

'Forgive Me Father, for I have Sinned': The Violent Fetishism of Female Monsters in Hollywood Horror Culture

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Received December 23, 2017; Revised March 10, 2018; Accepted March 20, 2018; Published May 07, 2018.

Abstract

In the generic gothic cornucopia, the figure of the female 'victim' becomes merely a physical signifier of the disembodied, biopolitics of violence that underlies the hyperrealistic, reiterative function of the visual body, which is to enact aggression in a vicious unending loop. It is a form of violence that is written on carefully choreographed, gendered bodies, which are manipulated as objects of graphic male fantasies. Since then, popular representations of femininity in the Hollywood gothic culture have remained mostly trapped within the finite, stunted constructions of the infantile, virtuous 'good' woman, the carnal/ cold *femme fatale* and the monstrous *Other* – terms that are subsumed in a pervasive categorical insulation, which does not allow for much mobility when it comes to their metonymical boundaries. This paper investigates the visual politics and polemics of our cultural engagement with monsters in popular films, which occupies an impressively broad range – “from movie monsters to psychotic killers, from the abusive family member to the horrific politician”. (Baumgartner and Davis 2008) Attempting a conjunction between Kristeva's conception of the Abject, Laura Mulvey's postulations on narrative cinema and voyeurism, and Barbara Creed's theories on feminism, film and *femme castratrice*, I seek to examine the qualitative scope, evolution and appropriation of the 'monstrous-feminine' (Creed) in Hollywood horror/ thriller genre and negotiate the possibility of a female heroine/ anti-heroine whose performative value can disrupt and overhaul the castration complex and sexual anxiety of the classic cinemas of terror.

Keywords: Female Monsters, Monstrous Feminine, Abject Body, Hollywood, Horror

'Mother Knows Best': Monstrous Mothers and the Terror of the Womb in Hollywood

It is an indisputable fact that the forbidden fascinates. The Hollywood horror/ thriller genre has diversely employed, amplified and encouraged representations of horror that are explicitly exhibitionist and, often, implicitly sexual. The Slasher films of 1950s and '60s, for instance, have inflicted a very specific brand of horror on women, reserving for female characters the roles of perpetual victims, or, conversely, absolute monsters – thus, situating the female body at the two extremes of the cinematic spectrum, while simultaneously pitting women against women. The agenda is, of course, decidedly masculine. The visuality of horror speaks of a hyperaggressive, violently voyeuristic male gaze that imbues the torn, debased female body with an almost pornographic appeal.

The performativity of the female body, in all its purported deviance¹ and Aristotelian insistence on 'monstrosity'², encodes infinite possibilities, embodied in its physical particularities and functions – menstruation, gestation, birth, lactation. The abject body, in its unapologetic

fecund glory, subverts the idealised space of 'difference' within which gender stereotypes and traditional notions of femininity (graceful, beautiful, innocent, vulnerable) are enacted, constructed and circulated, creating an atypical assemblage of arbitrary, selective and culturally variant metaphors of the 'eternal feminine'.

The 'performance' of femininity, as Judith Butler would have it, thus, becomes a deeply gendered act, produced from repetitive, socially and culturally contingent gendered codes that entrap female subjectivity and transform it in accordance to the predetermined expectations of, what Byron S. Turner calls, the 'somatic society'. This historically-situated self is rendered into a sexualised, hystericized body through the regulatory capacities of various institutional forces (scientific, social, cultural and political) acting upon it, conditioning it to patriarchal parameters that effectively cauterize ideas of agency and autonomy.

This persistently pathologized female body becomes a culturally constituted site of dissidence, difference and dread. If, on one hand, the transsexual/ intersexual 'lesbian phallus' of the Drag transgresses heterosexist normativity, then, on the other hand, the abjection of the fertile, reproductive female body functions as a disembodied signifier of the unresolved horror of the impure maternal. (Ussher 2006) This insistence on impurity stems, to an extent, from the cultural reconfiguration of the menstrual blood into a symbol of ancient feminine powers, threatening to subvert patriarchal authority; in fact, certain historical and anecdotal references suggest that the 'moon dew', a poison famously used in ancient battles, was brewed from menstrual discharges by females rumoured to practice witchcraft. (Ussher 2006) The monstrous mother exists as a figure of prelingual horror, submerged in the mephitic, semiotic depths of forbidden hungers, desires and fears in the masculine subconscious. The menstruating body becomes an anthropomorphic extension of the unclean, grotesque sexual appetite of the breeding female, eager to cannibalize its own offspring.

