly attacked). The killer ends up in the front yard of the house, where the girl’s parents have returned home and realise that something violent has happened. They address the killer as Michael, and as the point-of-view shot suddenly changes to a frontal, medium

---

16 See, for example, Dika, *Games of Terror; Clover, Men, Women and Chain Saws; Wood, Vietnam to Reagan;* and Steve Neale, “*Halloween: Suspense, Aggression and the Look,*” in Grant, *Planks of Reason,* to name only a very few.
shot, we see that the person holding the knife and staring ahead, completely affectless, is in fact a little boy of around five or six years old. This moment would have been utterly shocking when the film was released, similar to the revelation at the end of *Psycho*, and in fact, it still has an impact today, even on multiple viewings. However, another element of the film has had a more fundamental impact on the horror genre, and not for the better.

Expanding on the template established in *Psycho*, *Halloween* clearly delineates the “good girl” from the “bad”, punishing the girls who engage in sexual behaviour, and rewarding the abstemious Final Girl with survival. Laurie Strode set the standard for the Final Girl in the following decades. Clover outlines the character’s main characteristics:

[The Final Girl] is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends… she is not sexually active…. The Final Girl is boyish, in a word…. She is not fully feminine… Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance sets her apart from other girls. 17

Though two Final Girls exist before Laurie, Sally from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and Jess from *Black Christmas*, both of whom will be discussed shortly, it is Laurie’s “boyishness” and above all else, virginity that has been the film’s main legacy. *Halloween*, in fact, not only reinforces the contrast between the “good” and “bad” girls but reverses the significance of the two figures.

In *Psycho*, although she is punished, there can be no question that Marion Crane, the ‘whore’, is the protagonist of the film. The viewer follows Marion from the start, learning her complicated situation, watching the sleazy Mr. Lowery proposition her, and following her inner monologue. Thus, even if it is with a disapproving eye, the viewer cannot help but sympathise with her situation. 18 Her sister Lila, on the other hand, who is positioned as the

---

social-norm-abiding “good girl”, is a simple character, and not someone in whom the audience becomes particularly invested, despite her ultimate survival as what would become known as the Final Girl. In *Halloween*, however, and the slashers that followed it, the Final Girl becomes the central figure, the only character allowed any level of complexity and interiority, while the ‘slut’ is an objectified victim with no purpose at all but to provide a body to be slayed. Laurie’s girlfriends are depicted as fairly normal teenagers. They tease Laurie about her disinterest in dating, but they also support her through her low self-esteem about her attractiveness to boys. Annie and Linda both have boyfriends with whom they are sexually active, and both girls fob off other responsibilities on Halloween night to have sex with their boyfriends, while Laurie babysits both hers and Annie’s charges, reading them stories, carving pumpkins, and knitting. However, if Marion Crane is the model for girls like Annie and Linda in slasher films, these girls are punished in a disproportionate way for engaging in what amounts to typical teenaged, carefree behaviour.

In an interview in Adam Simon’s *The American Nightmare* (2000), a documentary about the impact and social critique of key horror films and filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s (essentially, Robin Wood’s ‘golden age’), John Carpenter says “I didn’t mean to put an end to the sexual revolution and for that I deeply apologise.” Sadly, this dual representation of “good girl” and “whore” is the most memorable and enduring legacy of his film, apart from Michael himself. Though Clover (who also appears in Simon’s documentary) created the name of this figure, it is Carpenter’s specific characterisation of the Final Girl that has been imitated in countless slashers and even other subgenres of horror since *Halloween*, and the importance of her status as a virgin is acknowledged and accepted in popular culture, through such disparate media as Wes Craven’s *Scream* films, Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), Tyler Shields’ *Final Girl* (2015), Todd Strauss-Schulson’s *The Final Girls*
(2015), and Riley Sager’s 2017 novel *Final Girls*, to name only a very few.¹⁹ As such, with regards to representations of women in the horror genre, *Halloween*’s legacy is not one of which Carpenter can be proud.

As mentioned above, before Laurie became ‘the’ Final Girl two notable precursors who did not adhere to the virginal model were Sally from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and Jess from *Black Christmas*. Turning to Sally first, as a character she does not explicitly reflect any negative stereotypes about women, and neither does the other woman in the group, Pam, and their sexual histories are not relevant with regards to how the film’s violence unfolds. None of the characters, in fact, male or female, are fully realised characterisations. Clover argues when defining the Final Girl, however, that

> [t]he image of the distressed female most likely to linger in the memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who…perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and her own peril; who is chased, coerced, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified…. (35).

This could not be truer of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, as, aside from the image of a crazed Leatherface dancing around in the dawn light, screaming and revving his chainsaw, the other lingering image from the film is of Sally being driven away in the back of a utility vehicle, covered in blood and laughing hysterically. It is clear that, although she has ‘survived’ in the most fundamental of senses, she is not going to recover from this traumatic experience.

Kurt Fawver offers an alternative reading of Sally’s screams and laughter to that of Clover’s “abject terror personified.” In his article discussing the semiotics of screams and silence in

---

¹⁹ Even if only symbolically – of course not every surviving girl in every slasher film is a literal virgin, but she is the innocent one when compared with her more sexually active or promiscuous friends and companions.
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre and Halloween, Fawver argues that The Texas Chain Saw Massacre “does not seem to aspire toward acute realism,” citing the “surreal trappings of the family’s home” as evidence for this, and thus takes a completely symbolic approach to reading the film. Thus, he argues that Leatherface and Hitchhiker’s silence as they chase Sally is a “signifier without a signified… nothing within their beings… prompts them to shout out to Sally in order to make her stop and, thereby, enter into the realm of signification-based communication.” Following this, because he does not believe that Sally’s screams can be read as a literal psychological response to the situation she finds herself in, he posits that,

[a]gainst the absolute vacuum of meaning that [her pursuers’] silence encompasses… [Sally’s] scream signifies life and endless possibility, the continuation of the individual uttering the sound and of the entire world of ideas, objects, and beings. Thus, in actuality, the scream is a weapon of joyousness, a weapon constructed of the unfettered play of signification.

Taken on a purely symbolic level, this argument does make sense, even, partly, in a literal way – that Sally is able to continue to scream does in fact attest to the “continuation of the individual uttering the sound” and, a few sentences later, “the symbolic order, signification as a universal communicative conception, survives.” In other words, Sally, if taken as simply a manifestation of signification, is not dead.

However, even with his semiotic reading of the film, the political ramifications of his thesis are unavoidable. He further argues, “… one of the final shots of the film shows Sally riding

20 Unfortunately, his assertion that the film is not aiming at realism is flawed because, for all of the film’s terrifying excess, the very aspect of the film he cites as too surreal to be an attempt at realism, the trappings and décor of the house, is the one aspect of the film that was in fact based in reality, as all of the decorative elements made of human bones and skin are an almost literal copy of those found in real life serial killer Ed Gein’s house (if anything, Gein’s decorations were even more macabre).
22 Fawver, “Massacres of Meaning”, 51
away in the back of a salvatory pickup truck, still screaming, but with the scream beginning to melt into a laugh, as if the two are, and always were, one utterance. Play has, seemingly, won the day...”

Symbolic, or otherwise, it is impossible to read Sally’s final laugh as “joyousness and play”, as it is the hysterical scream-laughing of someone who has indeed “survived” in the most basic of senses, but the signification she represents is ultimately far less victorious than Leatherface and Hitchhiker’s silent lack of meaning. Her hysterical cries of signification ultimately mean less than nothing, because, though Sally’s body may have survived her ordeal, “Sally”, her sense of self, has not. If her screams are meant to convey pure signification, in direct opposition to Leatherface and Hitchhiker’s lack of signification and inner life, then her final laughter is simply, to quote Shakespeare, “full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing.” Whether Sally’s torture, screaming, and hysterical laughter are meant to be realistic or symbolic, the end result is the same: she is, as Clover states, “abject terror personified.” Thus, no matter how subversively critical of the structural economic and social inequality in American society The Texas Chain Saw Massacre is, the audience must still endure the graphic brutalisation of a woman, and although the Final Girl survives, she is the sacrificial lamb to this social message.

Released in the same year as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, Black Christmas offers a progressive narrative about young women. According to Richard Nowell, “the dramatization of serious social issues has been highlighted by producer-director Bob Clark as one of his primary objectives.” In fact, the film can be read as a women’s horror film, sympathetically engaging with social issues specifically relevant to women. At the outset, it would seem that the film has a ‘good girl’ in Jess, and a ‘bad girl’ in Barb. However, it quickly becomes clear

23 Fawver, “Massacres of Meaning”, 51.
25 Nowell, Blood Money, 72-73.
that both of these categories are oversimplifications of two fairly complex female characters. Barb is not a very nice person, as demonstrated when she tells another one of the sorority girls (Claire, who as the first victim is an important part of the film’s plot) that “townies can’t be raped”, and feeds a small child alcohol at a Christmas event at her sorority house. However, she is also rebellious, sassy and sarcastic, standing up to the film’s obscene phone caller on behalf of herself and her housemates, and when it appears that Claire is actually missing, she accompanies Claire’s father and another housemate to the police station, getting angry at the police officer for not taking their concerns seriously. Barb later demonstrates that she feels guilty about her earlier argument with Claire, saying that everyone will blame her for driving Claire away. Her concern shows that not only is she afraid of being blamed, but that she in fact does blame herself. This is of course foundationless, as we see that Claire, while upset, simply went to her room to pack for her trip home with her father, and the killer was hiding inside her room. After seeing Barb as a mixture of both awful and vulnerable in turn, much as most people are, it is genuinely affecting when she is brutally stabbed by her own glass unicorn figurine.

Jess, as the primary identification character and ultimate Final Girl, is even more nuanced. Jess is softly spoken and, unlike Barb, not brash and uncouth, but she is not priggish in demeanour either. She comes across initially and throughout the film as considerate and caring of her housemates. However, quite early in the film, we are surprised to learn that she is pregnant to her boyfriend Peter, and although he wants to keep the baby, Jess is planning to have an abortion, and is not ashamed to be upfront about this. As Sara Constantineau points out, “Jess is not criticized by this film for wanting an abortion, but Peter is punished for
trying to force her to keep the baby; he appears irrational and controlling, and audience sympathy remains with Jess.”

Later, when Peter tells her he is quitting music so they can get married and keep the baby, Jess is strong and resolute in her objections. She points out that music is his passion, and that it would be ridiculous for him to give it up, and similarly she has ambitions and dreams that she would like to pursue before she has children. When Jess tells him that she does not want to marry him, Peter spits at her, “You selfish bitch. You talk about killing a baby like getting a wart removed.” Jess is not swayed or made guilty, simply replying, “Now you see why I didn’t want to tell you”, finally yelling at him, after he declares that she is not allowed to have an abortion, “Peter, you can’t tell me what I can or can’t do!”

While the “golden age” horror films discussed above are certainly important cultural texts, engaging with social and civil concerns of the day through allegorical means, there is a compelling case for Black Christmas to be counted amongst them. Not only does it concern women’s civil rights pertinent to its time period (as none of the other films do), but it in fact directly (rather than allegorically) reflects on the topic of abortion. The year prior to the film’s release saw the Roe v. Wade decision in the United States. However, despite its legality, abortion is still, in the 21st century, not commonly represented as a positive option for women in American cinema. When abortion is discussed at all in American films, it is usually depicted as a shameful act, and generally sidelined to a supporting character, as it is in Emile Ardolino’s Dirty Dancing (1987). However, Black Christmas is not restricted by the same conservative conventions because though it “has the same generic principles as the American slasher… it does not propagate the same ideology.”

As Constantineau further

---

26 Sara Constantineau, “Black Christmas: The Slasher Film was Made in Canada”, in Cineaction!, 2010, Vol.82, p.58-63, 60.
27 Constantineau, “Black Christmas”, 60.
argues, *Black Christmas* “communicate[s] a Canadian sensibility… for, in contrast to American slashers, *Black Christmas* is socially progressive and critical of society’s dominant forces.”

There have been two American remakes of Black Christmas, one in 2006, and one in 2019. While the 1974 film has an open ending, with the identity of the killer never clarified, and the reason behind his sexually-motivated phone calls and homicidal tendencies only alluded to during the killer’s obscene phone calls, the 2006 version of the film (directed by Glen Morgan) gives the audience copious amounts of back story and explanations for the killer’s actions, thus taking the original’s premise, but removing all of the ambiguity and progressiveness, instead spoon feeding the audience with a simultaneously puritanical and puerile story about abusive mothers and incest. The 2019 *Black Christmas*, directed by a woman (Sophia Takal), adapts the original film’s progressive stance in representing issues pertinent to young women, taking as its subject date rape on university campuses, a particularly timely issue in the current open, #MeToo era in media. However, as progressive as the 2019 version of *Black Christmas* is, it is not as daring as Clark’s original. With a protagonist planning to have an abortion who is in no way excoriated for her choice, *Black Christmas* is a radical horror film, even by current standards, let alone in 1974, a fact that is not emphasised in either academic or cult horror circles.

**Motherhood in the 1970s Horror Film**

The other significant representation of womanhood in the 1970s horror film is of the mother, another figure made important to the horror genre through her characterisation in *Psycho*.

---

28 Constantineau, “*Black Christmas*”, 60.
29 For more on the 2006 *Black Christmas*, see Constantineau, 60-61.
Motherhood in the 1970s horror film was essentially dominated by two constructions of the mother. Towards the end of the decade two films followed quite directly in the footsteps of Norman Bates’ castrating mother, Mrs. White in Brian de Palma’s adaptation of Stephen King’s debut novel, *Carrie* (1976), and Nora in David Cronenberg’s *The Brood* (1979), both of whom I will discuss later in this chapter. These two films naturally led into the 1980s, which was arguably the decade with the most consistently castrating and abusive mothers in the horror film, which is the subject of Chapter Two. The other type of mother found in the 1970s horror film is the suffering or grieving mother. This does not preclude complexity, but it does continue a trend in film of creating a spectacle out of women’s pain, whether physical or psychological in nature.

Richard Loncraine’s *Full Circle* (1977), also known as *The Haunting of Julia*, opens with a tragedy. Kate Lofting, the daughter of Julia and Magnus Lofting, chokes on a piece of apple at the breakfast table. Unable to dislodge the apple from her throat, Julia attempts a tracheotomy, but Kate dies. The scene ends with a powerful shot of Julia in the foreground, speckled with blood, chest heaving, and staring blankly while in the background Magnus lets in the paramedics, arriving too late. Julia spends a month in a psychiatric hospital, and when Magnus comes to pick up Julia and take her home she flees in a taxi, and in the next scene she is moving into the new house that she has bought herself, with her own money. When her sister-in-law meets with her to tell her that Magnus needs her back, Julia tells her that, “things have been wrong for a long, long time. Maybe they were never right… And now Katie’s gone there’s no reason to try.” As the film progresses Julia’s doubts in her marriage are confirmed when it becomes clear that Magnus is only interested in Julia’s money, as he mounts a gaslighting campaign in order to have her sent to a facility permanently, thus giving him control of her fortune.
All of this is only an adjunct to the main theme of the story, which concerns relationships between mothers and daughters, and the guilt and anger surrounding those relationships. Guilt and rage return in the form of revenants, continuously in a circular fashion of past bleeding into present and bleeding back into past. In a bizarre early scene in the film Julia’s sister-in-law Lily invites herself and her séance circle over to Julia’s house. Mrs. Flood, the refreshingly down-to-earth and cheerful medium, who insists that she never takes money because, “money soils the gift”, has a bad experience in the house, telling Julia that she should leave her house, as “there’s wickedness. Bad things.” Julia also senses a presence in her house, telling her friend Mark, “I keep feeling Kate in the house, in the park, and I… I feel such hatred”. Mark asks, “why should Kate hate you? You tried to save her life.” However, Julia cannot let go of the guilt she feels, believing she is the reason her daughter died. When she gets blood on her hands from a cut on her leg, she washes her hands in a manner reminiscent of Lady Macbeth, and at one point she breaks down sobbing, begging Katie, “oh my baby, forgive me, forgive me”.

Julia is told by a neighbour of a previous inhabitant of the house, Mrs. Rudge, who “had a child without any of the usual formalities…. She had a daughter, lovely little thing by all accounts… [The daughter] had an accident, she swallowed something or other, made herself sick, and choked herself.” Julia’s continued feelings of a presence in the house, further bolstered by her neighbour’s story, lead her to speak to Mrs. Flood again, finding out that the child she saw in her vision was not a little blonde girl, as Julia assumed, but a boy bleeding and dying in the park across the street from her house. This leads to Julia discovering a third mother whose child Geoffrey Braden was murdered, the tragedy of these losses echoing each other. Mrs. Braden tells Julia that murder “is an eternal crime”, and in this film that is certainly true. Mrs. Braden tells Julia about the children who murdered her son, for although she is blind, like the medium Heather in Nicolas Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* (1973) (another
film about the death of a child), she sees more than most people. In turn the remaining person involved in Geoffrey’s murder, David Swift, tells Julia about Olivia Rudge, who “to look at [was] just about the most beautiful thing in the world. She could make you do anything, absolutely anything.” It is she who murdered Geoffrey, she who though only a child had an uncanny and perverse power over the other children, who taught them “all about sex… one way or another”. Olivia’s actions continue to reverberate, thirty years after the fact. The children who were the accessories to her crime have not flourished as adults, and both the mother of her victim, Mrs. Braden, and her own mother barely even exist at all, spending their days in a ghost-like limbo themselves.

Julia, because of her similarity to both Mrs. Braden and Mrs. Rudge through her own loss and grief, has also become ensnared in this never-ending circle. When Julia finally meets Mrs. Rudge, the latter echoes Mrs. Braden when she tells Julia, “evil is not like ordinary people. Evil never dies. She’s not dead, not dead, and you’re not safe.” Mrs. Rudge stops to think, and then the cause of Julia’s kinship comes to her:

Mrs. Rudge: You killed your daughter.
Julia: No, oh no!
Mrs. Rudge: Oh yes, oh yes you did! Like I killed mine!

Julia did not in fact kill her daughter “just like” Mrs. Rudge killed hers, with intentionality and a desire to punish. However, Julia feels responsible for her daughter’s death in a way that feels like murder, due to her grief and self-blame, and so it is all the same to Olivia’s spirit. There is also, perhaps, a niggling sense in Julia that she did wish to punish Katie, for she disobeyed her mother when Julia told her not to eat an apple until after breakfast, and not to eat too fast, her fears about her daughter choking on her food coming true in a macabre ‘I told you so’ moment.
There is a continuous motif running through *Full Circle* of choking, suffocating, or neck wounds that form a direct link from the beginning of the film through to the end. Katie choked and then had her throat slashed, Geoffrey was smothered and then posthumously castrated, Olivia lures Magnus into Julia’s house and causes him to choke and then die from a neck wound, Olivia was herself suffocated and choked, and finally Julia dies from a slash to her throat. Clover discusses the importance of the mouth and throat, and the vagina, in films about spirits and possession, playing on an ancient and widespread association between the vagina and the throat – an association reflected in the fantasy of the vagina dentata, in the German word for the neck of the uterus, *Mutterhals* (“mother throat”), and in the folk belief that the body is open to the devil both during sneezing… and during orgasm.  

