

**From Women's Cinema to Women's Horror Cinema: Genre and Gender in the Twenty-
First Century**

by

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This dissertation addresses the shift from one fundamental genre in feminist film history (melodrama) to a contemporary one (horror), arguing that genre is a crucial tool for reconsidering women's cinema. I demonstrate how women's horror cinema in the twenty-first century bears the legacies of both feminist film history and horror film history by arguing that the lineage of women's cinema is visible in women's horror cinema, where these filmmakers use horror to consciously engage the codes and conventions of non-horror genres. Prior to the year 2000, women working in horror were less numerous and far less acknowledged for their contribution to the genre than afterward. In 2020, there are at least 700 active female horror directors working globally; most of their films have yet to be addressed in the field of film and media studies. I utilize this fresh material to argue that women-directed horror cinema offers a concrete, textual basis for analyzing how women's spectatorship of horror and feminist cinema looks and functions. In turn, I theorize that women-directed horror films reflect intersectional spectator positions that women have long embodied and that horror enables them to articulate in innovative ways.

Feminist film theory in the 1970s and 1980s and the surge of critical attention to women directors in this period are vital precursors to an emerging discourse around women-directed horror. As such, my dissertation pairs women's horror cinema and festival programming between 2000-2020 alongside films and events important to earlier feminist film theory. This methodology

reveals an ongoing dialogue elucidating issues long important to women that are now emerging in women's horror cinema. Chapters one, two, and three read select texts of twenty-first century women's horror cinema alongside key texts of melodrama, experimental film, and comedy, three genres historically important to feminist theorists and filmmakers. Chapter four utilizes ethnographic fieldwork and archival research to explore the niche phenomenon of women's horror film festivals as critical exhibition spaces that facilitate the roles that female filmmakers and programmers of women's horror cinema play in redefining the limits of horror.

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction

In a 1979 article, film critic Robin Wood opens with the following question: “What became of the American family comedy?” (171). He then proceeds to outline how the gender relations and narrative trajectory of the American family can be traced from the 1940s to the 1970s as a fundamental genre shift. The American family, he writes, “simply moved into the genre where it had always rightly belonged” (178). He is referring, of course, to the horror film, a genre whose vast field of scholarship Wood is well known for shaping. He was among the first critics—and certainly the most influential one—to take the horror genre seriously and to recognize its social, cultural, and political significance in the face of overwhelming critical and cultural dismissal.¹ For this reason, scholarship on the horror genre—including my own—largely owes its existence to Wood’s pioneering criticism. In my study of what I call women’s horror cinema, I take further direction from Wood by identifying a trajectory from certain key genres to others. While feminist and women’s issues once dominated the purview of genres such as melodrama, experimental film, comedy, and documentary, in my dissertation, they have “moved into the genre where [they] had always rightly belonged.”

¹ As Adam Lowenstein points out, Wood’s “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” served to combat “conventional associations attached to the horror genre: heartless exploitation, slipshod filmmaking, gratuitous violence, unrelieved misogyny, and an inherent silliness that precludes any substantial aesthetic or political ambitions. Against all odds, Wood wanted to take the horror film seriously” (Lowenstein, “Reintroduction” 1). Despite its influence (and perhaps because of it), Lowenstein further points out the limitations of Wood’s essay by revisiting Wood’s analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Omen* (1976) as examples of progressive and reactionary horror films, respectively. The designation of horror under the strict (but, as Lowenstein points out, contradictory) categories of “progressive” and “reactionary” according to their mode of production, authorship, or social/psychological concerns “simplifies the relations between art and politics, leaving little room for ... polyvalent negotiations” (10) that allow for variety in a horror film’s engagement with art, politics, and taste.

Horror has been a central topic for feminist scholarship since the late 1980s.² Only recently have women turned to horror filmmaking in order to consciously critique and reframe women's issues through the genre. However, women's horror cinema has not simply left the genres historically important to women's cinema behind. Instead, the traditions of melodrama, experimental film, and comedy are being assimilated into women's horror cinema and re-articulated through the codes and conventions of horror. The number of women turning to horror filmmaking contributes to the formation of an emerging women's horror cinema "canon" that, I argue, can be a critical tool for assessing and theorizing the stakes and trends of women's film spectatorship—particularly in horror—in concrete terms.

Historically, women have had poor representation in horror film production except as actors. At the same time, issues of gender and sexuality feature prominently in the genre and have been central to horror scholarship. Writing in 1992, Lucy Fischer noted that *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) legitimized women's difficult and downright negative experiences with pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, and above all the dismissal they face from male partners and medical practitioners. Since then, scholars and critics have discussed how horror legitimizes the experiences of women and minorities. Kier-La Janisse writes about horror's ability to express women's frustration at being dismissed, undervalued, and gaslighted. More and more women report finding the horror genre "profoundly cathartic [because it] constructs imaginary spaces

² Again, this is largely due to Wood's pioneering work in designating women as one of several social (and sexual) categories represented as Other in the horror film. In Wood's wake, scholars such as Rhona J. Berenstein, Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Isabel Pinedo, and Linda Williams have formulated influential theories of gender and the horror film in terms of cinematic spectatorship, psychoanalytic theory, and postmodernism.

where they can work through true-life trauma” (Gillmor 21). Studies of women’s spectatorship and fandom demonstrate that women have long been avid and voracious viewers of horror.³

Even so, the number of women working in the genre as directors (and all other roles behind the scenes) has historically remained slim. Annual studies from Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film report that women’s representation across film production in general remains low, but horror is particularly saturated with male directors. The legacies of revered horror auteurs—among them John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and George A. Romero—reveal that no women have ever reached a similar status or been able to sustain comparably prolific careers. In 1979, Robin Wood and Richard Lippe curated “The American Nightmare,” a landmark event in the study of horror cinema that involved a series of film screenings and seminars that took place during the Toronto Film Festival, as well as the publication of Wood and Lippe’s highly influential collection of program notes entitled *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*. The invited filmmakers included Craven, Romero, Brian De Palma, David Cronenberg, and Stephanie Rothman. While Rothman’s career ended by the mid-1970s (her final film was *The Working Girls* in 1974), her male counterparts have enjoyed relatively stable and long-running careers until the present (or until the end of their lives). Rothman’s case is similar to that of her female peers; other notable female directors of horror, such as Mary Lambert, Jackie Kong, and Katt Shea have endured rocky careers with only a handful of feature-length films to their name.⁴

³ For discussions of female horror spectatorship, see Rhona J. Berenstein, Kier-La Janisse, Isabel Pinedo, and Linda Williams (“When the Woman Looks” and “Discipline and Fun”). For a journalistic account of female horror fans, see Erik Piepenburg.

⁴ One exception is the successful career of Kathryn Bigelow, whose early films include the vampire western *Near Dark* (1987) and action-horror film *Blue Steel* (1989). However, the fact that she has enjoyed particular success after moving away from horror into action and war thrillers such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *Detroit* (2017) suggests that she is the exception that proves the rule.

Since the year 2000, however, the number of women in horror film production has dramatically increased, and women who made horror in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s have also begun to receive more recognition. Alongside my dissertation, I have developed the digital humanities project *Cut-Throat Women: A Database of Women Who Make Horror* (www.cutthroatwomen.org), through which I have amassed the names of over 800 women currently making horror today. The increase in number and visibility of women in the horror industry is leading many to reconsider the contributions of women such as Rothman, Lambert, and Shea to the genre.⁵ Better access to production equipment and wider support networks from fellow filmmakers is contributing to the rise of women in horror film production and, in turn, film production in general.

By looking at women's horror cinema in conjunction with other key genres and modes for women filmmakers, critics, and scholars, I do not mean to suggest that women's genre filmmaking is a recent development; arguably, women's horror cinema can be traced back to Alice Guy-Blaché and Ida Lupino. Furthermore, I do not propose to argue that feminist issues have found their natural home in the horror genre, nor do I aim to suggest that horror is the only (or primary) conduit for exploring women's experiences in film. Rather, my intention is to expand this discourse by arguing that non-horror films are being reclaimed by horror fans, filmmakers, and scholars in the twenty-first century, and that women's cinema has played a pivotal role in shaping and establishing the codes, conventions, and narratives that are becoming commonplace in horror.

⁵ The first book-length study of women's work in horror, Alison Peirse's *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre*, is forthcoming from Rutgers University Press in September 2020. My own contribution to this edited collection considers how fandom and fan communities at film festivals influence women directors of horror. I focus on three short films (Aislinn Clarke's *Childer*, Norma Vila's *Jules D.*, and Misty Dawn's *Hooker Assassin*) in order to analyze how they reflect the influence of horror fan discourse. In turn, I demonstrate how these particular filmmakers reframe aspects of women's objectification in ways that gesture toward empowerment for female characters and spectators.

1.1 Defining Horror

In February 2017, when I traveled to Berlin to attend the Final Girls Berlin Film Festival, my brother joined me for many of the short film blocks. Before the festival started, he half-jokingly confided that he was a little anxious about seeing so many horror films on the big screen. But when we walked out of the theatre one evening, he said to me, “I don’t know what horror is anymore.” So few films in the festival fit his preconceived notions of horror that he no longer knew how to recognize it—yet they were grouped together under the guise of a horror film festival. He was baffled because so many films blended horror with other genres and modes: melodrama, comedy, romance, experimental and non-narrative forms, and fantasy. I bring up this anecdote to suggest that while casual viewers tend to have preconceived notions of what codes, conventions, and iconography to expect from a horror film, fans, critics, and other experts often read horror in texts that do not always fulfill those narrow expectations. I will return to this in more detail in the following section; first, however, it remains important to briefly outline how theorists and critics have attempted to define horror.

One of the first essays that broached an overarching theory of the horror film, Robin Wood’s “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” defined the genre through a basic formula: “normality is threatened by the monster” (14). He offers a basic description of what he means by “normality” and “monster,” indicating that while the former remains largely static according to social norms, the latter is “much more protean, changing from period to period [according to] society’s basic fears” (14) and, more specifically, represents the Other that transgresses or exists outside of social norms. The relationship between normality and the monster, for Wood, determines whether a given horror film is “progressive” (the Other is made sympathetic) or “reactionary” (the Other is made demonic). Significantly, Wood’s suggestion that this basic

formula also has applications to other genres—his examples include the Western, melodrama, comedy, and science fiction—bears heavily on my own formulations in this project.

To film-philosopher Noël Carroll, the threat posed by a monster or evil force in a horror film is distinct from the human—he makes little differentiation, therefore, between the horror and science fiction genres. The horror genre for Carroll is marked by a threat intended to inspire a specific emotional state in the viewer—somewhere between awe, fear, and disgust, bordering on the sublime. He writes, “horrific creatures seem to be regarded [as] inconceivable [and] unclean and disgusting” (21). There is, once again, a distinct separation between the human and the monster (or in Wood’s terms, normality and monstrosity), and to Carroll, there must be a monster for a film to be considered as horror.

Vivian Sobchack, in contrast to Carroll, distinguishes between the science fiction and horror genres by the depiction of people under threat rather than the monster: while science fiction’s monsters threaten society, horror films tend to focus more closely on individuals (29-30). Alternately, in the introduction to his edited collection on the genre, Ken Gelder defines what he calls “the rhetorics of horror” as “provid[ing] ways of defining, for example, what is evil (and what is good) in societies, what is monstrous (and what is ‘normal’), what should be seen (and what should remain hidden), and so on” (1). He goes on to specify horror in terms of clashing oppositions—an entanglement where “the archaic (the ‘primal’, the ‘primitive’, the ‘frenzied subject of excess’) and the modern (the ‘struggling moral subject’, rational, technological) suddenly find themselves occupying the same territory” (3). What ultimately becomes disturbed in the process, he argues, are our seemingly intact cultural and ideological conventions.

In terms of classification, Peter Hutchings notes that the industry itself markets horror films inconsistently, and his definition remains as ambiguous as many others: “horror films present us

with fearful and unpleasant events and experiences but usually do this in a way that renders those events and experiences pleasurable and/or ‘safe’” (6-7). He then points out that “fearful and unpleasant events and experiences” are, themselves, difficult to define; the basis of such a complication, he notes, is shared by all genres—it can be equally difficult to definitively define the western. To complicate matters further, Carol Clover’s mention in her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* that “the slasher (or splatter or shocker or stalker) film” lies “at the bottom of the horror heap” (21) suggests that the subgenres making up “the horror heap” are categorized and hierarchized in terms of quality and characteristics of their own, presumably with the potential to overlap with other genres, modes, and subgenres. In his 1992 book on the subject, Mark Jancovich anticipates a turn in horror studies to bypass the definition of horror altogether in order to pose a more in-depth analysis of certain tropes and films; Jancovich notes elsewhere that there is frequent disagreement among horror fans about what fits within the genre (“A Real Shocker” 23-35). Furthermore, in the introduction to his 2014 edited collection *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Harry Benshoff does not attempt to define the genre at all and instead implies that the debates over its classification and reputability make their own case for horror’s importance as an object of study.

While these various and conflicting theories show that horror cannot be precisely defined, viewers tend to expect a set of visual and narrative tropes from a film accepted as horror. These might include one or more of the following: a preoccupation with death or decay; a hostile disturbance of the status-quo (through the body, the family, or identity); an aesthetics of suspense (including a tense soundtrack or editing, or narrative setups building to a startle effect or violent image); and/or a conflict between good (or “normal”) and evil (or something aggressively resisting the “normal”). However, these guidelines do not account for how fans, filmmakers, critics, and programmers read films or knowingly revise what falls under the category of horror. As I will

discuss in the next section, it is common in female-directed horror to see re-interpretations, re-workings, and re-readings of what horror means and does for women, and what overlap it might have with other genres or modes.

1.2 From Women's Cinema to Women's Horror Cinema

The concept of women's cinema emerged as such concurrently with the 1960s and 1970s feminist movement; therefore, it came into existence with political objectives and associations (Butler 3). However, it never existed as a coherent or agreed-upon category; one strand of feminist filmmaking was committed to political activism onscreen, while "the other insisted on rigorous, formal work on the medium" (de Lauretis 26). "Women's cinema" refers variably to women-authored cinema, films concerning women or women's issues regardless of authorship, and films that contain some "prefeminist 'essence' ... feminist activism ... or postfeminist consumption" (White 8-9). For the purposes of this dissertation, I accept all of these definitions for women's cinema, but I focus particularly on how female-directed films refer to earlier female-directed films and male-directed films that concern women's issues. Women's cinema has seen three large "waves": first in the silent era, which was readily forgotten and only rediscovered by feminist film scholars beginning in the 1990s;⁶ the second in the 1970s and 1980s, which saw the institution of feminist film theory and the rise of women's cinema as politically-charged "counter-cinema"; and finally in the twenty-first century, which has seen an influx of women behind the camera. However,

⁶ See Jane Gaines' *Women Film Pioneers Project*.

the problem of separating feminist waves and cinematic traditions has been vocalized in various debates across academic disciplines.⁷

I take these debates and discourses as evidence that, while women-directed cinema has flourished or garnered critical attention across important moments in history, and while different historical and cultural moments give rise to different political and aesthetic priorities, women-authored texts remain in dialogue with one another. Older films are foundational to, rather than replaced by, the newer films. As I elucidate in the methodology section below, the structure of this dissertation is based on the idea that texts form dialogues with other texts. In the twenty-first century, women filmmakers are revisiting vastly different genres and modes through horror and, in turn, revising horror through these various formal and generic categories. Horror functions as an important bridge between seemingly opposed categories—the (often) popular forms of melodrama and comedy on the one hand, and the underground domain of experimental film on the other. Furthermore, the live exhibition spaces of women’s horror film festivals enable women’s horror cinema to flourish through new collaborations and distribution opportunities. Two concepts in particular—the aesthetics of violence and female horror fandom—play critical roles in my theorization of the intertextual and cross-genre processes at work in women’s horror cinema, and I will discuss these in turn.

When Claire Johnston dubbed women’s filmmaking as a form of “counter-cinema,” she did not mean that women should make films that, per Laura Mulvey, set out to destroy pleasure. Rather, Johnston saw entertainment as a crucial tool for feminist filmmakers:

⁷ For more on problems with the “waves” narrative, see May Chazan and Melissa Baldwin’s “Understanding the Complexities of Contemporary Feminist Activism.” For debates on feminist theory from different generations of scholars, see Susan Gubar and Robyn Wiegman.

[A] strategy should be developed which embraces both the notion of films as a political tool and film as entertainment. For too long these have been regarded as two opposing poles with little common ground. In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film. Ideas derived from the entertainment film, then, should inform the political film, and political ideas should inform the entertainment cinema: a two way process. ... we should seek to operate at all levels: within the male-dominated cinema and outside it. (31)

For Johnston, an effective women's cinema is one that unites political objectives and viewing pleasure, and that explores, validates, and normalizes female desire. By 2004, with the launch of *Pretty-Scary*, the first website created for the community of female horror fans, women-directed horror had begun to take up many of these critical tasks.⁸ I contend that many female filmmakers in the 2000s and 2010s use the horror genre as a way of uniting the political and formal aspirations of women's cinema, whether consciously or unconsciously, while also exercising and validating female viewing pleasure. Their films belong to a genre tradition that has a wide-reaching audience, mainstream currency, and subversive potential in terms of content and aesthetics, while their gendered subject positions often inspire them to use the codes and conventions of the genre toward explicitly political ends. Often, these political ends might manifest themselves in counterintuitive ways, for instance by vocalizing the vulnerabilities and insecurities felt by marginalized members of society.

In many of the films I discuss, these vulnerabilities are perhaps most evidently explored in narrative and aesthetic forms of violence that appear self-destructive. This trend features

⁸ For more on *Pretty-Scary*, see chapter four of this dissertation.

prominently in feminist film beyond horror: “the feminist film canon is strewn with corpses, imagined or literal, male and female, depicted or described. Most often the violence is performed by the women in the film, but in [some films] ... violence against women is also explicitly represented as a condition in which the characters live and enact violence” (Lord 177-8). Filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman and Julia Ducournau describe their films as violent, whether in terms of graphic visual violence or more intangible instances of violent formalism. To both Akerman and Ducournau, there is a distinction between the ways women are stereotypically seen—nurturing images of sweet, soft femininity—and the ways they conceive of their films as violent, shocking formal endeavors that exhibit femininity in vastly different ways than it appears in mainstream media. In 1976, Akerman told an interviewer, “Of course you still hear ‘Oh, a woman did that,’ and ‘women are soft and sweet as honey,’ but when women concretize their modes of seeing, the result is very vehement, very violent. It is just that this violence manifests itself very differently than it does with men. Women’s violence is not commercial; it is beyond description” (Bovenschen 123). Forty years later, upon the release of her cannibal body-horror hit *Raw* (2016), Ducournau responded to a male viewer who perceived a feminine “softness” in the film as follows: “Softness? Have you *seen* my movie? When you make horror, it’s the expression of a form of violence that you feel inside of you – and it’s important we recognize that women feel violence and anger as well” (Reilly, “Rolling Stone”). While Ducournau’s film is very different from Akerman’s oeuvre—in 1976, Akerman was gaining recognition for her feminist tour-de-force *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)—these comments are strikingly similar and suggest that manifestations of violence are not always discernible as such in women-directed films, even when they present graphic bodily violence. Certain feminine modes of violence might not be perceptible to viewers in the same way as overt, brutalizing

representations of carnal violence against the human body. Feminine violence might present itself onscreen as “beyond description,” in formal or thematic registers that present violence in unexpected or uncharted guises. These might include ambivalence toward oneself or one’s allies, self-destruction, self-degradation, or the trial of fitting into the expectations that society imposes on different bodies.

Women’s horror cinema frequently turns to representations of self-destructive violence in order to confront and explore the traumas wrought by patriarchal ideology. This is the case for many of the films I analyze, including *Pin Cushion* (2017) in chapter one, *Flesh* (2016) in chapter two, and *Inside the House* (2017) in chapter three. They explore self-destructive violence in ways that invoke clinical studies of self-mutilators: many harm themselves “to relieve tension, release anger, regain a sense of self-control” (Strong 27). I draw on this psychological perspective not to suggest that women who direct horror are akin to self-injurers or to read their work through a clinical apparatus. Instead, the apparent contradiction of causing harm in order to promote healing (or at least relief) can be brought to bear in interesting ways on the films under discussion here. The language used in such studies—for instance that “in contrast to the permanent escape of suicide, self-mutilation actually promotes psychic reintegration and reinvolverment in life” (Strong 33)—is productive for identifying and analyzing how internalized violence is processed through women’s horror cinema. The concept of “homeopathic horror”—a notion referred to by Georges Franju, director of *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), to describe his own cinema—is a useful stepping-stone for applying these clinical writings to the critical framework of this dissertation. It refers to the risky but tempered application of negative elements for healing purposes; by taking small doses

of poison, one becomes immune, or at the very least inured to it.⁹ Through the exploration of violence against the female body, examples of women's horror cinema reflect the process of accepting negative tropes in order to challenge or revise them. However, because they are made by fans and admirers of the genre, many women-directed horror films also reflect the paradoxical, unapologetic enjoyment of these "poisons."

The film that perhaps most concretely applies to the process of self-destruction enabling self-control is Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002), in which the protagonist Esther (played by de Van), a successful businesswoman, becomes fascinated with her body after she fails to notice a deep wound in her leg following a fall. This fascination manifests itself as self-mutilation as Esther methodically begins to cut herself and, in one disturbing sequence, imagines that her forearm is detached from her body. For Esther, self-mutilation becomes an act of taking charge of her body and, in turn, how it is perceived; it is an act in which she recreates herself and her body according "to her own specifications" (Lowenstein, "Feminine Horror" 482).¹⁰ It also, Lowenstein argues, represents that the cost of a woman "'having it all' is a sort of self-denial that must return to inhabit the very site where the irresolvable tensions structuring her private and public personae take shape: her body" (473).

Due to its myriad vulnerabilities and capabilities, the female body is the critical link between cinematic representation and the real-life, self-destructive violence analyzed in the study

⁹ Lowenstein quotes Franju and builds upon the concept of "homeopathic horror" in the first chapter of his book *Shocking Representation*. See in particular pages 49-50.

¹⁰ As Lowenstein writes: "The self-mutilation, as destructive as it is, also functions as a form of self-making—there is relief and even satisfaction for Esther when she can cut herself to her own specifications, a literal gesture of self-creation" (482). Lowenstein's analysis is in line with Adrienne Angelo's discussion of the same film, in which she argues that Esther's self-mutilation is a form of harnessing control and autonomy: "Ultimately, Esther's injury and resulting disfigurement and, particularly, her preoccupation with that mutilation, allow her a certain marginal status in the eyes of those around her. Of course, the spectator is forced to share her obsession; however, what we might consider as Esther's clinical gaze—that is her own dissociative view of her body—in some sense destabilizes the viscosity of corporeal spectacle, granting her pathological autonomy" (Angelo 221).

I discussed above. Women's bodies are among the most vulnerable in film and in the social institutions of politics, medicine, and the workforce. For many women, the violence imposed on female bodies in horror films invokes images and experiences representative of everyday reality; this is even more pronounced for Black women, poor women, and queer women, whose bodies have been under scrutiny and subjected to institutionalization and horrific experimentation.¹¹ In the horror genre, women also frequently share an affinity with monstrosity.¹² As I mentioned earlier, the horror genre's treatment of women's bodies serves to legitimize women's negative real-life experiences and the repercussions of a political and medical landscape that has exploited them. Even so, for women, making horror means contending with images of bodily and emotional violence against them or associations with monstrosity and confronting the pleasure they experience as willing—and eager—consumers of horror.¹³ This appears across the films under discussion in the first three chapters through visual, thematic, and formal violence that tends to take shape in self-destructive terms. For women to find their place as makers in the ongoing evolution of horror, they must first explore the destructive aspects of objectification and vulnerability imposed on female bodies in the genre. One important way of doing so is to draw

¹¹ See, for instance, Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage* on the treatment of Black and poor women in medicine, and Sarah Carr and Helen Spandler, "Hidden from History?" on the institutionalization of lesbian and bisexual women in mid-twentieth century England specifically. See also Chelsea HaleyNelson, "Sexualized Violence Against Lesbians."

¹² See, for instance, Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film"; Clover, *Men, Women, and Chains Saws*; Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Williams, "When the Woman Looks."

¹³ In her possession film *The Devil's Doorway* (2018), director Aislinn Clarke simultaneously confronts and frustrates the desire to see bodily or emotional violence against women. The film takes place in a Magdalene Laundry in Northern Ireland (Catholic institutions where "fallen" women were banished and obligated to work). Clarke has discussed her decision to film her possessed character's face in close-up while she undergoes a symphysiotomy (a procedure during childbirth in which the pubic bone is sawed open to allow the baby to pass through). This choice reflects Clarke's intention to represent the character's harrowing experience rather than emphasize the gruesome spectacle of violence imposed on her body. To see Clarke discuss her film during a visit to the University of Pittsburgh that I organized in February 2019, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24yBY9jGgvo>

upon and inflect their films with elements of other genres such as melodrama, experimental film, and comedy, thereby pinpointing how these genres also exercise and privilege formal and narrative aspects of self-destructive violence.

As this discussion of violence demonstrates, there are several paradoxes at work in women's horror cinema. Chief among these is the fraught position of the female body as a site of violence or degradation and as the subjective focal point from which these films depict negative experiences based on gender politics. These evoke similar tensions felt by female horror fans; because nearly all (if not all) women who make horror were drawn to the genre as fans first, this is an important element of women's horror cinema to address. While horror has historically been a "boys' club ... devotion runs deep" for female fans; women make up a vital part of the attendance and culture of horror conventions and other events (Piepenburg). For many horror fans, male and female alike, conventions, festivals, and the horror family they find there provides a kinder, more welcoming community than they find in their everyday lives. At the same time, with few exceptions, the female horror fan has remained marginalized within the horror community and appeared only sporadically in academic study. In the past ten years, the dramatic increase of women turning to horror filmmaking has been documented journalistically and, more recently, in film scholarship, but the role that female fandom contributes to this surge has not been sufficiently addressed. There is plenty of evidence to show that women have been a primary audience for the horror genre throughout its history despite their marginalization in its fan cultures.¹⁴ Studies of fandom and fan communities provide a productive framework for discussing horror filmmakers as a whole, and particularly how contemporary independent horror filmmakers are prone to

¹⁴ See in particular Rhona J. Berenstein for an account of how horror films have been marketed to women viewers. Berenstein's cases date as far back as the 1930s.

experiment with the genre. I contend that female fandom plays a crucial role in the way female horror filmmakers activate the “‘generative’ forces of genre” (Paszkievicz 54) toward a female-focused end. In this way, many female horror filmmakers turn to the genre because they are fans, and because they read horror films as legitimizing women’s fears and experiences in a creative and cathartic way.

Genre is ever evolving according to the ways producers, audiences, and critics reframe, accept, or present certain films within different genres for different reasons. This is in line with Rick Altman’s definition of genre as a “process,” and by reframing women horror filmmakers as influenced by their viewing positions as genre film fans, the discourse around Stuart Hall’s model of negotiated subject positions also becomes useful here. Hall famously proposes three reading positions that viewers of audiovisual texts can embody. The first is what he calls the “*dominant-hegemonic position*” (515, emphasis in original): viewers read and accept the meaning intended by a text’s producer. The second is a “*negotiated code* or position ... Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (516). This reader accepts the intended reading of a text in part and, at the same time, “makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule” (516). Finally a reader who “detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference” is positioned in an “*oppositional code*” (517). All of these relationships to the “preferred” reading intended by the producer determine how the reader engages with the text.

While Hall’s well-known model remains relevant and influential, it has been modified and expanded upon by numerous scholars and critics, including Matt Hills, Will Brooker, Jackie Stacey, and Jacqueline Bobo. For instance, Matt Hills adapts Hall’s model by arguing that fandom and fan cultures inhabit a fraught position within the processes of commodification. He

exemplifies how fans engage with their objects of fandom as consumers—even as they might perceive themselves or be perceived as operating “outside” of consumer society—and how fan cultures influence the production of new texts. This process complicates Hall’s framework of how readers interact with texts by inserting the reader into a more actively influential role for the creation and evolution of texts. In other words, Hills’ framework allows for a reader’s active role in the encoding process, rather than one limited to the decoding process. Bobo, in turn, focuses on Black female spectators of *The Color Purple* (1985), a film directed by a white male (Steven Spielberg) based on a novel about Black women written by a Black woman (Alice Walker). Despite Spielberg’s authorship and related criticisms of the film, Bobo demonstrates that many Black women enjoyed a positive engagement with *The Color Purple* in which “the viewer constructs something useful from the work by negotiating her/his response, and/or gives a subversive reading to the work” (312). This is based on selectivity and reflects the “uses and gratifications” paradigm of audience studies, which Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn define as an approach that “credits [audiences] with being ‘active’ and/or discriminating in their engagement with the media” (9). In Bobo’s configuration, the reader combines negotiated and oppositional reading positions, overlooking certain elements while embracing others. This is in contrast to a negative oppositional reading of total rejection.

The positive mode of engagement is also reflected in Brigid Cherry’s study of British female horror fans in the 1990s, in which she identified among her respondents a pattern of “deliberate interpretative strategies to accommodate the films’ representations of women, either ignoring and making excuses for what they see as negative representations or condoning feminine behavior in strong female characters” (175). Cherry’s suggestion that female fans’ positions ignore certain elements and focus on others functions similarly in women’s horror cinema: women

filmmakers pick and choose which horror tropes and narratives to explore in their films, thereby removing, modifying, or reframing aspects of horror through the lens of critique, reclamation, or overall revision. However, as my discussion above regarding self-destructive forms of violence suggests, this is not a simple task; fans and filmmakers alike must come to terms with the experience of finding pleasure in elements of horror that enact violence on the female body. I suggest that the ambiguities faced by female horror fans enable a unique framework offered by women's horror cinema: by enabling a combination of negotiated and oppositional reading positions, women's decoding positions are analyzable in the texts they produce. Similarly, programmers and critics' similar reading positions are legible in the language they use to describe films or in their film selections for festivals.

I do not entirely follow Bobo's lead in theorizing an oppositional subject position, or even a positive one. Instead, I consider the role of fandom in women's horror cinema an important marker of the negotiated reading position. Fandom in this context is therefore important for understanding the encoding process at work in women-directed horror films. Their subject positions are also central to the role that women—as filmmakers and programmers—play in the regenrification process.¹⁵ I choose to frame women directors of horror within fandom, rather than spectatorship alone, because fandom is central to their identity as spectators and filmmakers. My choice to include excerpts from interviews with filmmakers acknowledges that their personal experiences as horror fans shape their creative endeavors. I do not claim to design a theoretical framework for female fandom based on ethnography.¹⁶ Instead, these interviews are grounded in

¹⁵ See chapter four for a more detailed discussion of Altman's concept of "regenrification."

¹⁶ While I do not draw on ethnography to theorize female fandom, I do consider ethnographic research a useful method for studying film festivals in chapter four.

the filmmakers' creative influences and output, and were performed with the intention of promoting their work, rather than theorizing their fandom.¹⁷

Most (if not all) female directors of horror films are fans, and many were exposed to the genre at an early age. Aislinn Clarke (director of *The Devil's Doorway*, 2018) recalls that she “got really into horror as a young kid”; Zena Sade Dixon (*Night of the Witch*, 2017) names her mother as a key influence for her love of horror. Prano Bailey-Bond (*Nasty*, 2015) remembers being deeply frightened by one figure in particular: “The first thing that [truly] scared me was the backwards-talking dwarf in *Twin Peaks*. I must have been about seven years old.” Caitlin Koller (*Blood Sisters*, 2017) was afraid of horror films as a child but became a voracious fan in her adolescence, in part to help herself overcome the same fear. She recalls that “it worked, effectively ... the movies that really helped were slasher movies. I really loved *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween*, [which] appealed to me especially with a female heroine.” Many filmmakers name aspects of horror that drew them while growing up, such as female heroines and complex genre blending, that they often actively foreground in their own work.

In addition to the influence of their own fandom, the ready-made horror production and fan community is a practical draw for many female horror filmmakers. England Simpson (*Prelude: A Love Story*, 2017) and Mattie Do (*Dearest Sister*, 2016) both identify the fan community as vital to their decision to work in the genre. Simpson says, “You can have a very successful career as a filmmaker just doing horror ... we have conventions, we have film festivals targeted specifically for this genre.” She notes that few other genres have a film festival or convention scene as prominent as the horror, science fiction, and fantastic genres, adding, “horror is the only genre

¹⁷ Unless otherwise cited, all filmmaker quotes come from in-person, phone, or email interviews performed between September 2017 and June 2018. I did not require IRB clearance to perform these interviews.

where you can grab your phone, [film something in a weekend], and find an audience for it the next day.” Mattie Do (among the few active female horror directors whose career began with a feature-length film, *Chanthaly*) describes her experience at Fantastic Fest as overwhelmingly positive: “People would go see every kind of film, films that I can barely categorize ... and they were just so nice, and so respectful. ... People aren’t all that receptive to subtitled films in general. But horror people are! Horror people will watch anything, as long as it’s interesting and brings something new to the table.” Although Do acknowledges that *Dearest Sister* received positive feedback at other film festivals as well, she recounts feeling alienated by the elitism and general dismissal of horror that she sensed at non-horror festivals.

Because they are so knowledgeable—the cinematic influences they name include George A. Romero, David Cronenberg, David Lynch, Alice Lowe, and the Gothic film tradition—women’s horror films often function as a reference to the horror genre as a whole, including its various tropes, narratives, and aesthetic tendencies. Bailey-Bond describes her short *Nasty* as “a love-letter to horror [and] the bonds that we form through films, as well as a tongue-in-cheek look at the fears surrounding VHS horror in the early 80s ... I wanted to satirize the idea that Video Nasties were going to turn us all into monsters.”¹⁸ Bailey-Bond’s intentions with *Nasty* are traceable in many other female-directed horror shorts and features: an affection for and familiarity

¹⁸ Bailey-Bond is referring to the video nasties debate in 1980s England, a public response to uncensored, graphic films released on videotape without certification from the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification). The term “video nasty” was coined by The National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVALA, now Mediawatch), a conservative advocacy group known for speaking out against violent, sexual, or otherwise offensive media content. In particular, the debates (fueled by NVALA’s campaign) were concerned with the potential psychological impact that viewing violent and graphic sexual content would have on children, and whether it would result in the rise of violent crime. For more on the video nasty debates, see Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties*; Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*; James Kendrick, “Nasty Situation”; Julian Petley, *Film and Censorship in Modern Britain*. For more on debates over media violence, see Barker and Petley, *Ill Effects*.

with genre tropes alongside a broader message or theme, whether relating to women, media, or society at large. As Amelia Moses (*Undress Me*, 2017) puts it, “there’s a sense of reclaiming the tropes and narratives that are problematic.”

Moses’ statement recalls the selectivity model of spectatorship proposed by Hall and expanded upon by Bobo and Cherry, and it echoes many of her peers’ discussions of their own work. Therefore, their fandom reflects, in many ways, their negotiated subject positions; they accept or enjoy some aspects of horror film and overlook others. In their own films, they exercise Bobo’s conception of a “positive” oppositional reading response, thereby showcasing their knowledge of and affection for the genre while inscribing it with an emphasis on the aspects of horror they find most interesting or productive. The result, of course, varies greatly from one filmmaker to another; what they have in common, I argue, is the tendency to explore horror through other genres—specifically melodrama, experimental film, and comedy.

1.3 Methodology

In *From Women’s Cinema to Women’s Horror Cinema*, I draw on melodrama, experimental film, and comedy because they have been important to feminist theory. I follow three key concepts in my methodology: “intertextual dialogue,” “re-vision,” and “constellation,” modeled by Lucy Fischer, Adrienne Rich, and Walter Benjamin, respectively. Like other feminist film theorists, Fischer proposes that “we envision women’s art as engaged in an oppositional struggle with the patriarchal tradition ... out of a wish simply to speak” (9). As readers of cinematic texts, Fischer argues, women “[engage] in an ongoing *intertextual debate* ... in *dialogue* with male culture” (12) in their own texts (emphasis in original). By reading texts from vastly different

decades together, I too propose that women filmmakers take part in a dialogue with existing films. Like Fischer, I do not necessarily see all these texts as oppositional, nor do I presume that all the horror films I analyze explicitly address the texts I pair alongside them. Rather, I find the similarities between them—particularly their importance for feminist film theory and women’s cinema—a productive method for reading female-directed horror films in tandem with earlier texts. I also adopt Rich’s term “re-vision, or “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18) as a theoretical concept for exploring how the films under discussion revise (or “re-view”) horror codes and conventions through the political objectives and formal aspirations of feminist filmmaking.¹⁹ In so doing, I call attention to the ways in which women’s authorship in horror cinema invites fresh perspectives and new critical directions for films that have been historically housed within different areas of feminist film theory.

A third concept is that of “constellation,” a term borrowed from Walter Benjamin that enables us to look at history not in linear terms, but to strategically connect historical moments and analyze them side-by-side, demonstrating how they inform one another in unprecedented ways. In my four chapters, I constellate film texts and events (specifically festivals) from 2004-2019 representative of the women’s horror renaissance that emerged during these years alongside film texts and events that have held historical importance for women’s cinema and feminist film theory. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist film critics were interested in challenging stereotypical images of women, theorizing women-directed films as “counter-cinemas” that destroyed or reclaimed pleasure, and bringing attention to the long history of women in film production. Many

¹⁹ See Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, eds. *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* for earlier examples of Rich’s influence on feminist film theory.

of these issues are still relevant to women directors of horror today. By constellating certain women's horror cinema texts alongside earlier women's cinema texts, I reveal that genre has long been central to issues of gender in film and that patterns can be traced from classic women's cinema texts to women's horror cinema post-2000. I theorize that women's negotiated readings of genres that were of strong interest to their feminist predecessors in critical studies and film production—melodrama, experimental film, and comedy—appear in their own films as revisions of those genres through horror. In doing so, they reveal how the earlier genres and films can be “read” productively within the bounds of horror.

In this way, I take up a methodology outlined by Walter Benjamin and taken up by several film theorists and historians: that of complicating the concept of history as cause-and-effect and instead reading the past and present as a “constellation.”²⁰ By “constellating” a series of strategic associations between certain events and images, past and present, we can reconsider the significance of the past for the present (*Arcades Project* 462). According to Benjamin, the dialectical historian “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (“Theses” 223). The ways in which history can be reviewed or reconsidered in light of the present urges me to seek out past moments in feminist film history and criticism that might inform the contemporary one and to consider how past and present texts can be read in conversation with one another. At stake is a rewriting of the history of women's cinema, one where horror matters both in its own right and in its relation to other genres.

Furthermore, I follow Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's lead in arguing that any apparent subversion of the horror genre in female-directed films must be considered first and foremost as

²⁰ See, for instance, Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*; Marcia Landy, *Cinema and Counter-History*; Jane Gaines, “On Not Narrating the History of Feminism and Film.”

natural expressions of “repetition with difference” ascribed to genre trends at large (50). Paszkiewicz usefully articulates the terms through which female horror directors, working variously in the production and circulation of genre and gender, should be seen as creators working within formulaic filmmaking where innovation is key to advancing the formula. Like Jane Gaines, she cautions against reading women-directed horror films (or films of any genre) as inherently subversive.²¹ Paszkiewicz concludes her argument by insisting, “instead of conceptualizing these filmmakers *a priori* as feminist auteurs who transcend the industrially imposed formats, it seems more useful to draw attention to how they activate the ‘generative’ force of genres in order to engage with feminist politics” (54). Lowenstein’s notion of “feminine horror” is a useful framework for identifying how women “activate [these] ‘generative’ forces.” Lowenstein defines “feminine horror” as “the adaptation and transformation of horror genre tropes and affects for female-focused concerns” (471). He constellates his case study, *In My Skin*, alongside relevant aspects of the surrealist movement beginning in the 1920s. Lowenstein sees filmmakers adapting horror elements for female-centered experiences and issues. Building upon this notion, my focus on melodrama, experimental film, and comedy enables me to analyze how women’s horror cinema expands the meanings and definitions of “genre tropes and affects.”

1.4 Chapter Breakdown

Chapter one, “‘Decidedly Female’: From Melodrama to Horror,” opens the dissertation with a focus on melodrama, arguably the first genre that captivated feminist film theorists. The

²¹ See Gaines, “On Not Narrating the History of Feminism and Film.”

field of melodrama studies has expanded to the point where theorists might consider the horror genre as falling under the umbrella of melodrama as a mode; as Linda Williams defines it, “melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures” (“Melodrama Revised” 42). However, I focus here on melodrama as theorized in terms of genre, specifically the maternal melodrama and the Gothic melodrama (or paranoid woman’s film). The first section of this chapter pairs King Vidor’s classical maternal melodrama *Stella Dallas* (1937) with Deborah Haywood’s *Pin Cushion* (2017) and alongside Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). I argue that bullying and sacrifice are central to the codes and conventions of horror that manifest themselves in *Pin Cushion*, shaping the features of what I call the “horror weepie.” Like *Stella Dallas* and *Carrie*, *Pin Cushion* is concerned with the horrors of bullying and social conformity and places the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of tensions between personal self-expression and social acceptance. In the second section, I constellate Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) alongside Leigh Janiak’s *Honeymoon* (2014) in order to analyze how the latter film adapts features of the “paranoid woman’s film” into explicit dialogue with horror tropes. While *Honeymoon* reverses the basic structure of the paranoid woman’s film by inscribing lack of knowledge and infantilization (via feminization) onto the male character, the film maintains many ambiguities present in *Rebecca*. Both films foster ambivalence when it comes to the liberating potential of queer sexuality as represented onscreen.

In contrast to the remaining chapters, the foundational texts I analyze in chapter one are male-directed, thus reflecting my acceptance of films concerning women’s issues beneath the umbrella of “women’s cinema.” Female practitioners did work at the same time and in similar molds as Vidor and Hitchcock; Ida Lupino and particularly Dorothy Arzner were of crucial interest

to feminist film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s.²² However, I choose to discuss *Stella Dallas* because of its role in feminist film theory's influential spectatorship debates between E. Ann Kaplan, Linda Williams, and other theorists published primarily in *Cinema Journal* in the 1980s.²³ Hitchcock's films, similarly, have been at the center of gaze theory and psychoanalytic theory, most famously in canonical feminist film theory texts by Laura Mulvey and Tania Modleski.²⁴

Chapter two, "Women's Experimental Horror: Subject Positioning, Violence, and Personal Filmmaking," focuses on two avenues of experimental film traditions that have been taken up by women directors of horror: the "trance" film and found-footage avant-garde film. A key example of the "trance" film is Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). I read *Meshes* alongside two later films that invoke its trance-like narrative journey, Tracey Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) and Monika Estrella Negra's *Flesh* (2016). *Flesh* unites the psychological, gendered focus of *Meshes* and the historically-inflected experience of colonialism and racism explored from an Australian Aboriginal perspective in *Nice Coloured Girls*. In so doing, Negra presents a

²² Arzner's film *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) has been celebrated and studied by feminists for its reversal of the male gaze, while many of her other films operate in the "women's genre" of melodrama-romance (see for instance *Merrily We Go To Hell* [1932]). Arzner has been the subject of a book-length study by Judith Mayne and an influential BFI pamphlet edited by Claire Johnston. Mayne focuses, in particular, on how Arzner's lesbianism informed what Mayne calls her "lesbian looks." See chapter six, "Odd Couples," in her book on Dorothy Arzner; chapter three, "Female Authorship Reconsidered," in her book *The Woman at the Keyhole*; and her article "Lesbian Looks." Furthermore, many of Lupino's films approached taboo women's social issues such as rape in her films *Not Wanted* (1949), *Outrage* (1950), and *The Bigamist* (1953).