Luce Irigaray had claimed that, in the male subconscious, female genitalia "represent the horror of having nothing to see". Creed sites Freud's similar attempt to offer a correlation between Medusa's head and man's encounter with his 'mother's genitals', linking it with the phallogocentric agenda of constructing and sustaining myths of female monstrosity. (Creed 2000) Thus, it may be said, that if horror is born of an instinctual human reaction to the unknown, then the horror of the maternal is bred out of the masculine anxiety of confronting the 'nothing' that birthed them, accompanied, as it is, by their unconscious and, therefore, undeniable urge to regress into that very nothingness. The visual nature of this 'confrontation', of the irresistible male desire to "see", brings us to the analytical paradigm of horror in Hollywood vis-a-vis its generic representations of the abject, monstrous mother.

It is no surprise, then, that the fetishized mother figure has become a staple among the teratological³ visual paraphernalia of horror films. She is an anomaly – an alien that resides 'outside the precision of language', only to find expression in the inclusive iconophilia of narrative cinema. (Mulvey 1996) In Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates claims to an apathetic Marion that "a boy's best friend is his mother", contrarily compounding it with a venomous diatribe against his suffocating entrapment as a caretaker of a mentally ill mother. Yet, he takes offence at Marion's suggestion about institutionalising Mrs. Bates, vehemently rejecting the notion, claiming, "But she's harmless. She's as harmless as one of those stuffed birds." He follows up with a similarly conflicting admission, "Of course, I've suggested it myself. But I hate to even think about it."

The conjunction of contradictions is telling, as is the jarring simile of the 'stuffed birds', embalmed and artificially preserved in their static entirety. As we slowly grasp the extent of

Norman's psychotic delusions and realise that there is no Mrs. Bates, the ominous presence of a distorted figure of maternal horror in Bates' psyche becomes evident. As Sarah Arnold has noted, "There is no Mrs. Bates. Or rather there is no physical, real mother, only a representation of her." (Arnold 2013) Like the stuffed birds, grotesque in their continued, unnatural preservation, Norman's mother remains mummified in his subconscious; we are, instead, confronted with a projection of the abject monstrous mother, produced, solely, from an unhinged oedipal imagination.

Barbara Creed, in her conception of the 'archaic mother' as a typified figure of the monstrous-feminine, has appropriated Kristeva's view of infantile attachment to the mother as both a formative influence and a threat to the development of an autonomous, independent self. (Arya 2014) Psychoanalysis has firmly situated the mother, her defiled body tainted by breast milk and menstrual blood, as a primal, pre-Oedipal space of abjection, blame, guilt and trauma, displacing the idealised notion of a nurturing, sacrificing mother by a figure conceived of fear, anxiety, desire and deathwish.

From Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976) to the evil, adoptive mother of Disney's animated film in *Tangled* (2010), Gothicised mothers are shown to prey upon their children, particularly, their daughters, where the budding sexuality of virginal, young women is repressed, chastised and confined (both figuratively and physically) by overtly dominating, punishing maternal figures. This imposed apathy, guilt and terror, generated by the male censorship of female sexuality, contaminating and shaming female bodies by turning them into topological sites of horror. This becomes an inherited shame, to be passed on, indefinitely, from mother to daughter. Carrie's trauma, for instance, begins with her induction into adulthood, with the onset of her periods, symbolising her entrance into the realm of female sexual maturity. Lacking the knowledge about menstruation, Carrie's fear of and for her own physicality is exacerbated by other teenage girls, who pelt her with tampons, directing her to "plug it up, plug it up." (Grant 1996) The 'plugging up', the forced silencing of the natural, sexual female body would, from that moment onwards, become a central concern in *Carrie's* torturous narrative. The infliction of torment on the adolescent Carrie by her fanatic mother in *Carrie* and the morbid undertones of the Disney song "Mother Knows Best" in *Tangled* are symptomatic of this monstrous 'mothering' – the parochial act of censoring the next generation of females in accordance to the laws set and governed by the phallic Father. Yet, paradoxically, it also involves a violent parody and, ultimately, subversion of the same.

In the Lacanian paradigm, the legitimacy of this paternal 'law of the father' of the Symbolic order is imposed and rationalized by the 'good mother', whereas the 'bad' mother epitomises an almost parasitic, "enclosed" mother-child relationship that excludes the possibility of other healthy relationships. (Arnold 2013) If speech is the father's prerogative, the marker of his authority over the phallic order, then the distortion of the balance within the patriarchal realm of language finds expression in the muted, "inarticulate grunts"⁴ of the female monsters. The monstrous-feminine ceases to be a mere anthropomorphized version of the Freudian terror of the womb, but stands as a challenge to the very socio-cultural processes that have constructed it.