She argues that, “[p]ossession via oral penetration is a cliché of… [the] horror film” and “as [these stories] concern themselves with bodies penetrated, invaded, and colonized… [a]nd [with] bodily orifices, holes – natural passages to an inner space – [they] would appear to be [stories] built around the female body.” In *Full Circle*, a film predominantly populated by grieving or angry mothers, dead daughters, and castrated (either symbolically or literally) men, the majority of whom have died through a cutting or blocking of the mouth and throat, Clover’s evaluation is very apt. It is indeed through Julia’s mouth that she becomes possessed by Olivia, “making her do anything”. It is not immediately obvious that Olivia is not acting on her own when she murders Magnus, David Swift, and Mark. However, when Julia visits Mrs. Rudge, and the latter sees Olivia’s eyes in Julia’s face when Julia turns back to her as she leaves, causing Mrs. Rudge to die from a heart attack, the words of Mrs. Flood the medium are recalled, “spirits can’t do anything on their own… not in the material way. They have to have someone on this side for them to do it through first.” Through her grief and

---

maternal instincts Julia has left herself open to “colonisation” by Olivia, and in one remarkable scene Julia sleeps while Olivia sensuously caresses her face, paying particular attention to her mouth, and then they clutch hands in a way that recalls how lovers may when they have sex. As Mrs. Rudge tells her, Julia is not safe, and after leaving Mrs. Rudge at the hospital, Julia goes home and literally opens her arms to Olivia, telling her, “it’s all settled, everything’s right now. Stay with me. Stay with me. Stay.” Coming full circle, Julia dies with a slash to her throat (made with the sharp cymbal on Katie’s toy monkey), presumably to stay with Olivia forever, as her mother-lover-plaything.

The next film I will discuss also deals with possession and women’s bodies which are vulnerable to attack, but from a very different source. William Friedkin’s The Exorcist (1973) is one of the most complex, multi-layered horror films ever made. The plot revolves around Regan, the 12-year-old daughter of a famous, recently-separated film actress, showing sudden signs of extreme personality changes (swearing, mood-swings, and aggressiveness), as well as unusual somatic symptoms (unnatural strength, and flipping around in her violently shaking bed). After exhaustive medical and psychiatric tests and treatments, two priests are called in to perform an exorcism. Although this film has been written about extensively from a variety of perspectives, the focal point of academic and critical discussion is usually either Regan’s abject, pre-pubescent body, or the titular Exorcist, Father Karras, and his crisis of faith. Regan’s mother, Chris, is treated as a secondary character in discussions of this film. Most critics only discuss Chris in relation to their argument that it is she, as a single and

an economically independent mother, who is responsible for the demonic incursion into her daughter’s body. I will argue that not only does a close analysis of the film refute this assumption of blame on Chris’ part, but that the film in fact offers a supportive depiction of the difficulties of motherhood and treats Chris as a sympathetic protagonist.

Turning first to women’s abjection and suffering in the film, Clover argues that supernatural horror films, specifically those dealing with either possession or revenants, are more often than not men’s stories, despite the appearance of being centred on women. Clover further argues that though The Exorcist has Regan’s abject body as a central spectacle, “Regan’s story is finally significant only insofar as it affects the lives of others, above all the tormented spiritual life of Karras.”34 Creed discusses Regan’s abject body as both a spectacle allowing viewers to “wallow vicariously in normally taboo forms of behaviour”, and as a material representation of what she argues is the central conflict of the film, the “struggle between men and women, the ‘fathers’ and the ‘mothers’.”35

In The Exorcist, women’s abjection exists primarily to motivate and test Father Karras’ faith. Regan’s sores and emaciated body echo Karras’ mother’s oedema. Karras’ sacrifice in taking in the demon Pazuzu in Regan’s stead and then killing himself is also his way of making up for his inability to properly care for his mother, as well as the many abject and mentally unwell women he encounters in the facility where his mother is placed when she can no longer properly care for herself. Karras’ story is both of faith and family, both of which are impacting negatively on his life. Ultimately, Regan’s suffering enables him to make up for his self-defined failures as both a son and a priest.36 The Exorcist, in its exploitation of

34 Clover, Men, Women and Chain Saws, 87.
35 Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine, 37.
36 I would argue that his failures are “self-defined” in that he is too self-critical, and that he is not a failure as a son or priest.
women’s bodily and emotional suffering as a narrative foil for a man’s inner conflict to be confronted and resolved, is simply another example of a well-established trend in both literature and cinema in general, where the majority of fictional women’s suffering, humiliation, absence, death, or in fact existence at all, is not something in place to develop their own characters or stories, but only there in service of men’s plot lines. However, in its characterisation of Chris, the film becomes much less conservative and more complex in its portrayal of a female character.

Both Tony Williams and Creed argue that mother-and-child relationships and the breakdown of traditional family structures are what cause Regan’s possession. However, although their work is generally politically liberal and left-leaning, their evaluations of what they believe the film is conservatively arguing about the problems in Chris and Regan’s relationship is not borne out by the film itself, and perhaps reveals some conservatism in their own attitudes about appropriate behaviour in mothers. William’s states that,

*The Exorcist* indicates that Regan’s family life is not ideal. The twelve-year-old girl lives with her actress mother in a glossy Georgetown house during the filming of [a movie Regan’s mother is starring in]. We never learn the reason for her parents’ divorce, though tensions arising from Chris’ status as a successful star and his obscure career are possible causes.

He argues further, “[d]espite a superficially happy relationship between mother and daughter, all is not well. Chris’ histrionic manner dominates the set as she violently argues with director

37 A number of popular feminist critical concepts identify and deconstruct the various ways female characters in film and literature exist only in relation to male characters. For an introduction to the Bechdel-Wallace Test, see, Rosie Cima, “The Comic Strip that Accidentally Created a Branch of Critical Theory”, https://priceonomics.com/the-most-important-comic-strip-in-feminist/


For “Women in Refrigerators”, see the website of the same name: https://lby3.com/wir/

38 Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 111.
Burke Dennings. Both indulge in obscene language. They may also do so at home.39 Creed also makes mention of Chris’ swearing when she argues that,

[the theme of urban and spiritual decay is linked to a decline in proper familial values through the MacNeil family. What better ground for the forces of evil to take root than the household of a family in which the father is absent and where the mother continually utters profanities, particularly in relation to her husband?40

Both Williams’ and Creed’s focus on Chris’ swearing as signifying her failings as a mother seem to be more a reflection of their own perceptions of her behaviour, or at least what they expect a film in which the Catholic Church is championed to be critiquing. However, the film does not bear out this interpretation. There is indeed no evidence that Chris ever knowingly swears in front of her daughter, as the only scene in which Regan hears her mother swear is when Chris is on the phone with her husband’s hotel in Rome, and not only is this a private conversation not meant to be heard by Regan, but is also a justified display of maternal rage on Chris’ part. When Chris declares, “Can you believe this? He doesn’t even call his daughter on her birthday!... He doesn’t give a shit!”, her angry assessment of her husband is not only accurate (as evidenced by his complete lack of communication with his family throughout the film), but in this one brief scene, it is quite clear that Chris is not the cause of the discord in her family, but that her absent ex-husband is in fact the problem.

The other times Chris swears in her house are again under completely justifiable circumstances, her stress over her daughter’s worsening condition. Finally, the example Williams gives above is a particularly conservative evaluation, and one that I would argue the film does not support. The entire exchange between Chris and Burke Dennings is reproduced here:

40 Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 34.
Chris: Burke, oh Burke? Take a look at this damn thing will ya, it just doesn’t make sense.
Burke: Why, it’s perfectly plain. You’re a teacher of the college, you don’t want the building torn down…
Chris: Come on, I can read for Christ’s sakes.
Burke: Well what’s wrong?
Chris: Why are they tearing the building down?
Burke: Shall we summon the writer? He’s in Paris, I believe.
Chris: Hiding?
Burke: Fucking.

Firstly, the argument between Chris and Burke Dennings is not in any conceivable way “violent”, and Chris’ manner is neither “histrionic” nor “dominating”. They simply have a disagreement about a matter of characterisation, something actors and directors often discuss, and it quickly descends into obviously playful banter between close friends. At worst, Chris is clearly frustrated about a script she does not think makes sense, and Burke’s laconic humour has them both laughing and hugging each other after his declaration about the writer’s holiday in Paris. The “obscene language” is another aspect of their banter, and as they are both adults talking to each other at their adult place of employment, their swearing has no bearing on Chris’ fitness as a mother. The entire group of onlookers, including Father Karras himself, laughing heartily and happily at the exchange between the two famous personalities with no hint of a negative undertone to the scene, demonstrates that this scene is not intended as an excoriation of Chris, but as a demonstration of another facet of her personality, separate to her role as ‘mother’. It also serves as an early introduction to her strength of character, which is her central trait throughout the film.

Pauline Kael wrote in her review of the film in *The New Yorker*, January 7th, 1974, “there is no indication that Blatty or Friedkin has any feeling for the little girl’s helplessness and suffering, or her mother’s…”41 As with the above criticisms of Chris’ swearing, this evaluation seems to be limited by Kael’s own dislike of the film’s subject matter, for Kael

41 Kael, “The Exorcist review”.
also describes the film, as “too ugly a phenomenon to take lightly”\textsuperscript{42} and that “[w]e in the audience don’t… even feel a pang of sympathy when the words “Help Me” appear on Regan’s body.”\textsuperscript{43} The film is certainly gory and upsetting, and thus not a text that everyone can enjoy. However, to say that Friedkin does not himself demonstrate or generate in the audience sympathy for the plights of Regan and Chris is an unusual point-of-view, though it does to a certain extent align with Williams’ and Creed’s arguments. Aside from inferring that Chris’ job, marital status, and profane language are major causes of Regan’s demonic possession, not much else is made of the character of Chris and her actions as Regan’s mother, in either academic or critical circles. However, I would argue that Chris is thematically almost as important a character as Father Karras, and that both her relationship with her daughter and her suffering throughout her daughter’s illness and possession are significant elements of the film’s plot. I would further argue that she is treated sympathetically throughout, a point I will return to in greater detail shortly.

David Greven, going against the usual academic and critical grain, argues that, “[m]ost treatments of William Friedkin’s \textit{The Exorcist} frame it as misogynistic; in Barbara Creed’s view, the film itself presents the female body as itself a site of horror. If we re-examine \textit{The Exorcist}… we can understand that one of its major themes is a mother’s attempt to preserve her relationship with her daughter despite overwhelming male opposition.”\textsuperscript{44} This is an interesting statement, especially in relation to how others interpret their relationship. Greven describes their relationship “before the possession sets in [as] notably warm [and] physically affectionate.”\textsuperscript{45} Creed, on the other hand, states, “[w]ithout a father or a father figure present, Regan and her mother live together, almost like lovers. They share an unusual physical

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Kael, “The Exorcist review”}.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Kael, “The Exorcist review”}.
\textsuperscript{44} Greven, \textit{Representations of Femininity}, 85.
\textsuperscript{45} Greven, \textit{Representations of Femininity}, 86.
intimacy, holding and caressing each other as they plan the details of their daily lives.” Like my own disagreement with Williams regarding the scene discussed above, of the ‘argument’ between Chris and Burke Dennings on her film set, there is a significant contrast between Greven and Creed’s interpretations of the way Chris and Regan’s relationship is depicted, and I can in no stronger terms stress how much I disagree with the latter’s assessment, particularly the absurd reading of the intimacy in the relationship.

There is nothing lover-like about the way Chris and Regan behave towards each other, unless one was to argue that all single mothers have ‘lover-like’ relationships with their children, due to the “lack of a father or father figure”. So, too, their “unusual physical intimacy” is only unusual in that it is uncommon. There is nothing inappropriate about the way Chris and Regan interact physically, nothing incestuous about a mother stroking her daughter’s hair, which is about as close as the film gets to having Chris “caress” her daughter. I therefore concur with Greven’s reading of a mother attempting to preserve her relationship with her daughter, “despite overwhelming male opposition.” No human males in the film itself put up any opposition to Chris and Regan’s relationship, and surprisingly the representative of patriarchal control of women in this film is not the Catholic Church or its priests, but the male possessing demon itself. In the relationship between Chris and Regan, it is clear that the only sexualisation that occurs between them is that which Pazuzu wreaks. In pulling Chris’ face into her daughter’s crotch and shouting “Lick me, lick me!” Pazuzu not only tries to pervert a perfectly normal mother-daughter relationship, but by choosing a form of sex act that is arguably the most female-centric, he also attempts to pervert female sexuality itself.

---

46 Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine, 40.
Creed argues that the demon in *The Exorcist* is “female and far from ‘innocent’.”⁴⁷ She further argues that because Regan is possessed at the “commencement of puberty, the threshold between girlhood and womanhood, the time when adolescent sexual desires find shape and expression… it is not surprising that Regan’s possession is aggressively sexual”, and that, “[e]schewing all forms of ladylike behaviour, [Regan] utters obscene blasphemies; makes lewd sexual suggestions to her mother; and attacks a doctor by grabbing his testicles. She becomes the castrating girl/woman, a figure designed to strike terror into the hearts of men.”⁴⁸ However, possessed-Regan does not simply “eschew ladylike behaviour”, and the sexuality that she demonstrates is not the sexuality of a normally socialised adolescent girl, even a rebellious one (or even an “untamed, “raw” adult woman in fact), and nothing in the film indicates that she has been anything but ‘normally’ socialised; no exposure to pornographic material or overt sexual behaviour by the adults surrounding her, no likelihood of physical or sexual abuse by either of her parents or anyone else that might account for a display of such aberrant sexual expression. Thus, Greven makes a valuable point when he argues that the demon is certainly a masculine one, for “[t]he sexually obscene, perverse, and violent demon… that possesses Regan is a dark image of male sexuality as well as compulsory heterosexuality’s colonization of female sexuality.”⁴⁹ This assessment makes sense, for Pazuzu does not behave as if he is representing women’s abject, raw, and socially unacceptable sexuality.⁵⁰ Pazuzu is definitively male, and his sexuality is the kind that likes to degrade women (“Let Jesus fuck you!”), make homophobic slurs (“shove it up your ass you faggot”), make ‘your mum’ ‘jokes’ (“your mother sucks cocks in hell!”). If Pazuzu were to possess someone in 2020 he would oxymoronically call women who do not want to sleep

---

⁵⁰ For an example of a horror film that successfully explores women’s untamed sexuality as a perceived threat to masculinity, see Julia Ducournau’s *Raw* (2016).
with him ‘sluts’, he would tell women who challenge his authority online that he is going to rape them, and he would send unsolicited ‘dick pics’. There is nothing female, norm-challenging or otherwise, about the sexuality of the demon possessing Regan. The answer to the question, “why Regan?” cannot be found in Chris and Regan’s ‘broken’ home, but in what Father Merrin himself says to Father Karras when he asks the former that exact question, “I think the point is to make us despair, to see ourselves as animal and ugly. To make us reject the possibility that God could love us”, and what is more ‘animal and ugly’ than the sexualisation of a child?

Father Merrin’s comment again reminds us that this story is not really Regan’s, but Father Karras’. However, this film is also Chris’ story, and it is nothing but sympathetic to her plight, and her characterisation as a single, working mother is radical in a film that otherwise affirms the healing power of the Catholic Church. Not a single priest refers to Chris’ marital status except to ask if Regan’s father is aware of her illness, Father Karras is clearly a fan of her work, and she is in fact close enough friends with another priest, Father Dyer, that he comes to a party she throws. Despite her obviously successful career (early in the film she receives an invitation to an intimate dinner at the White House), she does not neglect her daughter. Allison M. Kelly, talking about a scene late in the film, before Father Karras’ final assault on Pazuzu, says of Chris,

[she] emerges from another room, her face haggard and hopeless, and dully asks, “is she going to die?” This is a woman who has finally learned how to love her child unconditionally. Before, she spent more time at work than with her daughter, and now she is being forced to pay attention and provide care for Regan.51 (emphasis mine).

In fact, the film only has one scene in which Chris is at work, and it takes place during fairly standard business hours, as she leaves for work in the morning, and returns home before dark, and as soon as Regan starts getting sick, she spends hours taking her to doctor’s appointments. Aside from the aforementioned college-campus filming scene, the only other scene in the film that depicts any behaviour on Chris’ part that could be considered “selfish” or “self-centred” is the scene of the party she hosts, which Chris and Father Karras’ priest-friend attends. Regan attends the party for a while, and then she goes to bed while the party continues. When she wakes up later and comes downstairs, she says something inappropriate to a guest (telling an astronaut that he is “going to die up there”), and then urinates on the carpet. A truly selfish parent might get angry at her child, and would certainly be embarrassed, for ‘ruining’ a glamorous party, however Chris apologises for Regan’s comment, but otherwise explains that her daughter has been ill. The next scene shows Chris, still wearing her party dress, kneeling next to the bath and washing Regan’s hair, hardly the behaviour of a mother who requires a threat to her daughter’s life in order “to love her child unconditionally” and be “forced to pay attention and care for her daughter”.

During these scenes of Chris attending medical appointments the film further contradicts Kael’s argument that Friedkin shows no feeling for Regan or Chris’ suffering. More so than the spectacle of an emaciated, possessed Regan, the truly horrifying scenes are the realistic depictions of the rigorous medical testing Regan undergoes, and very few people, parents or otherwise, could watch these scenes, and the way that Chris suffers as she watches her daughter suffer, without sympathy or even empathy. During an early scene, before any of the more invasive procedures have been done, having decided to trial Ritalin for a few weeks in order to combat what at first appears to be hyperactivity, the neurologist tells Chris, “in the
meantime, try not to worry”. Chris pauses and then asks, “how?” With this one word, Chris captures the entire experience of being a ‘mother’.

Moving from suffering and grieving mothers, I now turn to the monstrous, abusive mothers who most directly follow in the footsteps of Mrs. Bates. One of the most famous and significant of these castrating mothers is Mrs. Margaret White, the abusive, Old Testament-driven mother in Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). As this film and its aberrant “Mama” has had considerable academic attention, I will only discuss it briefly. The film opens with a shocking scene that immediately captures the neglect Carrie has faced at the hands of her mother, before the audience ever sees Mrs. White. While high schooler Carrie sensuously showers in a scene that could easily come from a softcore pornographic film, a closeup of Carrie rubbing soap into her thigh quickly changes the register of the scene, as blood starts to flow down her leg. From her age (approximately sixteen or seventeen years old) and the location of the blood, it is immediately clear to the audience that Carrie is simply menstruating. However, the surprise and then distress on Carrie’s face, followed by her screaming and asking her classmates for help, demonstrates that not only has Carrie never menstruated before, but that she does not even recognise what is happening to her body.