²³ In chronological order, these debates included: Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother"; Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother"; Modleski, "Time and Desire"; Gallagher, "Dialogue"; Modleski, "Tania Modleski Replies to Tag Gallagher"; Williams, "Linda Williams Replies to Tag Gallagher"; Kaplan, "Ann Kaplan Replies to Linda Williams"; Petro & Flinn, "Patrice Petro and Carol Flinn on Feminist Film Theory"; Kaplan, "E. Ann Kaplan Replies to Petro & Flinn"; Gledhill, "Christine Gledhill on *Stella Dallas*"; and Kaplan, "E. Ann Kaplan Replies to Christine Gledhill."

²⁴ See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*. Many of Modleski's essays on Hitchcock are part of another debate between herself and Robin Wood. See also Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, revised edition.

psychological/social portrait of a Black woman's internalization of racism in the twenty-first century United States, with particular attention to the impact of micro-aggressions.

I then turn to the found-footage tradition, in which filmmakers appropriate footage from other sources to make their own "collage," often with the intention of revealing visual or ideological patterns in dominant media. In this section, I constellate Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's tongue-in-cheek *Schmeerguntz* (1965), which satirizes the discrepancies between the representation of femininity in the media and the reality of women's everyday (domestic) lives, alongside two films that utilize found-footage with attention to the horror genre. The first of these, Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's *What Happened to Her* (2016), blends horror, non-narrative found-footage, and documentary to reveal how women's corpses are depicted in film and television, at once addressing the contradiction between the social construction of conventionally beautiful women and the morbid fascination with seeing violence enacted upon them. The second film, Jennifer Proctor's *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* (2017), edits together footage from popular cinema of women in bathtubs, emphasizing how women's bodies are depicted in vulnerable spaces and how ideal femininity is also constructed and enforced in these visual spaces. This chapter is unique in that the horror filmmakers I discuss explicitly name their influences; Negra draws explicit inspiration from both Deren and Moffatt, while Guevara-Flanagan and Proctor refer to specific audiovisual texts in their found-footage films.

Chapter three, "Self-Destruction, Self-Creation, and Eroticism in Women's Horror-Comedy Film," considers the genre of comedy as a defiant challenge to Laura Mulvey's proposition in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that a politically-oriented women's cinema should destroy pleasure. In this chapter's two sections, I analyze three films produced before or concurrently with Mulvey's essay alongside three twenty-first century women's horror-comedy

films that inherit the complex interaction between female pleasure and pain at work in the earlier films; an interaction that comedy is uniquely positioned to explore. I adopt filmmaker Nelly Kaplan's conception of female eroticism (which anticipated Mulvey's censure of cinematic visual pleasure) as a critical text for reading how women's comedy and horror-comedy perform pleasurable aspects of female spectatorship that might seem at odds with feminist ideals.

In this chapter's first section, I pair the feature-length films *La Fiancée du Pirate* (1969, directed by Nelly Kaplan) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009, directed by Karyn Kusama), two films featuring a sexualized "bad girl" who seems to invert male and female characteristics. However, I adopt Kaplan's notion of "discovering the *unknown*" of women's eroticism (200) to posit that the similarities between these two films do not depend upon women's empowerment through inversion. Instead, both films propose that self-creation through self-destruction is a vital avenue for making the "unknown" of women's eroticism known. In the chapter's second section, I pair two sets of short films: Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and Jan Oxenbergs's *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (both 1975) with Jennifer Bonior and Dycee Wildman's *Inside the House* (2017) and Devi Snively's *I Spit on Eli Roth* (2009). While the former two films critique (by poking fun at) assumptions and expectations regarding domestic femininity and lesbian stereotypes, the latter two explore the paradoxes of taking pleasure in violence and gore. Through the employment of what I call "feminine-coded objects," these films reflect the gleefulness of self-destructive female pleasure offered by horror film spectatorship.

Chapter four, "Canonization and Regenrification: From Women's Film Festivals to Women's Horror Film Festivals," turns from critical analysis to ethnographic and archival documentation of women's horror film festivals, which I argue build upon the foundation of 1970s women's film festivals in North America and the United Kingdom. This chapter constellates select

examples from each festival phenomenon. From the 1970s, I focus on the First International Festival of Women's Films in New York (1972), the Women's Cinema Event in Edinburgh (1972), and the Toronto Women and Film International Festival (1973). I then outline the events and collaborations that led to the first-ever festival of women's horror film, Viscera Film Festival, in 2007. Finally, I pay particular attention to specific editions of three festivals that emerged after Viscera ended, the Women in Horror Film Festival 2017, Ax Wound Film Festival 2017, and Final Girls Berlin Film Festival 2018. I then draw on screenings of films across all three festivals to reveal how programming decisions influence how a film will be read and accepted by an audience. This is particularly important for films that do not explicitly engage horror tropes; using Altman's theory of "regeneration," I argue that these film festivals play a central role in assimilating non-horror narratives for legibility within the genre and reframing the boundaries of horror.

As one of the first monographic studies of women-directed horror cinema,²⁵ this dissertation unites critical analysis of cinematic texts with ethnographic research and fieldwork in the live spaces where these films are exhibited. Because digital media and film festival circuits enable the formation of vibrant communities among genre filmmakers, programmers, and fans, I consider these roles (often assumed to be strictly distinct) as complementary and in dialogue with one another. Furthermore, my digital humanities project *Cut-Throat Women*, created as a public-facing component of this dissertation, provides a link to hundreds of directors whose work has yet to be discussed in film and media studies and that merit their own place in the history of women's filmmaking. By focusing on the legacies of melodrama, experimental film, and comedy present in women's horror cinema, I propose a revision of women's cinema through genre. I argue that key

²⁵ See, also, Dan Vena's doctoral dissertation, *Unfinished Business: The New Wave of Women's Horror Cinema* (2018).

issues that were explored in women's cinema in the past—among them motherhood, sexual violence, and female friendship—are resurfacing in women's horror cinema today. In my formulation, women-directed cinema offers an invaluable resource for reconsidering women's spectatorship, while women-directed horror cinema offers a concrete, textual basis for analyzing how women's viewing positions look and function. I propose that this methodology can be applied to many other female-authored films across genres, and that the legacies of many other genres important to women are present in women-directed horror cinema. While space does not permit me to discuss all of these examples in this dissertation, women's horror cinema is also notably indebted to the genres of documentary, action, science fiction, and romantic comedy. What I have attempted to provide here is a model for exploring the rich legacies and dialogues between multiple genres and women's horror cinema. A model, in other words, where an inclusive history of women's cinema becomes possible.

2.0 Chapter One: “Decidedly Female”: From Melodrama to Horror

“As with most female horror fans, people love to ask me what it is I get out of horror. I give them the stock answers: catharsis, empowerment, escapism and so on. Less easy to explain is the fact that I gravitate toward films that devastate and unravel me completely—a good horror film will more often make me cry than make me shudder ... I was chauffeured into this dark terrain by my parents, but I stayed there because of something in myself. And that ‘something’ was decidedly female.”

-Kier-La Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women* (pg. 7)

The terms Kier-La Janisse uses to describe her experience of watching horror—“devastate ... unravel ... cry”—suggest that the stakes and investments of horror spectatorship are revised when viewed from a female perspective. These terms are closer to the “weepie,” or the melodramatic “woman’s film” of the 1940s and 1950s. Known for its “gratuitous emotion” (Williams, “Film Bodies” 3), melodrama in terms of the “woman’s film” genre is marked by its ability to make viewers cry. In this chapter, I explore what I call the “horror weepie”: films that bring the melodramatic “woman’s film” into explicit dialogue with the horror genre. I argue that horror weepies engage sympathetic monstrosity and female collectivity as a means of expressing the losses that mark each of them.²⁶ I begin with melodrama because it has been the subject of

²⁶ As Linda Williams argues, melodrama, horror, and pornography are closely linked as “body genres” that, because of their “excessive” displays of bodily sensation, compel the spectator to react in a physical way that mimics the spectacle onscreen (i.e. screaming during a horror film and crying during a melodrama “weepie”). Importantly, one thing all three genre have in common is that “the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain” (“Film Bodies” 4, emphasis in original).

critique and discourse among feminist film theorists since the early 1980s, and it was central to initiating the study of female spectatorship. Melodrama is perhaps more comparable to horror than many other modes or genres; the “woman’s film” and the horror film very often tend to explore common themes such as family, romance (especially doomed romance), and the home.²⁷ I posit that fantasy is also central to the revision of melodrama in women’s horror cinema. According to Mary Ann Doane, “the ‘women’s films’ are “based on an idea of female fantasy which they themselves anticipate and in some sense construct. Interestingly, the problematic of female fantasy is most frequently compatible with that of persecution—by husband, family, or lover” (“*Caught and Rebecca*” 196). The films under discussion in this chapter all address and explore the possibilities and limits of female fantasy in relation to the different kinds of persecution they face.²⁸

The women’s horror cinema texts discussed in this chapter look back to and re-view melodrama as a genre, rather than a mode. I examine instances in which women directors are using horror to re-imagine the particular subgenres of the maternal melodrama and the Gothic women’s film. However, it is important to briefly discuss how the study of melodrama has evolved to account for its chameleonic modality, before turning—as I do in this chapter—to its helpful function in generic terms. In 1998, Linda Williams named melodrama “the fundamental mode of

²⁷ Tony Williams, for instance, calls the melodrama “a sister genre to family horror because it has a specific relationship to it in terms of depicting family trauma” (*Hearths of Darkness* 15). Other scholars connect the woman’s film, particularly the maternal melodrama, to the modern horror film through the lens of genre codes and conventions. Discussing what he terms “persephonal horror” (*Representations* 83), or films that focus on mothers and their children, David Greven argues that “Both the woman’s film and modern horror, in its female-centered form, thematize mother-daughter bonds and a simultaneous desire for and dread of return to the mother” (“Bringing Out Baby Jane”). He focuses particularly on generically liminal films such as *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962, dir. Robert Aldrich) and *Strait Jacket* (1964, dir. William Castle), noting that the presence of major woman’s film stars such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in these titles further emphasizes the relationship between maternal melodrama and horror. See also Mark Jancovich, “Hitchcock, Horror and the Woman’s Film” for an account of how the press considered Hitchcock’s 1940s women-centered films to be horror films at the time of their release.

²⁸ For an account of women’s horror film spectatorship dating back to the 1930s, see Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies* and “It Will Thrill You.” Berenstein suggests that the performance of gendered film spectatorship complicates the assumption that horror has always primarily been enjoyed by (and marketed toward) the male spectator.

popular American moving pictures” (“Melodrama Revised” 42). Twenty years later, in a collection intended to broaden (or “unbind”) the scope of melodrama studies from critical and national limitations, she and Christine Gledhill similarly described it as follows: “Never itself a singular genre, melodrama as a pervasive mode has functioned historically as a genre-generating machine” (Gledhill and Williams 5). The conception of melodrama as a mode versus a genre is a result of several shifts in industrial terminology and academic analysis. It was initially a trade term associated with thrills, action, and male-coded films.²⁹ Beginning in 1971, it was redefined by scholars as a genre that, in the hands of directors such as Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, utilized ironic distancing to subvert 1940s and ‘50s ideology with focus on the home and excessive emotionalism.³⁰ This revision, which sought to rescue melodrama from negative, low-brow

²⁹ See Steve Neale, “Melo Talk.” Neale’s historiographic analysis of trade descriptions of films between 1929-1955 is a direct response intended to rectify the trajectory that led feminist film theory to associate melodrama with the “woman’s film.” He argues that “the use of terms like ‘melodrama,’ ‘meller,’ and ‘melodramatic,’ although very common ... in trade reviews, are actually rather rare in reviews of women’s films—precisely because these films usually lack the [masculine, action-driven] elements that conventionally define these terms from the trade’s point of view” (74). Neale is therefore in line with Williams’ move in “Melodrama Revised,” to outline the range of genres or film categories that were considered “melodrama” before 1960: “western melodrama, crime melodrama, sex melodrama, backwoods melodrama, romantic melodrama ... stunt melodrama, society melodrama, mystery melodrama, rural melodrama, action melodrama, crook melodrama, underworld melodrama, and even comedy melodrama, as well as just plain melodrama” (50). Importantly, Neale also suggests that films marketed to female viewers were not, as feminist critics later claimed, reviled or considered low-brow in popular opinion or the trade press: “what were adjudged to be the finest women’s films were also consistently regarded ... as exemplifying the industry and its product at their best” (75). Among the reasons he cites for this is that women often chose which films to see with their partners or families, and because they comprised the majority of viewers themselves.

³⁰ Lucy Fischer’s edited collection *Imitation of Life* includes several influential articles published in the 1971 special issue of *Screen* devoted to Sirk’s work, including Fred Camper, “The Films of Douglas Sirk,” and Paul Willeman, “Distanciation and Douglas Sirk.” Other influential texts include Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*; Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*; and Christine Gledhill’s edited collection *Home Is Where The Heart Is*, which includes Thomas Elsaesser’s massively influential article “Tales of Sound and Fury,” Laura Mulvey’s “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,” and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s “Minnelli and Melodrama.” In 1976, Peter Brooks published his influential book *The Melodramatic Imagination*, in which he defined melodrama as a mode of expression that traverses media from stage, literature, and screen, and functions importantly as a feature of “realist” literature.

associations with sensationalism and excess, evolved into feminist film theory debates and discourses on the “woman’s film,” which became synonymous with melodrama.³¹

This trajectory reflects Rick Altman’s definition of genre as a “process” in which producers, spectators, and critics all play a part. Altman argues that recognizable generic labels are more enduring than neologisms, and that when familiar labels are applied (in some cases retroactively) to new cinematic trends, it marks a natural progression, rather than a misinterpretation. Speaking of the woman’s film in particular, Altman writes: “the association of the woman’s film with family melodrama retains the power of the more general term, while applying that term to a corpus of films many of which do not fit the original action-oriented meaning of the term *melodrama*” (80). The redefinition of melodrama by feminist film critics is, in other words, indicative of a natural evolution of genre and does not necessarily suggest that critical revisions of genre are misguided or incorrect. To cite another example, scholars now identify films such as F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) within a broader tradition of horror, while it was not marketed as such at the time of its release. As Murray Leeder points out, “horror film” did not become a familiar term until 1936, during the 1930s reign of Universal monster movies. Altman’s discussion suggests that melodrama, perhaps more than any other genre/mode, has been defined and revised by critical scholarship rather than producers or spectators. In the opening to his article “Unbinding Melodrama,” Matthew Buckley traces the history of melodrama as a perceived low-brow, popular genre that, as “revisionist scholarship” reveals, “has been produced

³¹ The most influential feminist film theory texts on the melodramatic “woman’s film” include Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*; E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*; Pam Cook, “Melodrama and the Woman’s Picture”; and the *Stella Dallas* debates including Kaplan, “The Case of the Missing Mother,”; Williams, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’,”; and Modleski, “Time and Desire in the Woman’s Film.” For a study of motherhood in genres other than melodrama, see Fischer, *Cinematernity*. See also Marcia Landy’s edited collection *Imitations of Life* for an inclusive overview of melodrama as a multifaceted and international phenomenon.

in ever-greater quantities and consumed by ever-growing audiences from its origins to the present day, despite continual critical hostility, derogation, and disregard” (15).³² In other words, critics have recently played a role in revealing the reach of melodrama across genres, transnational cinema, and film history broadly.³³

In this chapter, I acknowledge the function of melodrama as an expansive mode, but I choose to focus on its generic subcategories of the maternal melodrama and the paranoid woman’s film in particular. The early films under discussion within these respective categories are King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* (1937) and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940). Both are male-directed, unlike the canonical examples selected for later chapters, such as *Meshes of the Afternoon* in chapter two. Although female directors did take up the legacy of melodramatic “women’s films,” particularly in the 1970s,³⁴ I choose instead to focus here on two films that contributed to debates in female spectatorship and feminist film criticism. The maternal melodrama is particularly critical, as “the paradigmatic type of the woman’s film” (Doane, *Desire to Desire* 73). *Stella Dallas* and *Rebecca* are further united by a significant similarity: they were both based on popular novels authored by women—Olive Higgins Prouty and Daphne du Maurier, respectively. Prouty’s authorship is more readily recognized in scholarship on Vidor’s film adaptation of *Stella Dallas*

³² Further elucidating the malleability of melodrama, John Mercer and Martin Shingler write in their short treatise that the mode “owes its longevity to the fact that it has existed—and continues to exist—as a category of films defined differently at different times by different types of people ... because it is an evolving form” (37). They echo Altman’s claim that feminist critics redefined melodrama out of a need for “a coherent group of films that addressed issues of female subjectivity and desire” (35); even if the industry saw the appeal of these films for women, they note, it did not make commercial sense to advertise them as such and exclude male viewers, and film criticism therefore took up the task.

³³ For a similar overview of how the horror genre has been defined by critics and scholars, see the introduction to this dissertation.

³⁴ Many of these films belong to a feminist avant-garde tradition of counter-cinema, which further evidences the importance, for feminist filmmakers, of placing genre in dialogue with other cinematic forms. Some examples include Jane Arden’s *The Other Side of the Underneath* (UK, 1972), Sara Gomez’s *De Cierta Manera* (Cuba, 1974), Lina Wertmüller’s *Swept Away* (Italy, 1974), Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (Italy, 1974), Karen Arthur’s *Legacy* (USA, 1975), Chantal Akerman’s *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (France, 1978), Ulrike Ottinger’s *Ticket of No Return* (Germany, 1979), and Margerethe von Trotta’s *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness* (Germany, 1979).

than the importance of du Maurier's authorship of *Rebecca*. In fact, du Maurier's authorship is often dismissed in critical discussions of Hitchcock's adaptation, "In part [because of] ... the general way in which *auteurist* studies of film foster a sense of directorial autonomy from 'source' material that is considered to be merely an occasion for the director to produce the work of art" (Allen 303). Importantly, *Stella Dallas* and *Rebecca* were both adapted with a female audience in mind, and from source material written by women; therefore, their place within the history of women's narrative and artistry is clear, even if the films adaptations were directed by prominent male filmmakers.

In section 1, I pair King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) with Deborah Haywood's *Pin Cushion* (2017), the latter of which revises the maternal melodrama through a horrific exploration of bullying and sacrifice. The film's generic placement in the horror genre is further illuminated by analyzing Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) alongside the two films. I argue that the "good" mother of *Stella Dallas* and the "bad" mother of *Carrie* cohere in the "monstrous" mother of *Pin Cushion*, who realizes too late that she is unfit for motherhood. In section 2, I pair Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) alongside Leigh Janiak's *Honeymoon* (2017), analyzing how the latter film adapts features of the "paranoid woman's film" into the body-horror subgenre. I draw on other horror films to illuminate how paranoia underlines the trajectory from Gothic melodrama to body-horror. All of my primary examples also place female fantasy at their center, and the process women take to realize or destroy their own fantasies factor importantly into their genre placement. As I will demonstrate, *Pin Cushion* and *Honeymoon* consciously re-imagine and revise the earlier films and the subgenres they draw upon, while their place within the horror genre—either as conceived by the filmmakers themselves or the films' audiences—reveals the trajectory from the maternal melodrama and paranoid women's film to the "horror weepie."

2.1 Misfits and Outcasts: The Maternal Melodrama From *Stella Dallas* to *Pin Cushion*

Pin Cushion is British director Deborah Haywood's first feature-length film. It tells the story of the homely, hunchbacked Lyn (Joanna Scanlan) and her teenaged daughter Iona (Lily Newmark) as they move to a new town in rural England. Lyn and Iona share a tender relationship, even sharing a bed, in an idiosyncratic household filled with frills, cat figurines, and a pet parakeet. While Iona is fond of her mother, she knows that Lyn's oddities are incompatible with her desire to befriend the popular crowd at school, and she therefore goes out of her way to prevent her peers from discovering that her mother is the bizarre stout woman who shuffles around town sporting a hideous cat-shaped hat and mismatched clothing. Instead, Iona attempts to impress her peers with elaborate, luridly represented fabrications in which her mother is an elegant and beautiful flight attendant; in turn, she exaggerates the extent of her friendships with the popular girls to her mother. In response, Lyn drifts into a fantasy world of her own in which she has friends and romantic prospects. But Iona's acceptance among the popular clique at school quickly backfires; in her eagerness to maintain a veneer of cool nonchalance and impress them with her knowledge of sexual matters, she becomes a vulnerable target. Keely (Sacha Cordy-Nice) and Stacie (Saskia Paige Martin) are the most vicious of the three "queen bees" at school, while the third, Chelsea (Bethany Antonia) clearly takes pity on Iona.

At the same time, Lyn begins to face the hostility of the adults in town: as one of the girls steals away the boy with whom Iona has begun a tentative relationship, Lyn is bullied by a neighbor who refuses to return the stepladder she borrowed. From there, the bullying against mother and daughter escalates rapidly out of control. In one grueling scene, Iona invites the clique to her home while Lyn is out, during which time they coerce Iona into drinking and stripping naked; her "friends" take a video of the spectacle and later circulate it to the entire school. The evening

culminates with Iona vomiting on the rug while Lyn returns home to find that one of the group has sat on her beloved parakeet and killed it. Iona's subsequent social exclusion from her schoolmates extends to alienation from her own mother; in one scene, Iona returns home seeking comfort from her mother, only to find that Lyn has heard the rumors about Iona's sexual promiscuity and claims to want no more to do with her. Lyn's hostility, however, softens when Keely and Stacie severely burn Iona, and Lyn decides to resolve her daughter's hardships by hanging herself in front of the two bullies. This sacrificial act at once frees Iona from the burden of association with her mother and is Lyn's way of punishing Keely and Stacie with the ensuing guilt. Following Lyn's death, Iona moves in with Chelsea's family. There, Iona befriends and settles into bed with a fluffy white cat, implied to be a reincarnation of her mother.

Pin Cushion is not explicitly "horror," as the bullies (the film's primary threat) act similarly to those in popular teen comedies such as *Mean Girls* (2004, directed by Mark Waters). Instead, the relationship between mother and daughter in the film aligns it closely to King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* and Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, thereby revealing the horrors implicit in maternal melodrama and the emotionalism implicit in horror films with familial relations at their heart. Haywood herself describes the film as "a dark fairy tale" (Winter), while critics use similar language such as "strange [and] ethereal" (Bogutskaya).³⁵ Awash in garish pinks, blues, and greens, *Pin Cushion* gives the impression of existing in a fantasy world, while the narrative corroborates this; Iona conceives of her origins in fairy tale terms and fantasizes about telling her classmates that a hunchbacked

³⁵ *Pin Cushion*'s festival run further denotes its eclecticism: it screened at the Venice International Critics' Week, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Créteil International Women's Film Festival, the Boston Underground Film Festival (BUFF), and Fantastic Fest. Like many other "underground" film festivals, BUFF screens unusual films from various genres, while Fantastic Fest is known for its selection of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and action. Its critical reception and presence at genre-blending festivals such as BUFF and Fantastic Fest suggests that it hovers within an ambiguous genre category. See chapter four for a discussion of its inclusion in the Final Girls Berlin Film Festival.

woman found her in the woods, raised her, and let her go. As I discuss in chapter four, *Pin Cushion*'s screening at women's horror film festivals demonstrates that it has found an audience that sees it explicitly in terms of horror. Audiences play a part in the evolution of genre as a process according to Rick Altman, and I consider *Pin Cushion* a critical example of this phenomenon. However, its thematic and narrative similarities to *Carrie* invite a textual comparison between these two films, and how horror functions as a bridge between them.³⁶ The film's modal combination of fantasy and social commentary exhibits bullying in such a way that it becomes legible within the parameters of horror without losing sight of its roots in the maternal melodrama. The viciousness of the bullying connects *Pin Cushion* explicitly to Brian De Palma's adaptation of *Carrie* (1976), while—as in the maternal melodrama—the film's resolution hinges on a mother's sacrifice.³⁷

The topic of *Pin Cushion* was deeply personal for Haywood, who wrote the treatment in 2008 and let it sit for nearly a decade until she started production (Mitchell). *Pin Cushion* was shot in Haywood's hometown of Swadlincote, South Derbyshire, where Haywood herself was bullied as a teen. Although Haywood did not set out to make an autobiographical film, she wanted to confront the issue of bullying head-on, and she was particularly interested in the figure of a “pin cushion,” or a girl ostracized for being sexually promiscuous. The film emerged from Haywood's

³⁶ Although I focus on the genres of maternal melodrama and horror and do not address British cinematic traditions in depth here, another important tradition reflected in *Pin Cushion* is that of British kitchen sink realism, particularly those films with dysfunctional, class-based mother/daughter relationships such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *Secrets and Lies* (1996). However, the film consciously deviates from this tradition in its emphasis on fantasy; even though Iona has no father to speak of and Lyn has no clear source of income, they move into a comfortable home and their financial situation comes up only briefly in one scene where Lyn counts expenses with no indication of whether they are financially vulnerable. Other subtle indications of the town residents' socioeconomic positions are to be found in their homes—Belinda lives in a modest townhouse and Chelsea in a plush mansion. However, class and financial issues are never explicitly brought to the foreground.

³⁷ Stephen King's novel has been adapted into film three times: first by De Palma in 1976, next by David Carson in the 2002 made-for-TV adaptation starring Angela Bettis, and again in 2013 by Kimberly Peirce. In 1999, Katt Shea directed a sequel to the 1976, *The Rage: Carrie 2*, which shifts the focus from girl-on-girl bullying to the gender politics of rape culture.

desire to explore “the person behind the school slag” (Bogutskaya). Importantly, bullying is not an experience specific to one gender or another. Both boys and girls (and men and women) are its potential victims; is it for this reason that Stephen King considers *Carrie* a cathartic story for both female and male subjects of bullying alike.³⁸ But beyond its attention to the spirit-breaking cruelty inflicted upon Iona “in that pit of man- and woman-eaters that is your normal suburban high school” (King 172) (as in *Carrie*), it is also explicitly about the relationships, tensions, and ultimate ruptures between mothers and their adolescent daughters (as in *Stella Dallas*).

I use the term “social exclusion” as an umbrella term to refer to the general treatment against mothers and daughters in the three films, but in *Pin Cushion*, Lyn and Iona specifically face ostracism, rejection, and bullying.³⁹ Lyn, desperate to make friends, eagerly lends her standoffish neighbor Belinda (Chanel Cresswell) the stepladder she is using to paint the living room, but later faces ostracism and bullying through silence when Belinda abruptly shuts the door in Lyn’s face in her refusal to return the stepladder. In her continued effort to make friends, Lyn begins to frequent a community friendship group, but faces bullying from Belinda (“this is a friendship group, not a freakshow”) and rejection from the group leader Anne (Isy Suttie) who, sporting a “best friend” pin, gently sides with Belinda and encourages Lyn to instead join her

³⁸ Carol Clover founds her argument about male viewers’ identification with female victims onscreen in part upon the implied male spectator of *Carrie* according to King. Clover writes, “If Carrie, whose story begins and ends with menstrual imagery and seems in general so painfully girlish, is construed by her author as a latter-day variant on Samson, the biblical strong man who overcame all manner of handicap to kill at least six thousand Philistines in one way or another, and if her target audience is any high school boy who has been pantsed or had his glasses messed with, then we are truly in a universe in which the sex of a character is no object” (20). Of course, I disagree with Clover’s assessment of horror’s target audience as male, but the broader point that the experience of bullying transcends experiences of gender is relevant—even if, as Clover also points out, bullying looks different depending on the gender of its perpetrator and victim.

³⁹ As psychologists define these terms, “Generally speaking, ostracism refers to being ignored and excluded . . . Social exclusion refers to not being included within a given social network (but not necessarily ignored). Rejection is usually an explicit verbal or physical action that declares that the individual is not wanted as a member within a relationship or group. Bullying usually involves others’ aversive focus on an individual, and often is accompanied by physical, verbal and nonverbal abuse of an individual” (Williams et al. 2-3).

assertiveness seminar. When Lyn attends, Anne pits her against Belinda and fails to intervene when Belinda's verbal abuse intensifies; finally, Anne rejects Lyn entirely by asking her to stay away from the group because she does not "fit in." Each of these scenarios compels Lyn to apologize profusely for her own exclusion. Despite her rudeness, Belinda also points out Lyn's critical flaws—her overly trustful nature, meekness, and inability to stand up for herself—which also put into question Lyn's ability to be a positive role model for her daughter.

Iona, as the new girl in school, first faces social exclusion through silence, but it gradually leads to bullying as Keely and Stacie's friendship becomes a blatant masquerade at Iona's expense. Keely immediately establishes ownership over Iona: in their first interaction, she writes her own name in permanent marker on Iona's pencil case, which Iona misinterprets as a sign of her inclusion within the group. She also exerts dominance over Iona's body and treats it as an exploitable plaything: while the four girls are socializing in Keely's bedroom after school, Keely asks Iona if she has ever had an orgasm, then uses an electric toothbrush on Iona to bring her to climax in front of the other girls. To further test the limits of her power, Keely steals away Iona's tentative boyfriend, Daz (Loris Scarpe). Like her mother, Iona begins by blithely accepting these acts of power over her, presumably because she naively believes that she is among friends.⁴⁰ By the end of the film, she is utterly passive against Keely and Stacie as they devolve from false friendship into aggressive, targeted abuse against her, which they also pressure other classmates to emulate. In her misery, Iona loses all sense of self-esteem or potential for self-defense. She begins to drink and arrives at school in a drunken stupor; she exchanges sexual favors for the privilege of being seen with certain people in the school courtyard; and, finally, she lies drunkenly

⁴⁰ Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009), which is the subject of chapter three, addresses many of the same issues regarding female relationships and bullying in high school.

in a bus stop alcove, where Daz finds her. Despite his repulsed rejection of her, their being seen together by a passing schoolmate leads to Keely and Stacie's final act of violence against Iona.

Although Lyn's bizarre appearance—once Keely realizes Iona's association with her—becomes another easy reason to mock Iona, it is important that both mother and daughter are harassed by their own bullies, partly because of one another, but mainly for reasons that have nothing to do with the other. This makes Lyn's sacrifice appear meaningless, compared to Stella's in *Stella Dallas*. Furthermore, the film's equal attention to mother and daughter's separate social suffering invites a reconsideration of the relationship between Carrie and Margaret White in *Carrie*. While *Stella Dallas* focuses on the mother and *Carrie* on the daughter, *Pin Cushion* unites the two perspectives. Each film hinges upon the separation between mother and daughter. This results in three different resolutions for their relationship across the films, each complicated in its own way: masochism and directed self-effacement for the mother in *Stella Dallas*, devastation and ambiguous catharsis for the daughter in *Carrie*; inward-facing revenge for the mother and futility for both mother and daughter in *Pin Cushion*. These differences in emphasis and end result bring to light the specific parameters of the “horror weepie.”

The fact that *Pin Cushion* screened at a horror film festival and can be accepted as belonging to the genre by fans explicitly encourages viewers to see the horror of physical and social violence inherent in bullying and to consider the similar tensions present in maternal melodrama as a core element that unites this subcategory of melodrama with the horror genre in particular. Notably, one of the festival directors advised attendees to “bring tissues” for the screening—a warning that one might not expect at a horror film festival and that directly challenges the audience to reconsider what a horror film is meant to do. *Pin Cushion*'s debts to both *Stella Dallas* and *Carrie* demonstrate that by exploring and blending tropes from such

different films—bullying, social alienation, mother/daughter mirroring, and maternal sacrifice with varying results—*Pin Cushion* teases out the boundaries between the “weepie” and the horror genre, fueling and shaping the unique features of the maternal “horror weepie.”

2.1.1 Anti-Bullying and Injustice in *Stella Dallas* and *Pin Cushion*

In the 1980s, *Stella Dallas* was at the center of a debate between E. Ann Kaplan, Linda Williams, Tania Modleski, and other prominent feminist film theorists. Its position as a “woman’s film” and the place of “women’s films” in discussions on female spectatorship were central to the debate, which I outline in more detail in the introduction to this dissertation, but which also merits some attention here. In her essay on *Stella Dallas*, which formed a core position in this debate, Williams identifies women’s spectatorship as one based on contradictory viewing positions, an argument she advances in her later essay “Film Bodies”; for instance, she argues that viewers are encouraged to sympathize not only with Stella, but also with Laurel, Helen, and Stephen, and to view the situation with a distanced objectivity and empathic subjectivity. For the character of Stella in particular, this contradictory viewing position manifests itself as follows in the film:

At the beginning of [*Stella Dallas*] Stella pretended a maternal concern she did not really possess ... Now she pretends a lack of the same concern in order to send Laurel to a better home. Both roles are patently false. And though neither allows us to view the ‘authentic’ woman beneath the mask, the succession of roles ... permits a glimpse at the social and economic realities that have produced such roles. (16)

Williams continues by arguing that female spectators view such a film, and such a scene, “from a variety of different subject positions. In other words, the female spectator tends to identify with contradiction itself” (17). Here she contradicts Kaplan’s assertion that *Stella Dallas* reflects

the limits of multiple subject positions and possibilities for women, both characters and spectators. Kaplan writes, “The film punishes [Stella] for [her forms of resistance] by turning her into a ‘spectacle’ produced by the upper class’ disapproving gaze, a gaze the audience is made to share through the camera work and editing” (82). For Kaplan, any attempt on Stella’s part to be both a mother and to enjoy her preferred lifestyle are punished by the film’s moral point of view, while Williams argues that the film allows for more ambiguous and fluid ways of viewing. This is achieved, Williams continues, by inviting viewers to align their sympathies alternatively with multiple characters, and by its refusal to either demonize any of these characters or to wholeheartedly align with their viewpoint.

Pin Cushion is less ambiguous in this regard: despite the film’s occasional critical gaze on Lyn and Iona’s social ineptitude, its empathetic and moral position is squarely anti-bullying. Despite their eccentricities, the film—like *Carrie*, as I will discuss in the following section—leaves little room for viewers to align their sympathies with the bullies or any other characters in the film, even as Lyn and Iona’s flaws are evident. When one bully snatches Iona’s love interest away from her, the film does not show his perspective; instead, it demands that the viewer’s perspective remains with Iona and Lyn throughout. If Williams identifies in *Stella Dallas* a liberatory potential for the female spectator in which she is not tied to a figure with society’s limitations imposed onto her, *Pin Cushion*’s unequivocally empathetic perspective on the trauma of bullying and social outcasts expresses a particularly constrained fear—that external cruelty can irreparably destroy a close bond between mother and daughter, and that the divide between social outcasts and their socially adept counterparts cannot be resolved. In other words, Haywood sees no good reason for Lyn’s rejection from the community, while the reason for Stella’s social exclusion in *Stella Dallas* is clearly expressed and presented from multiple perspectives, however unsatisfying the reason is.

Although Lyn and Iona can be criticized for their naiveté, there is no explicit financial or class divide between them and their communities that explains their social exclusion. It is based solely on personality and physical appearance.

2.1.2 Maternal Pathos from 1937-2017

The central mother-daughter relationship in *Pin Cushion* is critical to the film's pathos. If maternal melodramas are "scenarios of separation, of separation and return, or of threatened separation" (Doane 73),⁴¹ then they reflect the ambiguous tensions between mother and daughter as defined by Nancy Chodorow. According to Chodorow, sons undergo a transfer of identification from mother to father as they grow into adulthood, thereby attaining a sense of self and separation from their mother's body and social position. In contrast, daughters retain their bodily and social identification with their mother and therefore "experience a sense of self-in-relation that is in contrast to men's creation of a self" (viii). This results in a complex process of simultaneous acceptance and rejection, as the daughter learns her gender role from her mother's example but "must be sufficiently differentiated to grow up and [experience] herself as a separate individual" (177).⁴² In all three films, the tensions between mother and daughter reflect the pattern Chodorow describes, albeit in different ways.

⁴¹ Like Molly Haskell before her, Doane identifies sacrifice as a crucial fixture of maternal melodrama, as in classical-era Hollywood films such as *The Old Maid* (1939, dir. Edmund Goulding), *The Great Lie* (1941, dir. Edmund Goulding), and *To Each His Own* (1946, dir. Mitchell Leisen). Doane also notes that maternal melodramas "obsessively structure themselves around just-missed moments, recognitions which occur 'too late,' and blockages of communication which might have been avoided" (90).

⁴² For a discussion of how this complex process is explored in women's experimental film, see Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1980). See also Linda Williams' and B. Ruby Rich's "The Right of Re-Vision" (also reprinted in Rich's *Chick Flicks*).

Like *Pin Cushion*, *Stella Dallas* is invested in the relationship between mother and daughter and how their lifestyles—in this case based on social class—render them vulnerable to judgment or attack from their more socially adept acquaintances. Physical appearance is an important factor in their social position. In *Stella Dallas*, the titular working-class character (Barbara Stanwyck) manages to secure an upper-class husband, Stephen (John Boles), but by the time their daughter Laurel is born, it has become clear to Stephen that Stella is still, and will always be, defined by her working-class idea of wealth and her gaudy, ostentatious taste in clothing and friends—by “the *excessive presence* of Stella’s body and dress ... [her] exaggerated feminine presence” (Williams, “Something Else” 13). Although Stella has married into the upper class, she remains associated with lower economic classes due to appearance and behavior. Lyn and Iona’s alienation from the townspeople is similarly based not necessarily on socioeconomic standing, but from their inability to fit in socially or to exhibit “normal” appearance and behavior.

The profundity of Stella and Laurel’s relationship also mirrors that of Lyn and Iona. Laurel and Iona are each torn between a devotion to their mothers and the humiliation of being their daughters. In one scene of *Stella Dallas*, Stella—who is living off of Stephen’s riches—takes Laurel to an upscale resort. There, Laurel is mortified by Stella’s vulgar clothing and lurid makeup, which betray her efforts to blend in and jeopardizes Laurel’s friendships. Traveling in separate train bunks shortly afterward, Laurel and Stella overhear three girls expressing their shock at discovering that Stella (who “dresses up to here, and paint an inch thick! And bells on her shoes that tinkled ... You never saw such a sight!”) is mother to their friend Laurel, who “seemed so lovely and sweet.” They suggest, furthermore, that Laurel’s association with Stella will affect her chances with her love interest, society son Richard Grosvenor III. After the girls leave, Laurel slips into her mother’s bunk to sleep with her. As in *Pin Cushion*, mother and daughter sleeping together

demonstrates the depth of their bond. But this critical scene, the turning point that prompts Stella's final sacrificial act, presents an ambiguous set of desires for both mother and daughter. Each pretends she has not overheard the girls, and each hopes the other truly did not overhear them. By doing so, both mother and daughter shield one another from the knowledge that they overheard the conversation. In this moment, Stella realizes that her physical appearance and lower-class associations make her an unfit mother in the eyes of Laurel's upper-class acquaintances, while Laurel is faced with the conflicted feelings of humiliation and affection.

Furthermore, Laurel cannot retain primary identification with her mother if she is to successfully accept her rightful upper-class place. Stella's subsequent decision to reject Laurel and live her own life is a performance that serves to solidify Laurel's sense of self, rather than "self-in-relation" to her mother. In enabling Laurel's sense of self (as a member of the upper class), Stella transfers her motherhood of Laurel onto her stepmother, Helen. As a substitute mother but not Laurel's biological mother, Helen is ideally positioned to become Laurel's role model *and* the point of reference for her sense of self as an adult; she helps Laurel to "overcome primary identification [with Stella] while [she] maintain[s] and build[s] a secondary identification [with Helen]" (Chodorow 177). In the film's final scene, Stella observes Laurel's wedding through the picture window of Helen's house without Laurel's knowledge. For Linda Williams, this scene—and Stella's process of renouncing motherhood—is full of contradictions: "the maternal melodrama presents a recognizable picture of women's ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women's lives" ("Something Else" 23). Stella's sacrificial act is masochistic in the sense that she renounces the most important source of happiness in her own life, but it is directed toward a bigger picture—that of assisting Laurel in

taking a step toward forging her own identity that she would not have taken herself. To Stella, these actions are necessary.

Carrie similarly pits mother and daughter apart from their neighbors and peers. Like Stella, Carrie White's (Sissy Spacek) mother is principally responsible for her daughter's alienation. However, this is due to Margaret White's (Piper Laurie) overprotection and religious fanaticism, rather than her class position. Again, this has something to do with physical appearance. Margaret stands out against her neighbors, like the prim Mrs. Snell, by her ramshackle house and witchlike appearance—black robes, unkempt red hair—while Carrie stands apart from her coiffed peers with her sullen face, shy demeanor, and tattered, bland clothing. Carrie's appearance, presumably, is due to Margaret's attempt to keep Carrie from looking attractive and therefore desirable to boys. Margaret's devoutness stems from the tormented memory of the sexual desire that resulted in Carrie's birth, and when Carrie has her first period, Margaret interprets it as the continuation of her sin and tightens her grasp on Carrie. Her control over Carrie appears abusive (and horrific)—she beats Carrie with a book and orders her to repent for the sin of beginning her menstrual period, then locks her in a small closet to pray—but it is, for Margaret, her way of protecting her daughter from sin and damnation, what she perceives to be the ultimate threat.

When Carrie's period awakens her telekinetic powers and she begins to assert control over her life, she begins to form her own identity. In her newfound power over her mother and therefore her life, Carrie begins to dress differently and experiment with putting on makeup. When she is asked to the prom (a plan set in motion by Sue Snell, a classmate who takes pity on her), she eagerly agrees and sews her own dress for the occasion. Both Carrie and Sue are unaware of other plans for Carrie's prom arranged by the bully Chris (Nancy Allen). Chris arranges for Carrie to be awarded the title of prom queen and, during her moment of glory onstage, for a bucket of pig's

blood to be dumped on her head. In this moment of humiliation and the realization that she never truly had the acceptance she craved, Carrie takes advantage of her telekinetic powers—fueled by her emotional distress—to set the gym on fire and let her classmates and teachers burn to death inside. She then walks home, defeated, to seek comfort from her mother. Instead of providing it, Margaret stabs Carrie with a kitchen knife in a final attempt to save her daughter’s soul. In return, Carrie uses her telekinetic powers one last time to pelt her mother with sharp objects and symbolically crucify her, arms splayed to each side, in the kitchen, before dying herself. In certain ways, Margaret’s strict rules reflect her own sacrifice as a mother: tormented by her own sexual impurity, she devotes her entire life to keeping her daughter from making similar mistakes.