Anxiety of the Body: The Horror of the Victim Mother and the Possessed Virgin

In the horror culture, the deconstruction of the nurturing mother figure, as discussed earlier, thus presents another, secondary scenario: the parasitism of an alien presence that sublimates the maternal body's autonomous agency, by rupturing the distinctions between the subject and the object. On the opposite end of the monstrous maternal resides the victim mother, a prey to her

own body, reeling under the invasive growth of a child, whose pregnant body becomes a cauldron of cultural expectations and anxieties. In Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), the conjunction of betrayal, rape, Satanism and a demonised pregnancy operates to alienate Rosemary, as she spirals into a desperate dementia of horror. Hesitating between reality and delusions, Rosemary's body becomes a primordial host for the unborn evil. Thus, the monstrosity of the child transfers onto the pregnant mother as bodily manifested in her increasing taste for raw meat and frequent, intense spasms. The cultural implication of demonising pregnancy, a deeply revered as well as an equally politicised phenomenon in feminist history, points to the historical legacy of hysteria and death associated with childbirth. The issue of fatality remains pivotal in the representation of impending motherhood in horror films. Minnie Castevet is represented an extension of the monstrous feminine, in her calculated participation in the debasing and impregnating of Rosemary through planned rape. She becomes a twisted maternal figure, who strives to preserve the satanic legacy growing in Rosemary's womb, thus implicating herself as an upholder of patriarchal authority and agenda.

In *Rosemary's Baby*, the paternal authority is transferred from a weak, cuckolded husband - Guy Woodhouse - to a more generic and thereby, pervasive, phallic power - the Devil. Significantly, when Rosemary detects the child's movement inside her womb and joyfully exclaims, "It's alive", Guy immediately recoils and retreats from her. (Baumgartner and Davies 2008) Whether spurred by guilt or fear, Guy's reaction is indicative of his psychological trauma, born of his confrontation with the infantile abject. Or it may simply have been an instinctive reaction to the evil he had helped spawn. In any case, in *Rosemary's Baby*, the ostracised, persecuted mother becomes a womb, a passive receptacle for the male heir. In the monstrous mother, the womb is represented as a cavernous pit of doom, guarded by the "toothed" *vagina dentata*. (Creed 1993) In case of the victim mother, it turns into a tool for her exploitation.

The monstrosity imposed on the female body in cinema is, ultimately, a reminder of the implacability of the body itself, its undeniable presence constantly undercutting the Symbolic prerogative of speech. (Creed 2000) The sins committed on and with bodies are released through the ritualistic confessional imperative of the possessed female. The burden of speech imposed by the 'Father' is radically destabilised and caricatured by the essentially female, semiotic language of the possessed woman - the incoherent voice of delusion, deviance and death.

In William Friedkin's *Exorcist* (1973), the priest, Merrin, represents the normative imposition of law and governance on the unregulated, uncensored tongue and body of the possessed, virginal Regan. The possessed woman's defiance of paternal governance, however, stems from a demonic presence, that is identified as distinctly male. The demon, Pazuzu, is revealed to have prior contention with Merrin. Regan, thus, becomes an irrelevant casualty of masculine rivalry and power plays. The abject body of the female victim, with its mutilated genitals and covered in menstrual blood, urine and faeces, is portrayed in explicit, scatological details. Her monstrosity is a masculine legacy and is, consequently, 'treated' with the ritualistic speech of Latinised exorcism rites, which literally choruses the name-of-the-father - "In the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit" - all exclusively male signifiers of patriarchal authority, facilitating the censorship and control over the unruly female body.

Bad, Bold and Broken: Rise of the Female Anti-heroine in Hollywood Revenge Flicks

"The monster is everywhere and everyone", claims Judith Halberstam. (Halberstam 2000) The fragile boundaries between the Self and Other stand as the only barriers between the pervasive, all-encompassing monstrosity and the automatism of the body. The traditional male monsters are violent and vigilant, constantly and unreservedly doling out punishments for perceived

transgressions. The female monsters are, in essence, still victims. Their monstrosity is a by-product, for the most part, of their gender and they are preys well as predators. At least, the majority of psychoanalytic reading of horror films would have it so. In the last two decades however, a specific brand of female monsters has emerged, specifically in thriller films - which may be seen as a generic extension of horror - wherein they become active aggressors, variously manipulating, emasculating and eradicating male authorities by dismantling the traditional victor/ victim, dominant/ submissive binaries.