Surprising enough as it is that Carrie has not had a period at this age, it is much more startling to find that she has clearly never been told about such a perfectly normal occurrence. When Carrie’s mother is introduced shortly after it is clear why Carrie is seemingly so sheltered.

When Carrie admonishes her mother for never having told her about menstruation, Margaret White smacks her in the head with a religious tract, and then begins to proselytise to her,

Mrs. White: And the Lord visited Eve with a curse. And the curse was the curse of blood.

---

52 This scene, to be fair to Kael, was not in the original theatrical release.
Carrie: You should have told me Mama, you should have told me.
Mrs. White: Oh Lord!... Show her that if she had remained sinless the curse of blood would never have come on her. She may have been tempted by the Antichrist. She may have committed the sin of lustful thoughts.
Carrie: No Mama!
Mrs. White: Oh don’t you lie to me Carrietta! Don’t you know by now I can see inside of you? I can see the sin as surely as God can.

This scene, which ends with Carrie being locked in a cupboard to pray to a brutal and macabre crucifix, demonstrates that Mrs. White is not simply neglectful but abusively monstrous. In her full realisation on the screen, Mrs. White takes the concept of the monstrous mother that is only ever hinted at with Mrs. Bates and turns her into a broad but disturbing caricature.

Mrs. White is some sort of obscure and extreme Christian Fundamentalist who “incarnates the irrational misogyny of Christian rhetoric.” So irrational is she that, aside from her belief that if a girl never has impure, sexual thoughts then she will never menstruate, Mrs. White also believes that no one should have sex, and that if God wills that someone have a baby that they will be blessed with immaculate conception. Although any negative fictional characterisations of women can have a harmful impact on how people see and treat real women, by the time Mrs. White refers to Carrie’s breasts as “dirty pillows”, and calls her extremely pale pink, almost white prom dress, “red”, it is clear that she is so parodic that she is not representative of any type of woman- or motherhood that even the most jaded misogynist could imagine existing in real life.

The film’s strongest point is in the effect Margaret has on her daughter’s self-esteem and mental health, which is all too realistic in its representation of how a child can be affected if she is systematically abused for her entire life. It is particularly sad for the viewer to see that,

53 Short, Misfit Sisters, 70.
despite her obvious questioning of her mother’s monstrous ideals, Carrie still seeks her mother’s approval and affection. This is particularly affecting when, after the disastrous prom, Carrie returns home and tells her mother that she was right, that they did all laugh at her (even though the reason they did was because of the bloody prank played on her, not anything fundamental to herself). Mrs. White hugs her daughter, stroking her hair, but then stabs her.

The real strength of the film lies in the performances of both Piper Laurie as Margaret, and Sissy Spacek as Carrie, elevating this material above mere caricature, for their affect is authentic, and our sympathy for Carrie is real. It is not only Spacek’s performance, though, that elicits our sympathy, but her physicality. In the novel by Stephen King on which De Palma’s film is based, Carrie White is a much more nuanced and complex character, demonstrating some very realistic consequences of her life of abuse at the hands of both her mother and peers. King’s Carrie is much harder to sympathise with, because she is physically unattractive, and is filled with barely contained, but justified female rage. De Palma, however, holds to his oft-quoted adage “female frailty is part of the suspense form,” and thus by casting Spacek his Carrie is beautiful and exudes a waifish and sweet vulnerability, even as she kills her tormentors at the prom. Much as this film is beautifully performed and executed, it would be a truly great moment in female representation in film if an adaptation of Carrie were made that stayed true to King’s Carrie, in order to see if our sympathy could be just as readily elicited by a physically unattractive woman whose abuse has led to realistically portrayed female rage.

54 Apparently stated in an interview. Though I have been unable to find the actual interview, it is quoted, but not referenced, in William Schoell, Stay Out of the Shower: The Shocker Film Phenomenon, (London: Robinson Publishing, 1985, 1988), 41.
I will now turn to a simultaneously more unreal and more complex representation of monstrous motherhood. David Cronenberg’s *The Brood* (1979) features many of the key themes and preoccupations of the Canadian auteur: a mysterious scientific institute, body horror, and sinister and mentally unstable characters. However, as William Beard argues, unlike Cronenberg’s preceding films, *Shivers* and *Rabid*, which focused on greater social themes around sexuality and biological destiny through a large and anonymous population of people (in a large apartment complex in the former, and an entire city in the latter), “[*The Brood*] allegorizes a personal drama, and carries a recognizable private conflict, domestic and generational, into the amplified metaphorical conventions of the horror genre.”  

Nola Carveth is undergoing a radical psychiatric treatment called psychoplasmics, with Dr. Hal Raglan at the Somafree Institute. This treatment is supposed to allow patients to release their negative emotions through a sort of displacement onto physical changes in their bodies. Nola’s husband Frank discovers bruises, bites, and scratches on their daughter Candace after a visit with her mother. What follows is the story of a marriage’s breakdown, and the consequences for the children involved, as well as generational patterns of anger and abuse, tinged with Cronenberg’s signature unsettling body horror.

Nola is ultimately the monstrous mother of the piece, as although she is not physically abusing Candace, or even aware that she is being abused, Nola’s rage physically manifests as children she births from an exo-womb, who then carry out her vengeful thoughts and feelings. However, despite Nola’s both figurative and literal monstrousness, she is a complex character whose interior life and mistreatment at the hands of her family of origin is

---

substantially focused on throughout the film, allowing her a humanity that can be empathised with.

Dr. Raglan’s method of therapy involves him roleplaying with his patients as the traumatic figures in their lives, allowing them to express their feelings and thoughts in a dialogue that they could never replicate with the real people involved. Throughout the film he takes on the role of different figures for Nola, and through this dialogue we see her entire family history play out without a need for unnatural expository monologues. It is through one of these dialogues that it is made clear that Nola is unaware of the harm that is being done to her daughter Candace, for when Dr. Raglan role plays as Candace, asking mummy why she hurt her, Nola replies, “no I didn’t sweetie, you must have had a bad dream. Mummies don’t do that, mummies don’t hurt their children.” This of course allows the contradictory reality to come to light, when Raglan asks if mummies really do not ever hurt their children,

Nola: They sometimes do. Sometimes, when they’re bad mummies. Fucked up mummies.
Dr. Raglan: Like who? Like whose mummy?
Nola: Like mine was. Fucked up and bad.
Dr. Raglan: No I’m not Nola. You’re being so unfair sweetheart. Mummies never do that. Mummies never hurt their own children.
Nola: You did hurt me. You beat me, and you scratched me. You threw me down the stairs.

Although this film, like many other horror films before and since, focuses on the mother as monstrous, while the father is doing his best to counteract this monstrousness, Cronenberg’s raw and realistic dialogue about generational effects of abuse, and the blame that can also be attached to people who see the abuse but do nothing about it, makes for a complex and believable monstrous-feminine.

A later conversation between Nola and Dr. Raglan illuminates this pattern of behaviours further, when Raglan adopts the persona of Nola’s well-meaning but ineffectual father.
Raglan posits that Frank is simply being protective of their daughter Candy when he keeps her away from Nola, wanting to protect her, even if it’s from her own mother, asking,

Dr. Raglan: Now is there anything wrong with that?...
Nola: No.
Dr. Raglan: No there isn’t. After all, that’s what I did for you isn’t it? Frank’s protecting Candy the same way I protected you, isn’t he? Isn’t he?
Nola: No.
Dr. Raglan: No? What do you mean, no?...
Nola: I love you daddy.
Dr. Raglan: What do you mean when you say no?
Nola: I don’t want you to think that I don’t love you.
Dr. Raglan: What do you mean when you say no?
Nola: I meant you didn’t.
Dr. Raglan: Didn’t? Didn’t what?
Nola: You didn’t protect me. You didn’t, you didn’t, you didn’t. And you should have. You shouldn’t have looked away when she hit me. And you shouldn’t have walked away from the table when she twisted my words. You should have stopped her. You should have… when she hit me, and when she slapped me. Oh God, I love you. But you didn’t protect me, and you should have. You pretended it wasn’t happening. You looked away… Why didn’t you? Why didn’t you? Didn’t you love me?

This exchange demonstrates that blame can be assigned to passive behaviour as well as active, and that none of it leaves the victim of abuse in a healthy mental state. It also highlights the multiple and contradictory feelings that one can experience about the same person, in this case Nola feels both strong love for but also resentment and anger toward her father.

After Frank witnesses both Nola’s parthenogenesis and the violence that “the children of her rage” are capable of first hand, he murders her in order to stop her “brood” from attacking Candace. However, there is clearly a relief and violent satisfaction in the way Frank strangles Nola, finally excising what he sees as the real threat to Candy, her “mad” mother. The message we take from this film, however, is that removing the cause of the trauma does not make the trauma any less, that its effects are ongoing. Nola’s mother Juliana tells Candace that Nola spent a lot of time in hospital as a child (which of course seems likely to be at least
sometimes as a result of Juliana’s own violence towards Nola), “[because] some days she would wake up and be covered in big, ugly bumps. The doctors were very worried because they could never find out what those bumps all over her skin really were.” In the final scene of the film a close-up of Candace’s arm shows many small bumps that look like a rash, but putting this together with what Juliana said earlier, and the particular form Nola’s psychoplasmics-induced physical manifestations take, it is clear that in this film psychological and physical trauma are inextricable from each other, and passed from generation to generation. Thus, although this film depicts a monstrous mother that truly emphasises the monstrous as something beyond psychology, the emotions, complexities, and multiple points of sympathetic identification demonstrated in the dialogue and characterisation elevates this material above the superficiality of a film such as *Carrie*.

The representation of women in the horror films of the 1970s did not consistently reflect the reality of the civil rights gains for women and the significance of the second wave of feminism. Although film makers in this decade used the medium of the horror film to address race relations, interrogate and subvert the status and complacency of middle-class families, critique the economic and social inequities between the working- and middle-classes, and excoriate America’s involvement in the Vietnam War, women’s roles in horror films largely adhered to the narrow paradigm established in *Psycho*, of the Final (good) Girl, the ‘slut’, and Mother. Though more complex than the damsels in distress and good wives of the classical age, women characters, with some notable exceptions, were still subjected to patriarchal violence and victimisation on the one hand, and charges of monstrosity and inappropriate and threatening sexuality on the other.

*Black Christmas*, arguably the first slasher film, was a genuine high point in the representation of women and women’s political and social gains in the 1970s. However, its
more famous successor in the slasher subgenre, *Halloween*, consistent with the good/bad girl dichotomy in *Psycho*, set a precedent of punishing women’s sexuality, which, when combined with a tendency towards transmisogyny arising from the nature of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*, established a disturbing trend towards both physical and psychological violence against not only women, but certain types of femininity itself in the 1980s horror film.

Further to this, any positive engagement with the figure of the mother found in particularly *The Exorcist*, as well as *Full Circle*, and even *The Brood*, was pushed aside in the following decade in favour of embracing the kind of monstrous motherhood established in *Psycho*, and fully realised in *Carrie*, resulting in some of the most cartoonishly villainous monstrous mothers to grace the screen.
Chapter Two

Misogyny, Madness, and the Spectre of Capitalism: The 1980s

In Chapter One I discussed the twin impacts of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and the second wave of feminism on the horror genre in the 1970s. These impacts continued to be felt during the 1980s, however, Susan Faludi argues that representations of women in the cinema of the 1980s were particularly lamentable due to a backlash against the social gains for women of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, a sort of filmic putting of women back in their place (at home, making dinner, and raising babies).

Robin Wood, writing several years earlier about what he refers to as “the violence against women movie” (as juxtaposed to “the teenie kill pic”), (reservedly) comes to the same conclusion as Faludi’s later, well-developed hypothesis, stating that the “hysterical response to 60s and 70s feminism… account[s] for the intensity, repetitiveness and ritual insistence of these films” through which “the male spectator enjoys a sadistic revenge on women who have begun to refuse to slot neatly and obligingly into his patriarchally predetermined view of the way things should naturally be.”

I would go further than Wood, in line with Faludi, and argue that it is not only the “male spectator” that is the gatekeeper of patriarchally determined gender roles, but that many

---


women in the 1980s (as before, and since) were conditioned into taking as active a stance in their own repression as men did.

The horror films of the 1980s actively engage with the dominant Reaganite values of capitalism and the middle-class family, sometimes critiquing but often supporting those values. Many horror films in this decade are concerned with exposing the harmful effects of the capitalist and masculine American Dream on families and women, as well as on men themselves. However, the majority of horror films in the 1980s offer as reductive a representation of femininity as the slasher subgenre, with motherhood rather than chastity being the dominant venerated female trait. While some of these films emphasise a monstrous side of motherhood, such as the overbearing and castrating Mother of the Psycho sequels (1983 and 1986), the abusive mothers of Mommie Dearest (1981), and Flowers in the Attic (1987), or the fatally neglectful mother of American Gothic (1987), other films reify the mother (the absent mother in Dolls (1987), and Carol Anne’s devoted mother in Poltergeist (1982)), and demonise women who prioritise other concerns such as materialistic pleasures (the stepmother in Dolls), or career over family (Alex in Fatal Attraction (1987)). One thing that the horror genre in general represents as the ideal of femininity is that “an autonomous female sexuality [that the heterosexual male] can’t control and organise”3 is not tolerated.

**The ‘Golden’ Age of the Slasher**

Although the slasher film was born in its ongoing form in the 1970s with Clark’s Black Christmas and Carpenter’s Halloween (1978), it was in the 1980s that it reached its misogynistic peak. While men are killed in slasher films, their deaths are incidental and swiftly dealt with, while the murders of women are carried out graphically and slowly, in

---

order to emphasise the message of punishment and humiliation for those women who transgress social and sexual boundaries. There is also, of course, a hypocritical element of erotic spectacle in these tableaus of sexualised violence, for as Dario Argento states, “I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man.”

Adam Rockoff argues in his retrospective book about the slasher phenomenon:

[m]uch has been written on the difference between the deaths of the sexes, how men are killed quickly, while the women are forced to suffer. However, it is certainly a stretch to propose that this was ever a conscious choice on the part of the filmmaker. I refuse to believe that, for example, Herschel Gordon Lewis and David Friedman sat around discussing psychosexual paradigms before making *The Wizard of Gore*.

While that would have been an interesting conversation to witness, Rockoff’s statement demonstrates a wilful ignorance of the ways in which cultural and social norms are internalised and disseminated throughout a cultural group. To paraphrase Susan Faludi, the patriarchy is not an Illuminati-style secret society holding regular meetings to determine which cultural product will be used to further the patriarchal agenda this week. Rather,

[the] workings [of the backlash] are encoded and internalized…. Taken as a whole, however, these codes and cajoling, these whispers and threats and myths, move overwhelmingly in one direction: they try to push women back into their “acceptable” roles - whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic, active nester or passive love object…. A backlash against women’s rights succeeds to the degree that it appears not to be political, that it appears not to be a struggle at all.

---

It is exactly in this way that the horror films of the 1980s are able to disseminate conservative gender representations, because they are seen as mindless entertainment and thus harmless. They are so successful in fact, that a writer like Rockoff, who is clearly very knowledgeable about slasher films and does not come across as overtly misogynistic, is blind to how prevalent the objectification and victimisation of women is in his genre of study.\(^8\)

Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the 13\(^{th}\)* (1980) utilised the formula established in *Halloween*, of a tragic past event whose lack of resolution leads to a present-day massacre, a formula used repeatedly afterwards in the slasher film.\(^9\) In *Friday the 13\(^{th}\)*, the past event is the accidental death of a little boy named Jason at summer Camp Crystal Lake due to negligence on the part of the camp counsellors who were having sex when they should have been watching him. This leads the mother of the boy to exact revenge on all camp counsellors from then on, particularly sexually promiscuous ones. Unlike other slasher films, including *Halloween*, there is a logical, narrative reason for Mrs. Voorhees’ particular focus on counsellors who she perceives as having inappropriate sex, since that is the specific traumatic event that led to her son’s death. The deaths, too, in *Friday the 13\(^{th}\)* are not more brutal for women, as the most gruesome and memorable death is reserved for Kevin Bacon’s character Jack, who dies *post coitum* with a spear stabbed up through the mattress underneath him and then through his chest. Similarly, Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) not only introduced a genre-defining villain in Freddie Krueger, but it did not specifically punish and humiliate its women victims, and the Final Girl Nancy is a particularly competent and savvy one. It is worth noting, that although the prevalence and brutality of the deaths of secondary

\(^8\) The graphic torture of women as the central spectacle on screen has not abated into the 21st century. For example, in 2017 I saw Samuel Galli’s *Our Evil* (2017), a Brazilian horror film, at a film festival. Of the nine deaths featured in the film, two were men (one quick, clean death, and one death offscreen). Of the remaining seven women, five of those were lingering, brutal, violent and sexually humiliating deaths.

female characters increased throughout the 1980s, the Final Girl herself became a much more active figure than her mostly passive counterpart in the 1970s slasher, for as Sarah Trencansky argues, “the heroines of the 1980s series go much further than simply defending themselves, matching or exceeding the powers of their monsters with their own.”¹⁰ This is true of many of the most famous and successful slashers, such as several of the Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, and Hellraiser films, which I will discuss in relation to Hellraiser later in this chapter.

Following Friday the 13th, however, the slasher subgenre descended into simplistic caricatures, with only a few interesting standouts. Paul Lynch’s Prom Night (1980), Tony Maylam’s The Burning (1981), and Tom DeSimone’s Hell Night (1981) all follow the same general formula as Halloween and Friday the 13th, with a past trauma influencing the present, and causing a killing spree. The three films heavily focus their violent acts on women who have just had or are about to have sex, thus continuing the trend of punishing ‘slutty’ girls. As none of the films are innovative in any other ways, nor do they have particularly interesting Final Girls, I will move on to two films which are exploitative but in more original ways. Roger Spottiswoode’s Terror Train (1980) and Robert Hiltzik’s Sleepaway Camp (1983) are not as focused on the obvious victimisation of sexually active women as the previous three films, however they make up for that lack with transphobia and transmisogyny. In Terror Train, Kenny, the victim of a prank gone wrong, returns three years later to take revenge on the perpetrators of the prank. Taking multiple disguises throughout the film in order to get close to his victims at a New Year’s Eve party aboard a train, the Final Girl Alana (Jamie Lee Curtis in her third turn as the Final Girl, her second for 1980 alone) discovers that the

attractive female magician’s assistant (who has accompanied the party’s entertainer throughout the film, a magician played by David Copperfield himself) was Kenny in disguise all along. Since the prank that institutionalised Kenny involved Alana pretending she wanted to have sex with him, the theme of emasculation is clear in his chosen disguise. This form of disguise, only one of many during the film, exemplifies Lucy J. Miller’s argument that “[t]ransgender womanhood becomes… just another monster costume, with wigs, dresses, makeup, and hidden penises taking the place of Jason’s mask or Freddy Krueger’s clawed glove.”