For Shelley Stamp, neither of Carrie’s two role models—her mother and her gym teacher, Miss Collins (Betty Buckley)—offer satisfactory directions for Carrie, between “the bodily denial endorsed by her mother or the masquerade of femininity offered by Miss Collins. Both scenarios proffer repression and disavowal as the only alternatives to monstrous femininity, and each is marked as equally impossible” (341). Unlike Laurel in *Stella Dallas*, Carrie is eager to differentiate herself from her mother and to create her own identity. While Stamp sees “repression and disavowal [and] monstrous femininity” as the only options for Carrie, I consider Carrie’s own agency—rather than her identity—an important factor here. Like that of all teenagers (and daughters) Carrie’s process of forging her own identity is one of trial and error; the important aspect is her decision to try and find it. Carrie does not want to entirely distance herself from her mother; she simply wants the space to discover who she is on her own terms. However, Margaret’s refusal to allow Carrie to build her own identity results in the destruction of their relationship (and their lives). Carrie’s monstrous potential is formed by Margaret’s abuse, but finally realized by her bullies’ abuse.

The relationship between mother and daughter in *Pin Cushion* is indebted to both *Stella Dallas* and *Carrie*, particularly as they hinge on mother/daughter conflict in the face of social acceptance. The “crisis” of each, to refer to Lucy Fischer’s *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*, is the mother’s failure to elevate her daughter into social stability. In all three films, it is clear that the mother figure sees her daughter as an extension of herself, or a mirror. The mother’s suppression or encouragement of their similarities affects the outcome of the daughter’s identity. *Pin Cushion* literalizes the mirroring theme in the film’s opening scene, which features Sally Oldfield’s “Mirrors” on the soundtrack. *Pin Cushion* sets the scene of Lyn and Iona’s new home as harmonious and picturesque, in its own modest way—decorated with colorful throw rugs, cramped with gaudy knickknacks, the walls painted turquoise. They spend an early scene dancing clumsily, but joyfully (and in identical moves), in their living room. The first minutes of the film are awash in bright colors and Oldfield’s dreamlike song as the two stroll through their new town, stop at a pet shop window to watch kittens frolic, and wonder aloud about the new friends they will make.

The carefree tone comes to an abrupt end when they pass two twelve-year-old boys throwing a ball back and forth and one scoffs at Lyn’s clunky shoes. His companion grotesquely imitates her hobbling walk, gasping, “The bells...the bells!” The jab is, of course, a reference to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In conjunction with the comment about shoes, this moment explicitly calls to mind the train scene in *Stella Dallas* (“bells on her shoes that tinkled”). But by calling attention to Lyn’s similarities to the physically monstrous figure of Quasimodo also recalls the relationship between the binary between monstrosity and femininity in classic horror cinema.⁴³ As Linda Williams writes, both the monster and the female protagonist in films such as *The*

⁴³ See Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* and Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.

Phantom of the Opera (1925, directed by Rupert Julian) share “the power and potency of a nonphallic sexuality. Precisely because this [recognition] is so threatening to male power, it is violently punished” (“When the Woman Looks” 26). Because of their similarities, Williams argues, there is potential for sympathy “between the two objects of cinematic spectacle ... the woman and the monster” (22). Iona’s separation from her peers occurs because she overcompensates for her sexual inexperience by fabricating romantic exploits, wrongfully assuming that this will impress her classmates. Ultimately these fabrications lead her to perform sexual favors and wear revealing clothing, even as she maintain an air of wide-eyed innocence.

Meanwhile, Lyn’s homely appearance (her hunched back and odd clothing) and meek personality alienate her from other parents, but it is also her expression of sexuality that instigates her ultimate rejection from the friendship group. In one scene, she approaches them wearing a black T-shirt with an image of an ice cream cone that reads “Lick me ‘till ice cream.” She then proceeds to over-share, delivering a monologue in which she describes acting recklessly in her youth: “I used to dress up and go out at night and hope I’d get raped, so I could have a child. So I could have someone.” The group responds with open-mouthed disgust; this monologue is a deciding factor in her exclusion from the group. Therefore, Lyn represents nonphallic sexuality that, because of her appearance and inability to act according to societal standards, is associated with monstrosity. On the other hand, Iona—by overcompensating and performing sexuality that ultimately reinforces her powerlessness—represents the woman as the monster’s mirror image, a sexual non-monster whose sexuality is punished. Lyn’s association with monstrosity leads to her death, but because the film presents Lyn and Iona as sympathetic victims, the reason for her death is more ambiguous. In this way, Lyn’s death is more futile than that of the Phantom or other classic horror monsters; despite any underlying sympathy for those monsters, their death is justifiable.

Unlike the seemingly necessary sacrifice of *Stella Dallas* and the seemingly cathartic assertion of self-defense and self-creation in *Carrie*, the “horror weepie” presents an equally contradictory, but even more ambiguous, resolution: a sympathetic character, painted as monstrous in subtext but harmless and kindhearted, still must be punished. Iona’s mother cannot exist in her life as the monstrous Lyn, but—like *Stella Dallas*—she can exist only at a distance (in the form of an animal, or, in *Stella*’s case, as a spectator).

In *Pin Cushion*, the stigma against mother and daughter is concentrated on appearance, but also in individual expression and social competence that is seen as *incompetence*—as extreme social ineptness that invites bullying against both. Along these lines, Lyn fails as an ideal mother in patriarchal terms, which Doane defines as “an identity with very precise functions—comforting, nurturing, protecting” (*Desire to Desire* 83). Lyn behaves more as Iona’s best friend rather than her mother: she is jealous and insecure when Iona claims to have made friends, she rejects her daughter rather than impose boundaries to prevent Iona from self-harming, and although her suicide represents an ultimate sacrifice for Iona, this act seems futile. Lyn’s final act in service of her daughter is a horrific, “too late” act of regret in which she realizes that her monstrosity makes her an unfit mother for Iona.⁴⁴ Unlike *Stella Dallas* (the “good” mother), she is unable to identify what her daughter needs until it is too late; unlike Margaret White (the “bad” mother), she finally realizes that she has damaged her daughter. In *Pin Cushion*, her sacrifice takes the form of revenge.

⁴⁴ “Too late!” refers to the excess of melodramatic women’s films. For this particular terminology, see Williams, “Film Bodies” and Doane, *The Desire to Desire*. As Doane writes, “Of the various subgenres of the woman’s film, the maternal melodrama is the one which appears to fully earn the label ‘weepie.’ The plight of the mother with respect to her child, the necessary separations, losses, and humiliations she must suffer are always moving and often ‘move’ the spectator to tears. The films obsessively structure themselves around just-missed moments, recognitions which occur ‘too late,’ and blockages of communication which might have been avoided. In this sense, the pathetic text appears to insist that the gap between desire and its object is not structural but accidental and therefore to reconfirm the possibility of a fullness in signification—a complete and transparent communication. Tears testify to the loss of such a fullness but also to its existence as a (forever receding) ideal” (90).

In pointing inward, rather than expressing her revenge outward, her solution serves to punish herself for her physical and emotional shortcomings. This iteration of a “horror weepie,” therefore, presents the maternal figure as flawed and imperfect, a sympathetic monster, while her solution to her daughter’s situation is one of sacrifice through inward-facing self-destruction. Her sacrifice does not allow for liberation, but for compromise that does not entirely resolve the situation. Like the villains of slasher films, *Pin Cushion* proposes a resolution based on futility (Lyn’s suicide) and surplus (her return as a cat). This uneasily resolved ending is a core element of the “horror weepie.”⁴⁵

2.2 “I Can Still Feel Them”: The Paranoid Woman’s Film and Haunting in *Rebecca* and *Honeymoon*

In this section, I move from the maternal melodrama’s influence on women’s horror cinema onto another kind of “horror weepie”: the dark romance, Gothic melodrama, or “paranoid woman’s film” (Doane, *Desire to Desire* 123). In this section, I pair the paranoid woman’s film *Rebecca* (1940, directed by Alfred Hitchcock) and the 2014 body-horror film *Honeymoon* (2014, directed by Leigh Janiak). These are two films that challenge heterosexual domesticity by offering fantastical alternatives. In *Rebecca*, this takes the form of queer and familial desire for an idealized, but false, femininity. In *Honeymoon*, this means forgoing the heterosexual union in favor of realizing a fantasy of an alternative. The two films also present domesticity as both a fantasy and

⁴⁵ Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014), another horror inheritor of the maternal melodrama, also provides an uneasy conclusion: to “defeat” the Babadook, Amelia must learn to coexist with it by nourishing and giving it shelter in her basement.

an overwhelming expectation. While *Rebecca* pessimistically reinforces heteronormative familial and romantic structures in the face of sexual “deviance,” *Honeymoon* imagines the liberatory potential of non-heterosexual deviance, even as it does not necessarily present its resolution as a positive model of liberation.

Honeymoon, Leigh Janiak’s feature film debut, follows Bea (Rose Leslie) and Paul (Harry Treadaway) over the course of their brief and tragic honeymoon to a secluded lake in Canada, where Bea slowly begins to transform into a monster. The film opens with an excerpt from Bea and Paul’s wedding video intercut with tracking shots of their drive from New York City to their honeymoon site, the lake house where Bea spent summers as a child. At the lake house, it is the off-season, and they are free to exercise their healthy sexual appetite without intrusions from interfering neighbors. The first night they spend there, however, it becomes clear that something strange is lurking in the surrounding woods: as they sleep, an orb-light beam of light pulses through their bedroom without an obvious source or purpose. During the day, Bea and Paul venture to the sole restaurant on the lake and discover that it is run by Bea’s childhood friend Will (Ben Huber) and his wife Annie (Hanna Brown). Annie behaves so strangely that Paul suspects that Will abuses her. He is also disconcerted by the evident history between Bea and Will, while Will’s boorish masculinity causes Paul to feel insecure. To compensate for his softer masculinity, Paul promises to wake up early and catch a fish for Bea’s breakfast, but a power outage causes his alarm clock to ring hours earlier than he intended. When he discovers the time and returns to bed, Bea is nowhere to be found. Paul pursues her in the woods and eventually finds her off the marked trail, naked and confused.

In the ensuing days, Bea begins to behave strangely: she forgets basic facts about herself and struggles to perform basic tasks, her sex drive vanishes abruptly, and she develops strange,

vein-like welts on her inner thighs. When Paul confronts her, she deflects his concerns and refuses to admit that anything unusual is going on. By the end of the film, however, Bea's condition is so obvious and overpowering that she needs Paul's help to "give birth" to a root-colored, wormlike organism. Afterward, she finally reveals what happened to her: she was raped in the woods by dark-bodied creatures that left "something" inside her and now control her physically and mentally. She now exists partially as herself, with her own memories and love for Paul, and partially as part of an unnamed community (she refers to herself as "we"). In this state of mind, she decides that the safest option for Paul is to go into hiding. Her solution for this is to weigh him down and "hide" him in the lake, where he drowns. The film closes with Bea watching their wedding video, her eyes glazed over and her face covered in spiderweb-like ooze, until the pulsing orb returns and she rises to join Annie, who is waiting for her outside. Close-ups on Bea's expressionless face as she walks through the woods are intercut with the wedding video playing back at the cabin. The sounds on the video are nearly drowned out by a scraping build-up of metallic sounds and throbbing rhythms, until the sounds cuts out and Bea's whisper comes through on the video: "Before I was alone, and now I'm not." In the video's chronology, seen in its entirety at the beginning of the film, this line implies that Bea is no longer "alone" because she is with Paul; in the final scene, the video's chronology is disturbed and the line extracted from its linear context in the video to associate its meaning with the otherworldly "community" that adopts her.

Honeymoon is indebted to numerous films and genres, particularly because Janiak scales down the film's genre elements to focus more intently on the intimate dynamics between a doomed couple. Janiak draws on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for the story,⁴⁶ *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)

⁴⁶ Jack Finney's 1955 novel *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has been adapted into film three times: in 1956 by Don Siegel, in 1978 by Philip Kaufman, and again in 1993 by Abel Ferrara.

and *The Shining* (1980) for the relationship between monstrosity and a failed marriage, and *The Fly* (1986) as an aesthetic influence. Janiak and her co-writer Phil Graziadei wanted “to tell a very intimate body snatcher story, where the person you think you know the best, in this case, a man’s new wife, turns into someone he no longer recognizes” (Sigler). Janiak is also aware of her film’s similarities to a very different kind of film. Among these horror titles, she also mentions Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012), a film that demonstrates the simultaneous terror and tragedy of “seeing the person that you love and you think you know so well turn into a complete stranger” (Saito). Other films about aging couples and characters with dementia or Alzheimer’s, such as Sarah Polley’s *Away From Her* (2006), are similarly invested in the disintegration of a couple faced with forces outside of their control.

The combination of literal monstrosity and the horrific process of mental deterioration finds its predecessors in the paranoid woman’s film. In particular, *Honeymoon* serves as a revision of *Rebecca* (1940): in both films, a man and a woman marry, only for one to discover too late that they do not know their spouse as well as they thought. In each film, one spouse watched helplessly as the other transforms into something distant, cold, and even monstrous.⁴⁷ In *Rebecca*, the original couple remains together and the film seems to end on a positive note as far as their relationship is concerned. However, this supposed “happy ending” is ambiguous. The seemingly destructive

⁴⁷ I selected *Rebecca* in place of other such paranoid women’s films as Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (1941), George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1949), and Max Ophüls’s *Caught* (1949) because these films focus less on the relationship between the spouses and more on the potentially fatal situation of their female protagonists. In *Suspicion* to some extent, but especially in *Gaslight* and *Caught*, men enter their marriages with an ulterior motive: in *Gaslight*, Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer) is after the jewels belonging to his fragile wife Paula’s (Ingrid Bergman) deceased aunt (whom, it is revealed, he murdered). In *Caught*, wealthy playboy Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan) marries the working class Leonora (Barbara Bel Geddes) out of an impulsive move to contradict his psychiatrist. In both films, furthermore, the female protagonists are rescued by fresh, honest love interests, and are eventually freed from the tyranny of the “wrong” husband into the dotting arms of the “right” one, while in *Rebecca*, the original couple remains married.

ending of *Honeymoon* can be read as equally ambiguous, but with the promise of an alternative to the dissatisfactory heterosexual relationships in both films.

Rebecca, based on the 1938 novel by Daphne du Maurier, was Hitchcock's first film made in Hollywood.⁴⁸ It follows an unnamed, innocent young woman (Joan Fontaine) who, during her employment as a companion to an elderly rich woman, meets and quickly falls in love with the charming aristocrat and widower Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier). They marry and return to Maxim's massive seaside estate, Manderley, where the second Mrs. de Winter is expected—despite her naiveté and unfamiliarity with an upper-class lifestyle—to become the new mistress of the house with servants to oversee and a schedule to keep. Most disconcerting is the frigid housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson), and her apparent contempt for Maxim's new bride, which contrasts with her disquieting devotion to his late wife, Rebecca—a devotion that the second Mrs. de Winter assumes her husband shares. Spurred on by Mrs. Danvers, the young bride emulates Rebecca's clothing and lifestyle to please her husband, but her efforts only enrage and distance him even further. When Rebecca's body is discovered in the sea, Maxim reveals to his wife that he was the sole witness to Rebecca's death, and his true feelings are revealed: he did not adore Rebecca, but despised her. She had, he claims, openly admitted to carrying on affairs and other “unspeakable things,” and continued her wanton lifestyle following their marriage, which was—for both—a farce. On the night of her death, she claimed to be pregnant with another man's child and taunted Maxim for the fact that another man's child would carry on the de Winter name. During their argument, he hit her; she fell and fatally struck her head. Afraid of being charged with

⁴⁸ Hitchcock himself disparaged his source material, despite the fact that he had adapted another du Maurier novel in England (*Jamaica Inn*, 1939) and would adapt her short story “The Birds” in 1963. As Hitchcock infamously related to François Truffaut, “it's not a Hitchcock picture; it's a novelette, really. The story is old-fashioned; there was a whole school of feminine literature at the period, and though I'm not against it, the fact is that the story is lacking in humor” (127).

her murder, Maxim hid her body in a fishing boat and weighed it down. At the end of the film, it is revealed that Rebecca was never pregnant, but terminally ill. Her gloat to Maxim was a final effort to ruin him by driving him to murder. This new information suggests that her death was a suicide and absolves Maxim of guilt. When Maxim returns to Manderley, the estate is on fire: Mrs. Danvers, in a desperate attempt to prevent the newlyweds from living happily at Manderley, burns it to the ground and perishes inside.

Most of the film aligns its subjective point of view with that of Maxim's second wife, who hears from several people only what turns out to be the masquerade hiding the truth—that Maxim and Rebecca were happily married, that “he simply adored Rebecca,” and that he was sick with heartbreak over her death. The second Mrs. de Winter's ignorance leads her to misinterpret Maxim's body language and the things he says until he comes forth with the truth toward the end of the film. Thus, in contrast to other paranoid women's films such as George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1949), Maxim has neither ulterior motives nor contemptuous feelings for his childlike wife, and his tyrannical behavior toward her is revealed to be latent trauma following the death of his controlling, immoral first wife. His bride spends the majority of the film trying to live up to the ever-present image of Maxim's first wife, only to discover that he desired her in the first place because she was nothing like Rebecca. While Rebecca was a woman, it is suggested, the second Mrs. de Winter is a “child.” Maxim's attraction to his second wife lies precisely in her difference from his first wife, in particular her innocence and naiveté. Despite his intentions, however, Maxim knowingly keeps information from her; like Bea does to Paul in *Honeymoon*, he torments his wife even as he intends to protect her.

One illuminating point of comparison between *Rebecca* and *Honeymoon* is in their presentation of gender roles. In *Rebecca*, Maxim is unequivocally presented as an alpha male: he

bears the burden of carrying information that his young wife cannot access, he manages the business of the estate, and he has a violent temper. The second Mrs. de Winter is associated with girlhood and clumsy purity, a stark contrast to the worldly (and corrupt) “woman” that Rebecca was. Before their engagement, the second Mrs. de Winter acknowledges that she is aware of her childishness when she tells Maxim, “I wish I were a woman of thirty-six, dressed in black satin with a string of pearls!” In reply, Maxim tells her, “Please promise me never to wear black satin or pearls, or to be thirty-six years old.” Of course, she is eager to embody her new womanlike role and dresses in black satin and pearls later on, but they do not suit her and she has the appearance of a girl playing dress-up with her mother’s clothes. Throughout the film, Maxim refers to his young bride as a “child,” and she is visually represented as such: clumsy, breaking objects and guiltily hiding them, and stammering when delivering orders to the servants. Rhona J. Berenstein notes that the estate’s grandness also dwarfs her: “even the doorknobs are positioned at a height that makes Fontaine look child-like in her attempts to turn them” (“Monsters, Queers” 214). Tania Modleski also comments on this, arguing that “the viewer receives a subliminal impression of her as a child peeking in on or intruding into an adult world that provoke both curiosity and dread” (“Labyrinth” 47). Hitchcock himself has noted his intention to give a fairy-tale quality to the film, noting that “children’s fairy tales are often terrifying” (Truffaut 131). At the film’s close, it seems that she has reached womanhood, or at least adulthood, when Maxim notes that her childishness has vanished: “It’s gone forever. That funny, young, lost look I loved won’t ever come back. I killed that when I told you about Rebecca ... In a few hours, you’ve grown so much older.”

Although it is debatable whether the second Mrs. de Winter’s childishness is a marker of femininity (Berenstein, for instance, aligns her more closely with the vulnerability of a boy), it is presented in marked contrast to Maxim’s paternal, alpha masculinity. But it also stands in contrast

to Rebecca, whose memory the second Mrs. de Winter admires, fears, and desires to become—and, in some ways, even desires. The queer subtext of *Rebecca* has been written about by numerous scholars, and I will return to this below.⁴⁹ But the influence Rebecca has on her successor can also be read as that of a mother on her daughter. Modleski, for instance, argues that *Rebecca* “repeatedly stresses the heroine’s total incompetence, this time contrasting her to the ‘mother’ (i.e. Rebecca), who was all efficiency and control” (“Labyrinth” 47). In her first meeting with Maxim, the second Mrs. de Winter reveals that she is an orphan. Her mother “died years and years ago,” she explains offhand, before tenderly describing her close relationship with her recently deceased father. While her father was a present source of comfort, affection, and identification (like him, she dabbles in painting), her mother was absent from her life. When she marries Maxim, she fills the absence left by her warm father for a cold, domineering father figure, while Rebecca fills the place of her already-absent mother. Now that she is in love and married to a man, however, she transfers identification with her father to identification with a second absent mother. To her, Rebecca’s elegant clothing and possessions and her evident adeptness in the lifestyle of high society represents ideal femininity to which the second Mrs. de Winter desperately aspires and constantly imitates. Modleski identifies the film’s narrative as the second Mrs. de Winter’s progress through the female oedipal trajectory, which also recalls Nancy Chodorow’s description of the process by which daughters retain primary identification with their mother while building a secondary identity of their own.

Instead of seeing Rebecca as a maternal figure, Berenstein revises Modleski’s formula in terms of sexuality: “For the heterosexual couple to succeed, there must be a shift away from same-

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Richard Allen, “Daphne du Maurier and Alfred Hitchcock”; Rhona J. Berenstein, “Monsters, Queers, and Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*”; Tania Modleski, “Woman and the Labyrinth”; Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*; and Patricia White, *Uninvited*.

sex identification, from sameness per se, to sexual difference” (“Monsters, Queers” 250). The lesbian subtext between Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers—and, by extension, between Rebecca and the second Mrs. de Winter—represents a “Sapphic menace” (251) that must be destroyed in order for the heterosexual couple to remain intact. For Berenstein and Chris Straayer, furthermore, queer female sexuality represents a threat to the male through its nonreproductivity. The threat posed by Rebecca’s queerness—and, as I will argue, Bea’s—is that of “nonphallic sexuality” (Williams, “When the Woman Looks” 26).

Like *Rebecca*, *Honeymoon* also challenges gender roles and proposes an alternative to heterosexuality. Bea seems more conventionally masculine than Paul; she is more capable in the wilderness, while Paul takes charge of the cooking (the one time Bea attempts to cook, her memory fails and she cannot perform simple kitchen tasks). Paul feels threatened by the “alpha male” lifestyle that he perceives to be the norm in the countryside. He is intimidated when he discovers that the bearskin on display in one of the bedrooms was a hunting trophy killed by Bea’s father, and he is visually contrasted with Will, who wears a baseball cap, plays hockey, and—like Maxim—reveals a violent temper. Although Paul is not necessarily feminized, these visual and behavioral markers represent him as non-masculine in certain ways. Despite these masculine-coded markers, however, Will also presents some gender ambiguity when he seems embarrassed to admit that his livelihood depends on the restaurant owned by his wife. Bea and Paul’s knowledge of the situation also reverse the gender dynamics of information in *Rebecca*. In *Honeymoon*, the female character knows something that she does not (or cannot) share with her partner, while he is tormented by the obvious changes in his wife and must seek out clues where he can. But the character of Will also suggests that type of masculinity has no bearing on survival rate: both he and Paul are killed because their biological masculinity renders them irrelevant to the sexual

process underway. Bea is similarly reduced to the utility of her feminine body when the entities penetrate and impregnate her. In certain ways, *Honeymoon* draws its boundaries between biological sex and gender presentation: Bea can be read as the “masculine” partner and Paul the “feminine,” and they take on opposite roles to the protagonists in *Rebecca*, but the supernatural figures in the film only see the characters in terms of biological sex.

Paul is perhaps most explicitly feminized by association with female characters in horror films that also carry the legacies of the “paranoid woman’s film,” in particular *Rosemary’s Baby* and Sidney J. Furie’s *The Entity* (1982). Each of these films feature female protagonists under threat. In these films, the female characters are not only relatable and sympathetic, but their fears and the reality of the threats against them are ultimately validated. Both films can be seen as equivalent, in many ways, to paranoid women’s films: like many earlier women’s melodramas, they are male-directed films that feature the “female point-of-view” (Cook 18) and confront women’s dismissal at the hands of the medical community in particular.⁵⁰ The protagonists’ fears are largely feminine-coded (pregnancy and domestic abuse or rape, respectively), and the horror narratives of each depend on the validity of the women’s experiences. The woman’s situation in films such as *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* (1941), and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947, directed by Fritz Lang) is one of lacking knowledge: “her position as subject of desire is presented as a problem of lack of knowledge and understanding of the forces which control her destiny ... The construction of the woman’s point-of-view privileges intuition, emotion, accident, questioning the validity of female desire in that very construction” (Cook 19). In *Honeymoon*, Paul is placed into the position of the paranoid, but validated, female character.

⁵⁰ See Liddy Grantland on how women’s pain is often ignored or dismissed among medical professionals. See Consumer Reports on how the issue is exacerbated for minority women.

In *Rebecca*, Maxim dismisses his young wife's concerns that Mrs. Danvers dislikes her and is trying to undermine her position in the household, but he does not necessarily dismiss her fears about his feelings for Rebecca. She avoids the topic entirely and comes to the conclusion that grief, rather than fear and hatred, for his first wife causes Maxim's sullenness and bad temper. Maxim's refusal to speak openly about his first wife drives his second wife to come to erroneous conclusions. In *Honeymoon*, Paul occupies the same narrative position as Rosemary and the second Mrs. de Winter: he knows something is wrong, he is faced with evidence that leads to certain conclusions, and his spouse deflects his attempts to learn the truth. Therefore, the second Mrs. de Winter and Maxim's roles are reversed in Bea and Paul. While Bea intimately knows the cabin and the surrounding areas, as it was her family's vacation home as a girl, the location is completely unfamiliar to Paul and he is entirely dependent on Bea during their stay. In *Rebecca*, the second Mrs. de Winter is not only new to the house and the surrounding areas, she is wholly uninitiated to the upper-class lifestyle into which she has married. Manderley is, as Berenstein points out, "foreign" to Maxim's second wife due to her class background, and—as I noted earlier—she physically does not seem to belong to the space. Paul, a somewhat effeminate city boy, is out of place in the rural countryside that seems to cultivate rugged alpha masculinity. Once Bea begins her transformation, Paul takes on the role of the uninformed spouse who can only come to partial conclusions based on minimal evidence.

2.2.1 The "New Order": Othered Sexuality From Rebecca to Honeymoon

In both *Rebecca* and *Honeymoon*, something otherworldly acts as a barrier between the heterosexual relationship. This barrier can be read, in both cases, through queerness. As Berenstein and others have read, Rebecca is both represented as androgynous and as "queer" in the sense that

some of her extramarital affairs are implied to be homosexual. The four primary characters—the second Mrs. de Winter, Maxim de Winter, Mrs. Danvers, and Rebecca herself—play a significant role in the primary heterosexual relationship between Maxim and his second wife. Rebecca is never seen in the film—not even in a photograph—and her simultaneous absence and presence (in linens, mentions from the household staff, leftover clothing, and so on) drives the second Mrs. de Winter’s imagination to inflate Rebecca’s image and influence to an unmanageable degree. Rebecca’s lingering presence in Manderley can thus be read as supernatural; she “haunts” the estate through her leftover possessions and the persistent memories of other people. Although she is absent physically from the film, Rebecca repeatedly “mediates, and in certain instances obstructs, the film’s primary heterosexual couple” (Berenstein, “Monsters, Queers” 241). This occurs, as Berenstein points out, through narrative intervention on the part of Mrs. Danvers and visual associations between Rebecca and the sea, both of which are represented as “unrestrained and destructive forces of nature” (Berenstein 243), thereby associating Rebecca’s femininity with superhuman forces.

In *Honeymoon*, the relationship between Bea and Paul is similarly obstructed, though the source and nature of this obstruction is far less concrete than the haunting presence of Rebecca (however abstract it is made by her death). Like Manderley in *Rebecca*, the cabin in *Honeymoon* is isolated and rural, its location never clearly defined; Hitchcock has commented on Manderley’s placement in the film himself—“the mansion is so far away from anything that you don’t even know what town it’s near” (Truffaut 131). He attributes this in part to its filming in the United States rather than England, and further acknowledges that “if the scene had been more realistic, and the place of arrival geographically situated, we would have lost the sense of isolation” (132). In *Honeymoon*, the cabin’s isolation is further emphasized by the time of year; Bea and Paul

deliberately planned their honeymoon to take place during the off-season in order to preserve their privacy. In *Honeymoon*, the barrier between the relationship is not a living or dead person, but supernatural entities that are visually bound to nature despite their unnatural—and in many ways, androgynous—expression of natural reproduction and existence.

Straayer's concept of the "hypothetical lesbian heroine" applies in certain ways to the deviant reproduction and sexuality present in *Honeymoon*. Straayer writes: "were lesbians able to situate themselves as another sex, that is, as non-women (and non-men), they could theoretically create a defining model to which men are irrelevant" (n.p). This recalls Williams' notion of monstrosity and femininity in the classic horror film as linked by their "potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a nonphallic sexuality" ("When the Woman Looks" 26). Like the women of classic horror cinema, Bea denies and represses her monstrosity; ultimately, she has no choice but to give into it. Although Bea tells Paul near the end of the film that she wants to stay with him, continue loving him, and to tell him what happened to her, she's "not allowed." The entities that have taken over her mind and body are erasing her desire and love for him and rendering their human relationship irrelevant. She also refers to herself as part of a collective ("we don't remember," she responds when Paul asks her for details of their engagement and wedding), and implies that Paul is not part of that collective. It is important, furthermore, that Annie comes to Bea's cottage before both women venture into the woods for the last time, instead of both being drawn separately to the lights in the woods. This act suggests a shared mindset precipitated by infection, but also a form of female bonding in which both women unite after murdering their respective husbands. Their connection does not require the complication of words, but hinges on the physical changes their bodies are undergoing and their visual association with the new collectivity they are joining.

Berenstein notes that lesbianism, and all “queer behavior” was, in the 1930s and 1940s, “more likely [than heterosexual infidelity] to have been treated as unrepeatable, as thoroughly unutterable” (246). In *Honeymoon*, what happened to Bea is similarly unutterable, and wholly inexpressible on her part; she comprehends her relationship to the dark bodies in physical, intuitive terms, rather than linguistic ones. As Straayer points out, “[eroticized] female bonding threatens to subvert, or worse, circumvent [the] heterosexual scheme entirely. The primary threat of female bonding is the elimination of the male” (n.p.). In *Honeymoon*, female bonding represents both the elimination of the male and a physical transformation predicated on unnatural sexuality (literalized when Bea gives birth to a tree, emphasizing a perversion of nature on her part—whether intended or not). The film also returns sexual power to the womb, rather than the phallus, and therefore reflects womb envy, or “a feeling of impotence clearly stemming from their jealousy of female reproductive power” (Robbins 135).

Bea and Annie’s new state of existence does not necessarily denote lesbianism. It cannot be articulated by a male/female binary opposition. As Straayer writes, “Lesbianism demands a new operation of subjectivity in which active desires, pleasures, and other specific declarations of identity, construct a field of multiple entry points. Within this new operation, a heterosexual woman’s active sexuality would not be consumed but empowered” (n.p.). Bea and Annie’s new state of being fits into “a field of multiple entry points” not necessarily defined by lesbian bonding or dependent on familiar gender patterns. Their gender ambiguity is, like lesbianism in *Rebecca* represented as monstrous, and it is non-consensual. However, the “new order” they join at the film’s close offers an alternative to their heterosexual relationships. While Bea and Paul appear happy, Paul’s offhand mention of Bea’s womb launches an argument between them about having children; Bea reacts awkwardly to the idea, suggesting that she had not considered it. Later in the

film, of course, she joins (and creates) her own monstrous family. Will's embarrassment at being financially dependent on his wife also suggests that the complication of heterosexual expectations and gender roles are sources of unhappiness and inadequacy for both men and women.

2.2.2 *Honeymoon* and Body-Horror

In addition to its lineage in the paranoid woman's film, *Honeymoon* is a clear inheritor of body horror as canonized by David Cronenberg and John Carpenter. Body horror, as Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz describes it, "finds its strength in the way it goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function in biological species (not limited to human)" (161). Cruz thus redefines body horror as "biological horror," which is fueled by disgust and revulsion toward hybrids and other anomalies that defy or go against nature: "Biological horror ... relishes the destruction of the organic form to the point of unnatural evolutionary significance" (167-68). Andrew Tudor similarly identifies the basis of post-1970 body horror as biological, or at least internal, in contrast to the "mechanical" horror of filmic predecessors such as *The Fly* (1958, dir. Kurt Neumann), where we see "a visible fitting together of mismatched parts" (30). In short, Cruz identifies the failure of a transgressive or unnatural body to procreate naturally as its primary source of horror. Particularly threatening to male bodies, he argues, "is the concept of parthenogenesis, wherein females are able to produce offspring without the need for sperm" (165-66). This echoes Straayer's analysis of female bonding, in which the male is rendered superfluous in the face of a close relationship between women (whether or not it involves reproduction). Furthermore, it reflects a

successful revision of Seth Brundle's failed attempt to control reproduction in *The Fly*, returning the power of reproduction and self-sufficiency to women and communities of women.⁵¹

The female body undergoes a transformation in *Honeymoon*, and in turn the focus is less on the idea of selfhood and personal identity than on the untimely destruction of a heterosexual, heteronormative union. In this way, it deviates somewhat from films such as *The Fly*, which—as Adam Charles Hart has written—“is less concerned with the threat associated with the monster than it is with the mutating, evolving figure of its protagonist ... the film doesn't just follow a physical transformation, but a transformation of identity, of self. It's a monstrous, continuously evolving category violation seen from the inside” (“I, Mugwump” 165). *Honeymoon*, as well, is less concerned with the threat of the monster—in fact, the “dark bodies” in the woods are never revealed in the film—than it is with the transformation of identity that leads to the dissolution of a marriage. In *Honeymoon*, Bea's transformation is not represented from her point of view; she confesses toward the end of the film that she has understood the gravity of her transformation from the moment she was infected. Her reluctance to explain the changes to Paul is fueled by her desire to spend as much time together as possible before she loses her sense of self to the dominant parasitic force. In the process, however, she loses her relationship and sexuality in favor of an ambiguous, monstrous one that offers a community designed for and specific to women.

Notably, Tudor places body horror within the confines of what he calls “paranoid horror,” in direct opposition to “secure horror”: in the former, “actions in defiance of the threat are often unsuccessful and human interventions of all kinds generally fail ... The typical threats of paranoid horror, furthermore, are much more ‘internal’ and proximate” (36). The dominant tone of paranoid horror is, for Tudor, doubt—the reigning modality of the paranoid woman's film and, in turn,

⁵¹ See Helen W. Robbins, “Womb Envy in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*.”

Honeymoon. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that male and female bodies manifest different signs of horror, “especially in movie gothic. There [women] are frequently rendered conventionally beautiful, and what is deemed monstrous about them is caught in the contrast between beauty and behavior” (Tudor 31). In *Honeymoon*, Bea’s transformation looks less like the sleek, femme fatale monstrosity of *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936, directed by Lambert Hillyer) as described by Tudor and more like Brundlefly. This eschewing of the “conventional perfection of female form” in favor of (rather than in combination with) “the imperfections of their given or created nature” (Tudor 31) reflects a similar trend in male-directed and female-directed twenty-first century body horror films such as the feature-length *Contracted* (2013, dir. Eric England) and *Starry Eyes* (2014, dirs. Kevin Kolsch and Dennis Widmyer) and the short films *Undress Me* (2017, dir. Amelia Moses) and *The Day Mum Became a Monster* (2018, dir. Joséphine Hopkins). In *Honeymoon*, Bea’s grotesque physical transformation represents the move from depicting female monsters as flawless femme fatales to flawed, very human, physical monsters. Ultimately, the paranoia in *Honeymoon* is transferred from the female character to the male character, while the female character exhibits more physically grotesque signs of internal bodily transformation than women have historically presented in horror films.

2.3 Conclusion

In *Rebecca*, the protagonist is driven away from a community of women coded as monstrous toward the closure of a heterosexual union. In contrast, the female protagonist in *Honeymoon* is driven away from a heterosexual union toward a community of women coded as monstrous. As Modleski writes, “the tendency of women to merge with other women ... [is

Rebecca's] chief 'problem'" ("Labyrinth" 44). In *Honeymoon*, this functions as the solution. However, the solution is—as in *Pin Cushion*—complicated by the protagonists' desires. When the second Mrs. de Winter gives up the fantasy of Rebecca's idealized femininity, she exchanges it for the reality of her heterosexual union with Maxim, which offers no such excitement or fascination. When Bea gives up the reality of her heterosexual union, she gives into a fantasy of collective femininity, of an alternative to the heterosexual union, which she destroys. For Stella Dallas, giving up the fantasy of her upper-class lifestyle also means giving up her daughter. In *Pin Cushion*, Lyn and Iona grow apart because of their fantasy lives, and their inability to contend with reality pushes them deeper into fantasy until Lyn is confronted with her monstrous motherhood, which she then destroys. As in classical weepies, "in these fantasies the quest for connection is always tinged with the melancholy of loss" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 11). Even when they are disguised as necessary and positive steps forward (as is the case in *Rebecca* and *Stella Dallas*), the self-destructive act of giving up or giving into female fantasy marks these films and define the parameters of the "horror weepie." This fraught relationship between fantasy and reality, pain and pleasure, and self-destruction via self-creation is a theme underpinning the remaining chapters in this dissertation. In chapter two, I will continue this attention to formal and narrative expressions of self-destructive violence as they function in women's experimental horror cinema.

3.0 Chapter Two: Women's Experimental Horror: Subject Positioning, Violence, and Personal Filmmaking

Despite their critical role in experimental and avant-garde filmmaking, female artists have historically been marginalized and overlooked by their male counterparts.⁵² Women were central to a paradigm shift in the 1980s avant-garde that privileged cultural critique and rejected the “great films” attitude of the earlier avant-garde. This shift was rejected and overlooked by many celebrators of the earlier avant-garde —among them J. Hoberman and Fred Camper—reflecting an attitude among predominantly male critics that (perhaps unconsciously) aimed to keep women at the margins of even avant-garde and experimental film practices.⁵³ Furthermore, female avant-garde filmmakers from the 1940s to the 1960s (in particular Maya Deren, Shirley Clarke, and Joyce Wieland) were constantly relegated to their physicality despite the fact that “the films they made consistently articulated positions for a *refusal* of the male gaze” (Rabinovitz “Women Filmmaker NY” 77; *Points* 10). This longstanding resistance to women’s artistry has made it difficult for them to find critical acclaim and a place in the history of cinematic counter-culture. In many ways, women’s exclusion from avant-garde and experimental film traditions mirrors their exclusion as makers in horror filmmaking. The parallels between the two modes do not end here. While female experimental filmmakers have long explored aspects of horror in their films, I contend that in recent years this exploration has more explicitly engaged in dialogue with the

⁵² For a comprehensive overview of women in avant-garde filmmaking, see Karen Hollinger, pp. 67-73. See also edited collections by Blaetz and Petrolle/Wexman.

⁵³ For more on this, see William C. Wees, “Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich and Abigail Child: No More Giants.”

cinematic language, codes, and conventions of the horror genre.⁵⁴ In particular, this chapter discusses films that explore horror tropes through experimental form from specifically racialized and gendered subject positions.

Writing on avant-garde and experimental filmmaking demands “the necessity of thinking about style in relation to mode of production” (Rabinovitz, *Points* 13). However, considering how vastly digital technology and the Internet (specifically streaming and crowdfunding) have altered traditional modes of production, it no longer seems possible to define avant-garde or experimental cinema in similar terms. John Sundholm argues as much: “What the recent changes in formats, media, and exhibition will imply for those products and practices that David James has termed ‘minor cinema’ is that, when taken together, ‘minor’ cinematic forms will turn out to be ‘major’ in terms of output and availability, due to digital technology and the Internet” (“Material and Mimetic” 165).⁵⁵ As the emerging canon of what I call women’s horror cinema indicates, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between (non-Hollywood) films in terms of genre, mode of production, or political orientation; hybridity is central to women’s cinema, independent cinema, and horror cinema at large. Although mode of production, expression, and other factors should not be overlooked in any discussion of genre or experimental cinema, this chapter argues that, for the experimental filmmakers I discuss in this chapter, horror is central to their cinematic identity and legible in their films.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Filmmakers who explore the connections between horror and experimental film in past decades and the present include Peggy Ahwesh, Stephanie Barber, Cecelia Condit, Shayna Connolly, Sarah Jacobson, Alison Maclean, Donna McRae, Jennifer Reeves, and Deborah Stratman.

⁵⁵ One striking example is the rediscovery of Cecilia Condit’s 1983 film *Possibly in Michigan* in July 2019, when it went viral as a meme among teen girls who were lip-synching along with the film and posting their short videos to the social media video-sharing app TikTok: https://twitter.com/chris_osborn/status/1150043085180719105?lang=en

⁵⁶ This is not limited to women filmmakers, and many scholars draw connections between horror and avant-garde or experimental cinema. As Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider write in the introduction to their collection *Underground U.S.A.*, critics frequently “view the underground film scene as a space where art-house stands shoulder to shoulder with spectacle-based atrocity, and where experimentation is a regular feature of exploitation” (2). Joan

In this chapter, I do not claim to refer to “women’s experimental horror” as a distinct category with a cohesive or shared framework. Instead, the texts and filmmakers I discuss either 1) consciously fit an experimental or avant-garde film tradition (such as found footage), 2) refer explicitly—formally or otherwise—to specific experimental films, or 3) employ distinct formal and narrative strategies designed to disrupt or complicate a traditional cause-and-effect narrative. Finally, like Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, I privilege the term “experimental” over “avant-garde”; the latter term, they argue, is “problematic because it casts history as a linear teleology that artworks anticipate: a succession of cultural orders rises and falls, heralded by prescient artist-heroes and masterworks” (3). While female filmmakers who blend experimental form and horror do not always provide “hidden or disguised challenges to patriarchal notions of fiction” (Friedman & Fuchs 3), they are always aware of gender issues: forms of sexual and racial violence, representation, domesticity, and more.

While some scholars suggest that the personal visions of experimental cinema are fundamentally anti-genre,⁵⁷ I argue along the lines of scholarship that see explicit connections between experimental film and genre. In particular, I consider the various tensions within experimental film in regard to the horror genre and gender. I turn specifically to female filmmakers

Hawkins’s *Cutting-Edge* is perhaps the best-known treatise on the malleable boundaries between horror and avant-garde film. Writing extensively on Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), Hawkins argues: “If the film has retained a dual (‘not really a horror film’) art-horror/avant-garde status within the world of cinephile culture, it’s also responsible ... for introducing ‘horror’—the low generic kind—into the world of high art” (167-8). The same could be (and has been) argued for many other films that have struggled to find a neat reception among mainstream audiences. Writing about the prolific exploitation filmmaker Doris Wishman, Michael J. Bowen points out, “Both exploitation and avant-garde cinemas are generally credited with an ability to shock, a concept now associated with the cinema in its ‘primitive’ form—spectacular, non-narrative, focused around the body” (109). He adds that scholars have treated both differently because of their thematic differences and divergent content, “the worst impulses in human nature—violence and unregulated sexuality” contrasted to “the boundaries of experience, both personal and aesthetic ... [and] questions of widely recognized intellectual worth” (110); in other words, exploitation film is typically centered on the body, while avant-garde film is considered to meet loftier, non-corporeal ends.