This trend owes its origin to the emergence of a new category of thriller/ horror genre since the 1970s and '80s, witnessed in the rapid proliferation of rape revenge flicks in Hollywood, some early examples being *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Sudden Impact* (1983) and *Alley Cat* (1984). The very ordinariness of the monstrous becomes pivotal in themes of vigilante justice as a counterpoint to the male aggression against the female body (through rape, abuse etc.) which have proliferated in psychological thrillers such as David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005) and David Fincher's widely acclaimed *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). The rape revenge film, as a cohesive category, focuses primarily on sexual difference and the woman 'looking back' at the source of the violent male gaze. (Grant 1996) In *Hard Candy*, fourteen-years-old Hayley becomes an unlikely predator who traps, tortures and murders a paedophilic photographer, Jeff, by luring him into her trap through sexual manipulation. The reversal of the 'Red Riding Hood' myth is purportedly hinted by Haley's deceptively innocent figure clad in a bright, red hoodie. The disruption of the linearity of aggressor/victim duality is deconstructed by the unexpected attribution of monstrosity to a most implausible body. The monstrous is not only freed from the restraints of abject femininity, but is awarded with a justification and a purpose. The legitimisation of the female monster automatically romanticises and, at times, sublimates its monstrosity. The 'unspeakable' horror of the monstrous feminine is, finally, given comfortable space within the realm of reason: the female monster is granted her voice and her agency.

In contrast, in Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014), the monstrosity returns with a vengeance, in the form of a borderline psychopathic woman, seeking revenge on her unfaithful husband by carefully concocting a plan to frame him for her own murder, through calculated power plays, elaborate conspiracies and strategic self-mutilation. The scene featuring Amy at Desi Collings' house, penetrating herself with a champagne bottle to create the illusion of rape, is shown with a graphic candour that highlights the intensity of her obsession with Nick. With the destabilisation of the classic *femme fatale*, Amy metamorphoses into a rabidly manic female aggressor who revels in her own monstrosity. The shame of the abject female flesh of the horror film is transformed into a more mundane, utilitarian vision of the body. In the earlier films, females bodies are ceaselessly divested of their agency; in *Gone Girl*, the woman retains enough authority over her body to exert it in calculated acts of seduction, mutilation and manipulation to assert her dominance over multiple male characters. The anxiety of motherhood, too, is recast in Amy's final revelation of her strategic pregnancy through *in vitro* fertilisation, to ensure Nick's continued support in maintaining the facade of a successful marriage. The deliberate act of impregnating herself for specifically material gains, thus, essentially disrupts the entire psychoanalytic narrative of horror films by posing a thinking, speaking, planning monster that has evolved far beyond the hesitant inarticulateness of the monstrous-feminine subsumed in the voiceless semiotics of the abject.

This evolution of the monstrous feminine, when placed within, what Freeland calls, the 'extra-filmic' context of the global rape culture, signals a reaction, perhaps, to the growing need for a vicious response against the politicised ideology of passivity and tonguelessness inherent in the representations of femininity in horror/ thriller films. (Freeland 2015) Psychoanalysis has

relegated the origin of male monsters to the psychic space of the subconscious while allowing them room for dissembling/ evading/ surviving; female monsters, on the other hand, are inextricably bound to their monstrous nature through their bodies. Their monstrosity, thus, is inescapable, undeniable and irreversible. The modern thriller has revised this paradigmatic exclusion of the female psychopath/ criminal from the cerebral narrative, their horror moving beyond the scope of the body fantastic to devious mind games and explicit violence of the self-controlled killer.

In conclusion, however, it must be pointed out that in Hollywood horror culture, bodies - especially female bodies - are treated by a discontented male gaze, which tears apart their subjectivity through 'fetishized' violence, carefully orchestrated trauma and punishments. (Bradley 1995) The female monster is peculiarly implicated in the performance and visualization of terror. The audience targeted is quintessentially male, who are positioned in a choric space of 'narrative codes' that project their unconscious desires on passive female victims, or alternatively, de-masculinised male bodies - almost androgynous in their powerlessness, thus implicating the monstrous feminine for strategic collusion. The female viewer, on the other hand, reconstructs the language of the gothic, a narrative particularly suited to voice the trauma, the guilt, the rage of the monster as well as the victim, creating a dual critique - one targeted at the male culture of generic horror and the other driven against the passivity of the female victim herself. In the end, we are constantly confronted with the implacable certainty of violence done by and upon bodies, both actions suggesting equal impotence. Ultimately, the evolution of monstrous females in Hollywood hinges upon a mimetic loop, an infinite repetition of the cycle of systemic dehumanization.

Notes:

¹ "Woman, as a sign of difference, is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-a-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out the unique blend of fascination and horror", writes Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011). p. 226

² "Woman is, literally, a monster: a failed, blotched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and coldness during the process of conception." - Aristotle. Quoted in Jane M. Ussher, (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 1

³ The term is derived from a conflation of two Greek words, *teras* (monster) and *logia* (a discourse, science or theory).

⁴ "Monsters have long been stereotyped by a propensity for inarticulate grunts," writes David J. Skal in 'Foreword', *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology*, by Caroline J. S. Picart and John M. Browning (New York: Palgrave, 2012) p. xi.

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