Sleepaway Camp begins with a father, his son Peter, and daughter Angela on a boating day out, when the father and one of the children dies in an accident. The daughter moves in with her aunt and cousin, and the film jumps forward eight years to teenaged Angela, painfully introverted, going to summer camp with her cousin Ricky for the first time. At the camp, people start dying, beginning with the camp cook who is killed by a boiling pot of water falling on his head after he attempts to sexually assault Angela. Following this incident, anyone who torments Angela or her cousin Ricky dies in a gruesome way that is fairly typical for a slasher film. At the end, the few campers who are left alive discover Angela sitting with a boy’s decapitated head in her lap, and when she stands up brandishing a knife, she is nude and has male genitalia. The film flashes back to when Angela first arrived to live with her aunt. It turns out that Peter survived, not Angela, but her aunt decided that since she already had a son, she would rather have a daughter, and raised Peter as Angela.

Following in the footsteps of Psycho, both of these films associate transgender women with monstrosity, and mental illness. Much like Psycho, neither of the characters are actually

transgender, as Kenny is only presenting as a woman in order to disguise himself, and Angela/Peter’s gender dysmorphia is forced upon him by his aunt. However, as with *Psycho*, the shocking twist and climactic revelations of both of these films hinge on the discovery that these characters who appeared to be women throughout each film are actually men, and they are also psychotic murderers. As Miller identifies:

*Sleepaway Camp* offers an example of an extreme response to the type of abuse many transgender people are forced to endure on an almost daily basis. Verbal harassment and physical attacks are a common, almost daily experience for most transgender people… Generally, they do not respond by trying to murder their assailants. Suicide is a much more common response to bullying and abuse.  

There is so little representation of transgender characters in film and television, and the majority of that representation is in horror films where transgender or trans-seeming characters are homicidal monsters, that, although *Terror Train* and *Sleepaway Camp* do not particularly focus on punishing deaths for promiscuous women, they are particularly guilty of egregious representations of transgender women as epitomising the monstrous-feminine, which has the potential to be much more damaging.  

I would like to turn next to J. Lee Thompson’s *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981). This film is an entertaining slasher film, however it has two elements that make it stand out as significant in the genre. The first is that it addresses class conflict, and specifically that it critiques notions of class superiority and the possession of wealth entitling one to behave as one likes. The film is set on and around an elite private school’s campus and revolves around a group of students known as the “Crawford Top Ten”, consisting of the children of particularly wealthy and powerful parents. The principal, Mrs. Patterson, captures exactly the tone the film is

---

12 Miller, “Fear and the Cisgender Audience”, 44.
13 *Psycho*, *Terror Train*, *Sleepaway Camp*, *Dressed to Kill*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Insidious*, *Insidious: Chapter Two*, and *Pretty Little Liars*, to name only a very few, all associate transgender identities with monstrosity.
attempting when she tells the protagonist, Virginia, “you and all your gang, you think that because you are rich you can sneer at people who have had to work hard, people who had to fight to get a decent education. That you can do just as you please.” Related to these class issues, the other innovation is that the film contains a mother character who in some ways is a precursor to Sidney Prescott’s mother Maureen in the Scream films (which I will discuss in the next chapter). The killer is Virginia’s best friend Ann, disguised as the heroine herself, in a memorable if impossible gas lighting stratagem involving very sophisticated latex trickery and flawless physical and vocal impersonation. Ann’s motive for the elaborate frame job is that Virginia’s social-climbing mother had an affair with Ann’s father (revealed to also be Virginia’s biological father). Ann’s mother eventually leaves their family, for which Ann blames Virginia and her mother. Instead of blaming her own father for cheating on his wife, Ann chooses to lay the blame for this sexual misconduct on the women involved, just as the killer in Scream did. As in Scream, however, Happy Birthday to Me allows the mother character to have some complexity, in that while she is portrayed as an alcoholic and shrewish adulterous social climber, she is also loving and protective of her daughter, and angry when no one comes to Virginia’s birthday party. When their car falls in the water, in a flashback, Estelle knows that she will not get out of the car alive (having been impaled by the gear stick), but she makes every effort to make sure her daughter is able to escape and survive.

The next film I would like to discuss establishes a completely new paradigm for the slasher genre and its representation of women in the 1980s. In 1987, during a television special about The Women of Horror, author Clive Barker declared that “[h]orror films are the last refuge of the chauvinist, who can do terrible things to women on the screen.”14, and in his film of the

same year, *Hellraiser*, Barker seeks to address and challenge the typically passive and reductive representation of women in the horror film. With *Hellraiser*, through his two complex and flawed female characters, Julia and Kirsty, Barker uses the generic conventions of the slasher film in order to subvert and undermine these conventions and expose the conservative and reactionary gender politics that these films usually advance.

*Hellraiser* is significant for the absence of the victimisation and exploitation of women, marking it as a watershed moment in the horror film. Gratuitous female nudity in slasher (and other) films is so prevalent that later, metafictional horror films Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996) and Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) both have characters give speeches on how important this trope is to the genre. However, for a film that is fundamentally concerned with kinky sexuality, *Hellraiser* contains very little female nudity, and that which it does contain is brief and non-exploitative. Even more importantly, aside from Julia being opportunistically stabbed by Frank, there are no female victims in this film. The victims in this film are men, and they are punished and humiliated with as much gusto as the girls and women in other horror films of this period. Instead of using his platform to endorse a reactionary and conservative agenda, or reverse the victimisation gratuitously, Barker chooses to emphasise the ways in which women are exploited and abused by men and offers a cathartic retribution onscreen.

The catalyst of the plot of *Hellraiser* is the ennui and complacent sense of entitlement found in men in the 1980s that results from the rampant capitalism of Western culture. Frank Cotton (Sean Chapman) is a dilettante who seeks visceral sexual experiences with which to

fill his otherwise empty life. When we encounter him at the beginning of the film, Frank has become so numbed to any kind of pleasure that he seeks out the fabled puzzle box of the Cenobites, which is rumoured to bring pleasures beyond mortal reckoning. This critique of materialistic excess is only a minor note in the film, but it is important in driving the narrative forward, and for illuminating the related phenomenon of patriarchal, toxic masculinity.

In *Hellraiser*, Barker chooses to focus his critique of patriarchal masculinity on the way men treat their romantic and sexual partners, and thus exposes the sense of entitlement that men feel they have over women’s bodies. There are many instances of disrespect, and worse, from men to women throughout the film, and because these events are presented from the point-of-view of the women in the film, we are positioned to see these events for the critiques of overbearing masculinity they are. A minor instance of this is the scene in which some movers are helping Larry get the marital bed into the house. One of the movers in particular is quite lascivious to both Julia and Kirsty, and as a female spectator I certainly found it satisfying to see such an everyday occurrence of sexism not only acknowledged and represented as a problem, but also to have the vicarious pleasure of seeing Julia and Kirsty so thoroughly shut this behaviour down, in Julia’s refusal to fetch the men beer, and Kirsty’s sarcastic “not much”, when the mover asks her if she would like to buy a bed. It is primarily


17 For a concise introduction to the term, see, Michael Flood (2018), “Toxic masculinity: A primer and commentary”, XY, June 7, 2018. URL: https://xyonline.net/content/toxic-masculinity-primer-and-commentary

18 Faludi and Evans, for example, discuss the Reagan administration and New Right’s efforts to strike down the Equal Rights Amendment and take abortion and other reproductive rights away from women, and Jennifer McMahon-Howard, Jody Clay-Warner and Linda Renzulli discuss the changes to rape laws in the 60s and 70s, and how the removal of the spousal rape clause was the most resisted reform, throughout the 1980s, in their paper “Criminalizing Spousal Rape: The Diffusion of Legal Reforms”, *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter 2009): 505-531.

19 There is a similar scene in Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist*, in which older daughter Dana puts some leering construction workers in their place with a raised middle-finger, to the evident enjoyment and approval of her mother Diane.
Julia who bears the brunt of sexism and abusive behaviour from men in this film. As the most ambiguous, complex character in the film, these instances of male misbehaviour and violence towards Julia serve to further complicate the spectator’s feelings towards her.

When we are first introduced to Julia (Clare Higgins), she is depicted through her hairstyle, dress, and mode of addressing her husband, as shrewish, cold, and severe, while her husband Larry (Andrew Robinson) seems long-suffering and henpecked. Our first ingress into Julia’s inner world is through a flashback that shows her meeting Larry’s brother Frank just before their wedding. The manifest reaction to her characterisation in this scene is that she is a heartless adulterer having sex with her fiancé’s brother, on top of her wedding dress no less. Cynthia A. Freeland certainly subscribes to this view, arguing that the “[f]lashbacks depict [Frank and Julia’s] coupling as heated and illicit, making it plain that [they] are evil, while poor deceived Larry is good and innocent,” marking the film’s tone as conservative.

However, if we look deeper, we find that Barker has skilfully created a scenario in which, despite her morally objectionable choice here, we see Julia as a complex and sympathetic figure, and are inclined to distrust and dislike Frank.

When flashback-Julia opens the door to Frank’s knock, she cuts a much gentler figure than present-day Julia. Her hair is much softer in style, she is wearing less makeup, she has a big, open smile on her face, and even the formal elements of the scene reflect this, the camera adopting a soft-focus when we first see her. As the scene progresses, Julia is seduced by Frank, who is violent and forceful in his approach to her body, claiming it as a possession.

---

As the film continues, Julia commits increasingly reprehensible acts, but the spectator continues to have sympathy and perhaps even empathy for her actions. In the dinner-party scene we see that it is not only Julia who is to blame for her failing marriage. During this scene Julia chooses to leave early and go to bed. When Larry elects to stay and continue the party, a close up of Julia’s face shows her initial hope that he will come with her, and her disappointment when he does not. In the somewhat shy way she says goodnight to her husband, and the small look back at him over her shoulder as she leaves, we again see the vulnerable Julia who was seduced by her brother-in-law, so it is not surprising that she succumbs to Frank again when she encounters his resurrected form in the attic moments later. However selfishly motivated, she sees in Frank a man who at least needs her, as her husband does not appear to.

The preceding acts by the men in Julia’s life are only minor examples of the ways in which men exert control over, or show a complete lack of interest or understanding of the desires of, the women in their lives, but Barker mines them for every possible element of truth and pathos in their representation of gender relations. After she makes her pact with Frank to bring him blood in order to properly re-form his body, Julia goes to a bar and picks up a man to bring home for this purpose. With this scene, Barker critically depicts another instance of masculine entitlement and sense of ownership over women’s bodies. When Julia is kissing the man she has brought home, as soon as she shows some anxiety or sense that she would like to slow down, the man immediately becomes aggressive, demanding angrily, “you’re not going to fucking change your mind, are you?”, as if they have signed a contract that she will sleep with him. Therefore, we watch with some satisfaction when a few minutes later Julia bashes his head in with a hammer. After committing her second murder, Julia is shown sitting calmly on her couch, sipping a drink, and her blank expression slowly becomes a smile. She has clearly begun to embrace the power she is realising in violently taking abusive men’s
lives. Further elucidation of her relationship with Larry clarifies why Julia might get some satisfaction from this misandric violence. Though there have already been some clues that Larry is not simply the affable and long-suffering husband to a frigid and demanding wife, as he seems on the surface, such as his dismissal of his wife during the dinner party and his angry remarks about his brother, he commits an act against his wife that is so deplorable we cannot simply dismiss it.

One night, in order to distract Larry from the sounds of a restless Frank in the attic, Julia initiates sex with Larry. In their bedroom, over Larry’s shoulder, she sees Frank stabbing and skinning a rat, and making threatening motions towards Larry. Julia becomes distressed, repeating “no, no, please don’t, I can’t bear it!” Although the spectator is aware that Julia is addressing Frank, Larry can only assume that Julia is asking him to stop, but continues attempting to have sex with her, and is angry with her when he finally stops, declaring, “I don’t understand you. I mean, one minute you’re all over me, and the next… I just don’t understand you.” As Barker states of this scene in the audio commentary of the Blu-ray edition of the film, “so we’re gonna see these two in bed together, and she’s anxious, and he doesn’t care because all he is concerned with is getting his rocks off”. Here is another man in the film with a sense of entitlement over a woman, and while his attempted rape of his wife does not justify all of Julia’s actions, it serves to mitigate them.

By making Julia the main character, and thus our primary point of reference in the film, Barker complexifies what in many other horror films is a simplistic, two-dimensional trope. Instead, Barker gives us a (somehow) believable, imperfect, and often vulnerable female character who is misused by the men in her life, driving her to become a villain, in contrast to the more usual femme fatale/femme castratrice who seduces men and makes them become
monsters. In this way, Barker uses the trope of the monstrous-feminine, and through it highlights the manner in which men mistreat women, both sexually and socially, in a way that is not often found in these films. In additions to the nuanced depiction of feminine subjectivity in Julia, in the character of Kirsty Barker challenges other gender issues and matters of representation of women in film, using the trope of the Final Girl.

Carol J. Clover outlines the Final Girl’s main characteristics:

[The Final Girl] is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends… she is not sexually active…. The Final Girl is boyish, in a word…. She is not fully feminine… Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance sets her apart from other girls.

In Hellraiser, Kirsty (Ashley Laurence) certainly functions as a Final Girl, as she embodies several of these character elements. She turns out to be resourceful and intelligent, entering into her own bargain with the Cenobites in order to survive, and defeating both Frank and the Cenobites at the film’s conclusion, while her boyfriend is somewhat perfunctory. However, she does not embody the more crucial moral characteristics, and those she does embody are undermined by the dearth of the heavy moral rhetoric that is usual for these types of films.

Until she encounters the supernatural horrors in the film, Kirsty does not come across as particularly competent or intelligent. She is not a stereotypical “‘airhead’ only interested in sex,” by any means, but neither is she “bookish”, or “competent in mechanical and other practical matters.” She has an unimportant job at a pet shop, and when we first encounter her,

---

21 In the rape-revenge film, the femme castratrice is a more sympathetic figure than the traditional femme fatale, however the act performed against her is a straightforward case of a crime for which she seeks vengeance, whereas the masculine acts that Julia reacts against are much more complex examples of mistreatment.

22 Clover, Men, Women and Chain Saws, 39-40.

23 Short, Misfit Sisters, 46.
she is flustered and unable to meet her customers’ demands, who she is in turn quite short with.\textsuperscript{24}

The main element of Kirsty’s characterisation that sets her apart from the typical Final Girl is her sexuality. Not only does Kirsty get so drunk at her father’s dinner party that she can barely walk straight, but she takes home and has sex with a man she has only just met. When Kirsty takes Steve home, he asks her why she dislikes Julia, to which she responds that Julia is too “damn polite”, and “uptight and frigid.” Kirsty’s dismissal of her stepmother because she is not sexual enough is certainly not typical of a chaste Final Girl. Kirsty is also wrong about Julia’s sexuality, which reveals another aspect of Kirsty’s lack of conformity to the Final Girl role. Clover argues that one of the defining characteristics of the Final Girl is that she sees what others do not, and perceives the threat before anyone else.\textsuperscript{25} Kirsty, in her reason for disliking her stepmother so thoroughly, represents an ironic reversal of the ways in which women condemn other women for their sexual and other transgressions of gender normativity, but it also demonstrates how completely lacking in insight Kirsty is about Julia, since the real threat is Julia’s adulterous relationship with Frank.

The manner in which Kirsty shows the Final Girl’s resourcefulness and achieves victory in the end is another subtle distortion of the typical Final Girl’s ‘pluckiness’. She does use the enemies’ weapons against them, but in this case as the weapon she adopts is cunning self-preservation in forming her own bargain with the Cenobites, the usual moral righteousness of the Final Girl is somewhat tarnished.\textsuperscript{26} Kirsty’s ability to think on her feet and make use of...

\textsuperscript{24} This highlights another trait usually found in the Final Girl, and one which is valued highly in women in general, which is a gentle and unprepossessing helpfulness, a trait that Jess (\textit{Black Christmas}), Laurie (\textit{Halloween}), Alice (\textit{Friday the 13th\textsuperscript{\textregistered}}), Kimberly (\textit{Prom Night}), Virginia (\textit{Happy Birthday to Me}), and Marti (\textit{Hell Night}) all share.

\textsuperscript{25} Clover, \textit{Men, Women, and Chain Saws}, 39.

any and all resources at hand, even morally ambiguous ones, makes her a worthy addition to
the Final Girl group, and her very unconventionality makes her a complex and realistic filmic
representation of a woman.

Passive Wives, Domineering Patriarchs, and the Monstrous Mother: Family Life in the
1980s Horror Film

Susan Faludi writes that the rhetoric of the New Right during the 1980s was “pro-life” and
“pro-family”, but that what men were really lobbying for under their “family rights” banner
was “for every man’s right to rule supreme at home - to exercise what [Jerry] Falwell called
the husband’s “God-given responsibility to lead his family.””\textsuperscript{27} Several notable horror films
of the 1980s critique notions of capitalism, and the concomitant ideal of masculinity, through
the conceit of the man as head of his family. Two of the most important of these films are
Stanley Kubrick’s \textit{The Shining} (1980), and Joseph Ruben’s \textit{The Stepfather} (1987). Both films
interweave notions of capitalism, the American Dream, and the role of the patriarchal
husband and father as provider, and head of his family. In \textit{The Shining}, Jack Torrance is
driven mad by his inability to live up to the patriarchal ideal of being the breadwinner for his
family, and he overcompensates by taking his other role as head of his family and
disciplinarian to violent extremes.

In \textit{The Stepfather}, Jerry Blake’s goal is to attain the perfect, submissive American family,
with himself as undisputed head of his household, and when his family starts exhibiting signs
of individuality and independence, he swiftly murders them and moves on to a completely
new family. This is the most direct and literal filmic representation of the Reagan and Moral
Majority-led ideal of ‘family values’, “basically an anti-feminist, anti-gay program to keep

\textsuperscript{27} Faludi, \textit{Backlash}, 251.
straight white men in control of the nuclear family and at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy.”  

Lest the film’s critique of the dominant patriarchal ideology of its time be missed by the spectator, despite the fact that the stepfather’s name is literally the same as Jerry Falwell’s, the absolute symbol of Jerry’s dominance, a birdhouse which is a replica of the family home (which we saw him devotedly handcrafting and then mounting on top of a very tall pole in his front garden) is felled by his stepdaughter Stephanie with a chainsaw, while her mother watches on with glee. The film’s final image of this obvious phallic symbol lying broken in the dirt while Susan and Stephanie walk away, laughing and enjoying their newfound all-female household, leaves the spectator with no doubts about which family model is superior as far as the film makers are concerned.

In The Shining and The Stepfather, as well as other horror films that critique the patriarchal institution of the family and the impact of angry, entitled men on society, such as the Elm Street series, the focal point for a critique of adverse American masculinity is on men’s interactions with children and youth, and any critique of these men’s relationships with the mothers and wives in these films is incidental. In The Stepfather this relationship is made clear through the title itself, as the main focus of the film is the eponymous stepfather’s relationship with his stepdaughter Stephanie, and her (rightful) mistrust of him in this role.