⁵⁷ See for instance Winston Wheeler Dixon and Audrey Gwendolyn Foster, who argue that “these films resist categorization and do not fall within the confines of established genres” (4) such as the western, the horror film, the musical, and others.

whose films blend the horror genre with the experimental film mode and, in doing so, illuminate the feminist experimental film lineage they build upon. In Section 1, my contemporary text is Monika Estrella Negra's *Flesh* (2016), which I read alongside Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and Tracey Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987). *Flesh* formally evokes both films in its protagonist's trance-like narrative journey. It combines the thematic concerns of the two earlier films and expresses them through the horror genre. *Meshes of the Afternoon* reflects a psychological state of mind, while *Nice Coloured Girls* explores the effect of colonialism on racial and gender relations in 1980s Australia. *Flesh* combines the psychological and the historical in its personal exploration of a Black woman's experience with micro-aggressions and racism in twenty-first century America.

Section 2 turns to the found-footage experimental tradition. While on the surface, found-footage might seem to deviate thematically from the filmmaking traditions outlined in Section 1, I argue that contemporary feminist found-footage films reflect the subjective viewing positions and daily experiences of their makers and, in those terms, similarly reflect their subject positions. Here I analyze two twenty-first century films, Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's *What Happened to Her* (2016) and Jennifer Proctor's *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* (2017), with recourse to Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's *Schmeerguntz* (1965). All three films juxtapose images of women from popular media in order to reveal how their bodies and issues tend to be depicted in mainstream visual forms. While *Schmeerguntz* maintains a playful, tongue-in-cheek tone, both contemporary films—and in particular *What Happened to Her*—adopt more serious tones. Both *What Happened to Her* and *Soap and Water* also focus more directly on depictions of women in terms of violence—and on depictions of women as presenting a kind of violence of its own. Furthermore, I argue that the act of cutting and re-cutting footage into a new context necessitates

an act of violence as well, in which disparate images are forced together in order to make new associations. The jarring effect of this in *Schmeerguntz* becomes more directly associated with the horror genre in the newer films, partially because of their emphasis on bodily violence and dismemberment.

Violence is central to how women make horror in the twenty-first century. I argue that women who combine horror and the experimental mode explore damaging stereotypes in everyday life and popular media in order to confront and destroy the messages that white, patriarchal ideology leads them to internalize. In certain ways, violence emerges in these films as a self-destructive act that allows marginalized figures (whether because of race, gender, or both) to process and take initial, critical steps to move on from their oppression. One crucial aspect of these initial steps is to represent their position in subjective, personal terms that enable others to comprehend them. Although the films under discussion in this chapter differ in many ways, they take these important steps.⁵⁸

Perhaps more than the others, this chapter demonstrates women's longstanding fascination with horror; because they work in such a traditionally low budget, independent, and underground mode of filmmaking, furthermore, they arguably reflect broader fascinations and spectator positions women have embodied but struggled to express prior to the horror boom in the twenty-

⁵⁸ Although I have selected specific examples here, critiques of violence against women is a recurring topic for women working in the experimental form. Although Cecilia Condit does not use found-footage in her 1983 experimental music video *Possibly in Michigan*, she is principally concerned with sexual violence and stalking. Shayna Connelly's 2003 film *I Don't Want to Murder You or Bother Your Life* is a highly personal film that Connelly made about a stalker in her own life. Stephanie Barber's 1996 film *Woman Stabbed To Death* (1996) blends together found-footage still images of blurry street views and a masculine figure as a meditation on the real-life murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964, and which Barber describes as "a feminist romp through the horror of radio. The gentle misogyny of the airwaves and the stabbing of Kitty Genovese" (email with author, June 12, 2019). I am indebted to Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, CA, for allowing me to preview *Woman Stabbed To Death* and several other films by Barber in August 2019.

first century. I follow Lucy Fischer's lead in her canonical study of women's cinema *Shot/Countershot* in highlighting an implicit, rather than explicit, discourse between films. Fischer writes, "What I will suggest is that we ... conceive women's artwork as engaged in an argumentative discourse with patriarchal culture—in an ongoing critical 'debate'" (12). Except in some cases—Negra, for instance, was directly influenced by both Deren and Moffatt—this does not mean that films directly quote from or revise the earlier films I will discuss here. Rather, by pairing women-directed films from the mid-twentieth century with women-directed films from the twenty-first century, I aim to discuss how the newer texts adapt the older ones in order to explicitly engage horror codes and conventions through the experimental mode.

3.1 Meshes of the Afternoon, Nice Coloured Girls, and Flesh

In her best-known film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), Maya Deren showcases her interest in dance while formally and narratively critiquing the sexist objectification of women. She does this by creating what she calls "a new reality," in which she represents a woman's vulnerability to being sexually objectified and her violent resistance of this process. The film sustains a violent aesthetic throughout because "any effort to wrest back a female subjective voice must necessarily be violent" (Rabinovitz 64). Deren's film is profoundly personal and subjective, and the way in which this subjectivity is expressed in the film is crucially tied to Deren's gender. In what follows, I analyze *Meshes* alongside two films that build upon its legacy for feminist filmmaking and that similarly privilege personal, subjective experience: Tracey Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* (Australia, 1987) and Monika Estrella Negra's *Flesh* (USA, 2016). Both of these films manipulate cinematic conventions in ways that reflect Deren's use of cinematography and mise-en-scène to

create new realities that represent female subjectivity in racial terms and confront racism against Black women through violence, albeit within different cultural and national contexts. *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* show that any effort to wrest back a Black female subjective voice must also be violent, perhaps even more so because Black women have been excluded and exploited far more viciously than white women, both in Australia and the United States.⁵⁹ I argue that the legacies of *Meshes* and *Nice Coloured Girls* cohere in *Flesh*, which revisits the two earlier films through the cinematic language of the horror genre. In revising *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Nice Coloured Girls* through horror, *Flesh* invites a reconsideration of how the formal and narrative language of horror is legible within the earlier films.

It is helpful to first describe Deren's film and her theory of filmmaking, the latter of which is also applicable to Moffatt and Negra's films. Across her theoretical and practical writings on film, a common theme is Deren's discussion of how the medium of film can manipulate time and space to represent subjective reality. In many of her critical writings, Deren refers to one scene in particular from *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).⁶⁰ This scene, in which the central figure (played by Deren) ascends a staircase, is edited in such a way as to make the staircase appear much longer than it is. The purpose of distorting the length of the staircase, Deren writes, was to "[project] visually the sensation of fatigue, frustration and endlessness" (Clark et al. 300). According to Deren, the experimental mode in particular allows filmmakers to mold reality—that is, physical

⁵⁹ As bell hooks reminds us, "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women ... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women" (21, *Ain't I A Woman*).

⁶⁰ Many relevant writings are available in the comprehensive collection of Deren's life up to 1947, *The Legend of Maya Deren*. In particular, volume 2 of this collection includes several writings that reference the staircase scene directly, including "Efficient or Effective" (299-304), "Magic is New" (305-310), "Cinema as an Art Form" (313-321), and "Cinema as an Independent Art Form" (345-349). Deren's 1960 article "Cinematography: The Creative Uses of Reality," reprinted in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (ed. Sitney), coheres many of the ideas she puts forth in the earlier articles.

objects, spaces, and figures—in order to create a new reality through mise-en-scène and cinematography. The cinema, she writes “is a time-space art with a unique capacity for creating new temporal-spatial relationships and projecting them with an incontrovertible impact of reality—the reality of show-it-to-me” (Clark et al. 319). The “show-it-to-me” reality “*itself constitutes an experience*” (314, emphasis in original). Cinema as an art form depends on visual form and stands in opposition to merely descriptive uses of cinema, which Deren argues is the province of other art forms such as theater and literature. This potential for manipulating existing objects is central to Deren’s conception of film as an art form (rather than as a commercial or educational form).

In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren manipulates space and time through cinematography, framing, and mise-en-scène in ways that reveal and critique the objectification of women in film and, particularly, in film noir and women’s melodrama.⁶¹ It features an uncredited Deren as the primary figure and whose dream state the majority of the film represents. The film takes place within and around a Hollywood bungalow, owned by art collector Galka Scheyer (Rhodes 42). The central section of the film is a dream sequence, and it is bookended by two scenes in waking life. The final bookend, however, is ambiguous, as it comprises a double ending: in the first, the protagonist’s presumed lover (played by the film’s co-director and Deren’s husband, Alexander Hammid) wakes her, leads her to the bedroom, where she lies on the bed. As he stares at her, she throws the knife at his face and the screen breaks like a mirror to reveal the ocean behind it. This scene cuts to the second ending, in which he enters the bungalow to find her dead, surrounded by

⁶¹ For more on *Meshes*’ evocation of these genres, see Rabinovitz, *Points* 56-61. The following quote from Rabinovitz also illustrates the film’s importance for feminist film theorists: “The film is significant, then, as a woman’s discourse that rewrites Hollywood’s objectification of women by addressing a female subject who must contend with her own objectification” (56).

seaweed and shards of mirror. Others have described the entire synopsis of *Meshes* at length.⁶² I will focus instead on the waking scenes and on how the visual motifs introduced in the opening scene are repeated in the rest of the film. In the opening (apparently waking) scene, a mannequin's hand drops a paper flower onto the path circling the bungalow. Deren's shadow appears on the pavement and a hand reaches into the frame to pick up the flower. She is seen only in fragments as she carries the flower down the path. A man's figure is seen vanishing from view further down the path, and Deren's shadow against the concrete wall seems to acknowledge this. She knocks on the bungalow door and tries to open it, but it is locked. She pulls a key out of her handbag and drops it. It falls down the stairs and she hurries down to lift it and open the door. Inside the bungalow, the film cuts to what seems to be her point of view as she looks around the room and focuses on important details: a knife falling out of a loaf of bread resting on the table and a telephone on a staircase with the receiver off the hook. Deren steps into the frame, climbs the stairs, and enters the bedroom to turn off a record player. She returns downstairs and, placing the paper flower on her lap, sits in an armchair and closes her eyes. The dream sequence begins, in which Deren pursues a cloaked figure down the path outside the bungalow and it turns to reveal a mirror underneath its hood in place of a face.

Formally, the opening waking sequence represents a subjective point of view. Many shots are handheld and appear to be shot from her perspective. In some cases, the positioning of Deren's arm reaching into the frame supports this, while in other shots her legs appear in the frame and break the fluidity of her perspective. However, the handheld shots—as well as many POV shots throughout the film—reinforce Deren's investment in representing a “subjective camera, one that

⁶² See for instance Sitney, *Visionary Film* pp. 7-9; Rabinovitz, *Points* pp. 61-64); Rhodes pp. 57-89; James pp. 170-172; Keller pp. 42-44; Mayne, *Woman at the Keyhole* pp 187-188.

would show only what I could see by myself and without the aid of mirrors and which would move through the house as if it were a pair of eyes, pausing with interest here and there, opening doors, and so on” (Clark et al. 309). The props and set pieces that will appear in this opening scene and come to bear meaning through their recurrence in the dream sequence include the flower, the key, the knife, the telephone, the staircase, and the record player. When Deren enters the bungalow, these are the objects that catch her eye. Therefore, they are also critical markers of her subjectivity. The mirror also becomes important, and while it does not appear in the opening waking sequence, Deren’s face is reflected in the knife later during the dream sequence. The association between these objects suggests that for her character, looking in the mirror can be an act of self-directed violence.

The manipulated, “show-it-to-me” reality that Deren theorizes in her writings can shed light on the ways filmmakers can use the medium to express their subject positions. This holds particular resonance for practitioners who identify as minorities because of their gender, race, and/or sexuality. Physical spaces and objects can be manipulated to express the perception and reality of a person from a particular subject position based on their identity, thereby privileging perspectives rarely represented on film. *Meshes* fulfills this purpose in certain ways. The film, Deren writes, “is concerned with the inner realities of an individual and with the way in which the sub-conscious will develop, interpret and elaborate an *apparently simple and casual experience* into a critical emotional experience” (Clark et al. 347, emphasis mine). Sarah Keller describes the film’s form in similar ways: “Instead of a causal logic, it focuses on an everyday incident, then alters it in multiple ways” (*Incomplete Control* 42). The artistic potential of cinema to focus on, alter, or amplify seemingly minute events or gestures mirrors the experience of racial or gendered micro-aggressions. The term “micro-aggression” was coined in 1970 by psychiatrist Chester

Pierce, who describes these offenses not as “gross and crippling,” but as “subtle and stunning” interactions that build cumulatively (265-6). Sociologist Charisse Levchak expands on Pierce’s definition, adding that the cumulative effect on one’s well being has debilitating effects. At the same time, their frequency in social relationships normalizes them and makes it difficult for victims of micro-aggressions to defend themselves against them. Micro-aggressions, furthermore, “are symptomatic of the larger problem of White supremacy, institutional racism, and hatred that fuels racially motivated macroaggressions, bullying, attacks, murders, and massacres” (Levchak 7). While micro-aggressions may seem minor, they belong to a larger narrative of normalized racial violence with wide-ranging effects. In other words, micro-aggressions can be defined—to draw from Deren’s description of *Meshes*—as “apparently simple and casual [experiences]” that accumulate into or become “critical emotional [experiences].” In these pages, I illustrate how minority filmmakers can, in turn, manipulate time, space, and physical objects to build a reality in which the experience of micro-aggressions is aestheticized and communicated to a broader audience.

Tracey Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls* and Monika Estrella Negra’s *Flesh* evoke (and invoke) Deren’s film, both in their adoption of the “trance” form of *Meshes* and in their expression of racialized and gendered perspectives on apparently minor events that represent critical social issues. Like *Meshes*, both are profoundly personal films that depict mundane, everyday incidents and alter them in ways that reveal their broader significance. In *Flesh*, this perspective and these incidents are rendered explicitly through horror, but—as I will demonstrate—the key to understanding why Negra chose horror as the most suitable genre to explore her character’s experience with racism can be found in the formal and narrative groundwork laid by the two earlier films. Also like *Meshes*, both films are invested in exploring personal experiences through

violence, both in formal and thematic terms. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *Nice Coloured Girls*, and *Flesh* also present different versions and adaptations of what P. Adams Sitney names the “trance” film. He describes the characteristics of the “trance” film as follows:

Its protagonists are somnambulists, priests, initiates of rituals, and the possessed ... The protagonist wanders through a potent environment toward a climactic scene of self-realization. The stages of his progress are often marked by what he sees along his path rather than what he does ... the protagonist remains isolated from what he confronts; no interaction of characters is possible in these films. (*Visionary Film* 18)

While Maureen Turim, Judith Mayne, and others rightly see Deren as a foremother of feminist filmmaking, Stephen R. Bissette identifies *Meshes* as the generator for another lineage: the film, he argues, is “the true ‘midwife’ to a whole series of later horror ‘trance’ films” including *Carnival of Souls* (1962), *Repulsion* (1965), *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), and *Begotten* (1990) (42). Of these titles, *Meshes* parallels *Repulsion* most vividly. I unite these two strands—feminist filmmaking on one hand and “horror ‘trance’ films” on the other—to argue that *Flesh* reveals a third legacy embedded in the earlier films. I name this legacy the “violent *flâneuse*” film: a film in which a female protagonist wanders through an environment—often a city—and kills other characters (usually men) who cross her path. Like the “horror ‘trance’ films,” *Nice Coloured Girls* and especially *Flesh* concretize and adapt the formal violence present in *Meshes*. All three films are structured in terms of repetition.

While Deren uses experimental film form as a means of representing women’s experiences of being objectified and violently resisting it, Tracey Moffatt and Monika Estrella Negra adapt the “trance” film form of Deren’s film to do the same for Black women in 1980s Australia and 2000s United States, respectively. Both feature Black female protagonists who, per Sitney’s definition of

the “trance” film, “[wander] through a potent environment toward a climactic sense of self-actualization” (18). Sitney uses Deren’s films, particularly *Meshes* and *At Land* (1944), as central examples of the trance film.⁶³ However, I do not consider that Deren’s character’s death at the end of *Meshes* reflects her “self-actualization” as much as it is a self-destructive act that confronts and aims to destroy objectification of women. Similarly, *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* are tied to their respective directors’ frustration and rage against life in racist societies; they, too, cannot reach a sense of “self-actualization” as much as they appear to reflect survival in hostile environments. *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* differ from Sitney’s definition of the trance film in that their protagonists are not entirely passive and they interact with other characters; these interactions, however, are unsatisfying and recall the discomfiting gender relations in place at the close of *Meshes*. The protagonists of *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* are neither possessed nor dreaming, but the representation of their journey is dreamlike. In both cases, the films’ formal elements manipulate reality to reflect personal experiences with micro-aggressions. Like *Meshes*, both films use violence to depict their characters’ subjectivities and their means of coping with the everyday hostility they experience.

Tracey Moffatt is a well-known Australian photographer and director of films such as *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990) and *BeDevil* (1993).⁶⁴ *Nice Coloured Girls* juxtaposes the perspective of three young Aboriginal women in 1980s Sydney (or the present day at the time of the film’s making) alongside written accounts of white settlers’ impressions of Indigenous women

⁶³ Although Sitney lauds the film, he speaks dismissively about Deren’s contribution in the first chapter of *Visionary Film* and credits its entire artistic vision to Hammid, describing it as a cinematically complex “portrait of his young wife” (9) for which Deren “simply pushed a button on the camera for the two scenes in which he appeared” (9). Geller recounts Sitney’s dismissal of Deren in her article on the film, adding, “Despite Deren’s vocal claims to the opposite, Sitney sees the film as conforming to the dominant artistic paradigm of the male auteur with his female muse” (Geller 150). Sitney also argues that *At Land*, Deren’s first solo film, continues to carry Hammid’s influence.

⁶⁴ Notably, *BeDevil*—an anthology ghost film—is the first state-funded feature-length film to be directed by an Aboriginal Australian woman.

during their colonization of Australia in the 1780s. Over the course of an evening, the three women pick up a “Captain” (a term for “sugar daddy” inherited from their mothers and grandmothers) to exploit over the course of an evening: first by charming him into buying them dinner and drinks, and next by robbing him when he passes out from drunkenness. Visually, the film follows three different segments intercut together: the three women in the present day, a beachfront on an overcast day featuring where a middle-aged Aboriginal woman silently “responds” to the young women’s actions, and a portrait of the colonizers’ landing and settlement at Botany Bay and Port Jackson in 1788.

The film uses two primary narration techniques—a male voiceover reading excerpts from the settlers’ journals and subtitles expressing the three women’s activities over the course of an average evening. In the present day, the women laugh as their friends descend on the Captain to take his cash and buy themselves drinks before robbing and abandoning him. On the beach, the middle-aged woman laughs in a clear reaction shot to the women as they laughingly take advantage of the Captain. In the setting with the portrait, figures act out several of the scenes depicted in the voiceover from early colonization, such as women climbing up a rope ladder, presumably to a colonizer’s boat. Disembodied hands shatter the portrait with a rock (in a shot that recalls the first ending of *Meshes*), spray-paint it, and pull back to reveal it as part of a film set, but it cannot be destroyed. In the present day, the film cuts to a crane shot of the city in the early hours of the morning and closes with a final colonial excerpt from Watkin Tench’s *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*.

Colonialist dominant narratives have systematically neglected—and thereby erased—the history of colonized populations (and especially women of color). Filmmakers such as Moffatt

therefore use the medium of film to re-imagine, revise, and rewrite the history of Black women.⁶⁵ This history does not intend to be accurate; as Moffatt says about her work, “I am not concerned with capturing reality, I’m concerned with creating it myself ... I’m not concerned with verisimilitude” (Rutherford 155). This is evident in Moffatt’s preference to construct film sets and foster environments where she maintains control over production, rather than shoot on location. Except for a few street scenes and cityscapes, *Nice Coloured Girls* is filmed on sets and, in the case of the segment with the portrait, employs theatrical effects, such as stark lighting and performative gestures. As Mellencamp argues, this demonstrates that “Moffatt reacts against ethnography, the realist tradition of representing black Australia” (136).⁶⁶ In her use of film sets and her predilection for juxtaposing contrasting perspectives, Moffatt demonstrates that she, like Deren, is invested in finding ways to manipulate existing objects to create a new reality—in this case, that of Aboriginal women whose perspective is rarely privileged onscreen.

Like Deren in *Meshes*, Moffatt is interested in fragmenting body parts—hands and arms, backs, and sides—in order to isolate gestures that represent unequal power dynamics. However, in *Nice Coloured Girls*, this fragmentation is both racially and historically charged. As bell hooks notes, the fragmentation of Black women’s bodies in popular culture is a way of objectifying them; in her film, Moffatt draws attention to this fragmentation by emphasizing gestures that represent imbalanced power relations between races. In one such scene, a light-skinned, masculine arm

⁶⁵ See Mellencamp, “Haunted History.”

⁶⁶ This is also evident in Moffatt’s 1990 film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, a visually striking revision of the film *Jedda* (1955) that incorporates Moffatt’s own experience as a child, when she was fostered out to a white family (though not against her mother’s will, as she emphasizes) as part of a larger effort to “assimilate” Aboriginal children into white society. Cynthia Baron elaborates on the complexities of Moffatt’s foster situation as a child, writing, “The assumptions and realities that led to that consent, however, were the same assumptions and realities that caused thousands of other Aboriginal children to be taken by force from their parents and placed in institutions and foster care as late as 1980” (159).

reaches out across the portrait holding a small bag of coins and dark-skinned feminine arm reaches out from the other side. When the feminine arm tries to take the bag of coins, the masculine arm yanks it away; they repeat this gesture several times until the feminine hand finally grabs hold of the bag. The masculine hand clutches the feminine hand for a long moment before letting go. Because these gestures occur over the portrait, they represent the inequality between the male colonizers and Indigenous women. The sexual nature of this exchange is implied in the uncomfortable pause during which the masculine hand clings to the feminine hand after she has caught the bag. Moffatt's decision to juxtapose this exchange alongside a scene in the present-day with the Captain and the three women suggests that the effects of these power dynamics persist two centuries later. The subtitles suggest that the three women seek out Captains not because they enjoy it, but because "we don't have any money." The Captain, in turn, pays for the benefit of being seen in public alongside three Black women, enforcing his dominance over them. These power dynamics are also evident in Moffatt's decision to use subtitles for the women and a voiceover for the white settlers' descriptions of them. This, along with her aesthetic preference for artificiality, demonstrates the ways in which "Moffatt reacts against ethnography, the realist tradition of representing black Australia" (Mellencamp 136). In giving a voice to the ethnographers and silencing the Indigenous women in her film, Moffatt reveals the inequality between them.

However, the depiction of present-day power dynamics between the white Captain and the Black women is more ambiguous. Moffatt is uninterested in portraying Aboriginal women as victims, even as she suggests that the dynamics between white men and Aboriginal women have the potential for violence. In certain ways, the women are both victims and aggressors, particularly because they rob the Captain at the end of the night. Moffatt describes mixed reactions the film received among Aboriginals specifically because, she says, "from certain members of the

Aboriginal scene you are pressured into always having to present a positive view of Aboriginal life” (Rutherford 148). For Moffatt, it is necessary to present portrayals of Aboriginal women as conflicted and imperfect. Anything else is too “one-sided” for her tastes (Rutherford 148) and poses the risk of downplaying or erasing postcolonial rage.

Like Moffatt, Philadelphia-based filmmaker Monika Estrella Negra is invested in exploring racial trauma and rage in her work. Her first film *Flesh* (2016) was made on a budget of only \$1000, which she raised independently, and shot in Chicago. Negra’s work is indebted to three feminist thinkers and creators: Audre Lorde, Tracey Moffatt, and Maya Deren. In 2015, Negra co-founded Audre’s Revenge Film Production Collective, named after the poet, writer, and activist Audre Lorde, an initiative devoted to promoting and collaborating with queer artists of color in the science fiction and horror genres. Negra created *Flesh* as the aesthetic flagship for Audre’s Revenge. Its erratic editing style and camerawork is reminiscent of both *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Nice Coloured Girls*—both of which Negra names among her chief influences. Negra’s protagonist, Rae (Ester Matthews Alegria), goes on a killing spree in which she murders her white friend and a white man. The film is accompanied almost entirely by a throbbing punk soundtrack (all featuring music by Chicago-based punk artists of color). Unlike Moffatt, Negra shot the film on location rather than on sets, but her use of asynchronous sound, overlapping editing, nondiegetic inserts, and unnatural lighting serves a similar purpose of controlling the imagery and manipulating objects in order to represent Rae’s subjective reality. For Negra, *Flesh* is a cathartic film that represents a protagonist of color killing off the aspects of herself that have internalized white patriarchal ideology (Interview with author). Like the three women from *Nice Coloured Girls*, words are a crucial tool used by Rae’s (micro)aggressors, and she must find non-verbal ways to fight the oppression to which she is subjected.

Formally, *Negra* was inspired by *Meshes*; Rae's journey through Chicago city streets and apartments becomes a surreal, trance-like nightmare. Its use of asynchronous sound, however, recalls the contrast in *Nice Coloured Girls* between the voiceover and subtitles. In one critical scene, Rae sits in a bar with her white best friend; asynchronous sound here makes it difficult to follow whether the dialogue is simultaneous with the scene, or even whether it is subjective or objective. The crucial point here is that only the white friend's voice can be heard as she says, "oh my god, I *love* her hair! I wish *I* had hair like that!" This comment is implicitly about a Black woman, though it remains uncertain whether she is speaking aloud, about Rae, or to Rae. The fact that Black hair has long been degraded and demeaned beside white beauty standards is well documented; as Tracey Owens Patton notes, it is telling that the 1960s Black Power movement chose to use hair as an important aspect for "[raising] and [challenging] the ingrained stereotypes of beauty that were and are perpetuated by Euro Americans" (40). In *Flesh*, even though the friend's comment about hair is not explicitly racially charged, her passive fetishization of Black hair is a micro-aggression against Black women in general and Rae in particular. Although Rae's lips move in response, her voice is simply missing from the film, very much like the women's voices are missing from *Nice Coloured Girls*. In Moffatt's case, the women's voicelessness critiques the matter-of-fact mode of ethnographic filmmaking, while in *Negra*'s, Rae's silence symbolizes alienation imposed by her white friends. As the scene progresses, a white male friend offers the white female friend a cigarette and joins the table. The two white friends are filmed in a two-shot, lit by the bar's warm color scheme. When the camera cuts to Rae, she sits in close-up and shakes her head in disapproval. Here, *Negra* uses framing to visually and narratively isolate Rae within a dark frame, reflecting her experience of alienation from her white friends as a micro-aggression.

In a later scene, Rae is attending an underground punk show, seated on a couch beside a white male who is speaking to her and gesturing wildly. The soundtrack plays only the song by the punk band, cutting out other diegetic room noise including the man's monologue. Instead, the focus is—again—on Rae's reaction to the scene; she stares determinedly away from the talker and toward the band performing offscreen. This stands in distinct contrast to the next shot: the soundtrack continues uninterrupted, but now Rae is leaning against a windowsill and speaking enthusiastically with a Black band member. This, too, is interrupted in the next shot, in which Rae's white female friend from the bar leaves the club with Rae's windowsill companion. Rae watches them descend a long staircase and exit the building into his car. This seems to be the final interaction that prompts her killing spree. Her first victim is a white male friend, whom she kills in his own apartment. They are seated together on the couch as he relates a story that quickly fades into the background of a new song. Frustrated, Rae leaves the living room and the film cuts to her in a bathroom—notably wearing a different outfit than she was a moment earlier, muddying the film's narrative order or possibly depicting Rae's fantasy—staring into the mirror and fingering a small switchblade knife. The scene cuts to the male acquaintance's body wrapped in plastic, presumably stabbed to death with the large kitchen knife that rests on his back. The camera zooms in to a close-up of Rae's hand caressing a small pool of blood forming beside the body. In voiceover, we hear a phone message from Rae's white female friend berating Rae for being upset about her earlier comment about hair. Here, the film juxtaposes scenes of the murdered acquaintance with others of Rae trying on a black dress and running her hands over her body as she admires her reflection in a mirror. Rae stabs her female friend next, in an alley at night: she attacks her from behind while the camera tracks shakily to film the scene from above. Rae drags the friend away and ties her up, presumably in her (Rae's) apartment, caressing the unconscious

body in a series of jump cuts until the friend wakes up and begins to struggle. Rae then stabs the friend in an ecstatic performance. The film ends with Rae walking alone down a city alley, a momentarily silent scene that, as Rae lifts her arms and the film cuts to a close-up of her face framed in black (as in the earlier bar scene), plays a brief audio clip from *The Elephant Man* (1980): “I am not an animal—I am a human being!” Rae turns away and exits the frame.

The legacy of *Nice Coloured Girls* is palpable in *Flesh*. When she speaks about her influences, Negra discusses Moffatt in terms of horror: “[Moffatt] was documenting the everyday lived experiences that could also be conveyed as horror. She talked about the horrors of colonialism, she talked about the horrors of white patriarchy, she talked about the theft of Aboriginal children” (Interview with author). The horror genre draws frequently on real-life horror; while *Nice Coloured Girls* was not conceived as a horror film, its influence on Negra led her to combine the horrors of racism with recognizable horror tropes.⁶⁷ Formally, Rae’s journey through the city streets and her interactions with white characters in public places mirror the tensions and colonialist “haunting” present in Moffat’s film, while Rae’s silence throughout mirrors that of the three women in search of a Captain to take advantage of. Although this silence represents Rae’s alienation, it is perhaps not necessarily negative; emphasizing Rae’s presence in visual terms could be read as a means of countering written or verbal misrepresentations of Black women. As Janell Hobson argues, “the black female body—as represented through her disembodied voice—is used in mainstream cinema by way of supporting and defining the normalized white (male) body” (48). Pooja Rangan similarly points out that the idea of “giving a voice” to marginalized people is a fraught solution to the need for diverse representation in media.

⁶⁷ History and real-life horrors have long featured in genre horror, from *Candyman* (1992, dir. Bernard Rose) to *Get Out* (2016, dir. Jordan Peele). For more on historical trauma as mediated through horror, see Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*.

Referring to radio scholar Frances Dyson, who demonstrates that the embodied markers of age, race, gender, and ability can be identifiable in the voice and undermine authority, Rangan writes, “For marginal social subjects, therefore, having a voice—that is, evidencing their humanity—inevitably involves losing something that matters: the embodied position they allegedly speak for” (103). Rangan advocates instead for the possibilities of experimenting with voicelessness, citing experimental filmmaker Leslie Thornton as an example. Thornton’s innovative use of sound, Rangan argues, “[brings] our attention to the violence as well as the potential of the voice as a vexed site of interpellative contact” (109). Along these lines, the protagonists’ voicelessness in Moffatt’s and Negra’s films offer an innovative and potentially empowering way for Aboriginal and African-American women to represent themselves.

The protagonists of *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* exact revenge—even if on a comparatively small scale—for the white oppression that has irreversibly affected their history. Negra states that Rae’s victims enjoy “the power of ‘normalcy’ [and] ‘acceptance’ of which she craves” (Medium), and she kills them in order to “[kill] off internalized patriarchy, internalized racism, within herself and [get] rid of these harmful elements that are blocking her from her own growth” (Interview with author). But at the same time, the violence at the heart of Negra’s film is self-destructive rather than entirely vengeful. *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Mesher* can also be read in these terms. As the subtitles in *Nice Coloured Girls* inform us, Captains “usually like to drink a lot and we like to encourage them. This way they’re more helpless and less likely to get nasty with us. If you know what we mean.” The implied violence—sexual or otherwise—in this observation from the perspective of the young women suggests that their actions are both a means of self-preservation and self-destruction. They want to enjoy themselves, but they cannot afford it; taking advantage of a Captain is their solution, despite its risks. In *Mesher*, Deren’s character proposes

two methods of dealing with her objectification through the male gaze. The first is to attack the male figure and, in the same action, the screen itself; the second is to enable her own unnatural death. In all three films, the self-destructive impulse can be read as a means of “[promoting] psychic reintegration and reinvolvement in life” (Strong 33), particularly for demographics that have long experienced oppression in the face of white supremacy and patriarchy. Oppression in racial and gendered terms is a form of social containment. In defining what she calls “the new racism,” Patricia Hill Collins extrapolates how Black men and women are pushed into certain stereotypes of sexual promiscuity, frigidity, and other stringent confines according to their class status. The process of forcing and suppressing individuals into rigid categories without allowing space for differences among them is a form of violence characterized by suppressing the diversity of personalities. In these terms, “any effort to wrest back a ... subjective voice must necessarily be violent” (Rabinovitz 64) for racial minorities.

In certain ways, *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* align with the narrative pattern of the rape-and-revenge film, or at least the latter aspect of the pattern—revenge following assault. In films such as *Ms. 45* (1981), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), and *Revenge* (2018), (white) women are brutally raped and left for dead; in return, they regain their strength and take gory revenge on their attackers or use their rage against men in general. Many feminist scholars find the rape-revenge film problematic for its apparent contradiction: that the depiction of graphic sexual violence against women appears alongside the justified, in many cases equally savage, violence they subsequently inflict against men. Some suggest that rape-revenge is ultimately empowering for women⁶⁸ while others remain skeptical.⁶⁹ Even so, as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas points out in an

⁶⁸ See Carol Clover and Anna Billson.

⁶⁹ See Cate Young and Jacinda Reade.

interview with Noah Berlatsky, it is significant that women are among the genre's most voracious viewers.

However, *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* do not fit the rape-revenge film because they are not always prompted by a specific event or assault, but retaliate—consciously or unconsciously—against the racial or sexual oppression they have experienced, whether in the form of micro-aggressions or macro-aggressions. Similarly, women in films such as *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* (1993) and *Teeth* (2007) take revenge on patriarchal society more generally, and more aimlessly, than the women in traditional rape-revenge films. These women and films belong to a sub-cycle of rape-revenge films I call the “violent *flâneuse*” film, and which *Nice Coloured Girls* hints toward but that *Flesh* explicitly manifests through the intersectional perspective of a Black woman. Both films depict protagonists performing small acts of revenge against a society that has oppressed them—an oppression that “haunts” the films but is not explicitly represented—rather than against specific actors who have harmed them personally. *Flesh* adapts the pattern from *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Nice Coloured Girls* and makes explicit the violence implicit in both. Like *Nice Coloured Girls*, furthermore, it is important that *Flesh* takes place outdoors; only a few scenes take place at Rae's apartment, and it does not carry the same domestic baggage of “home” as the bungalow in *Meshes*. This suggests that the subjective journey of Black women as represented in these films places more significance on the traumatic experience of living in society and the outside world—the city—than being trapped inside the home.

Meshes evokes film noir and the woman's melodrama.⁷⁰ But *Flesh* revisits the cyclical pattern of *Meshes* in order to re-articulate its narrative structure through the lens of horror. In *Flesh*, the crucial visual motifs include hair, a knife, a mirror, and a staircase—the latter three of which,

⁷⁰ Other scholars who draw these connections include Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, pp. 56-61; Geller, pp. 140.

of course, appear in *Meshes*. In *Flesh*, Rae watches her white friend “take” her Black male friend from their conversation (whether Rae is sexually attracted to him is not clear, but the interruption is evident) and lead him down a long staircase in a shot that lasts long enough for them to reach the bottom. This scene precedes Rae’s killing spree and, perhaps, prompts it. In *Meshes*, Deren tries desperately to climb the bungalow staircase, but canted and dizzying camera angles reflect her physical and mental disorientation and struggle to follow the mirror-faced hooded figure and reach the top. The hooded figure deposits a flower on a bed, where it transforms into a knife; moments later, Deren watches herself from indoors and pulls a key from her mouth that also transforms into a knife. Later, in the first of the film’s double endings, a man (played by Hammid) wakes the sleeping Deren and she follows him upstairs, where he places the flower on the bed and looks at his reflection in a mirror. This visually associates him with the hooded figure. In the second ending, Hammid approaches the bungalow, finds the flower on the doorstep and enters to see shards of a shattered mirror strewn across the floor with Deren lying, dead, in a chair with blood streaming from her mouth and seaweed around her neck. In *Flesh*, there are similarly ambivalent scenes in which it is unclear whether the action takes place in Rae’s imagination. But if, as Rabinovitz argues, *Meshes* “rewrites Hollywood’s objectification of women by addressing a female subject who must contend with her own objectification” (56), then *Flesh* rewrites Hollywood’s—and white society’s—silencing of Black women by addressing a Black female subject who must contend with her fraught position between racial cultures and violently wrest internalized racism away from her perception of herself. By actively murdering white acquaintances and friends who threaten her sense of self, *Negra*’s protagonist places the film squarely within the horror genre and invites a reconsideration of *Meshes* in similar terms—as a

violent, subjective film that uses horror-coded visual motifs in order to return subjectivity and selfhood to its protagonist.

In evoking and revising the rape-revenge horror film, the “horror ‘trance’ film” (and *Meshes* as a progenitor of this subcategory), and the real-life horrors embedded within Moffatt’s film, *Flesh* invites a reconsideration of the horror elements present in the earlier films. Formally, all three films are nightmarish and circular, but the props used in *Meshes* are central to a re-reading of the film within horror terms. The objects that Deren focuses on are another marker of subjectivity. She is drawn to a flower, which is a marker of femininity; a mirror, a marker of feminine vanity and cosmetics; a knife, a kitchen utensil; a key, which opens the door to the domestic space. The telephone, record player, and staircase can also be interpreted as part of the domestic space; apart from a winding path around the bungalow and a few shots of the ocean, most of the film takes place in the domestic spaces of the living room, kitchen, and bedroom. Importantly, the mirror—a mode of seeing the body and, stereotypically, a place where the female body is under close subjective scrutiny—is interchangeable with the knife, which is eventually used to smash the screen into mirror shards. In *Flesh*, Rae’s attention is drawn to certain objects, such as hair and mirrors, that hold a deeper resonance for Black women. Mirrors represent body image, which is a conflicted topic for women of color in Western society where feminine beauty is rigidly defined by whiteness (Patton). As I noted earlier, hair is also a complex issue for Black women in particular for the same reasons. Beyond Rae’s tension with her friend over the comment about hair, *Negra* includes one recurring nondiegetic insert in particular—a high-angle shot of a woman braiding a young girl’s hair on the front stoop of a building. This focus throughout the film makes it clear that hair is among the most common features to prompt micro-aggressions.

Although *Negra* credits Deren as a key influence, it is important to note that *Flesh* is inflected by racial tensions that Deren never experienced.⁷¹ Because Deren was a white woman, *Meshes* reflects issues of female objectification, fetishism, and violence that stand apart from the historical experience of Black women. Black women have long been perceived as either non-sexual and therefore unthreatening, or hyper-sexual but Othered in a way that sets them apart from white femininity. Looking relations in film are so racially specific that, as Janell Hobson notes, the Black female body is often erased from mainstream film even as “her disembodied voice [is] used in mainstream cinema by way of supporting and defining the normalized white (male) body” (48). Hobson argues that sound is key to understanding how Black women have appeared in Hollywood cinema, particularly when their voices (usually in music) are used to narratively and affectively support the white main characters. She urges scholars to become attuned to whether—and how—the visual absence of Black women in film is offset by their presence in non-visual ways.

Despite Deren’s importance for feminist filmmaking, *Meshes*—and the rest of her films—are deeply indebted to Black women who played a critical role in her creative directions. Chief among these is Katherine Dunham, the well-known dancer and anthropologist under whom Deren worked in Los Angeles shortly before she met Hammid and started making films. Before taking on the job of Dunham’s secretary (or “liaison,” as dancer Rita Christiani called her [Clark et al. 520]), Deren did not train as a dancer or ethnographer; she gained these interests through her association with Dunham and her dance troupe. Although Rita Christiani describes Deren’s dancing technique as much different than Dunham’s, Dunham’s influence on Deren—and her

⁷¹ Deren herself did struggle to identify with her Jewish background, as Lucy Fischer relates in her article “Afterlife and Afterimage” (9-10).

connections to dancers such as Christiani and Talley Beatty, both of whom Deren included in her films—is rarely addressed in discussions of *Meshes*. As Marina Warner notes:

Dunham was sad that Deren herself and her posthumous cult have taken such small account of their productive alliance in the 1940s, and that instead Deren has been cast as a unique femme fatale, high priestess, muse and *La Pasionaria* of independent, experimental film. This image has generally succeeded in effacing the most important artistic contexts which enfolded and fostered her—among which should feature the Afro-Caribbean dance movement led by Dunham.” (*Tate Etc.*)

In an interview for *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2001), Dunham describes her interest in Haitian Voudoun as a primarily cultural one, particularly the aspects of it that were brought to the Caribbean from African traditions. Along with her fascination with dance, Deren was also interested in Haitian Voudoun, particularly in its investment in trance, ritual, and dance. She explored this interest in the late 1940s and early 1950s, during which she filmed 20,000 feet of film in Haiti for a film that she did not complete, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1954), and that her third husband Teiji Ito edited and completed after her death. Deren’s interest in dance was therefore a direct influence from Dunham, but this is not evident in *Meshes*. Furthermore, Deren’s interest and participation in the Voudoun rituals during her time in Haiti, and their treatment in *Divine Horsemen*, are problematic instances of appropriation and fetishization. In this way, her work stands apart from Moffatt’s, who reacts against ethnography in *Nice Coloured Girls*.

The Black female filmmaker, Hobson argues, is in a unique position to use her oppositional spectatorship (per bell hooks) “to reshape the gaze and redefine [visual] pleasure for her audience” (54). Both *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Flesh* can be read as influenced by Deren’s film but also

instances in which Black female filmmakers can re-inscribe the Black woman missing from *Meshes* and much of Deren's work. Both films are keenly attuned to the erasure of women of color in historical discourse and endeavor to re-imagine that history in innovative ways. *Nice Coloured Girls* addresses their erasure and oppression through its use of a white settler's writings on aboriginal women in Australia, and *Negra's* films do so through their conflation with the horror genre. If the horror genre can allegorize fears of unruly technology, toxicity, bodily vulnerability and violation, social isolation, political brainwashing, and more, its multifaceted iterations seldom acknowledge or explore the extent to which marginalized bodies and minds already face these fears in everyday life. *Negra's* films—and Black women's lack of representation in the film industry, academia, and beyond—make clear that these remain core issues to Black women in particular. The erasure of—or worse, violence against—Black women in cultural, social, and academic discourses, as well as their well-documented neglect at the hands of the white medical community (and even more so that of queer Black women) is already infused with horror.