In The Shining, Jack’s abusiveness towards his wife Wendy is more marked than in The Stepfather, as she spends the majority of the movie in a panicked daze, worried for her son, but helpless to do anything about it. However, the abuse she sustains is always in relation to

---


their son, for when Grady, the ghost of the previous caretaker, tells Jack that he once
‘corrected’ (murdered) his wife, and that Jack must also ‘correct’ his, it is clear that these
‘corrections’ are only necessary because of their wives’ interference in the men’s proper role
as disciplinarian of their children. Robert Kilker argues that it is ironic that, “the monument
[the Overlook] to patriarchal excess features hallways haunted by feminine ghosts.”

It is not ironic at all, as the feminine ghosts are victims of men who are seduced by the very
patriarchal excess that the Overlook offers, and they are trapped doing patriarchy’s job for it,
by luring in even more victims and perpetrators. However, in Grady’s case, even though he
murdered his two daughters and his wife, we never see his wife’s ghost, she is completely
erased, just as Jack’s abuse of Wendy is secondary to Jack’s relationship with his son Danny.

*The Stepfather* and *The Shining* are Jerry, Stephanie, Jack, and Danny’s stories, while Susan
and Wendy must passively watch as their husbands and offspring battle each other.

Turning now to horror films in the 1980s whose mother characters were central to the
narrative, mothers still could not win. Working mothers were neglectful, abusive monsters,
while stay-at-home mothers were so passive and unskilled that they could not survive without
their husbands. Celebrity mothers put on a good show of happy families when their fans were
watching and the cameras were rolling, but in private they were abusive monsters, and
heiresses, who had all the time in the world for their children as they had neither housework
nor paid work to distract them, were neglectful, abusive monsters. All of these descriptions
apply to the most memorable horror mothers of the 1980s, the terrifying matriarchs of Frank

---

30 Robert Kilker, “All Roads Lead to the Abject: The Monstrous Feminine and Gender Boundaries in Stanley
Kubrick’s *The Shining*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2006, 34, 1, 59.
*Mommie Dearest* is based on the memoir written by Christina Crawford about her life of abuse at the hands of her mother Joan Crawford. The book, and its validity or not, is not relevant to my discussion here, as I will be examining the film as a fictional horror-melodrama, not attempting to come to any conclusions about Joan Crawford’s real-life parenting history.\(^{31}\) Thus the decade began with a horror-melodrama film that captured multiple elements guaranteed to pique people’s interest, a biopic about one of Hollywood’s greatest stars promising titillating details about her abuse of her adopted children, and her all around “craziness”. Obviously, at the centre of this is the monstrous-mother. David Greven argues that the modern horror film and the woman’s film/melodrama have a kinship, stating that, “[m]odern horror submits the anxieties circulating in the woman’s film – principally the simultaneous fear of and longing for the mother, and the simultaneous fear of and desire for the suitor-lover-husband – to particularly baroque extremes.”\(^{32}\) This evaluation is particularly apt with regards to *Mommie Dearest*.

Joan early in the film asks her lover Greg, “you know what’s missing in my life?” Disbelievingly, he states, “come on, you’ve got everything you want”, to which Joan replies, “no I don’t, I want a baby”. After Greg outlines all the ways he thinks this is a bad idea, and unlikely to come to fruition, he tells her, “besides, a baby needs a father”, to which Joan responds,

Father. A father. I never had a father. Ma changed husbands faster than she changed bedsheets. You know, hard times is good for people, I tell you it is. Would I be where I am if I hadn’t had them? I could be a mother, and a father. I know how to teach a kid to take care of himself and amount to something. I know I could.

\(^{31}\) Stephen King writes in *Danse Macabre* regarding the validity of *The Amityville Horror* novel versus the film as a true story or not, “[a]ll movies, after all, are pure fiction, even the true ones…. the very medium fictionalizes.”, 138. This is even more relevant in this case as Christina Crawford herself has said on multiple occasions that the film does not depict her life with her mother with any level of accuracy to her own experiences as set out in her memoir, so I will follow King’s lead.

At the outset, certain expectations are set in this film, that Joan is going to be a hardworking, single mother, who comes from nothing and plans to teach her child to be a survivor, which are all the key elements of a melodrama, or woman’s film, however the film takes these melodramatic impulses and pushes them to the horror-film end of the spectrum.

Coming from a poor family, her mother and siblings abandoned by their partner and father before she was born, Joan successfully reinvented herself and built herself up to be one of the most influential actresses in Hollywood. This origin story when presented in a film is a perfectly acceptable one if the protagonist is male. However, in a woman, the “improving one’s social class” narrative is only acceptable if, like in the staples of the form King Vidor’s Stella Dallas (1937), and Joan Crawford’s own Oscar-winning vehicle, Michael Curtiz’ Mildred Pierce (1945), the woman is sacrificing herself in order for her daughter to improve her station through marriage. For a woman to declare that she will be both “mother and father” to a child, in either the late 1930s and 1940s when the film is predominantly set, or 1981 when the film was made, denotes an “unnatural” and unacceptable gender position. In order to make this abundantly clear, every moment in which Joan attempts to “teach [her] kid to take care of [herself]”, and thus performs a traditionally fatherly act, can only be monstrous and grotesque. The ways Joan teaches Tina how to survive are indeed monstrous, as Christina is only allowed to keep one present on her birthday or Christmas because, “I don’t want her to be a spoiled, Hollywood brat just because she’s Crawford’s daughter”; similarly, anything Christina does must be done to the point of exhaustion, such as swimming and cleaning, and Joan will not even let her win once to boost her confidence. When Tina refuses to eat her steak for lunch because it is almost raw, Joan makes her stay at the table for the entire day, serves it to her again for dinner, and again for breakfast in the morning, and

---

when Christina is living on her own and asks for some help with rent money, Joan refuses to give her a cent, and it is Tina’s stepfather Al that sneaks the money to her, reversing a traditional gender dynamic.

There are several moments in *Mommie Dearest* that do not present as horror, as they have a level of emotional authenticity that is otherwise absent in the film. The scene in which Joan tells Greg that she wants to have a baby, the scene in which L.B. Mayer dismisses Joan from her MGM contract and refuses to walk her to her car, and the scene in which Joan visits Christina and gives her encouragement about an upcoming audition that Tina is attending and then gifts her with the pearls that her most recent husband Al had given her, are among the best of these emotionally resonant scenes. However, as Annette Brauerhoch argues, any time the film allows us to have sympathy for Joan, as in the scene where she is fired, “[t]he next sequence takes all that back and makes her alien again.”

This is exemplified by the fact that immediately after the scene in which she is fired, Joan is in her garden in the middle of the night, chopping down her roses, forcing her children to wake up and help her, screaming about “creative differences” and “box office poison”. Similarly, in the film’s most infamous scene, Joan comes into the children’s room late at night to put something away, and lovingly looks through Christina’s dresses. However, her affection turns to rage as she notices that some of Tina’s clothes are hanging on wire hangers. Joan screams, waking the children up, “no wire hangers! … I work and work ‘til I’m half dead and I hear people say, “she’s getting old”, and what do I get?”, and then beats Tina with the hanger and makes her scrub the bathroom with her. Throughout this scene, Joan’s cream face mask, a staple throughout the film demonstrating her rigorous beauty regime in order to “not appear old”, melts and smears

---

on Joan’s face, and combined with the rage-filled grimace, she truly does look like a monstrous thing.

Brauerhoch argues that the film’s major critiques of Joan centre on the fact that she is not a “real” mother but only an adoptive one, and thus “she can only be grotesque and excessive.”

In Joan’s case, within the diegesis, the adoptive element is played up as showing how “selfless” she is, such as in the words of an interviewer in the film, “all America knows of your generosity in adopting these two homeless orphans”, or when Joan declares at the very public birthday party for Christina early in the film, “I want to adopt every unwanted child in the world. No one should be unwanted. Life is tough enough when you are wanted.” However, this only further demonstrates how “grotesque” Joan’s motives are, for when Christina is a teenager, she asks her mother, “why did you adopt me?” After Tina dismisses her mother’s claims of “wanting someone to love”, Joan says, “maybe I did it for a little extra publicity. Tina, that’s not true, you know that’s not true!”, to which Tina replies, “maybe just a little true.”

All of these negative attributes, however, can also be applied to “real” mothers. People get pregnant for a lot of selfish reasons, and children often cry “why did you even have me?” (something that plays a very significant role in the mother-child relationship in Ari Aster’s Hereditary, to be discussed in Chapter Three). As many of the films in this thesis attest, in addition to adoptive or stepmothers “real” mothers are also depicted as monstrous in horror films. Mrs. Bates, Mrs. White, Nola Carveth and her mother Juliana, and the two mothers in Flowers in the Attic that will be discussed shortly, are all “real” mothers, “natural” mothers.

---

Ultimately, Joan’s monstrousness is somewhat related to her status as an adoptive mother, but in a more general way. As Susan Faludi argues, in the 1980s the media and popular culture depicted women as having themselves been negatively impacted by the women’s liberation successes of the 1970s, and that Hollywood produced films, “of which *Fatal Attraction* is… the most famous, [in which] emancipated women with condominiums of their own slink wild-eyed between bare walls, paying for their liberty with an empty bed, a barren womb.”

*Mommie Dearest* encapsulates the 1980s backlash, for if we circle back around to her opening conversation about wanting a baby, when Greg expresses his disbelief at Joan wanting a child, he tells her, “you’re too vain to be pregnant”, to which Joan replies, “vain? I can’t have one. I was pregnant seven times with Franchot, I lost them all.” Initially coming across as tragic in that early scene, the sentiment is replaced by a notion that Joan is barren with good reason. Joan’s infertility, her inability to “keep a man”, and her jealousy of and insecurity around her daughter are indicative of Joan’s failures as a woman, the film tells us. I will now turn to perhaps one of the most baroque filmic representations of the monstrous mother, based on an even more florid and decadent novel.

Like *The Brood* before it, *Flowers in the Attic* deals with generational inheritance and conflict between mothers and daughters. However, where the former is a sophisticated exploration of family trauma, portrayed through the lens of sci-fi horror, *Flowers in the Attic* makes no attempt at subtlety or realism, despite its melodramatic and non-Fantastic setting and premise. Jeffrey Bloom’s film (1987), based on the novel of the same name (Virginia C. Andrews, 1979), concerns the Dollanganger family, consisting of a father, mother, and four children, Chris and Cathy who are in their early teens, and twins Cory and Carrie who are five. Their life is portrayed as idyllic, until their father dies in a car crash, forcing their mother Corrine

---

(who is apparently skill-less and helpless) to take them all to her estranged parents’ estate, Foxworth Hall. It is here that the story falls directly into Gothic melodrama. In order to “win back her father’s love” and inherit the estate, Corrine must lock her children in an attic room and pretend they do not exist, and as time passes (several years), Corrine becomes more and more distant.

Virginia Andrews’ novel has been enduringly popular since its publication, selling approximately 40 million copies (to put that in perspective, that is the same number of copies as To Kill a Mockingbird). The film, however, did not see the same level of success, and one reviewer said of it, “[t]he only possible reason for its existence has to be New World Pictures’ hope that some of the 4 million people who bought the late V. C. Andrews’ book will flock to see it on the screen.” While Harrington’s prediction was fulfilled, as according to Box Office Mojo it opened at number 3, and made just over $5,000,000 on its first weekend, overall the film is largely forgotten. However, the film’s multi-generational mother-daughter relationships and cartoonishly villainous monstrous mothers endure and are a near-perfect example of the prevalent attitude towards these relationships in the 1980s horror film.

The film utilises a number of venerable gothic conventions that were established in the works of Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, and Ann Radcliffe, including intergenerational conflict, and the sins of the father (and mother); repetition and echoes; religious dogma; isolation and imprisonment; incest; poison; filicide, and matricide. The film’s focus is on the increasingly

---

40 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, (New York: Methuen, 1976, 1986), particularly 10-11, for a discussion of the origins and continued use of these gothic conventions.
competitive and antagonistic relationship between mother Corrine, and daughter Cathy. In the film’s opening, an adult Cathy narrates, painting a picture of the idyllic life of the Dollanganger family before they move to Foxworth Hall. Cathy talks of the tradition that she and her siblings would jump out from behind the couch to surprise and hug their dad when he would return from business trips, and that “the whole family was really close,” however, even in this idyllic prologue, the cracks are already visible in this perfect façade.

The first time we see Corrine, the camera pulls into a tight close-up of Corrine’s face, and pans right to show that she is looking intently at her reflection in a small, hand-held mirror, while Cathy looks on. Although Cathy’s voice-over is talking about how her “father and mother were the centre of [her] universe”, our first impression of her mother is that she is vain. The fact that the reflection we see is fractured, just one eye, and half of her nose and mouth, indicates that not only are we seeing a false representation of her, but that this false representation is fractured and incomplete.

A later shot of Corrine during this idyllic prologue reinforces our initial unease. Cathy’s voice-over tells us that, “he loved us all, but dad never let me forget that I was his favourite,” and the following scene shows Cathy’s father coming into her bedroom, checking behind him to make sure no one else is around, then putting his finger to Cathy’s lips when she exclaims out loud. This is obviously behaviour that raises some concerns around incest and child abuse, and this is compounded when Cathy’s father gives her a dancing ballerina figure, revealing a small compartment in which is a ring more appropriate for a lover than a daughter, which Cathy joyfully places on her ring finger. In the background, Corrine is framed in the doorway, watching on with a frown. Though the interpretation of facial expressions is subjective, Corrine’s expression registers more as jealousy and annoyance than concern for a potentially inappropriate relationship between a father and daughter. Combined
with the fact that when her husband dies Corrine is unable to independently provide for her children, and must return to her rich, estranged family, in order to, “win back [her] father’s love”, the portrait painted of Corrine is of a spoiled, vain, competitive, rich girl, even during the prologue.

When the children meet their grandmother, they encounter another aspect of monstrous motherhood, as she is obsessed with quoting scripture, and corporal punishment, much like Carrie White’s mother. The grandmother tells them,

> Remember, God sees everything. … Your mother’s marriage was unholy. A sacrilege. An abomination in the eyes of the Lord. She didn’t fall from grace, she leapt. Into the arms of a man whose veins pulsed with the same blood as hers. Not a stranger, but her own uncle. And you, the children, are the devil’s spawn. Evil from the moment of conception. … Your grandfather will not be told that you are here. He will never be told. He has no idea that you even exist. … No idea that you were ever born. As long as he lives, and I swear this to you, I will spare him that final agony of shame.

This establishes the reason for the children’s incarceration, for in order to “win back [her] father’s love”, and thus receive her inheritance, Corrine must pretend that she never had any children. The earlier characterisation of Corrine as self-centred, as well as the brutality of the grandmother, quickly makes us realise that ignoring her children will not be as challenging as she, and the children, thought.

The theme of incest runs throughout the film. Aside from the overt instance of Corrine marrying her uncle, there is an echo of the earlier scene between Cathy, her father, and Corrine, wherein Corrine sits with her sick father while he strokes her hair, and in the doorway Corrine’s mother watches. Cathy and Corrine also end up being rivals for Christopher’s attention and fidelity, as he is torn between loyalty to a mother who visits less and less, and his sister who, rightfully, is suspicious of their mother’s absences and lack of care. After a particularly long absence, during which the children were starved for a time, as
well as victims of their grandmother’s general abuse, Corrine returns in a jubilant mood, having gone on holiday for several months. She is shocked when the children are not excited to see her, saying, “[d]arlings, I’m back! Darlings! I’m so happy. … You’re angry with me. But you don’t know how much I’ve missed you. And wait til you see the presents I bought you.” After telling them that she has been successful in “winning back her father’s love”, and that she will be re-written into the will, the following exchange demonstrates how much has changed in Chris and Cathy’s feelings towards her:

Chris: So, what’s to become of us, mom? How much longer do we continue living in this prison?
Corrine: Prison?
Chris: You come back with gifts for us, mom. Do you think they can make up for what we’ve lost?
Corrine: Christopher, if you stop loving me…
Chris: I haven’t stopped loving you, mom. I make myself keep loving you, every day. Despite what you do.
Corrine: Don’t say another word.
Cathy: Look at us, mother! Do we look like you, with your rosy cheeks and your bright eyes? Look at the twins, mother. Cory has stomach cramps almost every day. And Carrie has little sores growing on her skin. Do you know, or even care, that the grandmother stopped feeding us for over a week?
Corrine: Stop it! You’ve no right to talk to me like that! Tell me I’ve had pleasure while my children have been in pain! You are heartless. When you are ready to treat me with love, I’ll be back.

Corrine is so narcissistic that she sees no inconsistency in claiming that she is the one being abused and underappreciated by her children, or even that they are in a form of prison, when the children stand before her, malnourished and abandoned by their mother for months at a time.41

---

41 Terri Apter’s book, Difficult Mothers: Understanding and Overcoming Their Power (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), contains a chapter discussing the effects that growing up with a narcissistic mother can have on her children. Although none of the examples of real-life and fictional mother-child relationships are as extreme as that in Flowers, the film’s portrait of Corrine aligns with Apter’s discussion, as well as the clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder that she references.
Generational conflict, particularly through the lens of incest and child abuse, are the currents running throughout the film. However, although it is the grandfather whose love must be won back, who demands that Corrine be whipped on her return to the family home, and who includes a clause in the will that bars Corrine from inheriting his fortune if it is ever revealed that she had children, he is only a shadowy figure of authority, with no lines and very little screen time. Though he is nominally the villain, it is women carrying out his punishments or wishes, and viewers only remember these monstrous mothers. The grandmother is clearly monstrous from the beginning, physically abusing the twins when they defy her orders to be quiet and calling them unnatural. However, Corrine’s abusive behaviour is insidious, and thus more monstrous. Like many American horror films of the 1980s, *Flowers in the Attic* critiques capitalism, but instead of critiquing patriarchal capitalism, and painting the grandfather as the real villain, the film frames its critique of capitalism in a misogynistic attack on “greedy, selfish” women. Where, in *The Shining*, female victims of patriarchal and capitalism-driven violence are co-opted in death to become agents of the very system that murdered them, in *Flowers in the Attic* women “don’t fall, they leap”, as the grandmother would say, into carrying out an agenda of misogynistic, capitalist excess. In fact, the film (and novel before it) fails to lay any blame for either the grotesque avarice or the punishing, Biblical dogma it depicts, or even the feminine helplessness of Corrine, on any of the male characters, even though all of these failings are endemic to patriarchal Christianity and capitalism.

At the beginning of the film, Corrine fulfills one of the Moral Majority’s tenets, in being a housewife with no other job or skills, however, when she loses the male provider in her family, she has no other recourse than to return to her family of origin. However, in doing so, and maintaining her status as dependent on a man (her father now, instead of her husband), she abandons first her maternal responsibilities, and finally her maternal feelings of love and
selflessness, and ultimately her humanity. Corrine, while in no way a sympathetic figure, is set on an inexorable, tragic path that she cannot possibly deviate from. The expression, “you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t” is apt here.

Although two other films I’ve discussed have combined a critique of capitalism with an attack on certain types of women, Happy Birthday to Me, and Mommie Dearest, this film’s misogyny is not tempered by any of the authentic and complex moments that appear in the former two, as it is simply a grotesque caricature of how monstrous women can be. As the films goes on, Corrine’s visits become less frequent and shorter, and her conversations with her children centred around herself and her glamorous lifestyle, while her children became deathly pale and malnourished. Finally, one of the twins dies, and the other children are told he was taken to the hospital too late, and that he would not be given a funeral, when in reality he is buried in one of four graves on the property. When Christopher somehow discovers that arsenic is being given to them in small amounts with their treat of cookies covered in powdered sugar they, and we, assume that it is the grandmother poisoning them in order to finally be rid of them. In a shocking reveal to the audience, we see a close-up of someone putting powdered sugar on the cookies, and as the camera pulls back, it is revealed that it is Corrine who has been poisoning her children, not the grandmother.

Cathy somewhat functions as a Final Girl, for it is Cathy who has seen who her mother truly is all along, even as far back as when they were on the bus to the grandparents’ estate, when she complains that Corrine should have prepared them for the possibility of death, and tells Christopher that they shouldn’t have to leave their home. Later, she is always the least forgiving of their mother’s absence and emotional distance. When Cory is sick, it is Cathy who demands he be taken to the hospital, confronting her mother’s indifference, “why are you just standing there? Cory needs to be taken to a hospital! There’s no other decision to
make. What’s wrong with you mother? Are you just going to stand there and think about yourself and your money while Cory lies there and dies? Don’t you care what happens to him? Have you forgotten that you’re his mother?” Corrine slaps her, exclaiming, “always, it’s you!” However, Cathy is undeterred, backhanding her in return, “damn you to hell, momma, if you don’t take Cory to a hospital right now! You think you can go on doing whatever you want to us, and nobody will ever find out? If Cory dies, momma, you’ll pay for it. One way or another I will find a way. I promise you that.” This a promise that Cathy keeps.

When the children escape the attic on Corrine’s wedding day, Cathy asks, “how could you do this to us?” This moment has some genuine pathos, as Corrine coldly denies any knowledge of who the children are, not missing a beat when Cathy mentions Cory’s death, saying, “who’s Cory?” The genuine effect of this moment is immediately undone when, in a moment of high camp that is worthy of Joan’s “wire hangers”, Cathy thrusts a poisoned cookie at her mother demanding that she “eat it! Eat the cookie!”, and the resulting tussle ends with Corrine falling over the balcony and accidentally hanging herself with her bridal veil. Given the high melodrama, Gothic, and camp, of this film, it is tempting to dismiss the possibility, like I did with Margaret White in chapter one, that either the grandmother or Corrine can excite any genuine loathing for women, as they are such cartoonishly evil villains. However, when the book series came out, and when this film was released, the narrative of a family of children locked away for an inheritance was advertised as “based on actual events.” This claim has since disappeared (though never fully debunked), but it was completely believed at the time of their release and height of popularity.42

42 According to a relative of Andrews, and her editor Ann Patty, Flowers was based on the true story. Allegedly, when Andrews was in hospital she got to know her doctor, and he told her that he and his siblings were kept locked away in an attic for inheritance purposes. There is, however, no evidence of this event. These interviews can be found at The Complete V.C. Andrews website. http://www.completevca.com/bio_truestory.shtml
Crimes like this do of course happen, but the vast majority of perpetrators of these sorts of crimes are men, and in reality, when mothers have murdered their children, it is usually an act of utter despair and desperation, due to postpartum psychosis, or some sort of other trauma.\textsuperscript{43} However, facts like this do not prevent people from gleefully imagining and believing the worst of women, for, as Barbara Creed argues, “[t]he presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{44} With this in mind, it makes perfect sense that although the novel was written in the 1970s, the film could only work in the era of Faludi’s backlash, for the notion of a mother so monstrous that she would imprison and slowly murder her children for no more than wealth and status belongs squarely in the capitalistic 1980s.

The 1980s saw a variety of harsh political and social measures develop that sought to erase any gains women experienced through the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s. The ideals of the New Right, the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell, and even patriarchally-driven, systemic capitalism and greed itself, all seemed designed to punish women for ever daring to believe they could make decisions for themselves, or even “have it all”.

Mainstream romantic comedies such as Charles Shyer’s \textit{Baby Boom} (1987) took a cutesy approach to showing women that they did not really belong in the boardroom and that they would feel more fulfilled if they left that idea behind and gave in to their biological clocks.

---


\textsuperscript{44} Creed, \textit{The Monstrous-Feminine}, 7.
Even in Mike Nichols’ *Working Girl* (1988), which allowed its heroine to have a corporate career, she was only deemed worthy of this position because she took a gentler, more traditionally feminine approach to the job, in contrast to her “ballbuster” boss, whose behaviour would be completely acceptable and in fact expected if she were a man. On the other end of the filmic spectrum, the thriller and horror genre took a much more literal approach in depicting men’s fears about women’s increasing sexual, social, and financial autonomy. A film like *Fatal Attraction* argued that the consequence of ignoring a woman’s ‘true’ role, as a married mother, was madness and violence. As Tom Hanks’ character in Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) says when his son proposes that they fly to Seattle in order to meet the woman he has been bonding with, “didn’t you see *Fatal Attraction*?... well, I did, and it scared the shit out of me. It scared the shit out of every man in America.” As funny a joke as this is, it is not far from the truth.

In the slasher subgenre, which although not as mainstream or financially successful at the box office as films like *Fatal Attraction* or *Working Girl* still had a significant cultural impact in the 1980s, the work against women that was begun in *Halloween* reached its nadir. Although there were significant exceptions to this, particularly *Hellraiser*, in the majority of cookie-cutter slashers that were made in large numbers in the 1980s, (attempting to cash in on the success of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*), the Final Girl was a model of chaste usefulness, while girls who expressed their sexuality were punished for it. Mothers in horror films were broadly caricatured, appearing as either passive wives and mothers in supporting roles to the male or child protagonists, or so monstrous as to leave no doubt to the audience what the dominant patriarchal social structure wished to promote about mothers who strayed from their socially accepted “natural” role.
Chapter Three

The Reflexive Final Girl and the Mother Reclaimed: The 1990s to the Present

The legacy of *Psycho* and its archetypes of women in the modern horror film, the good girl, the mother, and the whore, has continued through the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. Although the slasher film is no longer the dominant horror subgenre, it has never completely disappeared. While one could argue that this is true of any subgenre of the horror film, the slasher and particularly its central figure the Final Girl has continued to have a powerful hold on the audience’s imagination. The real change that has occurred is that the slasher genre has become self-aware in the 1990s and 2000s, and as such hardly exists anymore as a film that is not a commentary on its own form. This is due to a ground-breaking film by horror auteur Wes Craven, *Scream* (1996), which not only changed the face of the slasher film but circled neatly back around to its roots in *Psycho*, by not solely focusing on the younger woman, either virgin or whore, but reinstating the ambiguous figure of ‘mother’ as an absent but dominating presence.

*The Impact of Wes Craven*

The reflexivity of the slasher resurgence has been filtered primarily through the figure of the Final Girl. Wes Craven is responsible for the brief re-saturation of slasher films in the 1990s, as well as the continuing postmodern turn to pastiche and self-referentiality in the horror genre in general. Prior to *Scream*, Craven returned to Elm Street with *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (1994), his official sequel and recursive framing of the Elm Street story; as the first victim in *Scream* says, “the first [Nightmare] was scary, the rest sucked”. *New*
"Nightmare" introduced a new paradigm for the horror film’s Final Girl and mother figures that he perfected with Scream.¹

The premise of New Nightmare is that ten years after the original film, the fictionalised characterisation of Wes Craven, played by Wes Craven himself, dreams of a demon who must be contained within some sort of artistic endeavour, and as that piece of art fades into obscurity, a new art-prison must be created lest the demon escape. The fading artwork is of course the original film, so the diegetic Craven casts the diegetic Heather Langenkamp and Robert England (Nancy and Freddy, respectively), also played by themselves, to reprise their original roles in order to create both the diegetic and non-diegetic New Nightmare.²

Langenkamp portrays Heather in the film we watch, and although she never explicitly plays Nancy Thompson, Langenkamp is truly a hybrid of Heather/Nancy throughout the film, as one cannot textually distinguish one from the other. Heather, now thirty, in fact takes on the functions of both the Final Girl and the mother, reprising the role of Nancy in the original, but also becoming the protective mother that Nancy’s mother was not, for she has a son that she must protect from the Freddy-demon.

Heather-Nancy is a refreshing take on the horror film mother. Heather does not embody the monstrous-feminine or devouring, castrating mother³, the neglectful, self-absorbed mother, the idealised absent mother, or the self-sacrificing Madonna. Rather, she is a working woman with a strong sense of self, but she is, critically, also an attentive and nurturing mother; in this sense, she bears a striking resemblance to Ellen Burstyn’s Chris McNeil and the figuration of

---

¹ For further discussion of the importance of A New Nightmare, see Souris Petridis, “A Historical Approach to the Slasher Film: The Classical Period, the Post-slasher Films, and Neoslashers”, film international 67.
² For ease of understanding, henceforth I will refer to the real actors by their surnames, and the fictionalised versions of themselves by their first names. Thus, the actress Langenkamp portrays Heather and Nancy in the film, as Englund portrays Robert and Freddy.
the working mother in *The Exorcist*. Although Heather’s characterisation is not an in-depth portrait, such a realistic and balanced portrayal of a mother in a horror film of this era is an innovation that paves the way for several complex horror film mothers in the following two decades. As suggested above, Craven’s *Scream*, which almost immediately followed *A New Nightmare* in 1996, has had a significant impact on the horror film genre, with its self-referential meta-narrative setting the template for much of the horror film genre after it, particularly in relation to the slasher subgenre and the figure of the Final Girl.

In *Scream*, Craven takes the phenomenon of the Final Girl and turns it into a story-concept within the film, self-consciously communicating the textual trope to a mainstream audience. *Scream*’s pop culture and film geek character, Randy Meeks, functions as a clever way to teach the audience about horror genre theory without being overly expository. As the murders in Woodsboro begin to occur, Randy lays out the tropes of the slasher film to the other characters, drawing explicitly on Clover’s analysis, providing a pithy set of rules to follow in order to survive the textual slasher scenario in which they find themselves. Unlike most other horror genre films, the victims and protagonists in *Scream* and its three sequels (all directed by Craven) are avid horror film buffs, and thus are better equipped to navigate the genre. According to Randy, the three rules of surviving a slasher film are, “don’t have sex, don’t do drugs or party, and never say ‘I’ll be right back’”. Most importantly, however, the killers also know the rules and tropes of their own ‘genre’ of murders, and their aim is to pay a sort of twisted homage to the horror genre itself, and thus achieve iconic villain status, alongside Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Krueger. Billy and Stu’s plan hinges on Sidney (Neve Campbell) taking up the mantle of the Final Girl.
Sidney has some of the characteristics of the Final Girl: she has a gender-neutral name, and is intelligent, brave, resourceful, and a virgin. Sidney specifically has a kinship with the Final Girl from J. Lee Thompson’s *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981), Virginia Wainwright. When late in the film Sidney asks Billy why he killed her mother, Billy says, “I don’t really believe in motives Sid. I mean, did Norman Bates have a motive? Did they ever really decide why Hannibal Lecter liked to eat people? Don’t think so! See, it’s a lot scarier when there’s no motive Sid.” Of course, thirty seconds later he admits he did have a motive, and as is so often the case, the cause is ‘mommy’ issues (and in fact, Billy’s motive is almost identical to Norman Bates’, despite Billy’s protestation of Bates having none). “Your slut mother was fucking my father, and she’s the reason my mom moved out and abandoned me. How’s that for a motive? Maternal abandonment causes serious deviant behaviour. It certainly fucked you up, it made you have sex with a psychopath.”

In *Happy Birthday to Me*, Virginia’s mother is dead at the film’s beginning, and like Sidney’s mother, had a reputation as a ‘loose’ woman, and a demanding, castrating alcoholic. Virginia, like Sidney, has been traumatised by her mother’s death (in Virginia’s case she has literally experienced a brain injury as a result of being in the car along with her mother in the accident that killed her). The murders in the film, leading up to Virginia’s birthday, are committed by her best friend Ann Thomerson, whose motive is the same as Billy’s: to frame Virginia for the murders as revenge against her for her mother’s transgressive behaviour in having an affair with Ann’s father (Billy wishes to frame Sidney’s father). The most significant difference, however, in Virginia and Sidney’s status as Final Girls is that while Virginia, as her name suggests, remains a virgin, Sidney, having slept with the aforementioned

---

psychopath Billy, is no longer a virgin, and as such Stu points out, “now you gotta die. Those are the rules!”

Sidney’s mother’s reputation as a ‘slut’ is what prompts Sidney to remain a virgin, rather than the usual reason of being a sensible or prudish character as is typical of the Final Girl of Clover’s analysis. Sidney avoids sex because she is afraid that if she has sex, she will open some sort of Pandora’s box and become a ‘slut’ like her mother. This notion of generational inheritance of transgression runs through the entire film series. It is explicitly Maureen Prescott’s (Sidney’s mother) transgressive sexuality that ‘causes’ the crimes in the first three Scream films. Prior to the first film, Sidney mistakenly identifies Cotton Weary, Maureen’s known lover, as her mother’s murderer. Billy’s murder of Maureen and subsequent crimes demonstrate an unhealthy fixation on his mother as an idealised absence, despite the fact that her absence is actually by choice, making her an abandoning mother. When Billy demands that Sidney get over her mother’s death because of the loss of his own mother, Sidney states, “your mother left you, she’s not buried in a grave somewhere”. Hypocritically, not only does Billy have less of a reason to mourn his mother’s absence than Sidney, but he is also unwilling to blame his mother for abandoning him, instead blaming Sidney’s father for not being able to keep a handle on his ‘slutty’ wife, Sidney’s “slut mother”, and Sidney herself.

Further transgressing the Final Girl rules, not only does Sidney lose her virginity in the film, but she does so with Billy, the murderer himself. As occurs with the Final Girl of Hellraiser, Kirsty, discussed in the previous chapter, Sidney’s Final Girl flouts these conventions and still goes on to successfully kill Billy. Despite her success in surviving Billy and Stu’s plot in Scream, Sidney carries the trauma with her throughout the rest of the series. In Scream 2 (1997) when faced with the decision as to whether she should trust that her boyfriend Derek is not involved in the new set of murders, she is unable to bring herself to trust him, and he
dies as a result. When it turns out that the mastermind of the murders this time is Billy’s mother wanting revenge for Billy’s death it is not particularly surprising that the film brings us directly back to the end of Scream, and that mothers and their transgressions are again at the heart of tragedy.

If the first two Scream films reflect on the nature of horror films, Scream 3 continues this trajectory but broadens this reflection to encompass Hollywood itself. The first two films present audiences with what they like about slasher films as a genre, but then subvert the form in order to demonstrate its renewed potential. Scream 3 (2000) has even further reaching ramifications than its predecessors, through its reflection on the horror film industry within Hollywood itself. Not only are fictional women victimised and abused in horror films, Craven tells us, but so are the actresses in Hollywood who routinely play these victims.

In Scream 3, Sidney discovers that her mother once worked in Hollywood under the pseudonym Rena Reynolds, one of hundreds of unknown, unsung, anonymous starlets who are an indispensable, yet disrespected and abused, cog in the Hollywood machine. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues, “the Scream trilogy points to the very essence of a culture in which women, from Monica Lewinsky to the sorority girls of Scream 2, see sexually servicing men as their most immediate access to power or even survival.”5 Producer John Milton, tells Stab 3 director Roman Bridger that “Hollywood is full of criminals whose careers are flourishing”, after two people associated with the film are murdered. This statement is an indictment on the culture of ignoring rumours, accusations, or indeed convictions of sexual assault that

---

surround many influential male directors and producers in Hollywood, their careers indeed flourishing with no repercussions for their behaviour.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Scream 3} captures the complexity of the legacy of this industrially sanctioned abuse of women, rendering not only the justified rage about these abuses, but also the shame and self-harmful coping mechanisms undertaken by the survivors of this abuse. Journalist Gale Weathers, Sidney’s sometime antagonist, often ally throughout the trilogy, discovers that photos of a young Maureen Prescott posing in Hollywood are being left at the crime scenes, and she and Jennifer Jolie, an actress from \textit{Stab 3}, investigate Maureen’s relationship to these crimes. In the studio’s records department they meet the records-keeper Bianca who bears a striking resemblance to Carrie Fisher, and is of course played by Fisher.

\begin{quote}
Gale: Hey, are you…
Bianca: No.
Jennifer: But you look just…
Bianca: Like her? I’ve been hearing it all my life.
Jennifer: It’s uncanny.
Bianca: I was up for Princess Leia. I was this close. So, who gets it? The one who sleeps with George Lucas.
\end{quote}

Bianca’s claim about “the one who [slept] with George Lucas” is apocryphal, but it is not simply a self-referential joke as it reinforces the theme of the film, that is, the prevalence of opportunistically abusive behaviour in the film industry. Bianca tells Gale and Jennifer that, “I know every face in here. I’ve got respect for the unknown actor.” It is this very anonymity that facilitates the culture of abuse.

The murderer, Roman Bridger, it eventuates, is the abandoned son of Maureen Prescott/Rena Reynolds, conceived when Maureen was gang-raped at one of the sex parties that Milton

used to throw for Hollywood bigwigs to take advantage of desperate starlets. He confronts Sidney, saying, “it’s time you came to terms with me, and with Mother.” Roman never had a relationship with their mother, and because of his resentment, he orchestrated Billy’s murder of Maureen. However, Roman’s revelations about Maureen provide Sidney, and the viewer, with a more complete picture of Maureen’s identity: “what [Milton] did to her made her a slut, didn’t it? She never recovered from that night… They fucked her three ways from Sunday. Ruined her life. Ruined yours too, didn’t it…” One act of assault and violence in Hollywood, Roman quite convincingly argues, is responsible for not only the personal tragedy of Sidney and her family, but for multiple serial murders with far-reaching consequences. As such, Craven’s film works as a powerful excoriating of how films and film-production represent, produce, and reproduce abusive conditions for women.

Although the Final Girl is an important figure in the Scream series, the original trilogy is ultimately about Mother. Maureen Prescott serves as a meditation on the figure of the mother in horror films and the many roles she may take: the monstrous mother, the femme fatale, the absent mother, the victim, and the mystery that needs to be solved. Karlyn argues that “[Sidney’s] struggle, like that of all girls, is to know her mother not only as her mother but as a person in her own right.” Speaking with the homicide detective investigating the case, Sidney says, “I always thought I had the perfect mom. Perfect family. ‘Til I found out I was wrong. She had a secret life, and I tried to understand that, and as soon as I thought I had, more secrets. I don’t know who my mom was.” Detective Kincaid replies, “you know who she was to you”, which encapsulates what Craven seems to be arguing in this film.