3.2 *Schmeerguntz*, *What Happened to Her*, and *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix*

In section one, I discussed films that privilege their makers' very personal, subjective experiences. In this section, I turn instead to filmmakers who, rather than create their own footage to reflect their subjectivity, edit together existing footage to make an objective argument about women's representation and violence involving women in the media.⁷² Even so, the footage

⁷² Found-footage is a common technique in women's experimental cinema. Su Friedrich uses it in many of her autobiographical or personal films including *Sink or Swim* (1990) and *Hide and Seek* (1996); Leslie Thornton incorporates found-footage into her long-running experimental series *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985). Notably, Tracey Moffatt uses found-footage in similar ways as Proctor and Guevara-Flanagan do in films such as *Lip* (1999) and *Love*

selected for these films reveal the subjective viewing positions of their makers. Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's *Schmeerguntz* (1965), Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's *What Happened to Her* (2016), and Jennifer Proctor's *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* (2017) all utilize and manipulate found-footage to critique gender representation in mainstream media. While the three films differ tonally, each analyzes images of women in media in terms of stereotype and repetition. While *Schmeerguntz* is playful in tone, the process of placing footage from different sources side-by-side creates jarring, and often formally violent, associations between disparate source materials. *What Happened to Her* and *Soap and Water* emphasize this violence more strongly than *Schmeerguntz*, and their use of horror film texts reveals the filmmakers' investments in women's representation in genre. The films I discuss in the previous section use original footage to create new realities that reflect minority subject positions. The films under discussion in this section use media footage to similar ends: to refashion film and television excerpts into new texts that reveal the gender ideologies and stereotypes embedded within popular media. *What Happened to Her* and *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* revise the formal elements used in *Schmeerguntz* with attention to the horror genre.

Found-footage films, also known as collage films (Sitney 298), appropriation films (Baron, "Remake" 471), and compilation films (Leyda 10) are films that utilize existing footage to create new standalone texts. Whether they are intended for artistic, educational, or other purposes, found-footage films chiefly foreground "manipulation of actuality. This manipulation ... usually tries to hide itself so that the spectator sees only 'reality'—that is, the especially *arranged* reality that suits the film-maker's purpose" (Leyda 10). Documentaries that use archival footage or compilation

(2003), on which she collaborated with Gary Hillberg. Both films compile footage from Hollywood films to explore, respectively, representations of Black maids and onscreen love in popular cinema.

videos that give homage to particular figures, events, or cultural texts also belong to the found-footage tradition, but in these pages I focus on the experimental found-footage film. Reception is an important factor for theorizing how a film uses existing footage (Baron “Archive Effect” 104). Often, experimental found-footage films are tonally playful. Sitney defines these films as containing a “natural irony ... which calls attention to the fact that each element quoted in the new synthesis was once part of another whole, thereby ... [creating] a distance between the image depicted and our experience of it” (298). This form also depends, he points out, on repetition and the disruption of cause-and-effect (331). The three films I discuss in this section do create a distance between the original materials and the new purpose they serve in the films, but in the process, they create texts that reflect the reality of how women see themselves represented onscreen. Therefore, while these films do create a “distance between the image depicted and our experience of it,” they also reflect the personal, gendered viewing positions of the filmmakers. Furthermore, the violent visual and narrative stereotypes concerning women onscreen that these films explore are reflected in the jarring, violent act of cutting scenes—and fragmenting bodies—out of their original context and re-editing them into the patterns we see in their new context.

Schmeerguntz was made by the Swedish-born filmmaker Gunvor Nelson and her early collaborator Dorothy Wiley.⁷³ The title refers to a nonsense word that Nelson’s father invented to mean sandwich (Widding 149). Nelson describes herself as a “personal” filmmaker rather than a feminist (or even experimental) filmmaker; even so, her films “are significant to the Women’s Movement in that they describe with accuracy, sensitivity, and humor the paradoxes of women’s experience in contemporary America” (Gill 28). *Schmeerguntz* and Nelson’s later film *Take Off*

⁷³ Born and raised in Sweden, Nelson studied and taught in California for many years as an adult before returning to her hometown of Kristinehamn in 1992 (Anker 109).

(1972) in particular provide “a hilarious critique of the officially sanctioned image of the American woman” (Sundholm, “Material and Mimetic” 167)—as housewife in the former film and sexual object in the latter. *Schmeerguntz* was filmed on black-and-white 16mm film and juxtaposes found footage of beauty contests and domestic advertisements with original footage of a very pregnant Wiley at home, dealing with the muck and grime of domestic life. The film was not originally conceived as a critical portrayal of mainstream representations of women and domestic life, even if it naturally turned to that route. As Nelson tells Brenda Richardson, “we wanted to make a 16mm movie ... But we had no subject. And one day I was looking at all the gunk in the sink and thought of the contrast between what we do, and what we see that we ‘should’ be—in ads and things—and that was the idea right there, from the sink” (35).⁷⁴

In between the shiny collages of domestic or cosmetic ads and beauty contests, we see a woman extracting a tampon, water churning in a brown-stained toilet, and messy piles of unfolded laundry. Images of sleek, costumed women, voiceovers of beauty contest broadcasts, and advertisements featuring plump, smiling babies are juxtaposed with the pregnant Wiley laboring to dress herself, vomiting from morning sickness, wiping her baby’s rear end, and scraping grimy, stringy food waste out of the drain. The use of animation creates erratic collage scenes; in one such instance, a cosmetic ad in which a man teases a woman’s hair animates multiple prominent men’s faces over the man’s face in the ad, including Salvador Dali’s. Other scenes place so many still images in such quick succession that they become difficult to follow or distinguish. While *Schmeerguntz* focuses primarily on the incongruity between media images and home life, however,

⁷⁴ In an interview with Drake Stutesman, Nelson says about her collaboration with Wiley: “When we first started out we needed each other. We barely had a camera and no knowledge of filmmaking” (143). Nelson and Wiley soon embarked on separate career paths, and although she speaks kindly about her former collaborator, Nelson in particular seemed eager to work on her own films.

it does also include media images of men's bodies as well, such as wrestling and other athletic footage. In one sense, this can be read as a critique of all media, or it can appear as a contrast to the images of women—smiling, thin, and unmoving—while the men's strong bodies are on display through their physical activities. Ultimately, the film is driven by the juxtaposition between the original footage shot in Nelson and Wiley's home and the found footage they selected to represent the desire for perfection sold by mainstream media.

I will also briefly describe Nelson's *Take Off* here because, although it is not a found-footage film, its focus on fragmenting the female body is done in a similar vein of playful critique as in *Schmeerguntz*. It was also filmed in black-and-white and uses original footage of burlesque dancer Ellion Ness removing her clothes in an elaborate striptease. Ness appears in a nondescript dark space and is filmed with erratic, disorienting camera movements and techniques such as superimposition and rapid editing. These techniques “*interfere* with our voyeuristic pleasure ... obscuring our erotic view” (Fischer, *Shot/Countershot* 27). As Ness disrobes down to nothing, the film begins to use a violent strobe effect that intensifies when she removes her hair, her legs, earring-clad ears, nose, head, and breasts. Her arms float away by themselves, waving cheerfully to the camera, and her torso rotates into nothingness. The film ends with shots of an asteroid drifting through space. These effects “aggressively [confront] the spectator ... with images of dismemberment and decapitation” (Fischer 29). The result, she argues, “fills the viewer with horror and, in this way, reveals that the striptease is a *dance* [sic] *macabre*—for the woman who performs and for the man who fuels his needless fear of women” (30). While they use different techniques, both *Schmeerguntz* and *Take Off* are disorienting, humorous critiques of female representation in the home and in regards to sexuality. They also have certain formal elements in common, particularly their use of animation and jarring camera techniques, which serve to disorient the

viewer. While *Take Off* delivers its message rather abstractly—using original footage and using the figure of Ness to stand in for burlesque dancers or stag films more broadly—the formal composition of *Schmeerguntz* is more concrete, taking specific examples from mainstream media or the home and thereby directing viewers to draw connections between the distinct examples juxtaposed in the film. Despite its playful tone, *Schmeerguntz*'s attention to the disparities between media representations of women and their domestic realities are jarring and suggest a formal violence in their juxtaposition. In *Take Off*, the literal dismemberment of the female body contradicts the film's light tone, while suggesting that critique requires aesthetic exploration that relies on self-destructive imagery. Dismemberment also plays a central role in both *What Happened To Her* and *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix*, both in terms of the visual content appropriated in each case and in the physical process of détournement—of wrenching the images from their original context and placing them in a new one. The overarching genre investments of both films are horror, but their tonalities are very different.

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's *What Happened To Her* explores the trope of murdered women in film and television through found footage. In many ways, it combines experimental technique with documentary. The striking images are accompanied by a voiceover performed by actress Danyi Deats, describing her experience playing the murdered teen in *River's Edge* (1986) when she was just nineteen years old. Deats' experience is unique in that her character's corpse plays a central role in the film, literally becoming an object of spectacle for the teen characters in the film, who ogle her slowly decomposing body one by one after their friend boasts that he strangled his girlfriend and left her by the river. However, Deats is not identified until the ending credits, nor are the film titles that Guevara-Flanagan used as her source material identified through the film's runtime. This results in associations between the voiceover and the images onscreen, so that while

Deats recalls her discomfort during the filming—particularly because her scenes were nude, she was cold, and she was surrounded by a male crew—the viewer can presume that the other women who played the roles of corpses went through similar experiences; most are nude or partially nude, and many are in water. As Guevara-Flanagan states in an interview, she was attracted to Deats’ story because it “mirrors a young actor’s vulnerability in the industry” (Guevara-Flanagan, WMM). Indeed, the experience was harrowing enough for Deats to step away from acting permanently; she holds only three credits to her name, and all were concurrent with *River’s Edge*.

What Happened To Her is fifteen minutes long and unfolds as compilations of similar events from different sources, featuring an organizational “arc” of sorts. The film begins with fifteen separate scenes of female corpses being discovered in and pulled out of water (lakes, rivers, swimming pools). Next, several corpses are discovered under sheets, pillows, plastic, or inside bags. In voiceover intercut with select audio footage from some of the original sources, Deats describes how she was offered the job and her carefree acceptance of the role, before realizing the weight of what she had taken on: “I just didn’t really realize that everyone was going to see me naked from here on out.” As the film’s visual composition continues, the juxtaposition of scenes calls attention to their similarities: whether nude or clothed, the women’s bodies are positioned in provocative positions—legs either splayed or crossed suggestively, many dressed in revealing clothing. Crane shots slowly track over the crime scenes, while closer shots are juxtaposed to focus on frozen hand gestures or gashing wounds. Deats expresses her ambivalence to continue on the set after the first day: “and then they just like, offered me more money. That’s how they solve problems in Hollywood.” Next, several shots show other people—usually male-dominated police or FBI crews—towering over the bodies, discovering them or investigating the crime scene. Increasingly sadistic crime scenes are displayed: women impaled on antlers, their bodies inscribed

with cryptic marks. Deats describes her discomfort and feelings of vulnerability alongside an entirely male crew. The day-to-day process of filming escalated for her: “then they just kept adding. ‘Would you feel comfortable if we put you in the water?’ Or like, ‘how far in the water would you go?’” Guevara-Flanagan also includes select audio and dialogue from some of her sources. In one dark scene, a woman’s nude body lies in the fetal position submerged in a waterlogged vehicle trunk while a male voice asks, “You ever see something like this?” and another replies, “No, sheriff.” The ways the bodies are displayed, shot, and talked about in these brief snippets contribute to a mystifying, almost mystical, atmosphere in which the women’s lives are effaced by the intrigue of their deaths.

Next, in the morgue or laboratory, corpses are examined and the cause of death is assessed. Close-ups on maimed faces show their stillness in death, while Deats’ voiceover brings attention to the labor involved in playing a corpse. In turn, close-ups on bleeding legs, ears, fingers, scalps, and other body parts accompany Deats’ coming to terms with the real-life story her particular character’s death was based on, reminding viewers that sadistic violence against women is not altogether rare. A forensics sequence involving physical intimacy (fingers and tools) between investigators and the corpses is juxtaposed with Deats’ discussion of her extensive makeup regime and the “lecherous” makeup artists she worked with. Next are a series of shots in which the corpses are photographed, itself revealed as a visually violent act when placed in quick succession. Next, a sequence of the women’s killers breathing heavily post-murder and close-up shots of women’s faces as they are killed. Finally, corpses are zipped into body bags or the bodies are tucked away into drawers at the morgue.

Guevara-Flanagan lists several patterns she identified while collecting footage for *What Happened To Her*, including a recurring narrative arc she noticed in both film and television and

which she strived to reflect in her film: “First, the female corpse is found ... Second, she is probed for forensic detail ... Ultimately, she is left behind ... It’s a process in which the forensics of death become a highly sexualized pageant” (WMM). She noticed that men’s bodies are rarely represented with the same degree of cinematic spectacle or sexual display. In turn, she was especially disturbed by the forensic scenes in which “there’s this whole second violation of these already violated bodies” (WMM). In these scenes, there is often an unsettling contrast between the gore and physical trauma in plain view alongside the cold act of probing and mutilation for a scientific end. Guevara-Flanagan noticed, furthermore, that female corpses in media were usually white, and they tended to have “a certain physical type, they tend to be attractive and thin” (WMM). This aligned with her experience of working in journalism early in her career, during which she noticed that missing women were more likely to get media attention if they were white. Although Guevara-Flanagan saw more corpses of color in television shows such as *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*, the majority of white corpses stood out: “if you’re going to violate the community, you violate [the white woman]. Ironically, it’s not about her, she’s a symbol of the community but it’s not about her as a human ... the message there is when a black woman is killed it’s not a big deal” (WMM). Additionally, it becomes clear when the white woman plays such a central, vulnerable, and sexual role in popular media that women of color do not represent the community in the same way, nor are they seen as vulnerable and innocently sexual in the same way that white women are. In turn, the white female corpse becomes both a symbol of what society cares about on a surface level, but ultimately discards. The films in this section therefore emphasize Janell Hobson’s point that the absence of Black women in popular media illuminates the ideal (white) femininity that saturates Western culture, while at the same time arguing that this ideal attracts sympathy and fascination among media audiences.

Because it eschews playfulness in favor of somberness, the tone of *What Happened to Her* differs significantly from *Schmeerguntz*. Guevara-Flanagan combines Deats' subjective experience of playing a corpse with visual evidence in order to suggest that all women hired to play corpses must put in the physical and mental labor that Deats describes. Many of the films and television shows that Guevara-Flanagan pulled her material from are horror films or crime shows that share the horror film's oft-cited investment in gendered bodily mutilation. However, *What Happened to Her* critiques the fascination viewers are invited to have for spectacles of death and dismemberment, and through editing and Deats' voiceover, Guevara-Flanagan appropriates the original footage to emphasize that the experience of playing a dead woman is itself a form of horror. The resulting trauma from playing the role in *River's Edge* was a significant factor that kept Deats from pursuing an acting career. For Guevara-Flanagan, the central horror explored in her film is the physical and emotional labor of playing such a vulnerable and difficult role, as well as the spectator fascination implied in such a role.

Media artist Jennifer Proctor similarly explores themes of visual stereotypes and violence against women in her film *Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix* (2017), but her film is more tonally playful than *What Happened to Her*. Proctor compiled *Soap and Water* out of footage from over ninety films, including many Hollywood films, in order to make explicit how women's bodies are framed in bathtubs. Running just short of ten minutes long, *Soap and Water* is organized according to segments unified by gestures, activities, and degree of voyeuristic framing. The film begins with shots of bathroom doors, obscuring the bather from view behind partially-open doors with only the sounds of splashing to indicate her presence. These excerpts are ordered to look as though the doors are "opening"; the first in the sequence shows a nearly-closed door, the door in the second shot is slightly more ajar, and finally a woman's arm is visible over the bathtub lip in

the third shot, which appears to be from a child's point of view. Proctor then assembles several shots that minimally reveal the bathers, many of these following intruding figures. Shots of figures closing the bathroom door on the women give brief closure to this initial sequence.

The rest of *Soap and Water* is organized somewhat chronologically in terms of bathtub-related activities. First are several shots of women turning on the bathroom light and preparing the bath; close-ups on hands and feet turning faucets and testing water temperature unite these images. Bathtubs fill, candles are lit. Women pull back their hair and begin to undress. Several shots edited in succession demonstrate the same shot composition, recycled across several decades of film history, of a woman removing her robe with her back to the camera. As they undress, the cameras focus on fragments: backs, legs, feet. The women step into the bathtub and sit, sigh, cry, or hum to themselves. They touch or brush their hair. They drink wine, they read, they look distressed. They wash themselves or shave their legs. The shot compositions continue to accentuate body parts, particularly legs and soap-covered arms. They masturbate; external objects or people touch or titillate them. They submerge themselves and are shot from underwater, with distorted reverse-shots of people looking down at them. They are startled or emerge abruptly to the surface. They rest their eyes or fall asleep. Then, abruptly, they scream; they are forced underwater; they are attacked and they struggle. Their hands grasp the edge of the bathtub. They are drenched in blood; they are dead; bathtubs drain around their corpses or their killers clean up. Other figures discover their bodies; their bodies disintegrate or decompose. In the film's final shot (appropriated from *The Shining*, 1980), one decaying woman comes, terribly, back to life. As in *What Happened To Her*, and as Proctor noticed during the film's making, *Soap and Water* reveals that such scenes are usually racially inflected as well; nearly all of Proctor's selected scenes feature women who are white, slim, and conventionally attractive.

Soap and Water reflects the lineage of feminist film theory in several ways, above all in its attention to the representation of women (and their bodies) onscreen. However, through its interest in vulnerability, voyeurism, and violence in intimate spaces, the film aligns thematically and formally with the concerns of horror. The bathtub space is perhaps even more intimate than the bedroom; in the bathtub, the women's explicit or implied nudity displays their vulnerability and reinforces their onscreen passivity. Proctor's strategy to linger on how the camera frames and fragments women's bodies evinces the violence of voyeurism. While feminist scholars have criticized Hollywood cinema for fragmenting women's bodies through close-ups and thereby reducing them to objects, feminist avant-garde filmmakers such as Carolee Schneemann, Naomi Uman, and Peggy Ahwesh use fragmentation or absence as a subversive practice, disorienting the spectator and frustrating the pleasure of the female body as spectacle. In *Soap and Water*, Proctor brings the two together, demonstrating how popular media fragments and frames women's bodies and removing them from their original context in disorienting ways.

In this way, *Soap and Water* recalls the history of feminist avant-garde filmmakers, who by the 1980s consciously worked toward making feminist visual language deliberate and explicit, rather than implicitly weaving in their political objectives (Rich, *Chick Flicks* 283). Like Fischer writes of many feminist filmmakers in *Shot/Countershot*, Proctor is "not only alluding to male-authored films but recycling them for her own aesthetic/ideological purpose" (Rich, "Feminist Film Criticism" 14)—and, I would add, pedagogical. Crucially, the source material for *Soap and Water* is not only male-authored, and excerpts from *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *The Babadook* (2014), for instance, suggest that female viewers also internalize (and may or may not resist) familiar images of women. With *Soap and Water*, furthermore, Proctor takes her cues from filmmaker Bruce Conner, whose *A Movie* (1958) she remade between 2010-2012. She appropriates

visual language from film texts and, through montage, *reappropriates* this visual language with a feminist objective: to make explicit how women's bodies are visually recycled in mainstream narrative films. In turn, Proctor poses a pedagogical challenge for the viewer to pay attention to these tropes elsewhere and to consider how visual media reproduce images of women for passive consumption. Proctor's process of fragmenting female bodies even further—of removing them from their original context and placing them fleetingly alongside other similar images—is itself a violent one. Through jarring juxtapositions, she brings patterns to the surface in ways that would otherwise not be possible.

Because Guevara-Flanagan is primarily a documentarian and Proctor is an experimental filmmaker, considering their films side-by-side—and in relation to *Schmeerguntz*—raises questions of genre and form that can be united, in this case, by horror.⁷⁵ The films are undeniably similar—scenes are carefully chosen to demonstrate the repetition of such images in popular media—but Deats' voiceover carries out a distinctly subjective point of view, thereby articulating its purpose in ways that *Soap and Water* does not. Therefore, *What Happened To Her* aligns more with the documentary mode than *Soap and Water*. Even so, Guevara-Flanagan's decision not to identify Deats until the end of the film lends it an abstract and experimental tone, particularly because the viewer is invited to associate the voiceover with all the bodies seen in the film, rather than one in particular. Their narrative "arc" is also strikingly similar: they both consider their

⁷⁵To further emphasize their acceptance within various circles of film reception, it is helpful to note that *What Happened To Her* and *Soap and Water* both played at diverse film festivals. Guevara-Flanagan's film played at Hot Docs Canadian International Film Festival, San Francisco Documentary Film Festival, and the London Feminist Film Festival, as well as at least two horror film festivals (Dead By Dawn and the Lisbon International Horror Film Festival). Notably, *What Happened To Her* also won the Audience Award for Best Experimental Film at the Chicago Feminist Film Festival. *Soap and Water* also played at numerous film festivals, particularly underground or experimental film festivals, women's festivals, and horror film festivals (such as Monster Fest in Australia, Telluride Horror Show, Dead By Dawn, and Ax Wound).

subject matter in terms of cause-and-effect, and the juxtaposition of found-footage illuminates repetition between similar shots and scenes in visual media.

Nelson and Wiley, Guevara-Flanagan, and Proctor all use détournement, or deconstruction, to critique the mass media images strategically juxtaposed in their films. While experimental filmmakers utilize found-footage in various ways and for diverse purposes, “the most direct and illuminating confrontation between Hollywood and the avant-garde occurs when avant-garde filmmakers take images of Hollywood stars and recycle them in ways that are more arresting and unconventional in form and significance than they were in the films from which they came” (Wees, “Ambiguous Aura” 6). For Proctor and Guevara-Flanagan, representations and the normalization of violence against women is a central concern. Proctor appropriates scenes from many horror films and thrillers, but she also uses other genres—including romantic comedies (*Bridget Jones’ Diary*, 2001; *Pretty Woman*, 1990), coming-of-age dramas (*Girl, Interrupted*, 1999), and erotic dramas (*Last Tango in Paris*, 1973)—in order to repurpose images that might seem innocuous in their original contexts and to make them sinister when viewed alongside similar shots from different films. Divorced from their original context, edited together with abrupt or disorienting tonal shifts, and unified by a continuous, brooding room tone, the film scenes comprise what becomes, effectively, a found-footage experimental horror film.

The lineage of both *What Happened To Her* and *Soap and Water* is evident in Nelson and Wiley’s film: while *Schmeerguntz* engages comedy more than it does horror, the effect of juxtaposing grotesque images alongside pristine ones is reflected in the tensions presented in both Guevara-Flanagan and Proctor’s films. In *What Happened To Her*, Deats’ personal voiceover forces the viewer to consider the actors’ experiences during filming and to become aware of formal similarities between and fascinations with scenes of murdered women, thereby reflecting on

commonplace media images that are rarely critiqued. In *Soap and Water*, even scenes that do not depict physical violence against women become highly voyeuristic and emphasize the violence inherent in filming a nude woman in vulnerable and intimate positions. In both cases, viewers might also struggle with recalling scenes in their original contexts (if they recognize the subject matter) and re-viewing them in such a provocative context. In all three cases, found-footage and détournement is used for offering pointed critique to dominant media images of women, though the focus has altered from a comedic reflection on domesticity, beauty, and motherhood to that of brooding, horror-inflected meditations on gendered violence.

The process of détournement can be seen as one of self-destruction: while all three films critique women's representation in different media, they "cut" the women out of their original contexts and place them into jarring formal combinations alongside other fragments. This suggests that the act of critique is, in certain ways, a self-destructive act. In order to confront internalized and normalized patterns of sexual objectification and violence against women, it is necessary to first destroy those images by removing them from their original context. In this way, the films under discussion in this section serve a similar function to those in section 1. For Nelson and Wiley, the messy process of giving birth and raising their children led them to view mass media images from a fresh, and critical, perspective. Guevara-Flanagan had been keeping a mental list of scenes featuring women's corpses long before she began the project. And Proctor came to her project in the research for another that she ultimately did not make. Therefore, these films represent the process of these filmmakers' attempts to "kill off" the effects of these damaging themes and images

on themselves as female spectators.⁷⁶ In chapter three, I will elaborate on how this process manifests itself in self-reflexive female-directed films that combine horror and humor.

⁷⁶ I refer here to Negra's point that her character in *Flesh* "[kills] off internalized patriarchy, internalized racism, within herself and [get] rid of these harmful elements that are blocking her from her own growth."

4.0 Chapter Three: Self-Destruction, Self-Creation, and Eroticism in Women's Horror-Comedy Film

When asked why she chose to make horror films, filmmaker Mattie Do pinpoints the genre's universality as a crucial draw: "Everybody gets fear. Everybody knows what it's like to ... hold your breath and not make a sound or the murderer is going to find you and kill you."⁷⁷ In contrast, citing her multicultural background, Do finds comedic films less attractive because humor hinges so dependently on cultural fluency. Speaking of British humor, for instance, she recalls being told by friends that she simply did not "get" the humor. She responds to this by acknowledging that she "[understands] that it's supposed to be funny, but I don't understand the real reason why everyone is laughing." For Do, who was raised in California to Vietnamese-Lao parents and today lives and works in Vientiane, comedy is not a viable mode for the stories she wants to tell.⁷⁸ To her, horror is readily digestible, enjoyable, and relatable across cultural boundaries, while she finds comedy at odds with these qualities. As Do's account emphasizes, comedy depends vitally on reception: what some find funny might offend others. Furthermore, Do is speaking from a specific viewing position: as a woman of color who was raised in the United States, she is sensitive to how humor can be used as an ideological weapon against marginalized groups.⁷⁹ Perhaps because of her subject position and negative experiences with peers and

⁷⁷ All citations from Do are taken from an interview with the author held in June 2018.

⁷⁸ Do does not touch upon whether certain forms of comedy, such as slapstick, have stronger potential to appeal to different national audiences than others.

⁷⁹ As a cultural and social product, comedy tends to be exclusionary. It is divided along the lines of socioeconomic class, gender, and minority status: "if you're high up in the status structure, you tend to make jokes at the expense of those below you. If you're low in the status structure, you are as likely to make jokes at your own expense as to make jokes at the expense of others" (Barreca, *Snow White* 26). Furthermore, there is a longstanding tradition of women's exclusion from comedy across its wide-ranging forms. Lucy Fischer has pointed to the historical absence of female

acquaintances that used humor to put her down, Do neglects—or refuses—to acknowledge the possibility that horror and comedy can be productively combined.

The horror-comedy subgenre has flourished alongside the evolution of the horror genre; in many cases, it functions as parody of more serious horror films, but in others it reveals the formal similarities between horror and humor.⁸⁰ As a subgenre, horror-comedy depends crucially on self-reflexivity and on the expectation that its audience will be familiar with (if not fluent in) the cinematic language of the horror genre. Horror-comedy demands audience engagement on some level; “getting” the joke depends on recognizing horror’s tropes, codes, and conventions. Formally, horror and humor may seem at odds with one another: in the most basic definition, comedies are expected to provoke laughter, while horror films are expected to provoke fear. However, as scholars who have written about the tonalities of humor and fear—and the horror-comedy subgenre

figures in comedy altogether, with focus on the maternal figure in particular (*Cinematernity* 111-130). Comedy is also a gendered issue; female comedians face more difficulties in gaining legitimacy and avoiding vilification than their male counterparts. Scholars such as Maggie Hennefeld, Kristen Anderson Wagner, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, and Linda Mizejewski are contributing to an ever-growing historiography of female comedy with the underlying motive of rectifying the idea—articulated most famously by Christopher Hitchens—that women cannot be funny, or are not interested in being funny. Even when women do laugh, or wield comedy as their own, feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero notes that female laughter has long been associated with ignorance in the face of her intellectual (male) superiors. Hennefeld also notes a tendency to retroactively recast women’s experiences through the lens of tragedy and melodrama, rather than humor, even though “Erasures, elisions, blind spots, and slips of the tongue are the lingua franca of humor, not the exclusive property of tragedy or melodrama” (“Editor’s Introduction” 3). Paradoxically, comedy is also an art of marginality and resistance against oppressors: “comedy was for centuries the most appropriate genre for representing the lives, not of the ruling classes, of those with extensive power, but of the ‘middle’ and ‘lower’ orders of society, those whose power was limited and local” (Krutnik & Neale 12-13). In these terms, comedy should naturally be—and is—wielded by women and minorities against patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacy.⁸⁰ I name horror-comedy a subgenre to avoid complicating the concept with terms such as “mode” or “category,” even if—like comedy overall—horror-comedy films do not necessarily contain distinct iconography or syntax across films. For more on horror-comedy, see William Paul, *Laughing Screaming*. In this study of gross-out horror and comedy, Paul uses the concept of the carnivalesque to discuss inversion in these genres and to define “gross-out” as a genre of its own. For a comprehensive overview of horror-comedy titles spanning from 1914-2008, see Bruce Hallenbeck, *Comedy-Horror Films: A Chronological History*. The list of films he provides gives a revealing snapshot of cultural and national investments in the subgenre (see pages 209-230). The overwhelming majority of horror-comedy films within the 94 years Hallenbeck covers are USA productions, with a handful of titles from the UK, France, Italy, Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand. Offerings from Hong Kong, Japan, and Thailand increase particularly toward the new millennium. This suggests that horror-comedy in particular has gained cross-cultural appeal.

specifically—argue, there are ample similarities between their mode of address and how they manipulate formal elements.

Separately, horror and humor depend on incongruity.⁸¹ This is the element that brings them together so fluidly. As Noël Carroll writes, they “share an overlapping necessary condition insofar as an appropriate object of both states involves the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation” (“Horror and Humor” 154). The words “incongruity,” “subversion,” “transgression,” and “inversion” are frequently employed by scholars and critics who investigate the seemingly counterintuitive relationship between the modalities of terror and laughter, as well as the two separately.⁸² These terms suggest that the unification of horror and comedy necessitates some version of shock through transgression: “At their most basic level, both comedy and horror depend on the shock of the unexpected: the subversion of the audience’s expectations” (Miller & Van Riper xiv). Alfred Hitchcock’s films demonstrate that the most effective thrillers and horror films are not undermined, but reinforced, by their use of humor.⁸³ However, his films are rarely classified as comedies; rather, they prove that the two tonalities (dark and light) coexist productively.⁸⁴ *Psycho* (1960), which shocked its unsuspecting audiences and

⁸¹ According to Geoff King, “In order to be marked out as comic, the events represented—or the mode of representation—tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world. Comedy often lies in the gap between the two, which can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration” (3). There is comedic pleasure to be found in “subverting traditional film narrative and codes of articulation” (Horton 9). Like horror, melodrama, and experimental film, comedy is notoriously difficult to define, and doing so is not within the purview of my task here. In fact, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai suggest, ambiguity is a crucial tenet of comedy: there is something internal to comedy—maybe its capacity to hold together a greater variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects—that makes its boundaries so uniquely ambiguous” (239). This is due, they continue, to “its capacity to absorb other aesthetic forms into modes, representational and aesthetic logics” (239).

⁸² Dirk Eitzen and Isabel Pinedo mention incongruity; Carroll mentions transgression; Miller & Van Riper mention subversion; William Paul mentions inversion.

⁸³ Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972) exemplifies this in its grotesque pairing of the rape and murder of a young woman edited alongside a slapstick sequence in which her would-be policeman rescuers hitch a ride with a woman driving a chicken cart.

⁸⁴ William Paul also makes this connection in *Laughing Screaming*.

forever changed the landscape of the horror genre and the movie-going habits of an entire nation, nicely demonstrates that shock is a key term for both horror and comedy.⁸⁵

While the combination of horror and comedy is significant in aesthetic terms, its reliance on shock suggests that it is also significant for its unique audience engagement. The employment of shock in horror films already serves to produce laughter, whether or not a film overtly engages comedy.⁸⁶ As Linda Williams notes of *Psycho*'s early audiences, there is joy in collective fear. Carol Clover also touches upon the pleasures of horror spectatorship in her brief discussion of shock in the slasher film, but she is more baffled than anything: "Audiences express uproarious disgust ('Gross!') as often as they express fear, and it is clear that the makers of slasher films pursue the combination" (41). For William Paul, the gross-out effect is valuable "*because of [its] willingness to confront things we normally feel compelled to look away from*" (20). The audience that Clover describes is gleefully aware of the ambiguous pleasures to be found in looking at the gross-out. Clover, however, does not know what to make of this "rapid alteration between registers—between something like 'real' horror on the one hand and a camp, self-parodying horror on the other" (41). Similarly, Robin Wood describes the "terrifying experience" of seeing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* "with a large, half-stoned youth audience who cheered and applauded every one of Leatherface's outrages against their representatives on the screen" ("Introduction" 22). He sees this kind of audience engagement as a communal celebration among youth in response to seeing the destruction of civilization onscreen. Vera Dika is more sympathetic to these audiences, but she also notes the seeming contradictions in spectatorship of graphic horror: "the youngsters (who ranged across the spectrum of race and class) greeted the gruesome events on

⁸⁵ See Williams, "Discipline and Fun"; Naremore, "Hitchcock and Humor."

⁸⁶ See Adam Charles Hart, *Monstrous Forms* (particularly pp. 31-39), for more on involuntary audience laughter in horror spectatorship

screen with open enthusiasm, cheering, laughing, and encouraging the actions of both the heroine *and* the killer” (9).⁸⁷

These are the same audiences that Williams describes when she equates the knowing viewers of slasher films in the 1970s and beyond to roller coaster enthusiasts; these audiences quickly grew accustomed to the shock offered in *Psycho* and, just as quickly, demanded more. Adam Lowenstein refers to Clover’s baffled reaction to horror spectatorship, offering—like Williams—a possible interpretation that does not rely on analyzing these films in terms of identification, but with an ambiguous, ambivalent, and enjoyable pain/pleasure experience of viewing violent spectacle.⁸⁸ Like shock, spectacle is central to the experience of watching horror and comedy. The slasher film is the subgenre of horror referenced most frequently when scholars discuss spectacle and contradictory audience responses in the genre: “bloody and horribly violent, they prove deeply repulsive to some but exciting or amusing to others” (Dika 9). Lowenstein suggests that there is a “target audience” (“Spectacle Horror” 43) for such films, and that the spectatorship terms offered by Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005) in particular are predicated on contradiction: “we must carry the pain as well as the pleasure” (58) of the film’s spectacular violence, which is not as easy to dismiss as many critics believe.

Williams also nods to the idea that horror film spectatorship involves both pleasure and pain when she argues that women identify not necessarily with the characters onscreen but with the other women in the theatre. When she writes that “Because women already perceive themselves

⁸⁷ Dika’s study of the slasher subgenre precedes Clover’s by two years. Clover’s argument hinges upon the idea that audiences encourage “both the heroine *and* the killer”; she expands upon this to argue that audience approval of both figures signifies a viewership based on gender, in which audiences shift from identification with the killer to the Final Girl.

⁸⁸ Lowenstein picks up where Clover left off in two separate articles, directly referring to her bafflement regarding the audience’s “uproarious disgust.” See Lowenstein, “Spectacle Horror” and “The *Giallo*/Slasher Landscape.”

as more vulnerable to penetration” (“Discipline and Fun” 370), she echoes Lucy Fischer’s point that horror is predisposed to exploit these vulnerabilities in ways that women can relate to. This is the foundation of one crucial aspect of the communal experience she ascribes to women’s spectatorship of horror: “We enjoy being scared *with one another*—a camaraderie” (371) that transcends identification with the cinematic characters. But another aspect is cross-gendered and happens over time and as a result of disciplining oneself to viewing horror. The viewers who were shocked by *Psycho* enabled the audiences of slasher films to enjoy the pain and pleasure of viewing violence. As we grow accustomed to shocking spectacles of violence and horror, learn the tropes, and begin to become impressed by films that escalate or innovate, the genre becomes ripe for comedic, self-reflexive experimentation. Women’s gendered viewing positions result in a gendered pain/pleasure experience of viewing horror violence onscreen. Like Isabel Pinedo, I believe “there is more to be gained by approaching the question of female spectatorship of horror by keeping both pleasure and danger in play” (69). This experience depends on recognizing bodily or emotional violence against women in film. But it also depends on the experience of enjoying the violent spectacles in horror films. Women-directed horror-comedy films explore or revise women’s issues specific to the experiences and stereotypes of horror spectatorship.

In this chapter’s two sections, I pair films from 1969 and 1975 that have thematic ties to the women’s liberation movement alongside women-directed horror-comedy films from 2009 and 2017. In Section 1, I constellate two feature-length films: Nelly Kaplan’s *La Fiancée du Pirate* (1969) and Karyn Kusama’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009). These films place a sexually aggressive “bad girl” at their center and, because of their length, put forth a character-based comedic style that engages the “comic grotesque,” in which “[ludicrous] and horrific elements rest, more or less, in equal balance” (Barasch 6). In Section 2, I pair short films: Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the*

Kitchen (1975) and Jan Oxenbergs's *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975) alongside Jennifer Bonior and Dyce Wildman's *Inside the House* (2017) and Devi Snively's *I Spit on Eli Roth* (2009) as comedies and horror-comedies that engage a short, scenario-based structure that results in subverting expectations and engaging with visual play. These films employ what I call "feminine-coded objects"—for instance, kitchen objects and cosmetic materials—for self-destructive purposes in ways that point to the possibilities of both re-creation and recreation in genre. The differences in length between the films under discussion in each section also bears on differences in their narrative form and formal presentations of comedy. However, all three earlier films express feminist rage against stereotypes, the constraints of domestic femininity, and the expression of female pleasure—three concerns that were critically important for the feminist movement. Their successors in horror also address these concerns, but they revise them through their familiarity with and affection for the horror genre. When practitioners employ comedy, both filmmaking contexts (the mid-century women's movement and the twenty-first century women's horror cinema renaissance) rely on collectivity (collective rage, joy, pain, and pleasure) and are invested in forging a language of cinema that speaks to women's pleasure. In the films I discuss in this chapter, this endeavor results in ambiguous and contradictory expressions of self-destruction and self-creation. I argue that these films cannot always be read as critiques or instances of "counter-cinema" against dominant cinema; they reflect a collective eroticism that relies on the combination of female pleasure and pain.

Both *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* were both produced in 1975, the same year as Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article about women's representation in cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Significantly, *La Fiancée du Pirate* preceded Mulvey's article by several years. Mulvey proposed that women should use cinema to destroy

visual pleasure associated with classical Hollywood cinema, because visual pleasure depends on the ingrained objectification and fetishization of women. Mulvey's argument is worth citing at length:

The alternative cinema provides a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film. This is not to reject the latter moralistically, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it and, further, to stress that the alternative cinema must start specifically by reacting against these obsessions and assumptions. A politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can still only exist as a counterpoint. (59-60).

Mulvey's hugely influential article and its assumptions about the spectator has been the subject of numerous critical debates, and it single-handedly launched psychoanalytic feminist film theory (Rich, *Chick Flicks* 2; Modleski, *Women* 1). While I do not address these debates here, it is important to mention that Mulvey's reference to "the society which produced [mainstream film]" means patriarchy to her, but removes any influence of women in art and culture. For Mulvey in 1975, cinema—which reflected the investments of society—was equated with men (and the "male gaze"). The only potential for women's liberation in cinema was to begin again.

Semiotics of the Kitchen, *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts*, and *La Fiancée du Pirate* demonstrate that before and during the time of Mulvey's writing, women found ways to exercise politically and aesthetically innovative filmmaking that also privileged and prioritized female pleasure (in this case, through laughter) without destroying visual pleasure and by acknowledging, in certain ways, for female pleasure in viewing Hollywood cinema. *La Fiancée du Pirate* proves that the expression of pleasure in women's filmmaking does not—and did not before the time of

Mulvey's writing—necessarily “only exist in counterpoint” to male-directed cinema. Instead, Nelly Kaplan's own theorization from 1964 on the potential for women's liberation in cinema offers a useful critical framework for discussing how the films I analyze here explore female pleasure:

When the endless servitude of woman is broken, wrote the Seer, then will she find things strange, unfathomable repulsive, delicious, then will she know how to offer us the song of seaman and mattress instead of the boring laments on some sad, drifting little women they vainly try to make us swallow, she, too, will be a poet! It isn't a matter of reversing the roles within *the same stories* ... but of discovering *the unknown*, expressing that ‘other’ eroticism still so badly, so infrequently represented on the screen. On this planet are a few seers, female ones, who armed with a lens would cause a great stir in the world of the darkened theater. (“At the Warriors’ Table” 127, emphasis in original)

Unlike Mulvey, Kaplan is wholly invested in female pleasure and the ambiguous “unknown ... ‘other’ ” of female eroticism. As *La Fiancée du Pirate* demonstrates, this does not necessarily mean rejecting or refusing the pleasure of presenting the body (female or male) in sexual terms. Instead, it means revising those terms to suit the erotic needs of women.

When Kaplan names female eroticism as “unknown” and “other,” she does not adopt essentialist notions of women as “other” to men. Instead, she suggests that women's eroticism deviates from the terms of eroticism as defined by patriarchal society, and that this deviation is rarely explored in film. Kaplan's writing anticipates that of two other feminist thinkers: Hélène Cixous's “Laugh of the Medusa” in 1975, and Audre Lorde's “Uses of the Erotic” in 1978. For Cixous, the act of writing is, for women, akin to desire: “it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (880). For

Lorde, eroticism is a sensation that can be—but is not necessarily—linked to sexual pleasure, and it points to more expansive and collective possibilities: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (54). These expressions of female desire and eroticism are opaque and based on complex feelings through personal labor, satisfaction, pleasure, and pain.

Implicit in these writings is the expectation that these feelings are experienced differently for different women, even if they also enable collective joy—and collective anger. In other words, female pleasure is not easy to define, but it drives artistic endeavors. I posit that the expression of “uproarious disgust” among collective horror audiences is akin to the pleasure and pain of eroticism according to Kaplan and Lorde, and that these manifest themselves in women’s horror cinema in ambiguous ways. Horror-comedy brings together the self-reflexivity of comedy and the gleeful pleasure of gory spectacles of bodily destruction. Women’s horror-comedy cinema points out the ambiguities, contradictions, and pleasures of viewing and making horror as acts that unite eroticism and self-destruction. Furthermore, horror is a unique tool through which filmmakers can engage the “language” of comedy in a way that is translatable across different audiences. Understanding comedy-horror depends on the cultural fluency of horror; it is important that audiences are able to recognize the codes and conventions commonly used in the horror genre. *Inside the House*, *I Spit on Eli Roth*, and *Jennifer’s Body* are all made by fans of the horror genre. They all engage with different aspects of horror filmmaking, while demonstrating their makers’ intimate knowledge of horror conventions. Therefore, the horror tropes they adapt through humor are immediately recognizable to audiences.