The Scream films demonstrate that mothers, and indeed women in general, can be, and are, more than one thing. Maureen is simultaneously Sidney’s “slut mother”, and Roman’s

---

7 Karlyn, “Scream, Popular Culture, and Feminism’s Third Wave”, 187.
abandoning mother, and Sidney’s remembered nurturing and perfect mother. At the end of *Scream 3*, Maureen is no longer a symbolic representation of the concept of ‘Mother’ and its impact on others, fitted into the mould of whatever she needs to be for different people. She is instead freed from this legacy of shame, blame, and retribution, and becomes a complex portrait of a woman in her own right. With his complex and flawed mother, as well as his rule-breaking Final Girl, Craven set the foundation for the increasing numbers of complex mothers and self-reflexive, playful Final Girls in horror films following his franchise.

**The Final Girl after Sidney Prescott**

After *Scream* provided a viable model for the return of the slasher format in the 1990s, there was a brief resurgence of the ‘traditional’ (non-self-reflexive) slasher form throughout the remainder of the 1990s. Films such as Jim Gillespie’s *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and its 1998 sequel, Danny Cannon’s *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* were lacklustre and offered nothing new to the form. In Jamie Blanks’ 1998 film *Urban Legend*, a series of murders occur on a college campus, each murder imitating famous urban legends. The killer, it is discovered, is motivated by the death of her fiancé resulting from an urban legend-inspired prank years before. The premise and styles of deaths make this film a much more original film than the ‘I Know’ films, and the presence of horror legends Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger) as a professor and Brad Dourif (a horror genre stalwart) as a suspicious-seeming but ultimately helpful gas-station attendant adds a knowing wink to the genre at large.

These three films offer nothing significant in the way of representations of women, yet, importantly, they do not exploit female characters as objects and victims of misogynistic acts of violence, unlike, for the most part, their 70s and 80s predecessors. As unoriginal as the
above 1990s films are, however, the first decade of the 2000s proved even more of a dearth of creativity, as the representatives of the slasher subgenre during this decade consisted almost entirely of remakes of popular successes in the form, including, *Black Christmas* (Glen Morgan, 2006), *Halloween* (Rob Zombie, 2007), *Prom Night* (Nelson McCormick, 2008), *Friday the 13th* (Marcus Nispel, 2009), and *The House on Sorority Row* (made as *Sorority Row*, Stewart Hendler, 2009), to name a few. One bright spot during the period was Geoffrey Wright’s 2000 film *Cherry Falls*, which attempts to engage with the slasher’s generic forms in a self-reflexive way, by making the central conceit that only non-virgins can survive, rather than the usual inverse, hence the film’s title. Aside from this splash of originality, the film has low production values in keeping with a made-for-television film, and thus has not made much of a lasting impact on the genre.

Due to the over-saturation of the slasher genre, since *Scream* the dominant genre mode tends towards self-reflexivity and referentiality. Adam Wingard’s 2011 film *You’re Next* exemplifies the new direction that slasher films have taken in the second decade of the 21st century. *You’re Next* initially appears to have a straightforward home invasion plot, with masked psychopaths murdering people in their homes for no other motive than fun. A dysfunctional family consisting of three brothers and their sister, gather with their partners at their parents’ country home in order to celebrate their parents’ wedding anniversary. Half-way through dinner some masked people arrive and start murdering family members with crossbows, machetes, and booby traps. However, it is later revealed that the masked killers are actually hit-men hired by two of the brothers to murder the rest of the family in order to be the sole inheritors of their father’s substantial fortune.

It is through this plotline, and the nature of the Final Girl, that the film’s originality becomes marked, as the film takes an established formula and challenges the tropes and conventions of
that formula, and thus the audience’s expectations. At the film’s outset it is clear that Erin, the partner of one of the brothers, functions as the Final Girl, as she is the only female character whose perspective is established from the beginning. However, her characterisation, aside from a general sense of competence, does not fit the Final Girl model. Erin drinks alcohol and engages in what might be perceived as a transgressive sex life (her partner Crispian was her professor when they first became involved). Further, her Australian accent, which is mocked in private by Crispian’s sister-in-law, makes her appear ‘other’, and thus she is underestimated. As soon as the carnage begins, however, Erin is revealed to be a resourceful, calm, and assured character.

One of the key initial characteristics of the Final Girl is that she is “watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that others ignore she registers. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch”\(^8\) Erin, in a manner that befits her status as a post-*Scream* Final Girl, goes much further than “watchful” and “resourceful in a pinch.” The moment when it becomes obvious to both the characters and the audience that Erin is unusual is when Crispian’s brother Felix suggests they hide in the basement, which Erin immediately refutes, stating, “the basement’s a bad idea. They could just pour gas down the stairs and throw in a match”. When Erin starts planting boards with nails sticking up out of them in front of windows, Felix’s girlfriend Zee finally asks Erin how she knows what to do in this situation. Erin reveals that she grew up on a survivalist commune in the Australian outback. This background, and the knowledge and skills it brings with it is an innovative and entertaining shake-up of the Final Girl formula, one that was hinted at in *Scream 3*, and fully realised by Laurie Strode and her daughter in *Halloween* (David Gordon Green, 2018). The usual pay-off of watching the Final Girl step up and win through is the unexpectedness and yet

predictability through the repetition of this trope (which relies on the idea of an underestimated girl becoming a warrior). However, in true, post-
Scream style, Erin’s appeal increases when it is unexpectedly revealed that she is not just practical and able to make the best of a bad situation but is in fact highly trained to deal with situations like this one. The next film I will discuss takes the meta-commentary of the Scream series to its logical extreme.

In Todd Strauss-Schulson’s The Final Girls (2015), teenager Max loses her mother, with whom she had a very close relationship, in a car crash. Max’s mother, Amanda Cartwright, was an actress famous for her role in a cheesy 1980s slasher film in the vein of Friday the 13th and Tony Maylam’s The Burning (1981), entitled Camp Bloodbath. On the three-year anniversary of Amanda’s death, Max and her friends attend a screening of Camp Bloodbath, however a fire causes the group to somehow enter the world of the movie. The conceit is fresh and enjoyable, and is handled intelligently, with a number of references to the rules of the slasher form, with an outrageously slutty girl, a flashback to the ‘prank gone wrong’ that sets off the killing spree in Camp Bloodbath, and of course the Final Girl who must be a virgin. The Final Girls actively satirises these conventions, demonstrating their absurdity and excesses. Camp Bloodbath’s designated virgin heroine Paula demonstrates how arbitrary the ‘virginity’ criterion is, as she is otherwise a take-no-prisoners, punky tough girl whose (lack of) sexual history is neither obvious in her demeanour (as it is in Halloween and Friday the 13th), nor seemingly relevant at all to her actual characterisation, and is simply a factor because the ‘rules’ state it must be. When explaining the generic structure of their situation,
one of Max’s friends states, “you have to be a virgin in this movie to kill Billy, okay?”, and that is indeed simply the way it must go.9

Although The Final Girls is a satirical slasher-comedy film, the mother-daughter relationship at the centre of the film, and the mother’s death, is not a superficial representation of the oft repeated trope. Films and literature, both horror and otherwise, are replete with dead or at least absent mothers who function as a catalysing cipher.10 However, this film opens with a brief establishing scene in which we learn that Amanda is not a flawless homemaker but instead a working actress, who is unmarried, and not practical with money, but who has, however, raised a practical daughter, with whom she has a mutually supportive relationship that is playful and warm. Due to this short but thorough scene, Max’s grief is a tangible and believable narrative arc, based on an authentic relationship played out on screen, rather than being reliant on Max’s (likely flawed) recollections alone.

Friendships are also emotionally authentic in the film. Max’s friends are supportive about her struggles with coming to terms with the loss of her mother, but they are also honest about their concerns that she is not moving on and recovering from her trauma, but instead clinging

---

9 At least in Friday the 13th this conceit is narratively justified, as Jason drowned because the camp counsellors who were meant to be watching him were having sex instead, thus providing a direct correlation for Mrs. Voorhees’ revenge, and in Halloween Michael murders his sister after she has sex with her boyfriend, again when she should be looking after him, which seems to trigger some sort of Freudian response in Michael to sexuality in general. Camp Bloodbath establishes no such relationship between sex and trauma or death.

10 This concept, when more broadly attached to women in film and literature in general, of killing off a female character in order to facilitate or drive the male protagonist’s narrative journey, has come to be known as “fridging”. This term comes from a website called “Women in Refrigerators”, established by comic-book fans who wanted to draw attention to how disproportionally it is female characters in comics that are “depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in refrigerators”. This is not a phenomenon limited to comic books and films, however, as even Edgar Allen Poe can be considered an early “fridger”, with his statement regarding his process in writing “The Raven”, “The death... of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world - and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”, Edgar Allan Poe “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), http://faculty.wiu.edu/M-Cole/PhilComp.pdf (published online: 1999 accessed 27/12/2020), paragraph 20
to her past. Her friends are often comedically blunt, demonstrating that their support is not contingent on their lives and friendships being easy, as rather than staying silent in order to avoid conflict, they are willing to communicate difficult truths with one another. As a result, parallel to the comedy and meta-analysis of the slasher genre, there is a strong and authentic emotional journey, which, in this genre of film, is rare indeed.\footnote{Another notable example is Fred Walton’s \textit{April Fool’s Day} (1986), wherein a group of university friends attend a party at the private island of one of their group. The banter, in-jokes, and gentle teasing the group engages in is natural and organic.}

\textit{Horror Movie Mothers of the Twenty-First Century}

As discussed in the previous chapters, mothers in horror films have traditionally taken on very specific roles that are only infrequently deviated from: the angelic, self-sacrificing mother who puts her children and family before herself; the neglectful, indifferent mother (who is usually a career woman); the monstrous mother, abusive, controlling, and castrating; or the absent and thus even more ambiguous version of any of these three. One of the most important characteristics of these stereotypical horror film mothers is that they are almost never the protagonist. The story is almost always told from the point-of-view of other characters who are profoundly affected by the mother character, but the mothers themselves rarely have their own voices.

As I discussed above, Wes Craven, with \textit{Scream 3}, rehabilitated the horror film’s morally-compromised, absent mother figure through the complex and sympathetic characterisation of Maureen Prescott. Building upon this foundation, horror films of the twenty-first century have begun reframing the point-of-view from the mother’s perspective, allowing the mother to tell her own stories. The first two films I would like to discuss specifically focus on mother characters who should be considered at best neglectful, and at worst monstrous, but who are
not only the complex protagonists of their respective films, but are treated with sympathy and nuance, despite their egregious flaws.

Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001), and Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring* (2002) both feature mothers in their 20s or 30s, beset by threatening supernatural forces. In *The Others*, set during the 1940s, Grace (Nicole Kidman), the mother of two young children who are so photosensitive that they will die if they are exposed to strong light, is completely cut off from the world in an old, isolated mansion in Jersey, while her husband is away fighting in the war. Unable to leave even to attend church, when three people arrive offering to be her new servants Grace, despite her reservations, must accept their help. As time passes, not only do the new servants begin acting in a suspicious manner, but the children claim the house is being haunted by the eponymous “others”. Although the supernatural elements of the story are diegetically real, the emotional nucleus of the story is Grace and her relationship with her children, Anne and Nicholas, and the strict routine around keeping the children safe from being exposed to strong light. Through the claustrophobic isolation and darkness, the air of sinister mystery, and the strained relationships, Amenábar produces a film that captures the complexities of a mother’s bond with her children, both the fierce love and desperate resentment and even hatred that are the contradictory mix of emotions at the core of that type of relationship, in an authentic and confronting way.

The film begins with a brief prologue in which Nicole Kidman’s voice asks, “now children, are we ready to begin?”, overlaying picturesque, Dickensian illustrations of a happy family (a reference to Dickens, however, is also a reference to family dysfunction, thus already signalling that everything may not be as idyllic as it seems at first). The animated portion ends with a beautifully illustrated, warm, and welcoming image of an old manor house, which then switches to a live action shot of the same house, in the same orientation, but the
real version appears in a muted palette of blues and greys, sinister, and gloomy. This impression is compounded when the brief silence of the shot is shattered by a piercing and devastated scream. Our first sighting of Nicole Kidman’s character, in stark contrast to the warmth of our first vocal impression of her in the prologue, is a closeup of Grace resting her head on one cheek, a horrified look on her face, while she covers her mouth in an attempt to contain her already-released scream. As the camera slowly rotates, we see that she is crying and shaking, alone in a bed, looking around in a disorientated fashion, presumably having just woken from a terrible nightmare.

The opening moments of the film present a sharp juxtaposition; the illustrated sequence denotes the expectations of a blissful, gentle family life, while the reality is far different, love and protectiveness warring with despair and hatred. In the prologue Grace calmly recounts the Biblical story of Creation which is of particular significance to the role of the Mother in this film. On Earth, unlike in Heaven, creation of life is a woman’s role, and Grace’s calm in the voiceover is symbolic of the type of mother she should be, according to her natural place in society, calm, dutiful, and imparting religious wisdom to her children. At the film’s conclusion we can look back on the opening scene and guess exactly what Grace’s nightmare must have been about, something truly horrifying for a mother to dream, let alone carry out, the murder of her own children.

The love, pain, fear, and anger of Grace’s isolated position throughout the film is predominantly exhibited through Kidman’s sometimes restrained and sometimes deeply emotional performance of Amenábar’s beautifully nuanced dialogue. Early in the film, when she first meets her new servants, Grace talks about the silence and darkness of the house,

---

12 The conceit of a mother or mother-figure isolated with young children in a forbidding English manor house immediately evokes Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which in turn suggests that the film will in some way engage with narrative ambiguity and fragmented characterisations.
describing it as “rather difficult, to say the least. One might say, unbearable. The only way of 
enduring it is by keeping a cool head.” The sigh, shakiness, and swallow indicate that it is in 
fact unbearable, but she has no choice but to bear it. There are hints throughout the film that 
Grace has in fact lost the constant battle between calm and dutiful parenting, and whatever 
might happen were she not to maintain her “cool head”. There are frequent references to 
something “happening”, “then it happened”, “it did happen”, “Anne, what happened?”, and 
Anne says “mummy went mad”, “she went mad like she did that day”, and “I’ve already told 
you, she’s gone mad”. We do not find out exactly what happened “that day” until the final 
scenes of the film, however throughout we can identify the struggle between the demands of 
being a mother, and having a clear sense of self, and that Grace is suffering from anxiety and 
depression.

Ultimately, this film, with Grace as its protagonist, is about motherhood, grief, and the war 
between meanings of motherhood that Adrienne Rich describes as “one superimposed on the 
other: the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to children; 
and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain 
under male control”.13 When Grace’s husband returns from the war, the patriarchal viewpoint 
is allowed an avenue of expression in the film. Although Grace’s husband does not come 
across as particularly domineering, or even especially masculine in his state of post-traumatic 
stress from the war, he still benefits from his status as a man, the head of the family who is 
able to come and go as he pleases. When Charles tells Grace that he is returning to the front, 
Grace lashes out, asking him,

what were you trying to prove by going to war? Your place was here, with us. With 
your family. I loved you, that was enough for me. Living in this darkness. In this

13 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York, London: W.W. 
prison. But not for you. I wasn’t enough for you. That’s why you left. It wasn’t just the war.

Grace’s words echo Rich’s observations on “unexamined assumptions” of mother - and woman -hood:

A “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs, [and] that the isolation of mother and children together in the home must be taken for granted.14

Grace is in fact literally isolated with her children, due to their medical condition, as she says when she tells Charles about the servants leaving, and about what “happened” on “that day”, stating, “the servants had left during the night. They hadn’t the courage to face me. And they knew that I couldn’t leave the house. They knew.” Her desperation and helplessness are palpable here, as it is when she tells her children, “I’m fed up, do you hear me? I am fed up with you”, and tells Anne to “stop breathing like that. You heard me, stop it. Stop breathing.”

When Mrs. Mills explains the concept of ‘death portraits’ to Grace, she says, “grief over the death of a loved one can lead people to do the strangest things”. This statement of course extends to Grace herself, who is so distraught over her husband not returning when the war ends, and so desperate in her isolation with her needy children, that she not only smothers them to death and shoots herself, but then, as a ghost, stays on in the house, adhering to her routine of complete darkness and isolation, without realising that they are all dead, and the rules and limitations that bound them in life need no longer restrict them.

The film makes good use of its twist ending, following M. Night Shyamalan’s paradigmatic The Sixth Sense (1999), that Grace and her children are actually dead after what “happened that day”, and the eponymous “others” are not haunting the house, but are in fact a new

14 Rich, Of Woman Born, 22.
family who have moved into the now seemingly unoccupied manor house. As in *The Sixth Sense*, the twist is no mere gimmick, but is a vital part of establishing just how isolated and vulnerable Grace is as a mother. Pascale Fakhry argues that, “at the moment [in the film] when Grace finally metamorphoses into a heroic, good mother, her monstrosity is revealed to the spectator. This revelation functions as a redemption for the young woman.”

Watching the film again, knowing as we do on subsequent viewings that Grace is the perpetrator of a murder-suicide of her children and herself, makes us re-evaluate but not revile her character and her journey. Grace remains a sympathetic if extremely flawed and somewhat monstrous protagonist. Her actual carrying out of the act of filicide of course crosses an unforgivable boundary, however it is an understandable though unacceptable response to the situation in which she finds herself.

Adrienne Rich wrote in her journal in 1960,

> My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness…. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair too at my fate…. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another. (Rich, 21).

We can hear and feel these exact emotions, contradictory and sometimes dangerous, in Grace’s brittle, measured, dutiful exterior, her cries of, “God help me! What is the matter with me? I don’t know what’s the matter with me”, and her final desperate act “that day”, followed by a final acceptance of what happened, and her decision to stay in the house with her children and her servants, taking a chance at a new (after)life together.

---

Gore Verbinski’s 2002 film *The Ring*\(^{16}\) engages with similar themes of complex, ambivalent feelings about motherhood. There are two mothers in this film (or in fact three; the third is important in her complete absence, a point I will return to), the protagonist Rachel, and the mother of the monstrous-child, Anna Morgan, the latter of whom is the catalyst of the action of the film, though she is dead for the entirety of it. Rachel is a single mother in her twenties whose niece Katie is killed after having watched a cursed video tape, and she uses her investigative skills derived from her career in journalism to piece together what caused her niece’s death. Rachel’s son Aiden is independent, making his own lunches and getting himself off to school every day, despite being only approximately seven or eight years old. It is clear almost immediately that Rachel is not particularly nurturing, arriving late to pick him up from school, and yelling at her boss on the phone while walking through the school halls. At first glance Rachel appears uncaring and distant, a typical horror movie negligent mother, prioritising her career over her son. However, on further examination it becomes clear that this mother-child relationship is more nuanced that the simple negligent mother trope.