Another intention in these pages is to curtail perpetual “amnesia [concerning] women’s long and unruly history of participation in comedy and comic performances” (Mizejewski & Stuyvesant 8). Women’s relationship to comedy is fraught with tensions regarding composure and femininity. In this way, it mirrors women’s exclusion from dominant horror filmmaking. Horror-comedy is one subgenre of horror where women are strikingly absent as makers, whether by choice or circumstance. While women’s horror filmmaking plays frequently with genre—mixing horror with melodrama, experimental film, and the musical—the cases of women-directed horror-comedy films remain few and far between. Jackie Kong’s *Blood Diner* (1987), Cindy Sherman’s *Office Killer* (1998), and Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000) are notable exceptions. Even the amount of short comedy-horror films written or directed by women is scant, but far more women are exploring the subgenre in the short form than in feature-length films. The comparative absence of women working in horror-comedy is noteworthy on its own, but it also heightens the urgency to critically analyze the films that do exist in the subgenre, while drawing on the history of women as makers, rather than performers, in comedy film.⁸⁹

A core argument underscoring much of this dissertation is that film production offers female horror fans the opportunity not to ignore or pick and choose the aspects of horror films to celebrate, as they might do as fans, but to explore, rectify, or engage with the contradictory spectatorial pleasures of these tropes in their own films. The intersection of comedy and horror offers a unique critical direction for analyzing how this process works, because both horror and comedy tend to engage the postmodern elements that Pinedo ascribes to the horror film; as she

⁸⁹ As Linda Mizejewski notes, female stars are not known for their own wit but for their performances of witty comic scripts” (Pretty/Funny 1). Rather than being lauded for their sense of humor, they are accepted for their “good comic timing” (1) in male-written scripts. As a result, female performers receive more scholarly attention than female directors or writers working in comedy.

writes, “comedy and terror are closely tied in recreational horror” (46). Both humor and horror, Noël Carroll argues, are “necessarily linked to the problematization, violation, and transgression of standing categories, norms, and concepts” (152). Importantly, humor depends on the pre-existing knowledge of its audience to “get” the joke, just as the many horror films that refer to other horror films depend on the cultural knowledge of their audience to pick up on the reference. This implies collectivity in an audience, and it does not seem coincidental that the three horror films I discuss below also place female friendship and collaboration at the forefront.

4.1 Self-Creation in *La Fiancée du Pirate* and *Jennifer’s Body*

Nelly Kaplan’s *La Fiancée du Pirate* (1969) and Karyn Kusama’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) acknowledge physical and behavioral stereotypes associated with women—slut, whore, man-eater, witch, Jezebel—and use them to enact male anxieties about women through the literal manifestation of these stereotypes.⁹⁰ Kaplan’s protagonist in *La Fiancée du Pirate* is Marie (Bernadette Lafont), a young woman who lives with her mother in a small shack in the woods bordering the fictional French town of Tellier. Both mother and daughter live in servitude, at once exploited and ostracized by the townspeople because of their gypsy origins and because the townspeople suspect Marie’s mother to be a witch. When Marie’s mother is killed in a hit-and-run accident, Marie invites the men of the town—among them the mayor, the grocer, and the priest—to her shack, where she entices them with wine and a freshly groomed sexual persona to help bury her mother’s body outside her home in an explicit rejection of the church. She begins to seduce

⁹⁰ *La Fiancée du Pirate* is also known as *A Very Curious Girl* and *Dirty Mary*.

the men of the town as a way to exert power over them, and when they shoot her beloved pet goat in a mini-riot against her, she begins to openly prostitute herself on the dependent, lustful men of Tellier, arbitrarily raising her prices and slowly accumulating a horde of treasures from her local clients and from shops in neighboring towns to adorn her shack and the double grave of her mother and the goat. As Karyn Kay writes, “She could never before afford such reckless consumerism, but now she flaunts before the villagers the objects of newly acquired power and independent means” (47).

Meanwhile, the town men—and the sole other prominent female character, the lesbian landowner Irene—plan trap after trap to return Marie to her previous servitude, and she continually thwarts each one in turn, expressing her sexual dominance and her careless attitude. Marie’s sole ally is Andre (Michel Constantin), the traveling projectionist who screens films throughout the region, who also brings her goods such as a tape recorder. At the film’s close, Marie enters the church during a service in which all the townspeople who abused her are present and, using the tape recorder, plays damning snippets she recorded during her clients’ visits, intercut with the song “Moi, Je Me Balance” (sung by the singer Barbara), which she plays on her phonograph regularly throughout the film. When the livid townspeople arrive at her shack to punish her, she has anticipated their attack and set her home and possessions on fire. The film ends with Marie skipping cheerfully on a country road, kicking off her heels and following a sign for “La Fiancée du Pirate,” the film Andre is currently screening in a neighboring town. It is unclear whether she means to follow him or not.⁹¹

⁹¹ Karyn Kay points out that this ending scene evokes two Hollywood films, Joseph Mankiewicz’s *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954) and Josef von Sternberg’s *Morocco* (1930), but that *La Fiancée du Pirate* “concludes ... as a happy alternative to the miserable conditions” of both films; “the close of *A Very Curious Girl* is a victory of self-discovery, of an identity won” (49).

As Kaplan herself has noted and as the film's title suggests, *La Fiancée du Pirate* is inspired by the song "Pirate Jenny" from Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, but—unlike the exploited character of Jenny—Kaplan's film enacts literal, rather than wishful, revenge.⁹² In several interviews, Kaplan describes her experience of trying to distribute the film as a struggle against male censors who were uncomfortable with Marie's final triumph and preferred to see her punished at the close. Kaplan, however, continues to reinforce the character of Marie "as a witch who doesn't let herself be burned; she sets fire to others" (Dupont 28).⁹³ As she states in an interview with Barbara Halperin Martineau, Kaplan consciously avoided painting Marie through sin or guilt. Instead, she sees the film as "a liberated comedy. That's why people laugh. They laugh because there's an identification, and when Marie becomes free you laugh because you're happy for her happiness" (Martineau 21). Linda Greene similarly relates the experience of viewing the film in 1973: a scene in which Marie thwarts a physical attack from one of the locals "galvanized the women in the audience. Our spontaneous, collective outbreak of delighted laughter, cheers and applause scared and scandalized the men in the audience but for us was a rare, joyous experience" (n.p.). A core source of Marie's strength is in her association with witchcraft, which, as Kaplan emphasizes, is meant literally: "Marie herself *knows* things, because she's a witch. It's not

⁹² "Pirate Jenny" was also the inspiration for Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), but the differences between the two films are enormous: importantly, Kaplan's film only briefly shows Marie's servitude before she takes revenge, while von Trier's film prolongs his protagonist's suffering for the majority of his film, which is three hours long. In *Dogville*, furthermore, Grace (Nicole Kidman) does not personally exact revenge against her abusers, but allows someone else to do it for her.

⁹³ In an interview with Kay Harris for *Women and Film* vol. 2, Kaplan elaborates: "I think the reason some men—not men, males—were so strongly against the film was because there was no feeling of the sense of sin. This prostitute is a woman, a human being, and not only a woman but a woman who will punish the others and she will go away free...and this they cannot afford. They told me—when I had problems with showing the film—'if at least she was killed'...but I don't want to have her killed! ... I like witches to win" (35). See also her interview with Barbara Halperin Martineau in *Notes on Women's Cinema*: "I wanted to tell the story of a whore who doesn't repent, and is very happy, and goes away, and begins to become free ... what I care about is to keep away the sentiment of guilt" (18).

superstition. She knows magic things” (Martineau 18). Kaplan reverses the typical punishment for witches: Marie burns the townspeople, rather than the other way around. However, the film closes after Marie has burned her own possessions and the house where she lived with her mother, the only human character in the film apart from Andre for whom she expresses any affection. This is an act of self-destruction as much as it serves to cleanse her; by destroying her old life, she can create a new one according to her terms.

Despite her connections to the surrealist movement in France, Kaplan denies that *La Fiancée du Pirate* is surrealist—“But it’s not realist either!” (Dupont 28). It is, instead, a kind of “fairytale” (Martineau 22).⁹⁴ As Chris Holmund notes, about Kaplan’s work in general—across film and literature—she explores “connections among horror, the surreal, the fantastic and the erotic” (365). Furthermore, Kaplan resists association with the feminist movement or organized feminism. Even so, the film is widely received as a gleeful feminist fantasy, and Kaplan herself sees the film as an expression of revenge for women and their oppression at the hands of men. She says: “To take possession of their strength again, [women] must have revenge” (Harris 34). As Greene points out, “The sexual politics of Kaplan’s film are tremendously effective because they satisfy the nearly boundless, well-justified vindictiveness which many women feel toward men” (n.p.). But Greene also suggests that this is the source of the film’s shortcomings: “because of its sexual politics, the film doesn’t satisfy a more important need—the need we have for naturalistic, revolutionary feminist films which would present women (or women and men) working together toward a common goal in a non-competitive and non-exploitative manner” (n.p.). It is one-sided in its misandry, even as it presents one sympathetic male character and does not automatically

⁹⁴ See chapter six of Michael Richardson’s *Surrealism and Cinema* for a discussion of Nelly Kaplan’s link to the surrealist movement.

excuse all female characters (Irene takes advantage of Marie as much as the others, while Kaplan might argue that the town wives are not liberated, or “free” [Martineau 20] from male oppression). Female rage is central to the film’s liberating politics, which anticipates the underlying tone of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* as discussed in Section 2; the registers of pleasure and pain are thus united in *La Fiancée du Pirate*. As Martha Rosler says in an interview, “Until you face your own anger, you can’t get rid of it or channel it constructively” (Weinstock 86). Despite Kaplan’s self-distancing from the feminist movement, her film engages with many of these same steps that feminist artists found useful in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 2009, the horror-comedy *Jennifer’s Body* takes up the legacy of female pleasure and liberation through self-destruction set in place by *La Fiancée du Pirate*. The film takes the point of view, through voice-over, of the bookish high schooler Needy (Amanda Seyfried) as her best friend, Jennifer (Megan Fox) undergoes a demonic transformation from a sexually promiscuous cheerleader to a literal man-eater. When Jennifer takes Needy to an indie rock concert by the band Low Shoulder at a dive bar, a fire breaks out and several people die inside. After Needy and Jennifer escape, they meet the band outside and Jennifer goes with the lead singer Nikolai (Adam Brody), who appears to be interested in Jennifer only because he mistakenly believes she is a virgin. Later that night, Jennifer comes to Needy’s home and wordlessly devours a rotisserie chicken, then projectile vomits black sludge all over the kitchen floor before departing. Needy begins to note drastic personality changes in Jennifer, such as her apathetic callous reaction to the collective mourning for the dive bar tragedy. The film departs briefly from Needy’s point of view to show Jennifer seducing a bereaved jock, taking him into the woods surrounding the school, and eating him alive. After this encounter, it becomes clear that Jennifer needs to feed on human flesh in order to maintain her good looks and humor, clear skin, and lush hair; otherwise, she becomes

greasy-haired, sallow-skinned, and cranky. Jennifer chooses to feast only on male flesh—even if, as she tells Needy at the end of the film, “I go both ways.”

Jennifer, it seems, also goes both ways in the colloquial meaning of the term: one night, she shows up in Needy’s bed and quells Needy’s attempts to throw her out by kissing her. The two engage in an intense makeout session that, because it is filmed in extreme close-up, contrasts the robotic sexual encounter between Needy and her boyfriend, Chip (Johnny Simmons) in an earlier scene. That same night, she confides in Needy to explain how her transformation took place: after the dive bar tragedy, Low Shoulder performed a ritualistic sacrifice on her in order to bring them fame and success. Because Jennifer was not a virgin, as the band believed, the ritual resulted in her demonic possession. By the time of the school formal, Jennifer has eaten three of their peers and begins to show an interest in Chip. That night, Needy hunts her down in an abandoned pool house, where she has lured Chip and begun to attack him. Together, Chip and Needy fight Jennifer and drive a large iron bar through her torso, but not before she inflicts lethal injuries on Chip. Jennifer escapes, and later that night Needy comes to Jennifer’s home to stab her across the heart with a box-cutter, killing her and the demon possessing her. Needy is blamed for the crimes and placed in an institution for the criminally insane. At the film’s closed, Needy reveals that Jennifer’s non-lethal bite transferred demonic powers (without the craving for human flesh) onto her. Needy uses her newfound powers of super-strength and levitation to escape from the institution and take violent revenge on Low Shoulder. The carnage is shown in crime scene photographs over the ending credits.

Although *Jennifer’s Body* was directed by Karyn Kusama, its authorial signature is often attributed to its screenwriter, Diablo Cody, best known for penning the Oscar-winning coming-of-

age comedy *Juno* (2007).⁹⁵ In his production notes for the film, producer Jason Reitman describes *Jennifer's Body* as a revenge fantasy: "The jock gets it. The sweet nerd gets it. The Goth kid gets it. This may just be Diablo's revenge on every type of boy she's ever met" (Paszkiewicz 63). While Jennifer's man-eating drives may represent a kind of revenge against various kinds of masculinities (especially stereotypical high school masculinities), the operative word underpinning Jennifer's actions is not revenge, but need (suggesting that Needy is not the only "needy" party in their relationship). Importantly, Jennifer twice considers eating Needy: once right after she has been possessed and devours the rotisserie chicken in Needy's kitchen, and once during the scene when she sneaks into Needy's bed at night. In the latter scene, they share a lengthy kiss instead, despite Needy's initial attempts to get rid of Jennifer.

Considering Jennifer's physical strength and demonic powers, it is clear that she consciously decides not to eat Needy. Instead of demonstrating the depth of Jennifer and Needy's bond, it reinforces the clear hierarchy between them established before Jennifer's demonic transformation. In early scenes of the film, Needy seems enamored with Jennifer ("sandbox love never dies," as she explains in the voiceover), offering her unwavering support and reliable friendship. In return, Jennifer treats Needy like a groupie, imposing unspoken—but strict—rules on Needy's dress code and demeanor in order to make Jennifer look her best. Jennifer's decision not to eat Needy suggests that she, too, needs Needy; without her, Jennifer might not maintain her position of social power. Rather than eat Needy, Jennifer begins to choose her victims more discerningly, turning from seemingly random encounters to choosing her victims among Needy's

⁹⁵ Early reviews of the film focused primarily on Cody's authorship; some even excluded mention of Kusama at all. Joseph Laycock, writing for the *Journal of Religion and Film*, describes it as "the second collaboration of writer Diablo Cody and producer Jason Reitman," and fails entirely to mention Kusama's directorial role. I follow Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's lead in considering Cody and Kusama as co-authors of the film (69).

friends and, in the end, her boyfriend. For Jennifer, their longstanding friendship becomes a mask for the ways Jennifer benefits more from her position of power within the relationship than she does from Needy herself. Jennifer's demonic transformation literalizes and makes explicit the implicit boundaries she set for Needy, and this explicitness enables Needy to stand her ground and ultimately destroy Jennifer. The transformation that Needy undertakes from her position as Jennifer's adoring friend to Jennifer's opponent marks, as well, the destruction of Needy. Finally, this transformation matures after Needy absorbs some of Jennifer's powers and becomes the hardened, humorless criminal. By the end of the film, Needy could not be more different than she appeared at the beginning.⁹⁶

Both *La Fiancée du Pirate* and *Jennifer's Body* feature female characters that seem to fit the characterization of the "unruly woman." Marie and Jennifer embody the stereotype of the sexually dominant, aggressive "bad girl" driven by her desires or bodily needs. The "unruly woman" or "woman on top"⁹⁷ "creates disorder by dominating men and refusing to confine herself to her proper place ... Her behavior is defined by looseness, including sexually ... Associated with dirt, liminality, and taboo, she is above all a figure of the grotesque" (Rowe 10). The categorization is not necessarily positive; despite any liberating potential within inversion or unruly femininity, these states also pose issues for women in society including marginalization and bodily suffering.⁹⁸ As Rowe notes, this process often results in derisive and negatively grotesque representations of women in popular culture that threaten to undermine their empowerment. In *La Fiancée du Pirate*,

⁹⁶ The theme of self-destruction in the film recurs across Kusama's oeuvre, including in *The Invitation* (2015) and *Destroyer* (2018). For an overview of Kusama's films through her contribution to the female-helmed anthology horror film *XX* (2017), see Katherine Farrimond, "Karyn Kusama" in *Cut-Throat Women*.

⁹⁷ See Natalie Zemon Davis, "Woman on Top."

⁹⁸ For Maggie Hennefeld, the carnivalesque "unruly woman" is a not an empowering figure, because "it also represents an inescapable response to industrial mechanization: an entrapment of the living body in the ceaseless production of revolutionary novelty" that "portray female comicality as a profoundly fraught and often agonizing state" (*Specters* 15-16).

Marie is seen as a witch and symbolic man-eater, while Jennifer is possessed by a demon that turns her into a literal man-eater. Both use their bodies in ways that transgress the traditional limits of femininity. However, although Jennifer's man-eating initially appears to associate her with Marie in *La Fiancée du Pirate*, Needy's self-destructive acts—and her will to survive—align her more closely to Marie as the film progresses.

Ultimately, neither film can be satisfactorily summed up in terms of inversion of transgression. Instead, Kaplan herself offers the guideline for understanding what her film does, and how we might be able to read *Jennifer's Body* in similar terms. I return here to the excerpt discussed in this chapter's introduction, in which Kaplan writes the following: "It isn't a matter of reversing the roles within the same stories ... but of discovering *the unknown*, expressing that 'other' eroticism still so badly, so infrequently represented on the screen" (200). Crucially, Kaplan is not interested in inversion, but in forging new expressions of female pleasure onscreen that should not be regarded as socially taboo, but as natural, powerful, painful and not necessarily at odds with the pleasures offered in mainstream film. This also involves spectacle of some kind: "In playing with excess, Kaplan's film shows that it can be manipulated so entirely that the issue of 'to be looked at' can be reformatted to show women's active control of their representational scene" (Ramanathan 40). Marie can be seen not as an "unruly woman" based on transgression and liminality, but as an unapologetic agent of female pleasure and self-creation through excess.

Self-creation requires self-destruction; while gathering her strength to dominate the men of the town, she destroys her ability to continue living there. Her final, destructive act of burning her own possessions leads to her liberation. At the close of the film, she walks toward an entirely new life of her own creation. While Jennifer is certainly unapologetic, her human self aligns more closely with Marie than her demonic self. Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that Needy

is the true agent of self-creation. Furthermore, Jennifer's fits inversion more closely according to Kaplan's writing, while Needy fulfills the expression of "unknown ... 'other' eroticism" that Kaplan emphasizes a need for. It is important to remember that Jennifer's transformation occurred at the hands of men, while Needy's occurred through Jennifer's bite. The mode of transmission, therefore, suggests that these expressions of transformed selfhood depend, on some level, on gender.

This also returns to the erotic connection between Needy and Jennifer. In this scene, Jennifer initiates the kiss, but Needy returns it. The sex scene between Needy and Chip is robotic and awkward, but the scene between Needy and Jennifer is sexually erotic; their movements are smooth and natural, and there is a lengthy extreme close-up of their mouths. Once again, this scene reinforces Needy's love for Jennifer and Jennifer's power over Needy, a source of painful and conflicted emotions for Needy in particular. Significantly, a small poster for the gory possession film *The Evil Dead* (1981, directed by Sam Raimi) hangs on Needy's wall and appears multiple times in this scene. The inclusion of this poster highlights Kusama's and Cody's reflexivity regarding other horror films (particularly a horror film that Raimi later recognized as ripe for comedy, as his follow-up/remake *The Evil Dead II* overtly explored), and it also likens Jennifer's demonic possession to the same phenomenon in *The Evil Dead*. But as a central part of the mise-en-scène during a scene of sexual eroticism between two women, it visually connects the erotic scene between them to their spectatorship of horror (or at least Needy's, since it hangs in her bedroom). In other words, this scene explicitly acknowledges female pleasure and pain within the space of horror spectatorship.

If *La Fiancée du Pirate* carves a space for female pleasure and pain to coexist in ways that lead to self-creation via self-destruction, *Jennifer's Body* takes up this task in terms of horror. Both

films also approach their task through comedy, reflecting the importance of pleasurable films made by and for women, rather than producing something akin to Mulvey's call for a feminist counter-cinema that destroys visual pleasure. Kaplan refuses to destroy pleasure in her film; instead, *La Fiancée du Pirate* "deliberately makes use of Hollywood iconography" (Johnston, "Counter-Cinema" 25).⁹⁹ For Kaplan, "It is through the 'entertainment' film that the collective fantasies of women can most easily and most effectively be tapped" (Martineau 15). It is important that while *La Fiancée du Pirate* found a voracious audience among women, Kaplan sensed that some men who watched her film felt threatened by the representation of female power over men (Harris 35). Even if Kaplan and others describe the film as a "fantasy," this suggests that certain viewers found the film too close to reality for comfort. This is in line with the idea that different registers of comedy and horror have different effects: the more formally or narratively absurd they are, the less likely they are to be taken seriously, but "when its imagined futures reflect the excesses of our present, [they] can cut uncomfortably close to the bone" (Miller & Van Riper xvi).

The excess of the literal "man-eater" in *Jennifer's Body* perhaps invites a less divided viewership, but this excess also denotes Kusama's and Cody's intricate knowledge of the horror genre. The comedy of *Jennifer's Body* fluctuates from the "comic grotesque" to the self-referential visual absurdity of numerous horror tropes. Like the films of John Landis, the film "[weaves] caustic dialogue and black humor so thoroughly into the horror that the two become inseparable" (Miller & Van Riper xviii). In an early scene, Needy's science teacher mistakes the jock's death shrieks for the sounds of grieving ("let it all out," he says understandingly). In a later scene, Jennifer lures Colin, a Goth friend of Needy's, to an empty house and violently murders him. At

⁹⁹ As Holmlund writes, "Kaplan's explorations of femininity *and* masculinity from unabashedly 'straight' perspectives are key to her mixes of porn, screwball, gangster, and thriller conventions" (354).

the same time, Needy and Chip are having awkward sex, and Needy has a vision of Jennifer's violent actions that cause her to gasp and cry out; Chip silently congratulates himself on what he perceives to be her sexual pleasure. Later on, at Colin's funeral, his mother reproaches his Goth friends for their obsession with death and describes Colin's dead body as resembling "a lasagna with teeth." In their final fight, Needy slices Jennifer across her heart and Jennifer groans, "my tit!" Her last words are representative of the "caustic dialogue" of the film that, for Jennifer, often include crassness and bodily humor (she and Needy nickname one another "Vagisil" and "Monistat," and in one early scene she laments over the pain of losing her "back door virginity"). These are among several instances in which the film employs the comic grotesque; significantly, many of these emphasize female sexuality and female bodies, in certain ways adapting the uses of "feminine-coded objects" employed by the films in Section 2 onto the female body itself.

The film also employs references to several horror subgenres, films, and figures. Jennifer reflects several longstanding tropes of monstrous femininity, including witchcraft, *femme castratrice*, *vagina dentata*, lesbian vampire, and possessed woman (Paszkievicz 80). Like the figure of the witch, Jennifer is aligned with nature, just as Marie is associated with "the surrealist space of [the] secluded area," which is "unpredictable and dangerous for noninitiates and is defined as different, marinal, isolated, savage, and/or fantastic" (Giukin 100). In accepting Nikolai's invitation to join him and the rest of his band in "his really cool van," Jennifer makes a decision that—viewed through Needy's eyes—appear just as stupid as those of teenagers who make poor decisions in films of the slasher subgenre. Apart from concretizing Needy's possible repressed lesbianism, the scene in which Jennifer and Needy kiss recalls the subgenre of the lesbian vampire that emerged from the Gothic tradition of literature and appeared in films such as *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971, directed by Jess Franco) and *The Hunger* (1983, directed by Tony Scott). Needy's act of

violence against Low Shoulder at the film's close reflects the narrative structure of the rape-revenge film. Finally, Kusama's choice to cast the prolific horror star Lance Henriksen in a minor role at the film's close showcases her familiarity with the genre.¹⁰⁰ This reinforces the visual and thematic influence of horror film fandom on Kusama's film, while including a self-referential layer of meaning for the knowing viewer.

Both *La Fiancée du Pirate* and *Jennifer's Body* aim to be mainstream and pleasurable for women, even if there is a tension between Kaplan's desire to reach a mainstream audience and the "anti-authoritarian and pro-individual" themes in her films (Holmlund 364). Her mainstream intentions are evidenced in her play with genre and her "[deliberate] use of Hollywood iconography" (Johnston 25). In turn, Cody and Kusama's film "heightens spectatorial pleasures and disrupts the gender coding and power relations not by distracting us from, but rather by intensifying, our pleasures" through exaggeration (Paszkievicz 82). In other words, the film's intertextual self-awareness of horror film conventions—and where it embodies these conventions and departs from them, particularly through the female body—reveals its mainstream intentions and aims to offer a pleasurable horror film viewing experience for women in particular. Both films posit that self-creation via self-destruction is an important aspect of cultivating female pleasure onscreen. Mixing comedy and horror in *Jennifer's Body* through gore and black humor, with its focus on the female body and female relationships, aims to fulfill the recreational pleasure and pain of viewing horror for women in particular.

¹⁰⁰ Henriksen is known for his roles in films such as *Aliens* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987), and *Pumpkinhead* (1988).

4.2 Seeing Like a Girl: Self-Destruction in (Horror-)Comedy Shorts

Like experimental film, comedy is well-suited to the short film form, although for different reasons. In fact, most women directing horror in the twenty-first century work primarily in the short film form. There are several reasons for this, above all limited technological or financial resources for first-time or emerging filmmakers, but some filmmakers also prefer to work in the short form and do not only see shorts as stepping-stones to making feature-length films. The length of a film is an important element of discussing its formal conventions. A longer or feature-length film, particularly a comedy, tends to contain narrative context combined with “the multiple use of gags, funny lines, and funny situations” (Krutnik & Neale 12). A short comedy, in turn, does not require a narrative context, and instead might function more closely to briefer instances of “the forms that specifically generate laughter (gags, jokes, wisecracks, and the like)” (Krutnik & Neale 2). In other words, unlike many other genres or modes, feature-length comedies depend on narrative to generate and sustain comedic situations, while short films can function instead like gags or jokes. Short films often focus on a particular theme or unravel a minute scenario and, “[more] than any other form of cinematic narrative, the short fiction film heightens our sense of the preciousness and immediacy of the moment, both in the events portrayed and in the storytelling process” (Raskin, *Art* 173). The four films under discussion in this section, Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Jan Oxenberg’s *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975), Jennifer Bonior and Dycee Wildman’s *Inside the House* (2017), and Devi Snively’s *I Spit on Eli Roth* (2009), deploy various kinds of humor in ways that engage the time constraints of the short film form in different ways. However, they are fueled by the ambiguous combination of anger and pleasure. The films express women’s anger toward misogyny in culture and media, even as they enjoy playing with the stereotypes and formulas they drawn upon and critique. *Inside the House*

and *I Spit on Eli Roth* build upon this mixed anger and pleasure; they express their makers' desire to revel in the violence and gore of the horror films they parody—much like the slasher film audiences described by Clover, Wood, and Dika—while critiquing and playing with negative images of women in the genre.

Semiotics of the Kitchen is a one-take, black-and-white videotape running just over six minutes in runtime, in which Rosler herself stands in a cramped kitchen and progresses through the alphabet by naming kitchen items, the uses of which she performs with the objects as she lists them. Her tone throughout is monotonous and matter-of-fact, and she goes through the kitchen utensils in alphabetical order with deadpan aggression and sullen, exaggerated (and exasperated) movements to demonstrate the purpose of each item. Because she is not actually using the utensils to make a meal, and because her cold tone deliberately contrasts the warmth of Julia Child and other women famous for their kitchens, it is evident, as Charlotte Brunsdon puts it, “that the semiotics of the kitchen signify containment fury, aggression, resentment, and potential revenge. The semiotics of the kitchen has nothing to do with cooking” (111). This is evident as well in the kitchen's lack of food: by displaying and naming a bowl but not filling it, by operating an eggbeater through thin air, and so on, Rosler empties the kitchen of its meaning and strips it to the bare actions necessary to yield the presumed result—a cooked meal. Instead, as Rosler herself says about the film, “I was suggesting that the signs imposed on women are extremely diminishing. This woman is implicated in a system of extreme reduction with respect to herself as a self” (Weinstock 85). Onscreen, Rosler is, as a woman, reduced to function in much the same way as she reduces the objects to their base function, thereby drawing a connection between the emptiness of woman as serving a function and kitchen object as serving a function. By the time she reaches the letter U, Rosler seems to have run out of objects to name and instead mimics the shapes of the

final letters with her upper body, two knives in hand, ending with a “Zorro gesture with raised knives” (Brunsdon 111). She then crosses her arms and her expression softens as she shrugs at the camera, and the short ends.

Semiotics of the Kitchen is a satire of woman’s role, place, and function in society expressed in second-wave feminist terms. It utilizes one of two narrative strategies that Nancy Walker identifies as critical for cultivating female humor as a collective goal—namely, direct address, or “an inclusion of the reader in the concerns of the writer, assuming shared values and problems” (68). This sentiment is echoed by Lisa Merrill, who takes recourse from Henri Bergson when she notes that “a sense of shared norms or values are necessary to perceive something as humorous” (273). *Semiotics of the Kitchen* reflects the rage in response to patriarchal oppression felt by many second-wave feminists, and for which second-wave feminists were often accused of lacking a sense of humor.¹⁰¹ In addition to being a social satire on gender roles, of course, the film serves as parody of televised kitchen shows and personalities such as Julia Child. Intentionally contrasting Child’s careful culinary skills and delicate pedagogy, Rosler unites rage and humor in her film through her physical presence, channeling second-wave feminist anger through aggressive humor that empties the kitchen of any value associated with cooking and homemaking. Rosler describes the experience of seeing audiences view her film as one that reflects this combination of anger and humor: “They laugh, and they recognize the logic of an aggression which is unfocused and undirected” (Weinstock 86). Anger and aggression is crucial to the film because, as Rosler continues, “The expression of anger is a step toward resistance and change and, as the women’s liberation movement discovered, it’s a step that can’t be bypassed” (Weinstock 86). Even so, Rosler also acknowledges the dismissive shrug at the film’s close as another important step for

¹⁰¹ Citron touches on this in “Comic Critique.”

feminists: “she minimizes the degree of power and aggression she has displayed ... She’s still there at the end, stuck to the spot, no further brutalized than at the beginning” (86). Rosler thus describes feminist anger as a process of expressing anger and accepting its limitations. Her violent gestures in the film co-exist and clash tonally with the dismissal of rage and aggression regarding women’s place and representation within American society.

In 2017, Nashville-based filmmaking duo Jennifer Bonior and Dycee Wildman completed the short *Inside the House*, which stylistically and thematically echoes Rosler’s film with particular attention to codes and conventions unique to slasher films. The film has no dialogue and is only four minutes long including the end credits. It unravels a simple scenario that is immediately familiar to any viewer even remotely familiar with slasher film tropes. The film opens with a shot of a sprawling, isolated country home at dusk, then cuts to a handheld point-of-view shot—the murderous I-camera reminiscent of the opening of *Halloween* (1978), or what Adam Charles Hart calls the “Killer POV” (89) and Pinedo calls the “unclaimed POV shot.”¹⁰² The camera stalls as it peers through a set of venetian blinds, where it can just make out the figure of a young, slim, blonde woman or teenaged girl in a T-shirt, cutoff shorts, and high ponytail as she stands to pick something off a shelf and exits the room. Her silhouette passes over the curtains hanging over glass doors; the camera approaches rapidly and a hand reaches out from behind the camera to try the door, which is locked. On the soundtrack, a brooding, pulsing tone gradually increases in volume and intensity, also reminiscent of the rapid, rhythmic undertone accompanying the piano theme in

¹⁰² Hart defines the “Killer POV” as “a type of shot that is specific to horror (or to other genres when they seek to emulate horror): a subjective moving camera shot without a reverse shot to reveal the wielder of the look. Killer POV is either handheld or employs a camera stabilization system like Steadicam or Panaglide ... it is a Killer POV sequence so long as it maintains that unique refusal of a reverse shot. This refusal, and the attendant anxiety directed at the viewer, distinguish the technique” (89-90). Pinedo notes that the I-camera “condenses three looks: the look of the camera, the look of the spectator, and the implied look of the monster” (52).

Halloween. The unseen figure positions then positions himself against the bay window of a large living room looking into the kitchen, where the young woman is talking energetically on a landline phone. The camera then cuts inside, no longer tied to a POV shot, as the woman hangs up the phone and walks out of the frame; the film's title appears behind her.

In close-up, the young woman presses “play” on a large boom box, which begins blasting a synthesized, ‘80s-inspired beat. She begins to dance in time to the wordless music, opening cupboards and the refrigerator to pull out salt and pepper, celery, carrots, and an onion. Her T-shirt, which advertises a 1982 road run in Perth Amboy, confirms the setting as within the mid-1980s. Here, the camera cuts back and forth between her upbeat path through the kitchen and a POV shot from the voyeur outdoors. In one shot, he is seen standing in the window peering in—dressed all in black, legs apart in a menacing stance, his bearded face clearly visible—and, when the young woman blocks him from view, he has vanished from sight by the time she turns around. She reaches for a large knife and, still dancing, stands with her back to the window and begins chopping the carrots. Once again, the voyeur is visible through the window, out of sight only for her. Outside, the voyeur stumbles and knocks over a clay pot in the garden, maybe a muffled sound. Inside, the young woman gasps and holds the knife upright in front of her, apparently on sudden guard. The diegetic music stops abruptly as she glances around, remaining in her rigid stance until her nose begins to twitch. When she suddenly sneezes, a close-up shows the knife plunge deep into her right eye. Blood dribbles onto the partially, neatly-chopped carrots, and the camera cuts to show her still holding the knife, now embedded into her skull, as the voyeur leans into the window in disbelief. In a second gruesome close-up, she pulls the knife out of her skull and her gouged eye comes with it, impaled on the blade, and she inspects it with vague interest. As she robotically continues chopping the carrots, the voyeur turns around and disappears into the

night. A final close-up on the vegetables shows the blade chopping carefully but unevenly through the carrots and the eyeball, smearing blood across the cutting board over the end credits.

To Bonior and Wildman, breaking down horror tropes is critical to their artistic intentions as filmmakers. Horror tropes, Wildman says, “become these building blocks that you anticipate ... and then the fun game of horror ... [is to] use them in a brand-new way” (Interview with author, October 2017). Bonior also notes that she is drawn to tonal juxtaposition and incongruity in her artistic practice as a means of exploring and breaking down horror tropes. *Inside the House* works both as a parody of the slasher/stalker genre and a punchline; it requires only the most minimal narrative setup in order to make its joke, and the narrative setup consists not of established characters or plot but codes and conventions recognizable to anyone with enough cultural fluency to recognize slasher film tropes. The film works to set up a gag based on genre tropes involving suspense: “[the gag’s] introduction is delayed while the narration provides the information necessary to generate anticipation” (Krutnik & Neale 57). Until the young woman sneezes, *Inside the House* sets up a very familiar horror film situation in which a (usually) male would-be killer watches and stalks a (usually) female victim. The gag of this short—which is, in fact, the entire purpose of the short—comes from the inversion of expectation, where the real horror comes not from the would-be male killer, but from the person the viewer is primed to believe is the victim. *Inside the House* builds on existing and longstanding horror tropes and presumes that audiences will recognize the patterns of the slasher film’s visual and narrative tropes, and then subverts those expectations with unexpected violence (notably, self-harm) from the anticipated victim.

In addition to *Halloween* and other slasher films, such as the opening scene of *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), in which the first film’s final girl is killed in her kitchen, *Inside the House* brings to mind several earlier films. Most notably, it recalls the opening scene of *Un Chien Andalou*

(1929, dir. Luis Buñuel) in which a woman's eye is slashed open, the voyeuristic scenes of *Rear Window* (1954, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) in which Jeff (James Stewart) watches the ballet dancer across the courtyard as she prances around her kitchen in revealing clothing, the fragmentation of bodies suggested by the body double in Brian De Palma's *Body Double* (1984), and the film-within-a-film opening scene of *Blow Out* (1981, dir. Brian De Palma). The latter film opens with a stalker's POV shot as he enters a sorority house and seeks out a victim; when he finds one showering, he pulls the shower curtain back and she lets loose a weak, wailing squeal rather than the crisp scream viewers likely anticipate. The film then reveals that this is a scene from a horror film that the protagonist, Jack (John Travolta), is working on as a sound effects recorder. Like *Inside the House*, this scene uses what Krutnik and Neale call surprise, and what Noël Carroll calls incongruity humor. Carroll argues that humor and horror both use incongruity, although for different purposes: they are "necessarily linked to the problematization, violation, and transgression of standing categories, norms, and concepts" (152). However, the result in *Blow Out* and *Inside the House* is the same—an unexpected, and therefore humorous, conclusion to an otherwise conventional setup for a slasher film scene. As Carol Clover writes, "The fact that the cinematic conventions of horror are so easily and so often parodied would seem to suggest that, individual variation notwithstanding, its basic structures of apperception are fixed and fundamental" (72). Even a viewer who has seen few slasher films will recognize the basic structure at play in the setup of *Inside the House*. Furthermore, that *Inside the House* so closely resembles the opening scene from *Blow Out* is telling, because it demonstrates that this punchline is best conceived in short form, independent of a larger narrative.

More illuminating are the film's connections to *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. As in Rosler's film, the young woman's kitchen activity in *Inside the House* "has nothing to do with cooking"

(Brunsdon 111); it largely exists to set up the violent punchline to come. If *Inside the House* expresses rage, as Rosler's film does, it is not at domesticity but at the structures of looking that historically dominate horror filmmaking. Even if the film is critically interested in the domestic space, it lacks the family members implied by such a space. The overall tone, furthermore, is tongue-in-cheek, suggesting that any gazing males might see something they would prefer not to see. The heroine's act of impaling her eyeball and then slicing into it mechanically with the vegetables is funny in much the same way that Rosler's militant performance of kitchen utensils is funny. The fundamental incongruity in both is that of removing the functional aspect of the kitchen utensils or the act of cooking. Neither film produces anything edible.

Like *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, *Inside the House* features several incongruities apart from its final inversion of slasher film tropes. It clearly sets up a slasher film scenario in which the threat is expected to move from outside the house to inside. The mise-en-scène places the film in the spirit, at least of the 1980s—during the height of the slasher film's popularity and proliferation. She uses a landline phone, and the SCR-8 boombox blasting the synth-pop mix tape to which she dances is dated between 1982 and 1986. Apart from the refrigerator, however, the kitchen appliances look modern; this film is only a throwback to the 1980s and not a meticulous recreation. As she bobs around the kitchen pulling utensils and ingredients from the shelves, she seems to know exactly what she is doing. The carrots, celery, and onion suggest that she is making a soup or a stew, not simply grabbing a snack. This is a meal for an entire family, made by someone so innately familiar with western cooking conventions that she does not even need to consult a cookbook. Our heroine, who is either a teenager or young adult, does not fit the image of a nurturing cook. In visual terms, she more closely resembles Clover's definition of a slasher film victim: "often sexually free and always young and beautiful" (90). In *Inside the House*, the would-

be victim is young and beautiful, while her form-fitting clothing and carefree dancing suggest a certain liberatory attitude toward sexuality, even if she does not have sex in the film. It is the incongruity between her appearance and her activity—and, later, the nonchalance and impassivity with which she slices through her own eyeball—that vividly recalls Rosler's feminist film. This also points to another incongruity in *Inside the House*: the young woman reflects the babysitter victim of films like *Halloween*, a figure who is utterly useless at her job, preferring sex with her boyfriend to caring for her charge. In *Inside the House*, she is putting together a real meal (until she puts her eye in it), but there is no family or child to be seen.

Her uncannily robotic gestures after she slices open her eye also suggest that the robotic gestures of domesticity are themselves horrific—an idea familiar to viewers of horror films such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975, directed by Bryan Forbes). This suggests that there is violence to domestic acts that remain under-explored by male filmmakers who place would-be horror film victims in vulnerable, feminine-coded spaces—bathtubs, in bed, or otherwise in a state of undress. In the hands of the heroine and in the feminized space of the kitchen, the feminine-coded domestic object (the knife) becomes an object of gleeful self-harm, at once becoming the heroine's defense from the would-be killer (who quickly leaves her alone) and a way to bypass (and, some might argue, surpass) the gory outcome implied by the stalker/stalked relationship. The heroine's passive reaction to what would be, in real life, a tragic situation suggests, as well, that she is immune to graphic violence, even when it is inflicted on herself. Her robotic gestures, which are incongruous with the physical trauma of the scene, serve a similar ending tone to Rosler's shrug at the close of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. In certain ways, her reaction—and the laughter generated by the gag—reflect the experience of female horror fans watching horror: they must distance themselves mentally from the violence in order to enjoy watching women die brutal deaths onscreen. Rosler

critiques the association between femininity and domesticity through tongue-in-cheek violence and ultimate dismissal. Similarly, Bonior and Wildman explore the contradictory pain and pleasure in the association between femininity and bodily violence through tongue-in-cheek violence and levity regarding its problematic tropes. As women who are intimately familiar with the erotic expressions of “uproarious disgust” regarding horror film viewership, Bonior and Wildman turn this experience to their filmmaking process.

4.2.1 Satire and Self-Awareness in *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* and *I Spit on Eli Roth*

Jan Oxenberg’s *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975) runs just over twenty-five minutes in length and is divided, as the title suggests, into six chapters. The film exercises both kinds of humor present in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Inside the House*: extended sequences in which the jokes build through visual or oral humor, and a setup leading to a visual punchline. B. Ruby Rich evokes Cixous when she names *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* as a “Medusan” film, arguing that it “[attacks] not simply men or sexism but rather the male-defined stereotypes of lesbianism” (*Chick Flicks* 77). *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Inside the House* similarly attack the male-defined stereotypes of feminine domesticity and violence against women in horror films, respectively. In this subsection, I turn to the horror-comedy short film *I Spit on Eli Roth* (2009), directed by the Midwest-based writer/director Devi Snively, as a film that largely builds up visual and oral humor but ends with an unexpected twist and that critiques male-defined stereotypes of female horror spectatorship. Like *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts*, *I Spit on Eli Roth* is unapologetically low-budget, using—as Michelle Citron says of *Comedy*—“a cinematic aesthetic not perceived by most critics” (“Comic Critique”). By this, Citron means that critics are quick to reject a film with such a rough aesthetic. While there is a leap to be made from a film about lesbian stereotypes and a later

film about female horror fans, I argue that the lineage of *Comedy* is present in Snively's film in its low-budget visual aesthetic and its use of satire to critique male-defined standards or representations of specific demographics of women. Both films point to ways in which women can adapt these standards to self-reflexively recreate representation and pleasure on their own terms.