If examined from a different angle, one that is more sympathetic to Rachel’s position, Rachel’s figuration as a mother presents a more nuanced image. She accidentally became pregnant at a young age and has raised her son without the support of the father, as well as little family support. Despite this, she has developed a successful career, and is intelligent and strong-willed. Pascale Fakhry argues that, “Rachel… becomes a potential victim because of her career and her professional ambition.”\(^{17}\) However, I would argue this is simply not the case. Rachel’s niece is the first victim of the cursed video tape, and it is Rachel’s career that

\(^{16}\) *The Ring* is a remake of Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998). The films share similar plot elements, but the American film engages with a particularly western horror sensibility.

provides her with the skills to solve the tape’s mystery. Though ‘nurturing’ does not seem to come naturally to her, instead of marking her as ‘unnatural’, the film acknowledges the reality of a situation that is not uncommon: that no mother is ‘perfect’. Rachel’s son is fed and clothed, intelligent and independent, and feels safe with his mother, the latter becoming the most important point as the film’s plot and themes become apparent.

On the other end of the spectrum of motherhood in this film, Anna Morgan and her husband spend years trying to conceive a child, and after Anna has several miscarriages, they disappear from their small island community, returning after an undisclosed amount of time with an infant daughter, Samara. Moesko Island’s doctor tells Rachel that nobody knew where Samara came from, and when Rachel investigates how Samara is related to the deadly video tape, Anna Morgan’s husband tells Rachel, “my wife was not supposed to have a child”. The film deftly interweaves complex layers of motherhood, wanted and unwanted children, too young and unprepared mothers, and those desperately seeking motherhood, as well as ideas around adoption and changelings.

The film offers two visions of motherhood, but comes to complex (in)conclusions, offering that there is no ‘natural’, innate affinity to mothering. Anna tells Samara that “all I ever wanted was you” in the exact moment that she throws her into the well. Anna, like many mothers, fictional and non-fictional alike, was consumed with her desire to have a child but was not prepared for the reality. Rachel’s statement concerning Anna, that “she wanted that child more than anything in the world. How could she have done that?” highlights for Rachel both her own inadequacies and strengths as a mother. Rachel has come to motherhood at the complete opposite end of the spectrum from Anna Morgan: far from struggling and fighting to have a baby for years, Rachel accidentally got pregnant at a young age, but has overcome
this beginning and has become a loving if flawed mother who cannot imagine herself committing the act that Anna did.

The third implicit mother in *The Ring* is of course Samara’s absent and mysterious birth mother. The implication, further elaborated in the film’s sequels, is that Samara came about through some sort of supernatural means. This puts Samara in the company of other famous horror-film children, such as Rosemary’s son or Damien Thorne from Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976). Although Samara is not anything as grandiose as the antichrist him(her)self, her dubious origins put savvy horror viewers in mind of a child brought about through a union between a demonic figure and an unsuspecting woman (or a jackal, as is the case in *The Omen*). Samara’s birth mother’s absence is an important structuring feature of the role of mothers in horror films. Her status and origin are completely unknown, and thus allow for endless speculation: is she an innocent figure, like Rosemary Woodhouse? Is she a jackal, or some other non-human vessel for the demonic? Did she choose to give her baby up or was the decision made for her? Did she in fact volunteer to carry some sort of demon’s baby? By positing, then leaving these questions unanswered, the film creates in Samara’s birth mother a kind of Schrodinger’s ‘mother’, in that she occupies all and none of these roles at once. As such, she is in some ways a nexus of horror film mothers, for she is the absent-self-sacrificing-indifferent-manipulated-manipulative-monstrous-innocent mother.

The final film I will be discussing is Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018). This film, like *The Brood* and *Flowers in the Attic* before it, deals with questions of family inheritance and legacies, both biological and social. The film opens with an obituary notice for an older woman, Ellen, and then cuts to what is clearly her family, preparing to attend her funeral. At the funeral, Ellen’s daughter Annie (Toni Collette) proceeds to give one of the most awkward eulogies in film,
It’s heartening to see so many strange, new faces here today. … My mother was a very secretive and private woman. She had private rituals, private friends, private anxieties. … She was a very difficult woman to read. If you ever thought you knew what was going on with her, and God forbid you tried to confront that. But when her life was unpolluted, she could be the sweetest, warmest, most loving person in the world.

There are many things to unpack in this statement. The notion of generational separation in families is strongly hinted at here, with Annie claiming she never knew her mother at all, which, as the film proceeds, is confirmed in the strongest possible terms. The two phrases that stand out, however, are that she had “private rituals”, and that her life was often “polluted” in some way. These rather ominous and ambiguous claims immediately capture the viewer’s attention. Some of these ambiguities are clarified soon after when Annie attends a grief support group, and tells the group of her mother’s background:

My mom was old, and she wasn’t all there at the end. And we were pretty much estranged before that, so it wasn’t really a huge blow. But I did… love her. And she didn’t have an easy life. She had DID [dissociative identity disorder], which became extreme at the end. And dementia. And my father died when I was a baby, from starvation, um, because he had psychotic depression and he starved himself, which I’m sure was just as pleasant as it sounds. And then there’s my brother. My older brother had schizophrenia and when he was sixteen, he hanged himself in my mother’s bedroom, and of course the suicide note blamed her, accusing her of “putting people inside him.” So that was my mom’s life.

After this we understand how Ellen’s life was “polluted”. Annie’s resignation when she says, “and of course the suicide note blamed her” reflects a pervasive culture in the US of mother-blame. Andrew Scull states that in the second half of the twentieth century a variety of mental disorders, including ‘borderlines’, schizophrenia, and autism “were perceived to have their roots in perverse mothering, or perhaps a combination of inadequate parents: a domineering, rejecting, aggressive mother who had picked out a psychologically inadequate, passive and withdrawn male as her mate.”18 After hearing about Annie’s family background of mental

---

18 Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilization: a cultural history of insanity, from the Bible to Freud, from the madhouse to modern medicine*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 343. In the 21st century mothers are often still blamed for autism, but now it takes the form of a discourse around whether
illness, as well as her experiences with a distant mother, when tragedy occurs as the film goes on, the notion of mental illness as ‘hereditary’ is at the forefront of our minds, and as Bernice M. Murphy argues, “it seems for a while that… [Annie] is likely succumbing to the strain of mental illness that is said to have cost both her father and brother their lives.”

Annie’s second child Charlie had a close relationship with Annie’s mother, although Charlie tells her mother that her grandmother wanted her to be a boy. After Ellen dies, Charlie displays some odd “ritualistic” behaviour of her own, beheading a pigeon in order to tie its head to a sort of stick-doll that she has fashioned, and constantly making a clucking sound with her tongue, a tic that will continue to haunt the narrative. Not far into the film, Annie forces her eldest son Peter to take Charlie to a teenage party even though she does not want to go. At the party she eats some chocolate cake which has nuts in it, and Charlie goes into anaphylaxis. As Peter drives her to the hospital Charlie, in an attempt to claw for air, puts her head out of the car’s window just as Peter swerves to avoid a deer, and is beheaded by an electricity pole. In shock, Peter drives home, gets out of the car, and goes straight to bed. Annie’s scream as she discovers her daughter’s headless body, and her subsequent grief-fuelled screaming and crying on her bedroom floor are shattering for the viewer, capturing the raw agony of the loss of a child, evoking both Julia’s (Mia Farrow) and Chris’ (Ellen Burstyn) emotional outpourings in Full Circle and The Exorcist respectively.

After this harrowing display of grief, the film ultimately focuses on the processes and structures of blame, guilt, and maternal ambivalence. We watch with increasing tension the interactions between Annie and Peter, waiting for the explosion, and we get it at the dinner

---

vaccinations cause autism. Though any alleged link between autism and vaccinations has been thoroughly debunked, the discourse remains, and thus mother-blame continues in new forms.


20 Murphy, “Hereditary review”, 180.
table. If one looks at the dialogue alone, it is reminiscent of the ‘wire hangers’ scene in 
*Mommie Dearest*, however the tone, and the trauma, hatred, blame, and even love evinced is 
raw and authentic. When Peter tells Annie to “say what you wanna say… just fucking say 
it!”, Annie finally bursts that bubble of tension that has hovered over the film since we 
wondered how Annie and Steve would react to Peter’s getting out of the car and going to bed. 
“Don’t you swear at me you little shit! Don’t you ever raise your voice at me. I am your 
mother!”, she roars. It is a deeply uncomfortable moment in cinema, in a film filled with such 
moments. She goes on to tell him that, as a mother,

all I do is worry and slave and defend you.... well, now your sister is dead. And I 
know you miss her, and I know it was an accident, and I know you’re in pain. And I 
wish I could take that away for you. I wish I could shield you from the knowledge 
that you did what you did, but your sister is dead.

Annie tells Peter he should take some responsibility, and Peter rightly pushes back, asking, 
“What about you mom? She didn’t want to go to the party, so why was she there?” It is an 
agonising scene, especially in its realism, knowing that everyone is making everyone else’s 
pain, and their own, much worse, and if we were confronted with a situation like this in our 
own lives we would most likely behave in the same way. And Peter is in fact not wrong; 
nobody in this family is taking responsibility.

Returning to the story that Annie tells the grief support group about her mother at the 
beginning, after Annie gives a sympathetic recount of the tragedies that her mother endured, 
the tenor of Annie’s story changes register, as she talks about the lack of trust and in fact fear 
she obviously held for her mother, without fully realising it. Talking about her years of 
switching between contact and no contact with her mother, she states that her mother was 
“manipulative”. Most troubling, along with the ominous-sounding “private rituals”, Annie 
says, “I didn’t let her anywhere near my first, my son, which is why I gave her my daughter,
who she immediately stabbed her hooks into.” These are not feelings commonly associated with an average family breach and demonstrate multiple avenues through which the feelings of distrust and abandonment occur generationally.

Annie returns to the grief support group after Charlie’s death, however, before she can enter the venue, she meets an older woman named Joan who remembers Annie from her previous visits. Joan befriends Annie and seems to provide the motherly support that Annie never got from her own mother, however Annie becomes more paranoid and uncertain about all of her relationships. When Joan asks Annie, “how’s your relationship with your son?”, Annie responds with a story of an incident that happened a few years prior, that she was sleepwalking and found herself standing over her children, all of them covered in paint thinner, having been woken by the sound of a match striking. She says, “I was just as shocked as [Peter] was. And it was impossible to convince them that it was just sleepwalking, which, of course it was…. Peter has always held it against me. And there is nothing I can say and nothing I can do, because it happened. While I was asleep.” This is a loaded response to a question about one’s relationship with one’s son. Joan, we imagine, was asking because of Peter’s involvement with the death of Charlie, but it is a revealing moment regarding what Annie actually thinks of herself as a mother, that she realises here that Peter has every right not to trust her.

With this story, therefore, the film would seem to indicate that the thing that is “hereditary” in Annie’s family is abuse, and children not being able to feel safe with their mother. However, as the film progresses, it becomes clearer that there is a far more complex relationship between motherhood and inheritance. For all its confronting dialogues and graphically brutal scenes, the moment in the film, as Murphy states, “that elicited audible gasps from the cinema audience I watched the film with” is when Annie enters her son’s bedroom and says,
“I never wanted to be your mother.”²¹ Annie’s own reaction to this moment is visceral, subtly and believably performed by Collette, as she gasps and covers her mouth, horrified at what she has just said to her son. As with the dinner scene above, this scene is similar to the one in Mommie Dearest, in which Joan Crawford tells her daughter Tina that she may have adopted her in part for the publicity, and then immediately takes it back, saying that it is not true. However here it does not sound disingenuous or self-deluding, for Annie does not gasp because she does not mean it, and she does not attempt to justify or take it back; instead, she is simply astonished and horrified that she has actually said the words out loud. Murphy states that, “[f]or all of the indisputable shock value of the film’s final scenes… it is Hereditary’s harrowing depiction of two of the most taboo emotions associated with maternity – resentment towards one’s children and regret at ever having had them in the first place – that linger longest.”²² When a devastated Peter asks why she did not want him, she tells him that she never felt like she could be a mother, and that “she [her mother] pressured me… I tried to stop it…. I tried to have a miscarriage…. I did everything they told me not to do but it didn’t work. I’m happy it didn’t work.” Peter is devastated, saying “you tried to kill me.” Annie tells him she did not, she loves him, and when Peter pushes the point, asking her why she tried to kill him she tells him, “I didn’t! I was trying to save you!” This seemingly outlandish statement, however, makes sense when the entire film is watched and digested.

Recalling Annie’s outline of her family-of-origin’s tragic history early in the film, the actions of her father and her brother makes sense, particularly Annie’s brother’s accusation that their mother Ellen, “put people inside him” which now, chillingly, is proven to be true, and not a schizophrenic delusion at all. Ellen was indeed trying to “put people inside him”, specifically

²¹ Murphy, “Hereditary review”, 184. This was exactly what happened in the screening I attended, and certainly my own gasp was audible.
²² Murphy, “Hereditary review”, 184-5.
a demon named Paimon, who requires a male, human body to inhabit, and as Ellen was the high priestess of the cult that worships Paimon, it was her responsibility to provide a vessel. Annie must, on some unconscious or barely conscious but denied level, understand the explicit threat her mother posed specifically to a male child, trying to keep her son away from Ellen. Thus, when she attempts to burn her children and herself alive, she actually is acting in a protective fashion.

As the film comes to its climax, Annie and the audience are able to piece together the complex plot that Ellen’s coven enacted over generations in order to bring Paimon to life. Annie discovers that her motherly friend Joan was in fact a friend of Ellen’s, having insinuated herself into Annie’s life in order to continue Ellen’s plans. The plan appears to be thus: as Ellen’s husband killed himself, thus preventing Ellen from producing a “spare” in case something happened to the “heir”, and said “heir”, Annie’s older brother, also killed himself, Ellen had to focus her efforts on her grandchildren. Since Annie was savvy enough to prevent her mother from “getting her hooks” into Peter, Ellen groomed Charlie as a temporary vessel for Paimon. Having somehow orchestrated Charlie’s death (presumably Joan and the coven must have had something to do with guaranteeing a nut-filled cake, and a deer forcing Peter to swerve, at the exact moment it was required), the next step was to pass Charlie/Paimon’s spirit into Peter, which the coven successfully does by the end of the film.

The tragedy of *Hereditary* is that there is nothing Annie could have done to change the course of her life, except killing her family (if she had been able to carry out the act). Annie’s family

---

23 This is also the overarching storyline of the *Paranormal Activity* series of films, even down to the matriarchally-led coven of witches who are attempting to physically manifest a male demon named “Toby”, in this case by providing him with a female child to become his bride. Both the *Paranormal Activity* series and *Hereditary* offer an interesting rendering of what I discussed in chapter two regarding women’s internalised misogyny and active promotion of the patriarchal ‘plot’ against themselves, and in this case it is a literal patriarchal plot.
legacy was abuse and mental illness, all in the service of physically manifesting a male, patriarchal demon. That it is women, and indeed mothers, that work the hardest to bring this apocalyptic event about in this film, is an indictment of a patriarchal culture that values women simply as vessels and props for men and their stories. *Hereditary*, like *The Brood*, and *Flowers in the Attic*, examines the legacies of matriarchal abuse over three generations of women in a family. Although *Hereditary* has one conventionally excessive (and absent) “monstrous mother” in Ellen, she is predominantly a foil in service of a much more complex and harrowing characterisation of horror-film motherhood in Annie.

Through a torturous and fantastic narrative of witches and demons, Annie is established as a near-perfect representation of ambivalent motherhood. Throughout the film Annie despises, loves, and grieves over, her children, with no one emotion ever completely winning out (though, unsurprisingly given the film begins with Annie’s own mother’s funeral and less than halfway through depicts the brutal death of one of her children, positive emotions like ‘love’ and certainly ‘happiness’ are rarer than the negative ones). However, as discussed above, the pivotal moment of honesty and ambivalence emerges when Annie tells Peter that she never wanted to be his mother, but that despite her failed attempts at aborting him, she was “happy it didn’t work” and that she had him after all. Although our society instructs that motherhood is in fact the ultimate expression of womanhood, that “[t]o have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness,”24 *Hereditary* interrogates this seemingly incontrovertible truth.

In *The Ring*, Anna Morgan’s husband tells Rachel, “my wife was never supposed to have a child”. In that film, *Mommie Dearest*, and *Flowers in the Attic*, to name only a few, this can be read as an indictment of women who cannot have children in traditional ways, as they are

---

somehow deficient or monstrous. In the case of The Ring and Mommie Dearest it is ‘barrenness’ that is the issue (though in the latter Joan’s barrenness is decisively a judgement and a punishment for her monstrousness, while the former, as discussed above, complicates the notion of infertility as a reflection of unworthiness), and in Flowers in the Attic it is the family’s incestuous and abusive tendencies that define the children as “unnatural”, though carried and birthed in the traditional, biological way.

In Hereditary, however, the idea that a woman has the right, or even more so, the responsibility, to choose for herself whether she becomes a mother or not, is posited, and ultimately supported. Annie has every reason to never become a mother, both in the prosaic sense of preferring not to pass on a hereditary set of mental illnesses to a future generation, and in the phantasmagoric, but no less important in the context of this film, sense of not enabling the demonic and apocalyptic consequences of birthing a son. In not wanting her children, and not wanting to be a mother, Annie is right. Sometimes a woman does not have to be a mother, and the film vindicates Annie’s feelings on the matter.
Conclusion

Women are such an indispensable element of the horror film that it is almost impossible to conceive of one with no female characters. However, though they are indispensable, women in these films are denigrated, and objectified, occupying subordinate roles to the male characters. Women’s roles in horror films take many forms: they are victims of stalking, victims of torture, victims of rape, and victims of murder. They are idealised as scopophilic objects of worship, or as virgins, or as self-sacrificing, self-effacing mothers. If they do not conform to these idealisations, they are deemed monstrous. They are excoriated and punished for being too sexual, too attractive, or not attractive enough. Women’s pain, be it physical or emotional, is almost always the central spectacle of the horror film. Women in horror films do not act, they are acted upon.

Over time, however, as conditions for women in real life have improved, women in horror films have become more complex. No longer a simplistic, male-defined binary of “perfect” or “monstrous”, many women characters in the horror films of the twenty-first century have become more nuanced, allowed to be “good” but flawed, and sexual or not, without being either punished or lauded for it. In the best horror films, although their pain is still the central spectacle, women are even allowed to tell their own stories, drive their own narratives, sometimes. It is a start.


Filmography


Amenábar, Alejandro, director. 2001. The Others. Cruise/Wagner Productions, Sogecine, Las Producciones Del Escorpion


Clark, Bob, director.1974. Black Christmas. Canadian Film Development Corporation, Film Funding Ltd of Canada.

Cooper Merian C. and Schoedsack, Ernest B, directors. 1933. King Kong. RKO Radio Pictures


Cronenberg, David, director. 1979. The Brood. Canadian Film Development Corporation.


Wan, James, director. 2010. *Insidious*. Blumhouse Productions.