The chapters in *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts*, titled "Wallflower," "Role Playing," "Seduction," "Non-Monogamy," "Child Molester," and "Stompin' Dyke," each address a stereotype or situation familiar to lesbians in particular. Each works as a standalone skit, often with a twist that relies on the basic narrative context offered by the setup. This is the case for "Wallflower," "Role-Playing," and to some extent "Child Molester" and "Stompin' Dyke"; the latter two, "Non-Monogamy," and "Seduction" also sustain an ongoing joke throughout the duration of the sketch. As Citron writes about all six acts, "at the end of each sequence, we realize that we have been led to misread the signs. And these one-line jokes become political precisely because they reveal the cultural construction of the codes themselves" ("Comic Critique"). In "Role Playing," a butch woman prepares to go on a date by putting on a suit and tie, then slicking back her hair with gobs of grease, and finally picking up a bouquet of flowers to present to her date, another butch woman in a suit and tie with slicked-back hair and a bouquet of flowers. While we are led to expect that the butch lesbian will date a femme woman, instead she is going on a date with an equally butch lesbian in a comedic reversal of commonplace expectations about lesbian relationships. In "Non-Monogamy," a woman struggles to juggle several balls at one time as a voiceover extrapolates on the virtues and freedoms of nonmonogamous relationships. Here, Oxenberg argues that "lesbians should not just imitate heterosexual behavior nor should they try to do the reverse of the dominant norm ... lesbians must always be questioning and critical of their

actions” (Citron, “Comic Critique”). The film is a satire, even if “Oxenberg is clearly acknowledging the power of movies to shape our attitudes and lives” (Citron, “Comic Critique”). Finally, Oxenberg’s film is clearly low-budget, and it embraces this aesthetic by offering rapid close-ups on its subjects’ sneers or winks, and—in the case of “Child Molester”—speeding up the frame rate to simulate a comedic silent film.

Running just under six minutes in length, *I Spit on Eli Roth* is obviously named after the rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978, directed by Meir Zarchi) and embodies much of this film’s militant vengeance against male-perpetrated oppression of women. Instead of taking revenge against bodily harm, the characters take revenge against tired horror tropes and reactionary perceptions of stereotypical female horror spectatorship. Significantly, they do so in a spectacularly self-destructive fashion. It is fiercely low-budget, starring Snively herself as a director making a horror film, and—like Oxenberg’s film—looks specifically to other films and film styles, most notably by including intertitles to invoke the silent era (even if *Eli Roth* is a sound film). Two independent horror filmmaker friends of hers, Amy Lynn Best and Jane Rose, burst onto the set to tell Snively about “chick-vision,” a new feature on the DVD release of Eli Roth’s *Cabin Fever* (2002). When “chick-vision” is enabled, hands block the screen during scenes of violence, imitating stereotypically female reactions to horror films. Infuriated, the three filmmakers seek revenge on Roth in a gratuitous torture session, inflicting injuries inspired by the violence in *Cabin Fever* and Quentin Tarantino films. As they prepare to castrate him, an apparition of the Bride of Frankenstein stops them, reprimanding them for rehashing the same tropes of Roth’s films. The three women realize they are no better than Roth and kill themselves: Rose slashes her gut open, Best hangs herself with a noose, and Snively slices open her neck. All three women collapse into a heap on the floor. The Bride of Frankenstein, who reminds the women

(and the audience) that her name is Shelley, ends the film with the following monologue to the audience: “This didn’t have to happen, you know. Horror can be an intelligent, socially relevant and highly innovative genre. Over the years it’s brought us such masterpieces as *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, and *Night of the Living Dead*, just to name a few. It’s made us laugh, it’s made us scream, it’s made us piss our pants and vomit. It’s even made us think. So let this tragic tale be a lesson to us all—friends don’t let friends denigrate the horror genre.”

Like its namesake, *I Spit on Eli Roth* is about revenge enacted by women against men. More specifically, it is about revenge enacted by female filmmaker-spectators against male-defined stereotypes and tropes. Unlike its namesake, *I Spit on Eli Roth* turns the violence inward, urging filmmakers (particularly female filmmakers) to “kill off” their urge to replicate horror tropes that denigrate women or that offer nothing but derivative, tired formulas. Their final act of self-destructive violence suggests that gore is not the problem, but part of the solution. The film depends on the viewer’s familiarity with the gory, sensationalist tropes associated with horror offhand. Although its crusade against the condescension of female viewers through “chick-vision” is at the core of its revenge narrative, it ultimately isolates and pokes fun at the repetitive tendencies of male-dominated genre filmmaking. It fits into the mode of parody, which Linda Hutcheon defines as “a form of ... imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text ... repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6). Building on this, Dan Harries isolates the process of parody as one of combining repetition with difference, “recontextualizing [a source text] through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, thus creating a *new text*” (6). *I Spit on Eli Roth* parodies male-directed horror as a whole and *Cabin Fever* in particular, along with its associated stereotypical depictions of female horror spectatorship. By bringing in the Bride of Frankenstein as an authority figure who

criticizes Snively's own impulses to reproduce negative horror tropes, the film designates the Bride—Shelley—as a foundational figure for women-directed horror, or at least for *this* female director (Shelley returns in Snively's more recent horror-comedy short, *Bride of Frankie* [2017]).

The direction of comedy and violence in both *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* and *I Spit on Eli Roth* point inward: in poking fun at lesbian stereotypes, Oxenberg also pokes fun at lesbians. In *I Spit on Eli Roth*, as in *Inside the House*, the violence onscreen is directed at—but also perpetrated by—the female characters. Both films therefore parody the excessive violence against women in horror through the exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek expression of self-harm. Clover points out that in the slasher film, female death is shot “at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length” (*Men, Women and Chainsaws* 35). In contrast, men are more likely to be killed off-screen, more quickly, and with less drawn-out violence. This formal difference is, as Isabel Pinedo puts it, “a compelling argument for the misogyny of the horror genre” (75)—however, this does not preclude or necessarily even complicate women's spectatorship of horror (or slasher films in particular). Self-mutilation is a common trope in women-directed horror cinema, as Adam Lowenstein points out in his article on what he calls “feminine horror.” Speaking of Marina de Van's film *In My Skin* (2002), he argues that in her role as both director and actor, de Van “risks exposing her own body to the potentially objectifying gaze of the viewer in order to confront that same viewer, at the level of bodily sensation, about how they see” (481). This is precisely what occurs in *Inside the House*—which, like *In My Skin*, visually refers to the confrontational opening scene of *Un Chien Andalou*—but, unlike *In My Skin*, engages humor to confront the definite “objectifying gaze of the viewer” as personified by the stalker outside. However, the gleeful and self-reflexive tone of *I Spit on Eli Roth* and *Inside the House* suggest that women also take pleasure

in these negative representations, and their films reflect their complex and contradictory experiences as eager spectators of horror.

Tonally, *In My Skin* functions very differently than *Inside the House* and *I Spit on Eli Roth*. However, it is striking that all three use self-mutilation as a means of expressing female rage, frustration, resignation, and even enjoyment of everyday life and horror film spectatorship. Lowenstein argues that for the protagonist Esther in *In My Skin*, “[t]he self-mutilation, as destructive as it is, also functions as a form of self-making—there is relief and even satisfaction for Esther when she can cut herself to her own specifications, a literal gesture of self-creation” (482). In other words, *In My Skin* represents self-mutilation as a loving act of connection with the self and a way of reconciling the subjectivity and objectivity imposed on women regarding their bodies and roles in society. The young woman who gouges out her eye in *Inside the House* similarly explores and deconstructs this simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity, transforming it into a joke rather than exploring it in the introspective tone of *In My Skin*. In turn, the triple suicide at the close of *I Spit on Eli Roth* functions somewhat as a “gesture of self-creation,” representing the active choice of director (who also—notably—plays herself in the film) Snively to “kill off” the parts of herself as a fan-turned-filmmaker that would rehash problematic horror tropes in her own films. In doing so, Snively aligns herself with the fans of Brigid Cherry’s study, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Cherry’s viewers “preferred to watch films they took to be imaginative, intelligent, literary or thought-provoking. Dislike was often expressed for films that revolved around excessive or gratuitous displays of violence, gore or other effects used to evoke revulsion in the audience” (172-3). By including films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Night of the Living Dead* in Shelley’s closing monologue, Snively expresses her artistic desire to create

“intelligent, socially relevant” films that also leave room for a female spectator who enjoys “excessive or gratuitous displays of violence.”

Significantly, the triple suicide of Snively, Best, and Rose—also filmmakers—turns Snively’s parody into a manifesto for other women directors to exercise. *I Spit on Eli Roth* therefore defines female-directed horror in terms of community and solidarity, a choice that complicates Cherry’s finding that “[female] horror film fans and followers tend to keep their liking for the genre private” (170). If female horror fans preferred—in 1990s Britain—to keep their horror film spectatorship as a private and individualized activity, Snively proves that contemporary horror filmmaking practices invite active collaboration and pleasurable creation among women. While *Inside the House* is concerned with female representation onscreen and the complexities of engaging both subjectivity and objectivity for women, *I Spit on Eli Roth* is concerned with the representation and acceptance of female horror film spectatorship and fandom. However, in their celebration of shock and gore, both films demonstrate that for female viewers and filmmakers, self-destruction functions as a vehicle for exploring the pleasure and pain of horror film spectatorship. In so doing, they explore these ambiguous pleasures to assert women’s spectatorship in gore and gross-out horror specifically.

As I have demonstrated in chapters one, two, and three, women’s horror cinema is attuned to other generic lineages of women’s cinema, and women are engaging the themes, social issues, codes, and conventions present in melodrama, experimental film, and comedy. I argue that women directors of horror are redefining the parameters of the horror genre and recognizing the ways in which these genres, which are important for female filmmaking and spectatorship for different reasons, find a new home in female-directed horror cinema. However, this discussion is incomplete without an account of the exhibition spaces contributing significantly to the redefinition of horror.

In my final chapter, I take up this task with attention to the history and evolution of women's horror film festivals.

5.0 Canonization and Regeneration: From Women's Film Festivals to Women's Horror Film Festivals

In 1972, the first-ever women's film festivals were held in New York City and Edinburgh, and the rest of the decade saw a proliferation of such festivals across North America and the United Kingdom. For Kristina Nordstrom, founder of the first International Festival of Women's Films in New York City, the purpose of such festivals was to empower women by bringing attention to the fact that women could, in fact, make films themselves: "I thought it was important that women see themselves as creators of culture instead of consumers of it" (Sweeney 9). The women's cinema movement in the 1970s emerged from and mirrored many of the aims of the established women's liberation movement: primarily that of bringing visibility to women's issues and female filmmakers and criticizing the negative or stereotypical representation of women onscreen. In many ways, the women's horror film festival phenomenon beginning in 2005 is a revitalization of the intentions and ideals of the 1970s women's film festivals. Both eras of festivals similarly express the issues and obstacles facing women in media: equal and fair representation, formal experimentation, a safe but rigorous environment that enables collaborative opportunities and provides an active support network, and a complicated relationship to feminist ideals and culture. The accomplishments of women's film festivals made women's horror film festivals possible; in turn, women's horror film festivals are refocusing women-directed films through the specific lens of genre filmmaking, while participating in a complex "regeneration" process central to the

evolution of the horror genre in the twenty-first century.¹⁰³ The 1970s women's film festivals played a central role in the formation of a women's filmmaking and women's cinema canon that fueled feminist film criticism. Their existence enabled further iterations of women's film festivals and programming including women's horror film festivals. In turn, women's horror film festivals are playing a crucial role in the formation of a women's horror cinema canon.

Women's horror film festivals are essential, curatorial sites for women's cinema, feminist filmmaking networks, and the history of women's artistry in media. In recent years, it has become clear that aspects of this history are endangered. Kay Armatage relates that Women Make Movies, the leading distributor of women-directed films in the world, has lost its entire archive of 1970s women's film festival catalogues and supplemental materials. What this loss entails "in hard copy at least, is the history of women's film festivals" ("Toronto" 82). Feminist film scholars Alicia Kozma and Melinda Barlow also discuss the erasure and ephemeral nature of women's film work in past decades. In an interview with Stephanie Rothman, Kozma notes that women who work in the genres of horror and exploitation are more at risk than others, because studying their work requires "initial acknowledgement and assessment" (180) rarely afforded among scholars. In a study of the New York Women's Video Festival, which ran from 1972-1980, Barlow argues that women's film festivals and other collective events "help put work by women on the map but ... recognition suffers erasure without appropriate historicization" (4). In addition to live events, Barlow describes female artists' homes and work spaces as " 'living archives' filled with photographs, flyers, posters, invitations, reviews, notebooks, correspondence, and other related materials. These materials help counteract the impermanence of ephemeral media" (4). Kozma and

¹⁰³ "Regeneration" is a term coined by Rick Altman and discussed in *Film/Genre*. See in particular chapters 4 and 5, pp. 49-82.

Barlow demonstrate that without the meticulous collection and conservation of women's work across various media, devastating losses are inevitable.

The field research for this chapter is invested in stemming these potential losses within women's horror cinema specifically, which I consider a "small cinema" housed within the expansive landscape of women's filmmaking. Women's cinema—here referring to women-directed cinema—has been associated with film traditions that have been called "minor cinemas," "small cinemas," and "peripheral," among other titles, a concept emerging from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "minor literatures"—"the literature of a minority or marginalized group, written, not in a minor language, but in a major one" (Butler 19).¹⁰⁴ While some take issue with ascribing the term "minor" to women-directed work, and while "small cinemas" is often used in reference to the cinemas of small nations, I find these concepts useful for theorizing the circumstances of production, exhibition, and distribution for women's horror cinema.¹⁰⁵ Women's horror cinema is an example of a successful "small cinema" tradition according to standards set by Hjort: financial and other constraints enable opportunities for innovation, small networks encourage collaboration and mentorship, and smaller scales of production ensure more sustainable and ethical film production ("Small Cinemas").

Women's horror film festivals are vital platforms that fuel these practices and contribute to the expansion and maturation of women's horror cinema. These festivals are "living archives" of their own: infrequent, live events that occur fleetingly, designed for women to screen their work

¹⁰⁴ See Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late*; Dina Iordanova, et al., *Cinema at the Periphery*; Deleuze and Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature*; Patricia White, "Lesbian Minor Cinema."

¹⁰⁵ Patricia White is one scholar who takes issue with defining women's cinema within "minor cinema. As she writes in *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*, "in this project I adopt neither counter-cinema nor minor cinema as a connective rubric. Minor cinema captures the crucial deterritorializing work of women's cinema, its resistance to totalizing narratives of the world system—the category of gender cuts through every whole, if unpredictably ... the idea of the minor risks minimizing the way diverse women's visions can be recuperated within [the category of Woman]" (13).

and collaborate with women and feminist allies working in horror and related genres. They uniquely bring together what Marijke de Valck names as “identity-based,” “activist-based,” and niche festivals catering to genre enthusiasts (15). They are, furthermore, fertile sites for an emerging discourse on how horror has historically functioned to express the fears of marginalized demographic groups in society at large—especially queer women and women of color. Festivals such as the Festival in New York City, the Women’s Cinema Event, and the Toronto Women & Film International 1973 were committed to excavating the history of women’s filmmaking: “organizing a women’s film festival was first and foremost a research project ... programmers were volunteering time and energy and literally rescuing films from a life on the shelf: they were dusting off cans to show women’s work for the first time in months, years, decades, *ever*” (Rich 29).

In contrast, women’s horror film festivals are committed to showcasing the work of current practitioners, rather than excavating a history of women-directed horror cinema (even if they hold pioneers of women’s horror cinema in high esteem). However, both approaches are vital to preserving and historicizing the ongoing trajectory of women’s filmmaking. Furthermore, the research presented in this chapter signifies first steps toward preventing the need to excavate the history of women-directed horror in the future. In this sense, this chapter has two overarching purposes. Firstly, to demonstrate how women’s horror film festivals play a critical role in defining women’s horror cinema and redefining horror; secondly, to provide a record of women’s horror film festivals as important physical spaces for women’s horror cinema and twenty-first century women’s cinema. The methodology of this chapter is ethnographic and historical: I present my own findings through attending festivals, interviewing festival directors, and conducting archival

research on 1970s festivals in order to compare the purposes and issues central to both festival communities.

5.1 Background and Beginnings, Part I: 1970s Women's Film Festivals

In June 1972, Kristina Nordstrom organized the First International Festival of Women's Films. The festival spanned nearly three weeks and screened approximately 110 films directed by women—short films and feature-length films; narrative films, experimental films, and documentaries. The earliest film on the program was Lotte Reiniger's *Cinderella* (1922), and the festival screened films up to 1972.¹⁰⁶ The same year saw the organization of a Woman's Event at the Edinburgh Film Festival, co-organized by Laura Mulvey, Lynda Myles, Claire Johnston, and Angela Martin. Through 1976, similar events thrived in cities across the United States and Canada. The women's cinema movement in the 1970s came out of and was fueled by the established women's liberation movement and mirrored many of its aims: primarily, that of bringing visibility to women's issues and female filmmakers and criticizing the overwhelmingly negative representation of women onscreen (both in terms of numbers and ideology). As Jan Rosenberg writes, filmmaking was the next step that many feminists in consciousness-raising groups at the time took, largely “out of frustration at the endless talk and introspection to which the consciousness-raising process so often led” (42). Nordstrom's experience in a feminist consciousness-raising group inspired her to form the Festival.

¹⁰⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the First International Festival of Women's Films, see Clarissa Kennedy Jacob, *A Festival of One's Own* (MA dissertation).

According to *ArtForum* critic Joan Braderman, the Festival suffered because of Nordstrom's leadership and the subsequent resignation of the twenty or so other committee members shortly before the event. Braderman criticized above all Nordstrom's desire to "present a comprehensive exhibition of films made by women *in order to investigate the existence of a female film sensibility*" (87, emphasis in original). Braderman further disparaged Nordstrom's eclectic curation of films that clearly did not belong together as follows: "one was forced to swallow in a single pill, this insane jumble of TV documentaries, commercials, cartoons, computer films, Hollywood and international features, and the avant-garde from 1922 to the present. Then in discussions and panels one was asked to cull from it ideas toward this erroneous notion of a female film aesthetic" (87).

Kathie Sarachild, writing for *Feminist Art Journal*, was kinder to Nordstrom's project and reprimanded naysayers for repeating "familiar patterns ... whereby those women who, for whatever reasons want to go more slowly, try to hold back the women who want to go faster" (6).¹⁰⁷ Sarachild lauded above all the Festival's success in demonstrating that when women make movies, women's representation is significantly altered: "it was clear that only women directors have been and are still, making films with female protagonists in any number that comes close to approximating the actual percentage of females in the human population" (7). Even though Sarachild criticized several of the feature-length fiction films screened for their lackluster portrayal of female protagonists—which she saw contrasted in the documentaries about active, vibrant real-life women—her criticisms were directed at the fiction films and filmmakers themselves, not at

¹⁰⁷ Sarachild was a prominent figure of the feminist movement; along with Anne Forer and Carol Hanisch, Sarachild developed the idea of consciousness-raising. She wrote "A Program for Radical Consciousness-Raising" in 1968, which was published in *Notes From the Second Year* (1970). Sarachild is also known for coining the phrase "sisterhood is powerful" in 1968.

Nordstrom, for failing to reach their full potential to “make connections and explore possibilities for women that a documentary can’t” (8). Her article ultimately praised Nordstrom’s clear support for female filmmakers and their work, arguing that raising the visibility of women filmmakers through such festivals and screenings is the most effective way to raise women’s representation across film production. Louise Sweeney, furthermore, provides some insight into the tone of the festival, describing it as “somewhere between that of a giant sorority meeting and a coed political rally” (91).

Sarachild and Braderman’s articles demonstrate an enduring tension in criticism about women’s films and film festivals: on one hand, female critics in particular are eager to praise efforts to elevate the visibility and representation of women’s filmmaking, but on the other, they are compelled to address the shortcomings and failures of such an event with an objective distance. Sarachild’s report, ultimately, is more receptive than Braderman’s to the notion of a female aesthetic, or at least the idea that women bring a fresh perspective to filmmaking; while Braderman was baffled by the eclectic programming, Sarachild identified fresh takes on familiar topics in most of the films she saw, writing, “What turned out to be so amazing and exciting was that, in fact, so few of the [films I saw] were linked to prevailing trends in films in both subject matter and style. Rather, they represented approaches to technique and subject matter that I had again ‘somehow’ missed seeing before, approaches that appealed to me far more than the prevailing trends in film” (6). Although the notion of a feminine aesthetic is difficult (and problematic) to theorize, Sarachild’s comment suggests that women-directed films caused her to reconsider techniques and content that she had viewed elsewhere, presumably in male-directed films. Other criticisms of the New York festival included its high price of admission and lack of resources for mothers with small children. Armatage and the other 1973 Toronto Women and Film International

Festival organizers aimed to rectify this; she describes the ten-day festival as “a fabulous hippie event, redolent with the 1970s zeitgeist: collective administration by avant-garde artists and grant-savvy girls, free admission, free full-time onsite daycare run by men, organic food concessions (sprouts!), and parties every night” (“Fashions,” 94). Armatage approached the festival organization following her experience attending the 1972 Women’s Cinema Event in Edinburgh organized by Claire Johnston, Lynda Myles, and Laura Mulvey, which preceded the June 1972 festival in New York City.

By 1976, the Second New York International Festival of Women’s Films—headed by Nordstrom and Leah Laiman—garnered skepticism from male and female critics alike. Molly Haskell, for instance, expressed hope that the festival would be a success, while criticizing the ambiguity of the term “women’s cinema” and asking, “in these multifestival times, do we really need another festival at all and second, do women’s films need the protective umbrella of their own sexually segregated festival? Do women’s films comprise an ‘alternate cinema’ that is neglected, conspired against, obscured, and otherwise suppressed by other festivals and commercial distributors?” (1). Haskell relates, furthermore, the fact that director Joan Silver withdrew her film *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* (1976) from the Festival when it was accepted to the New York Film Festival, adding, “It doesn’t say much for sisterhood, but who can blame the filmmaker? As far as I know, most women writers, brave protestations to the contrary, would rather have their books published by a major house than a women’s ‘alternate press’ ” (91). Haskell is pointing out here that women filmmakers were no longer enthusiastic to be celebrated for—or reduced to—their gender in a women’s film festival now that their films were more likely to be screened in better-known, general festivals; she is implicitly arguing, furthermore, that Silver’s withdrawal of her film from the Festival when it had received a more distinguished invitation

suggests that by 1976, the circulation of women's feminist cinema was not as pressing as it had once been. Nordstrom responds to this question in a *New York Times* article on the 1976 festival by Judy Klemesrud, acknowledging that "we may be creating a ghetto of women's films this way ... But it is badly needed. After the last women's film festival here, in 1972, we thought that all the problems would be solved and there would be a market for women's films. But there isn't. So we wanted to let the public know that there are women making good films, and the producers know that there is an audience that will come to see these films" (Nordstrom, quoted in Klemesrud). Like the first Festival, the second one showed new films along with retrospectives of earlier films by women, including Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. It seems that there was much overlap between the films screened at women's festivals in the first half of the decade; in many cases, festivals also organized a tour following the festival intended to bring women-directed films to rural areas; for instance, following the Toronto festival "three teams [carried] films out to 18 cities across Canada ... East, West and Quebec, with different films and paraphernalia" (Armatage, "Toronto" 91).

In her chronology of key events and publications concerning women and film in the 1970s, B. Ruby Rich excludes the New York Women's Video Festival, which ran from 1972-1980 and was a much smaller, less-publicized festival than Nordstrom's and other festivals of women's films across the United States. However, Melinda Barlow highlights the importance of this festival and the act of videomaking for feminism, activism, and feminist artistic expression, arguing, "For many women in the early 1970s, video served as a unique conduit to heightened self-awareness and often functioned as an extension of the consciousness-raising process. By sharing individual life experiences and analyzing them collectively, women discovered their own subjectivity in consciousness-raising groups" (6). Barlow further cites the accessibility of the medium as attractive for feminist visual artists, noting that "the low cost, instantaneous transmission, and

sense of intimacy offered by the medium seemed to forecast a revolution in image-making; access was of paramount importance, and controlling the technology was, for women, tremendously empowering” (7). Marusya Bociurkiw echoes Barlow, quoting video artist Shawn Preus as explaining, “ ‘You’d film something that day and go to a community meeting that night to show it’ ” (16). In many ways, Barlow and Bociurkiw’s descriptions of the women’s videomaking scene in the 1970s draws connections to the accessibility, empowerment, and intimacy afforded by digital technology, and which many female filmmakers working in the horror genre cite as among the reasons for the ever-growing numbers of women turning to filmmaking. Despite any debate as to the success of 1970s women’s film festival programming, these festivals had a discernible impact on broader awareness of female directors, and the films they screened—such as Leontine Sagan’s *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931) and Dorothy Arzner’s *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940)—quickly became feminist classics and staples of a women’s cinema canon.

5.1.1 Feminism, Positive Representation, and Genre in 1970s Women’s Film Festivals

For the first women’s film festivals in 1972, “factual research and providing information on films made by women, past and present” was of paramount importance (Mulvey, Edinburgh Film Festival 1979 press release). When the organizers of the 1972 Women’s Cinema Event developed the follow-up “Feminism and Cinema” event during the 1979 Edinburgh Film Festival, they were more interested in theoretical analysis and “exchange of ideas” concerning women’s cinema (Mulvey, press release). Among these issues were dilemmas faced by programmers throughout the decade: was it preferable to privilege positive representations of women in the festivals? While Nordstrom’s experience in a feminist consciousness-raising group inspired her to form the Festival, it is significant that she originally called it the Feminist Film Festival and

changed the name because she wanted “a varied program of creative ideas” (Rolon de Clet 11).¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, B. Ruby Rich describes her decision to include Leni Riefenstahl’s film *The Blue Light* (1932) in the 1974 Chicago Films By Women Festival and to invite her to the festival, an invitation which Riefenstahl initially accepted by later turned down in the face of a public backlash. Rich recounts that “We didn’t want to show a “Nazi” film, certainly didn’t want to offer any support to Nazism. Yet we were cognizant of the irony that made Riefenstahl probably the best-known and most critically recognized of all the women filmmakers we were showcasing” (*Chick Flicks* 36). Riefenstahl’s associations with Nazism reflect an extreme example of a programmer’s conflict in showcasing potentially negative content at a festival in the 1970s, but this question also emerged regarding exploitation films.

Whether or not to include certain films in festivals were central to debates among feminist theorists throughout the 1970s.¹⁰⁹ In 2009, Armatage relayed an anecdote from the 1973 festival in Toronto that reflect a strong clash between the festival’s commercial and avant-garde filmmakers in attendance. Armatage’s illuminating account is worth quoting at length:

In a workshop on directing, Stephanie Rothman (in a pastel sweater set and pearls) and Shirley Clarke (wearing black skinny pants and a turtleneck) traded tips: Clarke emphasized the importance of good solid shoes, and Rothman demonstrated a yoga posture to take the strain off the back over long hours of standing. In the workshop, they got along well, but later Clarke, who had never heard of Rothman, was horrified to discover the kinds

¹⁰⁸ Consciousness-raising groups were a phenomenon adopted from the Civil Rights Movement that emerged from the New York Radical Women organization. In these meetings, women would discuss their lived experiences in order to bring attention to systemic oppression in their daily lives. As the Chicago Women’s Liberation Movement put it, “Through consciousness-raising we begin to understand ourselves and other women by looking at situations ... in our own lives. We see that ‘personal problems’ shared by so many others ... are really *political* problems.”

¹⁰⁹ These debates were “over issues of positive and negative imaging of women, avant-garde versus Hollywood, distanciation versus identification, elitism versus populism, documentary versus fiction, transparency versus ambiguity, accessibility versus difficulty, and so on” (Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts* 447).

of films Rothman directed: American International flicks. After Clarke saw *Terminal Island* on the first weekend of the festival, she didn't speak to Rothman again. This was, in spades, the standoff of avant-garde vs. B-movie, New York vs. L.A., groovy vs. Square, not to mention class privilege (the opposite of what their chosen vestimentary codes might suggest: Rothman's was a masquerade). Yet there was no discussion of feminist content, which Rothman's early films would have won hands-down. While her films conformed to the Roger Corman model of sex or violence every seven minutes, they presented commanding woman characters and dealt with women's issues. ("Toronto" 96-97)

Despite this clash between exploitation and avant-garde among the attending filmmakers or any objectionable content in Rothman's films, Armatage—like many other festival organizers—found Rothman's films to be important inclusions to the festivals. Her films were frequently included in 1970s women's film festivals, and occasionally they sparked debate among programmers. Armatage relates that organizers of the 1973 Toronto Women and Film International Festival were hesitant to screen Rothman's film *Terminal Island* (1973) "amongst the uplifting feminist and avant-garde films" (89). Like Nordstrom, they ultimately decided "to concentrate on production by women directors, despite their 'women's content' or lack of it" (89). The inclusion of her films in the Event followed years of featuring films directed or produced by Roger Corman.

In short, women's film festivals were interested in screening women-directed horror or exploitation films but they were not necessarily a priority or readily available. Furthermore, feminist film theory has long been interested in genre, though scholarly attention was historically given to melodrama, documentary, and experimental cinema. While Jane Arden's psychological horror film *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972) screened at the 1972 Women's Cinema Event, two other films that explicitly engaged the horror tropes of witchcraft and zombies—Brienne

Murphy's *Blood Sabbath* (1972) and Gloria Katz's *Messiah of Evil* (1973)—were rarely, if ever, featured in women's film festivals. It is possible that the organizers were not aware of these films, but it is also possible that film festival programmers were unable to come to terms with films that explicitly engaged horror tropes with no overt feminist relevance. As Pam Cook wrote, "If the films of Stephanie Rothman are to mean anything to feminists it must be in terms of the ways in which they manipulate the stereotypes and codes of the exploitation genres to create new meanings for women" (26). Importantly, women's horror film festival organizers are also faced with difficult decisions when it comes to positive women's content. In 2018, the Women in Horror Film Festival screened Brooklyn Ewing's *She Was So Pretty 2: Be Good For Goodness Sake* (2017), a slasher sequel to her own *She Was So Pretty* (2016). Both films follow a derivative formula in which a voyeur (played by Jerry Larew) stalks and brutally kills young women. The film stands out negatively, in many ways, alongside the innovative films that "manipulate the stereotypes and codes of the exploitation genres to create new meanings for women" usually screened at women's horror film festivals. Festival director Vanessa Ionta Wright expressed her ambivalence at selecting the film for screening at WIHFF and justified her decision to include it based on the possibility that the content of the film could lead to productive conversations.¹¹⁰

5.2 The Horror Film Festival Circuit

Before turning to women's horror film festivals, it is important to briefly summarize the horror festival circuit. The horror festival circuit is removed from the broader festival networks

¹¹⁰ From a conversation with the author that took place at the 2018 Women in Horror Film Festival.

that are the focus of many film festival scholars, such as Marijke de Valck, Thomas Elsaesser, Skadi Loist, and Julian Stringer. They and others discuss the film festival hierarchy and its historical roots in politically-motivated regulation by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) during WWII and the Cold War, and whose ramifications persist today. Abé Mark Nornes argues that FIAPF's accredited film festival categories demonstrates a “‘first Europe, then elsewhere’ structuring that discounts the importance of non-Western film cultures” (37), naming the largely-unchanging European weight in the film festival hierarchy as an “international film festival short circuit” (37) in which non-Western film festivals are overlooked. To earn FIAPF accreditation, a film festival must apply—and therefore its organizers must desire to earn accreditation—and it must demonstrate prestige, stability, growth, and a dedication to the locale where it takes place. The downside of a failure to pursue or earn FIAPF accreditation, Stringer argues, is that “any event that does not participate (for whatever reason) ... runs the risk of being perceived as a maverick outsider” (“Film festivals in Asia” 40). Perhaps unsurprisingly, FIAPF includes only one horror film festival (Lisbon International Horror Film Festival) and one fantastic film festival (Sitges) in its B-list category and none in its A-list category. Either by preference or lack of resources, even the most prestigious horror and genre film festivals—among them Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival, Fantasia International Film Festival (Montreal), Fantastic Fest (Texas), and Bucheon International Fantastic Film Fest—remain unaffiliated with FIAPF.

As Elsaesser notes, the film festival has become one of the most—if not the most—prominent markers of an independent film's success: particularly in Europe, “films are now made for festivals” (72). At festivals, independent films “can gather the cultural capital and critical prowess necessary to subsequently enter the national or local exhibition markets on the strength of

their accumulated festival successes. No poster of an independent film can do without the logo of one of the world's prime festivals" (87). The ideal trajectory for an independent film, following a premiere at a top-tier film festival, is to launch in theatres to critical and financial success, and/or otherwise to "trickle down second- and third-tier events and simultaneously move along the multiplicity of rhizomatic channels of parallel thematic circuits for documentary, human rights, animation, women's, or LGBT/Q film festivals" (Loist, "Circuit" 52). The trajectory of a horror film on the independent horror film festival circuit is far different; much of this is due to the typical audience response at horror festivals. Horror film festivals are an offshoot, in certain ways, of fan conventions, after which many horror festivals are modeled. They are founded by genre fans and filmmakers and designed with the horror community in mind, and are therefore set apart from general festivals by their association with fandom.

In North America, there exists a known hierarchy among horror film festivals; the more prestigious ones are marked primarily by their length, popularity, and ability to draw high-profile guests, such as Elijah Wood who attended the 2014 edition of Fantastic Fest. In a 2015 article written for *MovieMaker Magazine*, Honeycutt names the midnight lineups at South by Southwest, Sundance, and TIFF, along with Fantastic Fest and Fantasia, as the top-tier places to premiere a horror feature, but warns filmmakers that films need to be of a certain quality and must "[break] new ground" in order to be accepted by one of the "unofficial big five." Somewhat below these, Honeycutt names Telluride Horror Show, Toronto After Dark, Buffalo Screams, Screamfest, and Shriekfest among "the less internationally prominent festivals that draw in smaller crowds but still carry a reputation for quality." Near the bottom of the top, Honeycutt names San Diego's Horrible Imaginings Film Festival, which offers more individualized attention to filmmakers. Film festivals associated with horror and comic conventions are lower on the hierarchy, as the films are not the

primary focus of the event, but “the enthusiastic audience makes up for these setbacks”; fans are ready-made at such conventions. Finally, Honeycutt lists “niche festivals” at the bottom of the hierarchy—both in terms of attendance and international attention—and includes among these festivals with a thematic focus, such as films influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, as well as festivals that overlap with what de Valck names “identity-based festivals,” such as LGBT and women’s film festivals.¹¹¹ According to Honeycutt, filmmakers should not dismiss niche festivals because they provide ample individualized attention, bring in targeted audiences, and draw the attention of industry professionals. While Honeycutt is knowledgeable about horror festival networks, however, her position as the founder and programmer of Etheria Film Night may demonstrate some bias on her part in regard to the visibility of niche festivals, particularly considering that Etheria takes place in Los Angeles; most women’s horror film festivals take place in smaller cities with a less-established film scene.

Genre-centered film festivals are therefore already anomalies against their much better-known counterparts, arthouse festival giants such as Toronto, Sundance, Berlin, and Cannes. Daniel Dayan mentions the problem of characterization at major film festivals and the impulse, in the film selection process and journalistic festival coverage, to move away from discourse on traditional or Hollywood genres. He writes, “The only genres that seemed tolerated are cult and ‘B’ movies. Their marginality is what makes the tolerable: not respecting the strictures of an existing genre is largely what the selected films are about. But this confronts critics with a formidable task: that of either reinventing or replacing the notion of genre” (51). Though he was writing in 2000, his discussion of genre at major international film festivals still rings true today,

¹¹¹ De Valck writes: “certain festivals target specific communities or demographic groups. Good examples are LGBT and queer film festivals, Jewish film festivals, women’s film festivals, and festivals aiming at particular ethnic communities” (15).

even if most such festivals today feature a “midnights” series. Peter Kuplowsky, programmer of the Midnight Madness lineup at Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), described the lineup as follows: “Though Midnight [Madness] has a reputation for horror, it also has a long-standing history of showing films that defy genre and explore alternative subcultures and eccentric personalities” (Tiff.net). The fact that these films play at midnight—as they also do at Sundance—already suggests that they are attracting a certain crowd predisposed to horror film fandom. Critical descriptions of films playing at the Sundance midnight series in 2017 and 2018 similarly emphasized the films’ genre-defying tendencies. Susannah Russell at the blog *Stories for Ghosts*, for instance, described the French high-profile cannibal film *Raw* (2016) as “art-house of the highest order,” the 2017 female-helmed anthology horror film *XX* (2017) as “vigorously challenging a stagnant status quo within the industry,” the recent cult hit *Mandy* (2018) as “[grinded] up beloved genre tropes” by director Panos Cosmatos “into a fine pulp and [sculpted] into something altogether otherworldly,” while *Piercing* (2018), starring Christopher Abbott and Mia Wasikowska, “blends psychological horror with comedy and stylish neo-noir, resulting in a sly take on the fantasy of escape and the hazards of modern romance.”

When IndieWire’s David Ehrlich covered the 2017 lineup of horror or horror-esque films at the Cannes Film Festival, he paid close attention to the untraditional genre techniques of Nicolas Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* (2016) and Olivier Assayas’ *Personal Shopper* (2016), while describing Na Hong-jin’s *The Wailing* (2016) as having “all the tenets and tropes of a traditional horror movie, but it doesn’t bend them to the same, stifling ends that define Hollywood’s recent contributions to the genre.” The Sundance website, furthermore, names the horror streaming service Shudder as a primary sponsor for the midnight series and describes the lineup of films as follows: “from horror flicks and bizarre comedies to works that defy any genre, these unruly films

will keep you wide awake and on the edge of your seat.” Even if they explicitly mention horror, many of these descriptions suggest that prestigious festivals aim to look beyond traditional horror—or mainstream, Hollywood horror—in order to find films that carve out new directions that horror may take. Sundance, for instance, prides itself on having “discovered” numerous horror classics over the years, including *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *American Psycho* (2000).

In the sense that they aim to “discover” new directions for horror, midnight blocks or genre inclusions at prestigious festivals have much in common with genre film festivals such as Fantastic Fest and others. Though it is worth mentioning that many of these festivals accept horror-related genres such as science-fiction, thriller, and cult films, they more readily embrace the “horror” label in their advertising and audience targeting. Screamfest LA prides itself particularly on discovering innovative and groundbreaking horror films, while Fantastic Fest similarly writes on their website that they “are committed to supporting film in its most provocative, ground-breaking and lesser known forms and giving the audience a chance to find new favorites and future genre classics.” Here, it is important to note the emphasis on the audience—as Matt Hills, Henry Jenkins, and others have written, the genre film community is one in which audiences are particularly crucial to the atmosphere. The niche festival Nightmares Film Festival (Ohio, founded 2016) writes on its website that it “sets itself apart from other genre fests by its deep year-round connection to the horror filmmaking community, which gives it the first line on the rarest, scariest, most daring and most unsettling films being created across the country.” Unsurprisingly, such festivals are more willing than Sundance and Cannes to embrace the genre label even as they similarly perpetuate narratives of discovery and quality on their mission statements. Nightmares Film Festival further describes its goal as fostering an environment in which “Filmmakers and fans [are] shocked and celebrated together ... a prestige festival and part of advancing horror filmmaking around the

world.” Indeed, the typical selections for these festivals tend toward more traditional horror; the 2017 iteration of Nightmares, for instance, featured among its special screenings the premiere of the derivative *Rock Paper Dead* (2017, directed by Tom Holland).¹¹² To a festival like Nightmares, community, discovery, and quality seem to cohere in the overall festival experience, while they—like Cannes, and like many other genre film festivals—prioritize the “liveness” and rarity of their events. Prestigious festivals and horror festivals carry equal weight in their respective circles—cinophilic on the one hand, independent horror fandom on the other.

5.3 Background and Beginnings, Part II: The First Women’s Horror Film Festivals

In 2004, filmmaker Amy Lynn Best, journalist Heidi Honeycutt, and Jennifer Whildin met online on a horror message board and bonded over their mutual negative experiences with male horror fans online. Best estimates that there were an average of six women on the horror message boards at that time; the three began chatting outside of the message boards and decided to form their own forum for female horror fans because, according to Honeycutt, “there wasn’t really a community where women [horror fans] felt comfortable.”¹¹³ Best similarly recalls being harassed, propositioned, and talked down to on the general message boards. Honeycutt, who had HTML experience, designed the message board, which they named *Pretty-Scary*.¹¹⁴ It was short-lived as a message board and quickly transformed into a website devoted to promoting the work of women

¹¹² Also known as *Rock, Paper, Scissors*.

¹¹³ Unless otherwise cited, the information about Pretty-Scary, Viscera Film Festival, and Best, Honeycutt, and Whildin’s experiences online was obtained through author interviews with Honeycutt (March 31, 2018, in Honeycutt’s home in Burbank, CA) and Best (October 13, 2018, in Bethel Park, PA).

¹¹⁴ Best credits her husband, filmmaker Mike Watt, with coming up with the name.

in horror—mostly actresses and writers, with the occasional director. Honeycutt, who had written for *Bloody-Disgusting* and *Film Threat*, was easily able to reach women involved in horror production or writers to contribute to the site through her journalistic connections. Even though *Pretty-Scary* only survived until 2009—ultimately only under Honeycutt’s direction—the rapid growth of the female horror filmmaking community can be attributed in part to their early efforts. The first women’s horror film events emerged directly from *Pretty-Scary*, namely a two-year screening series programmed by Best in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania under the umbrella of the Genghis Con horror convention in 2005-2006, organized by Best and her husband, filmmaker Mike Watt.

Shortly afterward, Honeycutt and filmmaker Shannon Lark came up with the idea to program the first standalone women’s horror film festival, Viscera Film Festival, in 2007. Its first year of programming was very similar to the research process of finding films for the 1970s women’s film festivals; Honeycutt referred to her journalism network to track down women who had made short horror films and screened all of them: “And not all the films were good. Some of them were good. Some were not even really horror, some were surreal and confusing ... People were like, ‘that was interesting. I got to see a lot of films by women and that’s why I came.’” In years following, the festival grew and Honeycutt instituted a submission process: “soon it went from I know twenty people to I know five thousand people who have films right now that I could show.” Honeycutt and Lark organized the first festival despite their lack of experience, unsure of what would result from the event; in the end, Honeycutt estimates that 400 guests attended the first festival. She recounts the experience of the first festival as follows:

We got the Downtown Independent [theater], Shannon somehow came up with the money, we’ve done all this work for months and months in preparation, it’s the day of. And we get

there early, and we had to set up the red carpet thingy and all that, we didn't have anyone helping us, so we're sitting there in our jeans doing that and people start coming in and we're like "oh shit, we'd better change!" So we go to the staff bathroom that they let us use as a green room. We're up there putting on our makeup and everything, and we look down [over the balcony that] looks down over the rest of the theatre and into the lobby. And so we peered out, and we're like "oh my god there's a shit ton of fucking people here." And I just remember like, Shannon and I looked right at each other and we were like "we fucking did it! We did it! We pulled this off!" I don't think we really believed that it was going to really happen, like a real festival. I think we thought, you know what, like 50 of our friends will show up and it'll be a fun night. But we didn't expect 400 people to show up, and for the audience to be a real audience. And that felt really fucking good, and we were like "we really fucking pulled this off, we did it, and we didn't know what we were doing."

After the success of the first event and the prestige that followed in later years, Viscera Film Festival inspired several other programmers to hold one-time or recurring women's horror events. Viscera also enabled the foundation of a key community that built an expansive culture of women in horror film production, journalism and criticism on women in horror, and initiatives such as Women in Horror Month, founded in 2009 by Hannah Neurotica concurrently with her *Ax Wound* zine. In 2013, Lark and Honeycutt ended the festival and Honeycutt founded the genre-fluid Etheria Film Night in its stead, an annual one-night "showcase of horror, science fiction, fantasy, action, thriller, and dark comedy films directed by women," according to its website.

In the late 2010s, there exist a handful of important platforms for women's horror cinema and female fandom, among them print and online journalism, social media, and digital

streaming.¹¹⁵ But one of the most vibrant and expansive platforms is that of the women's horror film festival, of which there are currently at least five ongoing multi-day events in the United States, Europe, and Canada and dozens more one-day events, particularly during the month of February, which Hannah Neurotica (Forman) of *Ax Wound Zine* and the Ax Wound Film Festival named Women in Horror Month in 2009. Below, I have compiled a chronology of key events, publications, and online initiatives that more fully demonstrate the establishment of women's horror since 2004.

Women's Horror Film Festivals and Related Events

2004: Pretty-Scary.net founded by Amy Lynn Best, Heidi Honeycutt, and Jennifer Whildin. Originally conceived as a message board exclusively for female horror fans, it quickly became a website with coverage on women in horror film production, ranging from actresses to producers/directors.

2005-2006: Genghis Con, horror convention, was organized by Amy Lynn Best and Mike Watt, and occurred in Pittsburgh. The three-day event included screenings of female-directed horror films, the "Pretty-Scary Film Festival." Filmmakers present in 2006 included Devi Snively, Paula Haifley, and Jane Rose.

¹¹⁵ Print and online journalism including the now-defunct *Ax Wound Zine*; *Belladonna Magazine* and *Grim Magazine*; podcasts such as Faculty of Horror; blogs such as *Graveyard Shift Sisters* and *Anatomy of a Scream*. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are vital spaces for the horror community at large and the women's horror community more specifically. To cite one example, Honeycutt is owner of a secret Facebook group, E.G.D.E. (Etheria Directors of Genre Entertainment), designed "for women directors of horror, sci-fi/fantasy, thriller, and action films and television." As of May 2020, it has over 1000 members. Finally, the horror streaming service Shudder, for instance, has a category titled "A Woman's Touch" among its curated collections, while Amazon Prime streams of high number of women-directed horror films; short horror films by women are also frequently available on the video-sharing websites Vimeo and YouTube.

Notable films: Emily Hagins' *Pathogen* (USA, 2006), Stacy Title's *Hood of Horror* (USA, 2006).

2007: Viscera Film Festival founded by Heidi Honeycutt and Shannon Lark in Los Angeles. One-day event, and ran annually until 2013, when Lark turned back to filmmaking.

2009: Pretty-Scary Blood Bath Film Night, Dallas, TX [Blood Bath is a regular event with varying themes programmed by this theater; they also program a regular event called "Fears for Queers"]. Pretty-Scary.net closed down. Hannah Neurotica (Forman) founded Ax Wound Zine, which remained in print through 2014. Neurotica founded Women in Horror Month (February).

Notable films: Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (USA), the Soska Sisters' *Dead Hooker in a Trunk* (Canada), Ursula Dabrowsky's *Family Demons* (Australia), Sophia Takal's *Green* (USA).

2010: Pretty-Scary Film Night, Armour Theatre, Kansas City. BleedFest in LA, a monthly event (Elisabeth Fies and Brenda Fies), ran until 2011.

Notable films: Karen Lam's *Stained* (Canada).

2011: Release of Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (UK), Donna McRae's *Johnny Ghost* (Australia), Laura Lau's *Silent House* (USA, co-directed by Chris Kentis).

2012: Release of the Soska Sisters' *American Mary* (Canada) and Xan Cassavetes' *Kiss of the Damned* (USA).

2013: Stranger With My Face in Tasmania, Australia (Briony Kidd). Ran through 2017 as an offshoot of Viscera Film Festival (currently “on hiatus”). Scream Queen Film Fest Tokyo in Japan (Mai Nakanishi). Ran through 2016 as an offshoot of Viscera Film Festival. Graveyard Shift Sisters, a website devoted to scholarship on Black women in horror/sci-fi, founded by Ashlee Blackwell. Viscera Film Festival ends.

Notable films: Kimberly Peirce’s *Carrie* (USA), Axelle Carolyn’s *Soulmate* (UK).

2014: Etheria Film Night founded by Honeycutt in LA to follow Viscera. Etheria is an annual, one-night genre event that screens sci-fi, action, horror, and fantasy.

Notable films: Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (Australia), Ana Lily Amirpour’s *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (Iran), Leigh Janiak’s *Honeymoon* (USA), Stewart Thorndike’s *Lyle* (USA).

2015: My Final Girl, a database of Black women (primarily actresses) in horror, founded by Kristina Leath-Malin.

Notable films: Karyn Kusama’s *The Invitation* (USA), Agnieszka Smoczyńska’s *The Lure* (Poland).

2016: Ax Wound Film Festival founded in Brattleboro, VT (Hannah Neurotica, following the closure of Ax Wound zine). Sick Chick Flicks Film Festival founded in Cary, SC (Christine Parker). Bloody Mary Film Festival founded in Toronto, Canada (Laura Di Girolamo, Krista Dzialoszynski, Nadine Brito, Melissa O’Neil). *Belladonna Magazine*, the first horror magazine run and written by women, founded by eleven female critics (“The Horror Honeys”); disbanded in 2018.

Notable films: Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (France), Mattie Do's *Dearest Sister* (Laos), Alice Lowe's *Prevenge* (UK), Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (USA), Ingrid Jungermann's *Women Who Kill* (USA).

2017: Final Girls Berlin Film Festival founded in Germany (Elinor Lewy, Sarah Neidorf, Lara Mandelbrot). Women in Horror Film Festival founded in Peachtree City, GA (Samantha Kolesnik and Vanessa Ionta Wright). Anatomy of a Scream, a "female-run, queer-positive horror entertainment and lifestyle site," founded by Valeska Griffiths, and begins publication of its online and in print magazine, *Grim Magazine*.

Notable films: Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (France), the anthology film *XX* (Canada, multiple directors), Issa Lopez's *Tigers Are Not Afraid* (Mexico), Mouly Surya's *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (Indonesia).

2018: Release of Aislinn Clarke's *The Devil's Doorway* (Northern Ireland) and Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (Australia).

2019: Release of Roxanne Benjamin's *Body at Brighton Rock* (USA), Veronika Franz's *The Lodge* (Canada, Austria; co-directed with Severin Fiala), and Sophia Takal's *Black Christmas* (USA).

2020: Women in Horror Film Festival moves from October to February. Release of Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (USA). Hannah Neurotica announces the indefinite closure of Ax Wound Film Festival.

This chronology, modeled after B. Ruby Rich's chronology of 1970s women's cinema events and publications, highlights the predominant importance of a handful of years to the history of women's horror filmmaking and fan culture, for instance 2007, 2009, 2016, and 2017, which saw the foundation of several festivals and new publications. I have chosen to include select feature films in this chronology in order to demonstrate the increase in feature-length horror film production among women directors. Rich's chronology and other accounts suggest that the explosion of women's film festivals in the early 1970s emerged from several women's rights and liberation activist networks. In other words, the groups and ideas that developed and circulated from the women's movement led directly into the feminist filmmaking and exhibition networks; the former provided a contextual and community foundation for the latter. The energy and vibrancy of the women's film festival scene in the first part of the decade fizzled by the late 1970s along with the concurrent feminist movement. In contrast, the women's horror events outlined in the chronology above did not emerge from a feminist movement, but they have steadily increased in number and visibility since 2004. In certain ways, the women's horror phenomenon is its own movement that originated in comparatively minor events—the foundation of *Pretty-Scary* and other self-serving fan initiatives—and flourished into a thriving, politically-motivated artistic and fan movement.

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5.3.1 Post-Viscera: Women's Horror Film Festivals and the Redefinition of Horror

As of early 2020, there are several active single-day or multi-day women's horror and genre film festivals around the world: Etheria Film Night (Los Angeles), Ax Wound Film Festival (Brattleboro, Vermont), Women in Horror Film Festival (Atlanta), Final Girls Berlin Film Festival (Germany), Sick Chick Flicks Film Festival (Cary, North Carolina), Bloody Mary Film Festival (Toronto), and Third Eye Film Festival (New York City).¹¹⁶ On average, they take place over two to six days, and they primarily show short films with a handful of feature-length films. There is plenty of overlap at these festivals, and many of the films screen at general horror film festivals.

¹¹⁶ A handful of others—*Stranger With My Face* in Tasmania, Australia and *Scream Queen Film Fest* in Tokyo, Japan—are no longer active. This list does not include one-night events or other unofficial film festivals that occur under the umbrella of Women in Horror Month. Refer to the chronology above and in Appendix 2 for dates.

However, because of the limited number of submissions women-centered festivals accept, the line-ups at general horror festivals differ greatly from that of the line-up of women's horror film festivals. Although I will refer to several of these festivals, I will focus on three events for different reasons: the October 2017 Women in Horror Film Festival (WIHFF, organized by Vanessa Ionta Wright and Samantha Kolesnik), the November 2017 Ax Wound Film Festival (AWFF, organized by Hannah Neurotica), and the February 2018 Final Girls Berlin Film Festival (FGBFF, organized by Elinor Lewy, Lara Mandelbrot, and Sara Neidorf).

I choose these events for particular reasons: firstly, because I attended all three and can therefore draw from onsite fieldwork and physical materials from each festival. Secondly, while some festivals feature related genres such as fantasy and science fiction, these three festivals explicitly mention horror in their mission statements. Finally, each festival has different aims and, in turn, different atmospheres that are important to discuss. WIHFF 2016 was the inaugural meeting, which is an unusual festival in that it boasts films with a high number of women across different crew roles, and not all are directed by women. As a result, it is attended by a higher number of male filmmakers and participants than FGBFF or AWFF. AWFF is significant as a relatively small festival with unparalleled prestige among women's horror film festivals that eschews granting festival awards. The founder of AWFF is known for launching Women in Horror Month (February), which has become a major international initiative among female horror filmmakers and programmers of their work, and for editing the short-running Ax Wound Zine. Finally, FGBFF features here as an international festival that also includes an academic component and an active traveling agenda; in addition to their annual festival in Berlin, the head programmers regularly curate "best of the fest" screenings abroad.

The multi-day events, such as *Stranger With My Face*, *Scream Queens Tokyo*, *Ax Wound*, *Bloody Mary*, *Women in Horror*, *Final Girls Berlin*, and *Sick Chick Flicks* often include panels, workshops, raffles, music events, vendors, and other activities among their offerings. Festivals are housed in a variety of exhibition spaces, such as local underground or independent theatres (*Ax Wound* is literally held underground, at the Hooker-Dunham Theatre in Brattleboro, Vermont, and *Final Girls Berlin* is held at the eccentric b-ware! Ladenkino in Berlin, which is fashioned into a living room theatre space with an adjacent video rental section), hotels, or larger movie theatre chains (*Bloody Mary* rents space from a Canadian theatre chain, *Imagine Cinemas*). The *Women in Horror Film Festival*, which was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Peachtree City in fall 2017 and 2018, moved to the Earl Smith Strand Theater in downtown Atlanta for its third edition in February 2020. The isolated space of the festival in its first two years is unusual for women's film festivals, which in turn cultivated an atmosphere that participants likened to "horror summer camp"; even *AWFF*, which takes place in a rural town in Vermont, is reachable by public transportation.

The tone at such festivals recalls, in many ways, Louise Sweeney's description of the First International Festival of Women's Films—as "somewhere between that of a giant sorority meeting and a coed political rally" (91). Like general horror festivals, women-centered horror festivals equally embrace genre in their mission statements; the *WIHFF* directors describe the fest as "a filmmaker, screenwriter, and community-focused festival dedicated to celebrating and showcasing women directors, writers, cinematographers, FX artists, editors, production designers, composers, producers, and performers in horror cinema, as well as the teams with whom they work"; *FGBFF* describes itself as "lashing against the tokenization of women as objects and beautified victims, and ... working towards the primacy of women as subjects in horror"; *Ax Wound* seeks to

showcase diversity “in representing both who’s telling the story and horror’s many subgenres.” Furthermore, AFFF director Hannah Neurotica seeks to cultivate a space in which women’s films are not in competition with one another: “There is so much competition among women in this field (it’s brutal) and the only way we can change that is by working together, hiring each other, and networking. Ax Wound provides a safe space which we hope brings women together rather than set up hierarchies” (Interview with author, October 2017).

With recourse to Melinda Barlow’s discussion of women artists’ homes, I consider women’s horror film festivals to be “living archives” of their own in which they circulate physical and digital materials specifically related to the films and filmmakers they screen (photographs, flyers, posters, advertisements and other marketing materials, festival programs, DVDs, T-shirts, book bags, and even horror-themed throw pillows). I extend the meaning of Barlow’s concept to include the experience of attending the festival, such as Q&As, panels, workshops, and talks, but also referring to the screening context of the films themselves. While many of the films become available following their festival run, many of them—particularly the short films—signify a fleeting existence because they rarely circulate widely.

Women’s horror film festivals are more likely to screen films that do not, in many ways, adhere to familiar horror film narratives or tropes; many of the films they screen mix horror with melodrama, comedy, and romance or adopt experimental and non-narrative forms. In many cases, the genre-blending selections at such festivals illuminate what is fundamentally horrific in films not traditionally considered as horror titles, even as their mission statements and marketing strategies explicitly define the showcased films under the label of horror cinema. These festivals play an active role in sculpting the image of women-produced horror for broader audiences. They are participating in a complex, but natural, process of what Rick Altman calls “regenrification,” or

reframing certain genres under the umbrella of another. In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I theorize how female filmmakers redefine melodrama, experimental film, and comedy through horror. This process is present most clearly at women's horror film festivals. Their flexibility in terms of what fits under the category of "horror" challenges the tendency for filmmakers, critics, and casual viewers to strictly define the boundaries of horror and exclude formally or narratively ambiguous films from belonging to the genre. Below, I discuss how programmers of women's horror film festivals take an active role in the "regenrification" process, "creating new cycles in support of their own interests" (Altman 82) and, in turn, providing an exhibition platform to female directors whose films also actively contribute to the "regenrification" of other genres within the umbrella of horror.

The way in which films are received among audiences at festivals depends heavily on the films' existence within the festival context and interaction with other titles. This experience is ephemeral and limited only to attendees of the festival. To illustrate how screening contexts change across different festivals, I will use the example of *Blood Sisters* (2017, co-directed by Caitlin Koller and Lachlan Smith), an Australian short film that screened at all three. *Blood Sisters* is a horror-comedy film about two friends who slice open their hands during a blood-exchanging ritual and then find themselves unable to leave the house for apparently supernatural reasons. As they banter and attempt elaborate schemes to stop their bleeding (including one horrible cauterizing scene with a curling iron), they slowly grow weaker from blood loss and finally try to reverse the ritual, with gruesome results. In the WIHFF line-up, the short appeared in a comedy block with five other films including a self-reflexive sorority house slasher, a body-horror comedy, and an

homage to Romero's *Creepshow* (1982).¹¹⁷ At AFFF, it played in an un-themed shorts block with fourteen other films, only one of them a horror-comedy; the other thirteen were more serious in tone and ranged from rape-revenge to heart-wrenching family drama.¹¹⁸ At FGBFF, *Blood Sisters* played alongside eight other films in a short block titled "Dark Gatherings" and which contained two other horror-comedies, one experimental film, and one animated film that featured, as the program described it, "pacts, covens, cults, [and] occult gatherings."¹¹⁹ Koller herself was present at the AFFF and FGBFF screenings and participated in Q&As.

The programming choices for each festival vary greatly, as is evident from this range of screening contexts. WIHFF's comedy-horror shorts block closed out the first day in a late-night screening, and ran about an hour in length with only six films in the line-up. The films were programmed together in this block because they are tonally similar; like many comedy-horror shorts, their self-reflexivity demonstrate their makers' fluency in the cinematic language of horror. In contrast, the shorts block in which *Blood Sisters* appeared at FGBFF emphasized the film's narrative similarity with other films about rituals and witchcraft, rather than demonstrate the programmers' intention to encourage a screening atmosphere driven by the tonal similarities of its films. Finally, its placement in the AFFF line-up results in a very different screening experience, in part due to the length of the shorts block in which it appeared (two hours, in contrast to the single hour at WIHFF) and the fact that the shorts block had no explicit thematic connection. The tonal and narrative range of films in the AFFF shorts block suggests that the programming team

¹¹⁷ These films are *Girl #2* (2016, directed by David Jeffery, written by Kari Wahlgren); *Earworm* (2016, directed by Tara Price); *Blood Shed* (2017, directed by James Moran, written by Cat Davies).

¹¹⁸ *Hooker Assassin* (2017, directed by Misty Dawn); *Cowboys and Indians* (2016, directed by Emilia Ruiz).

¹¹⁹ *What Metal Girls Are Into* (2017, directed by Laurel Vail); *The Contest* (2017, directed by Aimee Morgan); *Prayers* (2016, directed by Edda Manriquez); *Madder Isle* (2017, directed by Laura Spark). An error in the FGBFF program attributes Laura Spark's *Madder Isle* to Caitlin Koller.

was less committed to creating associations between the films, instead prioritizing the inclusion of as many titles as possible within the festival program overall. The penultimate film in the shorts block, Emilia Ruiz's humorless *Cowboys and Indians* (2016), concerns a small boy's trauma after witnessing a family tragedy; the placement of *Blood Sisters* alongside films with dark subject matter and tone results in a less joyful, more tonally mixed—even somber—screening context than its placement at WIHFF. While screening time, placement within the program, length of the shorts block, whether the filmmaker is present, and other factors all contribute to different viewing experiences for a particular film across several festivals, the screening context of the festival is distinct from other viewing contexts.

The screening context at women's horror film festivals also ensures that films that do not explicitly engage horror tropes, codes, and conventions are legible as horror films within the context of their screening in the festival. This is a central part of the “regenrification” of distinct genres such as melodrama into horror. For instance, FGBFF's 2018 included *Lyle* (2014), *Most Beautiful Island* (2017), and *Pin Cushion* (2017) among its feature-film line-up. Of these three, the paranoid frenzy of *Lyle*—a micro-budget lesbian reimagining of *Rosemary's Baby*—most readily reads as “horror.” *Most Beautiful Island* is a thriller about human trafficking, and *Pin Cushion* is a maternal melodrama that evokes both *Stella Dallas* and *Carrie*.¹²⁰ FGBFF co-director Elinor Lewy categorizes *Pin Cushion* in particular as “ ‘social horror’ or ‘real life horror’ ” and describes the festival's purview as encompassing “a broader definition of horror” (Correspondence with author, April 2019). *Pin Cushion* was not submitted to the festival; instead, the directors sought it out and requested to screen it. WIHFF and AFFF similarly include films that deviate

¹²⁰ For more on *Pin Cushion*, refer to Chapter One of this dissertation.

from standard conceptions of horror iconography; for instance, in AFFF 2018 screened Mitzi Peirone's non-narrative fairy tale *Braid* (2018) as its first feature-length inclusion in the festival.

Because of the wide variety of films made independently, film festivals in general are predisposed to reflect Altman's conception of genre as a "map [that] can never be completed, because it is a record not of the past, but of a living geography, of an ongoing process" (70). However, the generic ambiguity at women's horror film festivals defines women's horror cinema for the attending filmmakers and inflect their future projects. Producers, critics, and audiences all play a part in the "regenrification process" (Altman 77). The screening contexts of women's horror film festivals play an important role in defining what horror means for female filmmakers and viewers. In turn, and through collaborating partnerships formed at such festivals, women's horror film festivals impact women's horror cinema aesthetically and thematically as a growing area of horror.

No matter the reputation or prestige of a given film festival, the community they offer are the primary reasons to attend one—and, as a filmmaker, the festival community will ideally result in networking opportunities for future projects. This is all, of course, true for women-centered horror film festivals. But for minorities within the film industry, the sense of community fostered by festivals such as WIHFF, AFFF, and FGBFF extends beyond networking and also includes a place in which female horror filmmakers are, for a couple of days, not the exception but the norm. de Valck mentions queer film festivals as examples of such overlap, writing that they "can be very activist in set-up, mobilizing LGBTQ communities to stand up for their rights" ("Introduction" 15). Skadi Loist elaborates on the stakes of women's film festivals at large, arguing, "in their core [they] carry an *element of activism, feminist activism*. They are fueled by a drive for social change; by an urge to create a counterpublic sphere, a place where women can meet, defy sexist (and

heteronormative) social conventions, form a group of network and mobilize around issues of feminism” (“Social Change,” emphasis in original). The counterpublic sphere in place at women-centered horror film festivals seeks to create a safe haven for female horror filmmakers and fans, furthering the current movement of expanding the visibility of women working in horror film production. Beyond that, however, women’s horror film festivals seek to carve out a space in which women can re-imagine horror altogether within a festival space designed and populated by them.

5.3.2 Visibility, Collaboration, and Mentorship (Past and Present)

Women’s horror film festivals enable partnerships and collaborations to emerge and flourish within the specific context of gender relations and horror. The visibility they bring to women directors of horror directly influences new voices to turn to the genre. As niche genre festivals, women’s horror film festivals occur at the intersection of identity-based festivals, which program their films “with explicit interest in engaging questions and representational issues that concern specific communities and groups” (de Valck, “Introduction” 15), and festivals that, as Loist puts it, “exist to serve specific audiences or ‘minor genres’ ” (“Circuit,” 52). De Valck notes that identity-based festivals can and often do overlap with other festival categories, such as activist-based ones that aim to raise visibility about issues related to the demographic groups they represent. The activism fulfilled by women’s horror film festivals is one that aims to heighten the visibility and opportunities of women in the horror film industry. As Kolesnik and Wright point out, female filmmakers and fans often feel overlooked at general horror festivals, and they founded WIHFF in response. Kolesnik said, “This is a common phenomenon that happens to me: I’ll meet tons of filmmakers at a festival and I’ll go up to them, I’ll talk to them, I’ll be interested in their work, and I’ll ask to read their scripts, and I’ll ask to see their films. Very, very rarely does a man

ask to read my script or see my film in return ... and I'll see men more easily, and more readily reach out to work together and collaborate" (Interview with author, September 2017). Another similar experience that female horror filmmakers have frequently faced at general horror festivals is the assumption that they are actresses. As writer-director (and film festival director of Sick Chick Flicks Film Festival in North Carolina) Christine Parker recounted, "they just assume I'm an actress. They would never assume that I directed it or made the film myself" (Interview with author, October 2017).

The fact that women are less confident in film production than their male counterparts is well-documented. In 1981, Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter wrote an essay for *Jump Cut* on the subject, "The Woman With the Movie Camera," in which they related their experience teaching men and women in the production classroom. In 2011, Jennifer Proctor, River E. Branch, and Kyja Kristjansson-Nelson revisited Citron and Seiter's essay in their own essay, "Woman With the Movie Camera Redux," in which they demonstrated that little has changed in the film production classroom since the 1980s. Leading female students to overcome their fear of technological equipment alongside their bolder male classmates has therefore continued to be a topic of conversation among female film production faculty. Women are still more hesitant to use camera equipment, while men continue to appear confident despite their lack of experience; furthermore, the content of their scenarios relate—as is evidenced in both the 1981 and 2011 essays—a disturbing prevalence of violence against women, often played for humor. The act of making film is empowering for women. Therefore, spaces that encourage women to create and—crucially—*direct* films themselves enable the number of active women filmmakers to expand. Maryusa Bociurkiw highlights the historical role of feminist collectives in supporting such efforts, noting that women were vulnerable to the fears of using camera or video equipment but that "Clearing a

space for women to learn about video technology in each other's company allowed them to more readily relinquish acculturated fears" (14). For this reason, feminist film collectives in the 1970s aimed to give women experience with film equipment in a comfortable and low-stakes environment, where they could master the technology.

Despite any debate as to the success of 1970s women's film festival programming, these festivals had a discernible impact on broader awareness of female directors. In a 1972 special issue of the Canadian film magazine *Take One*, Stephanie Rothman was quoted as follows: "I naturally want my films to be judged on their own merits. But at the same time I feel that calling attention to the fact that I am a woman might suggest to other women that they too could become directors if they wished ... When I left film school eight years ago, I found the fact that at least one woman, Shirley Clarke, was actively working in a field otherwise monopolized by men, was a constant source of reassurance to me that I might be able to do it too" (12). Like many critics of women's film festivals in the 1970s, Rothman is toeing the line between advocating for visibility of female directors simply because of their gender and acknowledging the desire to have her work considered on its own merits, absent of association with gender politics. However, as Kolesnik, Wright, Parker, and numerous other women have recounted to me, female role models are crucial to the expansion and maturation of women-led filmmaking, particularly in the horror genre, which most casual viewers associate with male directors and fans.

5.4 Conclusion

The importance of women's film festivals for building and bringing attention to the canon of women's cinema is indisputable. The "research project" (Rich 29) of organizing a women's

film festival in the 1970s became the foundation for decades of feminist film theory scholarship; films screened at the festivals such as Maya Deren's *At Land* (1944) and Mai Zetterling's *The Girls* (1968) are now staples of feminist film history. Furthermore, these festivals were crucial to reframing female filmmakers such as Dorothy Arzner, Ida Lupino, Claudia Weill, Nelly Kaplan, Agnes Varda, and Lina Wertmuller as auteurs. In certain ways, women's film festivals revised film history to include the contributions of female filmmakers. While this is a necessary project, the reclamation and formation of these films within a specific female-specific canon also serves to revise film history as one in which women's cinema existed physically before it existed conceptually. I argue that this process is similar to Rick Altman's concept of "regenrification," which he illustrates with recourse to 1980s feminist film theory discourse on melodrama: "Until the 70s the term family melodrama was rarely used, and the term woman's film was never associated with the genre of melodrama. Yet during the 80s, critics regularly conflated the two categories, eventually styling the woman's film and family melodrama as the very core of melodrama as a genre" (77). Similarly, women's horror film festivals are playing a crucial role in redefining horror in women's terms: in creating a "canon" of women's horror cinema, they contribute to a regenrification process reflective of broader horror trends.

6.0 Conclusion

During the process of researching and writing *From Women's Cinema to Women's Horror Cinema: Genre and Gender in the Twenty-First Century*, I developed the digital humanities database *Cut-Throat Women: A Database of Women Who Make Horror*, intended to document the staggering number of women who work in horror and to provide an outlet for analysis of their work.¹²¹ When I began my doctoral studies, it was with the intention of researching and developing a dissertation project analyzing contemporary women-directed horror cinema, but it quickly became evident that their work was not readily circulated or recognized, apart from a few key titles. Women who direct horror—let alone write, produce, or otherwise work in horror in any capacity beyond acting—were rarely recognized in criticism or fan circles.¹²² As I continued to view and watch films, I began to compile a list of films, and I realized that even someone attuned to women's creative output would not comprehend the extent of women's contribution to horror. I therefore developed *Cut-Throat Women* as a companion piece to my dissertation, in part to keep a log for my own developing project, but eventually in order to obviate the future need to perform extensive historiographic fieldwork to reconstruct the history of women in horror film production.¹²³ As soon as it became clear that my research would yield not only a few dozen or a hundred names, but hundreds, I realized that the history of women's cinema would be incomplete

¹²¹ *Cut-Throat Women* can be accessed via this link: www.cutthroatwomen.org.

¹²² In 2018, Jason Blum—the CEO of the horror powerhouse studio Blumhouse—was the subject of criticism when he stated that the reason he had never hired a female director was because there were too few women willing to direct horror.

¹²³ *Cut-Throat Women* is influenced by Dr. Jane Gaines' monumental Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP), a project dedicated to recovering the forgotten history of women working as directors, screenwriters, and in other roles behind the scenes, and aims to prevent the need for a similar future project to document women's work in horror.

without a comprehensive resource devoted to the work of women in a genre that many critics and casual viewers believe to be at odds with positive representation for women and women's spectatorship.

Recently, minority directors of horror are enjoying much-deserved praise and more visibility than ever before, but women continue to be obscured in this discourse. While the massive success of *Get Out* (2017, directed by Jordan Peele), for instance, has resulted in fresh attention to race horror and Black practitioners in the genre, the accomplishments of Black women continue to be overlooked in this context. As of May 2020, a Google search for the upcoming reboot of *Candyman* yields results that overwhelmingly attribute the film's direction to Peele, the film's producer, while director Nia DaCosta's name is comparatively obscured. In this instance, mainstream discourse repeats a pattern in which male practitioners hold the spotlight and their female counterparts are treated as an afterthought. Just three years after its release, *Get Out* has already been the subject of an academic anthology.¹²⁴ Alison Peirse's forthcoming collection *Women Make Horror*, the first of its kind, will be published fifty-four years after the release of Stephanie Rothman's first film, *Blood Bath* (1966) and sixty-seven years after Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-hiker* (1953). Many other practitioners have been similarly overlooked, and until they receive adequate critical attention, the study of women's contribution to film history remains incomplete.

Cut-Throat Women and my dissertation are companion pieces that aim to provide a resource and model for such an inclusive, expansive, and necessary revision of how we view women's filmmaking. I began by collecting the names of women who had directed at least one

¹²⁴ See Dawn Keetley, editor, *Jordan Peele's Get Out*. For more on Black horror, see also the 2019 film *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, based on the book of the same name by Robin R. Means Coleman and produced by Ashlee Blackwell.

horror film—short or feature-length—and quickly expanded the projected reach of the database to include an array of behind-the-scenes roles women have occupied in horror. I discovered many names and titles while attending women's horror film festivals, where I also continued to amass names, conduct interviews, and familiarize myself with hundreds of short horror films directed by women. I first saw many of the films I discuss in this dissertation at such festivals. Beyond documentation, I designed the project to be in dialogue with the diverse output of scholars, critics, journalists, filmmakers, programmers, and fans. The database thus includes the list of director names in alphabetical order, as well as some screenwriters. In addition to the list of names (which has reached 845 in number), it also includes written pieces that I solicit from scholars and critics from various institutions. When I launched the database online in June 2018, I published five directors profiles by scholars and critics from various institutions, and the amount of director profiles have continued to grow steadily since then. I am also building a section for interviews, and I plan to institute a peer-review process for academic essays to enrich the database's scope. For the time being, the database focuses on women's work post-2000, but in the future I plan to expand the project's timeline into the silent era.

The purpose of the database is to provide an evolving, multi-modal critical resource for the quickly growing and multidisciplinary field of women-created horror media. It complements my dissertation and reflects the amount of research that, due to space, could not be incorporated into the written portion. It is intended for use by academics, journalists, and horror enthusiasts seeking new films to view, but also for filmmakers and practitioners looking for collaborators. The output of women's horror cinema continues to grow rapidly, and *Cut-Throat Women* aims to provide a critical and practical resource to complement the expansive landscape of this vibrant and ever-

growing film and media production. In this sense, the work of this dissertation continues to expand in the form of *Cut-Throat Women*.

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Filmography of Short Films

A Movie. Directed by Bruce Conner, 1958.

At Land. Directed by Maya Deren, 1944.

Blood Shed. Directed by James Moran, 2017.

Blood Sisters. Directed by Caitlin Koller, 2017.

Bride of Frankie. Directed by Devi Snively, 2017.

Childer. Directed by Aislinn Clarke, 2016.

A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts. Directed by Jan Oxenberg, 1975.

The Contest. Directed by Aimee Morgan.

Cowboys and Indians. Directed by Emilia Ruiz, 2016.

Earworm. Directed by Tara Price, 2016.

Flesh. Directed by Monika Estrella Negra, 2016.

Girl #2. Directed by David Jeffery, 2016.

Hooker Assassin. Directed by Misty Dawn, 2017.

I Don't Want to Murder You or Bother Your Life. Directed by Shayna Connelly, 2003.

I Spit on Eli Roth. Directed by Devi Snively, 2009.

I Was a Teenage Serial Killer. Directed by Sarah Jacobson, 1993.

Inside the House. Directed by Jennifer Bonior and Dycee Wildman, 2017.

Jules D. Directed by Norma Vila, 2016.

Lip. Directed by Tracey Moffatt, 1999.

Love. Directed by Tracey Moffatt and Gary Hillberg, 2003.

Madder Isle. Directed by Laura Spark, 2017.

Meshes of the Afternoon. Directed by Maya Deren, 1943.

Nasty. Directed by Prano Bailey-Bond, 2015.

Nice Coloured Girls. Directed by Tracey Moffatt, 1987.

Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy. Directed by Tracey Moffatt, 1990.

Night of the Witch. Directed by Zena Sade Dixon, 2017.

Nothing a Little Soap and Water Can't Fix. Directed by Jennifer Proctor, 2017.

Possibly in Michigan. Directed by Cecilia Condit, 1983.

Prayers. Directed by Edda Manriquez, 2016.

Prelude: A Love Story. Directed by England Simpson, 2017.

Schmeerguntz. Directed by Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley, 1965.

Semiotics of the Kitchen. Directed by Martha Rosler, 1975.

Take Off. Directed by Gunvor Nelson, 1972.

Undress Me. Directed by Amelia Moses, 2017.

What Happened to Her. Directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, 2016.

Woman Stabbed to Death. Directed by Stephanie Barber, 1996.

Filmography of Feature-Length Films

A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night. Directed by Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014.

Aliens. Directed by James Cameron, 1986.

American Mary. Directed by Jen and Sylvia Soska, 2012.

American Psycho. Directed by Mary Harron, 2000.

Amour. Directed by Michael Haneke, 2012.

Away From Her. Directed by Sarah Polley, 2006.

The Babadook. Directed by Jennifer Kent, 2014.

The Barefoot Contessa. Directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, 1954.

BeDevil. Directed by Tracey Moffatt, 1993.

Begotten. Directed by E. Elias Merhige, 1990.

Bernice Bobs Her Hair. Directed by Joan Micklin Silver, 1976.

The Bigamist. Directed by Ida Lupino, 1953.

Black Christmas. Directed by Sophia Takal, 2019.

The Blair Witch Project. Directed by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999.

Blood Diner. Directed by Jackie Kong, 1987.

Body Double. Directed by Brian De Palma, 1984.

Blood Sabbath. Directed by Brianne Murphy, 1972.

Blow Out. Directed by Brian De Palma, 1981.

The Blue Light. Directed by Leni Riefenstahl, 1932.

Blue Steel. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 1990.

Body at Brighton Rock. Directed by Roxanne Benjamin, 2019.

Body Snatchers. Directed by Abel Ferrara, 1993.

Braid. Directed by Mitzi Peirone, 2018.

Bride of Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale, 1935.

Bridget Jones' Diary. Directed by Sharon Maguire, 2001.

Cabin Fever. Directed by Eli Roth, 2002.

Candyman. Directed by Bernard Rose, 1992.

Candyman, Directed by Nia DaCosta, 2020.

Carrie. Directed by Brian De Palma, 1976.

Carrie. Directed by David Carson, 2002.

Carrie. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, 2013.

Carnival of Souls. Directed by Herk Harvey, 1962.

Caught. Directed by Max Ophüls, 1949.

Chanthaly, Directed by Mattie Do, 2012.

Un Chien Andalou. Directed by Luis Buñuel, 1929.

Cinderella. Directed by Lotte Reiniger, 1922.

The Color Purple. Directed by Steven Spielberg, 1985.

Contracted. Directed by Eric England, 2013.

Creepshow. Directed by George A. Romero, 1982.

Dance, Girl, Dance. Directed by Dorothy Arzner, 1940.

Daughter Rite. Directed by Michelle Citron, 1980.

The Day Mum Became a Monster. Directed by Joséphine Hopkins, 2018.

De Cierta Manera. Directed by Sara Gomez, 1974.

Dead Hooker in a Trunk. Directed by Jen and Sylvia Soska, 2009.

Dearest Sister. Directed by Mattie Do, 2016.

Desperately Seeking Susan. Directed by Susan Seidelman, 1985.

Detroit. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2017.

The Devil's Doorway. Directed by Aislinn Clarke, 2018.

Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti. Directed by Maya Deren, 1954.

Dogville. Directed by Lars von Trier, 2003.

Dracula's Daughter. Directed by Lambert Hillyer, 1936.

The Entity. Directed by Sidney J. Furie, 1982.

The Evil Dead. Directed by Sam Raimi, 1981.

Family Demons. Directed by Ursula Dabrowsky, 2009.

La Fiancée du Pirate. Directed by Nelly Kaplan, 1969.

The Fly. Directed by Kurt Neumann, 1958.

The Fly. Directed by David Cronenberg, 1986.

Gaslight. Directed by George Cukor, 1949.

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, 2017.

Girl, Interrupted. Directed by James Mangold, 1999.

The Girls. Directed by Mai Zetterling, 1968.

The Great Lie. Directed by Edmund Goulding, 1941.

Green. Directed by Sophia Takal, 2009.

Halloween. Directed by John Carpenter, 1978.

Hide and Seek. Directed by Su Friedrich, 1996.

Honeymoon. Directed by Leigh Janiak, 2014.

Hood of Horror. Directed by Stacy Title, 2006.

Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror. Directed by Xavier Neal-Burgin, 2019.

Hostel. Directed by Eli Roth, 2005.

The Hunger. Directed by Tony Scott, 1983.

The Hurt Locker. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2008.

I Spit on Your Grave. Directed by Meir Zarchi, 1978.

In My Skin. Directed by Marina de Van, 2002.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Don Siegel, 1956.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Philip Kaufman, 1978.

The Invitation. Directed by Karyn Kusama, 2015.

Jacob's Ladder. Directed by Adrian Lyne, 1990.

Jedda. Directed by Charles Chauvel, 1955.

Jennifer's Body. Directed by Karyn Kusama, 2009.

Johnny Ghost. Directed by Donna McRae, 2011.

Juno. Directed by Jason Reitman, 2007.

Kiss of the Damned. Directed by Xan Cassavetes, 2012.

Last House on the Left. Directed by Wes Craven, 1972.

Last Tango in Paris. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972.

Legacy. Directed by Karen Arthur, 1975.

The Lodge. Directed by Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala, 2019.

The Love Witch. Directed by Anna Biller, 2016.

The Lure. Directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2015.

Lyle. Directed by Stewart Thorndike, 2014.

Maedchen in Uniform. Directed by Leontine Sagan, 1931.

Mandy. Directed by Panos Cosmatos, 2018.

Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts. Directed by Mouly Surya, 2017.

Mean Girls. Directed by Mark Waters, 2004.

Merrily We Go to Hell. Directed by Dorothy Arzner, 1932.

Messiah of Evil. Directed by Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck, 1973.

Morocco. Directed by Josef von Sternberg, 1930.

Most Beautiful Island. Directed by Ana Asensio, 2017.

Ms. 45. Directed by Abel Ferrara, 1981.

Near Dark. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 1987.

The Neon Demon. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016.

Night of the Living Dead. Directed by George A. Romero, 1968.

The Night Porter. Directed by Liliana Cavani, 1974.

The Nightingale. Directed by Jennifer Kent, 2018.

Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens. Directed by F. W. Murnau, 1922.

Not Wanted. Directed by Ida Lupino & Elmer Clifton, 1949.

Office Killer. Directed by Cindy Sherman, 1998.

The Old Maid. Directed by Edmund Goulding, 1939.

The Omen. Directed by Richard Donner, 1976.

The Other Side of the Underneath. Directed by Jane Arden, 1972.

Outrage. Directed by Ida Lupino, 1950.

Pathogen. Directed by Emily Hagins, 2006.

Peggy and Fred in Hell. Directed by Leslie Thornton, 1985.

Personal Shopper. Directed by Olivier Assayas, 2016.

The Phantom of the Opera. Directed by Rupert Julian, 1925.

Piercing. Directed by Nicolas Pesce, 2018.

Pin Cushion. Directed by Deborah Haywood, 2017.

Pretty Woman. Directed by Garry Marshall, 1990.

Prevenge. Directed by Alice, Lowe, 2016.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1960.

Pumpkinhead. Directed by Stan Winston, 1988.

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

Raw. Directed by Julia Ducournau, 2016.

Rear Window. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1954.

Rebecca. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1940.

Les Rendez-vous d'Anna. Directed by Chantal Akerman, 1978.

Repulsion. Directed by Roman Polanski, 1965.

River's Edge. Directed by Tim Hunter, 1986.

Revenge. Directed by Coralie Fargeat, 2018.

Rock Paper Dead. Directed by Tom Holland, 2017.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski, 1968.

Secret Beyond the Door. Directed by Fritz Lang, 1947.

Secrets and Lies. Directed by Mike Leigh, 1996.

She Was So Pretty. Directed by Brooklyn Ewing, 2016.

She Was So Pretty 2: Be Good For Goodness Sake. Directed by Brooklyn Ewing, 2017.

The Shining. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980.

Silent House. Directed by Laura Lau and Chris Kentis, 2011.

Sink or Swim. Directed by Su Friedrich, 1990.

Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness. Directed by Margarethe von Trotta, 1979.

Soulmate. Directed by Axelle Carolyn, 2013.

Stained. Directed by Karen Lam, 2010.

Starry Eyes. Directed by Kevin kolsch and Dennis Widmyer, 2014.

Stella Dallas. Directed by King Vidor, 1937.

The Stepford Wives. Directed by Bryan Forbes, 1975.

Strait Jacket. Directed by William Castle, 1964.

The Student Nurses. Directed by Stephanie Rothman, 1970.

Swept Away. Directed by Lina Wertmüller, 1974.

Suspicion. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1941.

A Taste of Honey. Directed by Tony Richardson, 1961.

Teeth. Directed by Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007.

Terminal Island. Directed by Stephanie Rothman, 1973.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. Directed by Tobe Hooper, 1974.

Ticket of No Return. Directed by Ulrike Ottinger, 1979.

Tigers Are Not Afraid. Directed by Issa Lopez, 2017.

To Each His Own. Directed by Mitchell Leisen, 1946.

Vampyros Lesbos. Directed by Jess Franco, 1971.

The Wailing. Directed by Na Hong-jin, 2016.

We Need to Talk About Kevin. Directed by Lynne Ramsay, 2011.

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? Directed by Robert Aldrich, 1962.

Women Who Kill. Directed by Ingrid Jungermann.

The Working Girls. Directed by Stephanie Rothman, 1974.

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

Zero Dark Thirty. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2012.