

The Equality of Fear:

An Analysis of Gender Representation and the Taboo within the Horror Genre

The horror genre has always exploited and experimented with the idea of gender, in some cases very controversially. Of course, horror, being a genre designed to shock and highlight the taboo, will always hold an element of controversy, whether it be in the infamous Video Nasties scare of 70s Britain or the alarming ['Tree Rape'](#) scene in *The Evil Dead* (1981, Sam Raimi), horror has always conflicted with many of society's defined ideals, creating an aura of extreme notoriety and ultimately controversy. This is most likely due to how horror can be used to highlight and satirise taboo, political and social contexts that most of society wish to ignore. However, one of horror's greatest controversies, lies in the themes of Gender and the 'Other', also referred to as the taboo. Examples of these controversies can be seen throughout the genre's history, even into the depths of its origins in folklore.

Although, it is being argued that the attitudes and representation of gender in horror films have changed since its official concept, thanks to the introduction of feminism and queer theory, leading the genre out of the ideals of exploitation and more into the ideals of feminist empowerment, both within television and film. A recent example of this is [The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina](#) (2018, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa). The show is a dark horror/comedy, reimagining of the 80's TV series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996 - 2003, Nell Scovell), based on the comic book series of the same name by series creator, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. In the series the character of Sabrina is portrayed as a strong, independent idealist, who remains committed to her feminist beliefs, which leads to conflict with not only the taboo practices of her coven, but the misogynistic nature of the coven's high priest and the devil himself.

From the 16th century to the 17th century the belief in witchcraft was a very real subject. This saw the brutal murder of thousands of innocent women. One of the most famous examples in Britain, is the [Pendle Witch Trial](#). A trial so infamous it has become ingrained within British folklore. It involved twelve accused witches who lived in the area of Pendle Hill in Lancashire and is considered to be one of the largest recorded witch trials in history. Witchcraft is a heavy element present within folklore,

an expressive narrative body which is argued to be one of the main origins of the horror genre.

Other examples of this narrative element can be seen throughout culture and history, including in British folklore, with the example of the 'Queen of the May', which was a religious practice that was present in ancient paganism, when it was still widely present and worshipped in the country. It revolves around the personification of the pagan holiday known as May Day. In ancient practices a young girl was chosen to parade as the May Queen and at the end of the festivities she was then sacrificed to the gods, either by burning or being skinned alive. This would later be explored in the British horror classic [The Wicker Man](#) (1973, Robin Hardy), a factor that backs up the idea that folklore has gone on to influence the genre.

This influence of folklore on horror has actually established the sub-genre known as Folk Horror. It was widely prominent in the 1970s and has recently seen a revival, with such films as *The Witch* (2016, Robert Eggers). According to [Folkhorror.com](#) it states:

*'Folk horror is a sub-genre of **horror** fiction (or of Occult fiction in WorldCat Genre terms) characterised by reference to European, pagan traditions. Stories typically involve standing stone circles, earthworks, elaborate rituals or nature deities.'* - [folkhorror.com](#) n.d

This further establishes its influence on the genre. It can also be noticed that these two examples have a clear relation to the themes of gender as well as the taboo. Other prominent folk tales and myths also share this relation, one example being the [Lamia](#), which in Ancient Greek mythology, was a woman who turned into a child eating monster. The legend of the Lamia, however, transcended into medieval folklore where it became a phantom that preyed on young men to satisfy its sexual appetites, and once satisfied it proceeded to feast on the seduced youth.

There are also many cultural and supernatural legends, such as the Black Lady of Bradley Woods. The story goes that she was the wife of a woodsman who was recruited into the English Civil War, leaving her to care for her child alone. One day a

group of soldiers came to her house demanding she hand over her money, when she refused, the soldiers proceeded to rape and beat her, and when finished, kidnapped her child. Afterwards, she went mad with grief and roamed the local woods, which she is still said to haunt, looking for her lost child. This is a tale that sounds eerily similar to a number of modern exploitation films.

All of these examples are clear indicators of gender being exploited as a catalyst in folklore. In these origin tales however, gender and the taboo are used very differently to current standards of storytelling. In these tales the use of gender exclusively serves as a warning to certain taboo elements considered sinful by the ideals of the periods they originate from. This it can be argued, is due to the conservative and moralist ideals of religions such as Christianity being enforced, in an attempt to extinguish previous ideals and beliefs from other ancient religions, such as paganism. Now, things are much different in the modern era, where we can see the use of gender switched around and coming into direct conflict with the moralist ideals once enforced by major organised religion.

The use of gender in horror film has been greatly explored by a number of genre theorists. The two most notable theorists being Carol J Clover, who developed the 'Final Girl' theory and Barbara Creed, who developed the theory 'The Monstrous Feminine'. According to the Studies in Fiction website, in relation to Barbara Creeds Monstrous Feminine, it states:

'The author examines the role of women in horror films challenging the dominant, patriarchal view which frequently puts the woman in the position of victim. She argues that when the feminine is constructed as monstrous, it is frequently done in conjunction with its mothering functions. Her main thesis sustains that the prototype of all definitions (sic) of monstrosity related to the feminine is linked the woman's reproductive body. Creed opts to use the term 'monstrous feminine' instead of 'female monster, which, in her conception would oppose to the idea of a 'male monster'.' – Studies in Fiction, 2011

Creed's theory effectively dismisses older traditionalist theories that establish women only as the victims in horror stories. She asserts that women can be the heroine or

even the villain of the story, rather than having to be constantly labelled as the damsel in distress. Very often this idea is harnessed through displaying feminine biological elements as being 'monstrous', a process intended to act as a male fear factor.

This theory can be applied to a number of case studies, for example, female vampires in vampiric legend. As seen in the art piece ['The Vampire'](#) by 19th century artist Philip Burne-Jones. The narrative element is of course often seen within horror films, with examples such as the [unnatural birth](#) in *The Brood* (1979, David Cronenberg) and the [crucifix masturbation](#) scene in *The Exorcist* (1979, William Friedkin). Alongside the Monstrous Feminine, Carol J Clover developed the Final Girl theory, which has also been used to challenge the more traditionalist theories that establish the horror genre as male dominated. In her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Clover puts forward the idea:

'The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again. She is abject terror personified.' Clover 1992, Page 35.

Clover describes how horror films often adopt the idea of having one last character alive, the 'Final Girl'. It is a trope most often seen in slasher films, with examples like [Halloween](#) (1978, John Carpenter) and [The Texas Chainsaw Massacre](#) (1974, Tobe Hooper). The last girl we see confronting the crazed killer, acts as a personification of the audience's terror.

In some cases audience members and academic critics would consider this a case of female disempowerment or a sadistic pleasure enforced by the 'Male Gaze' theorem, which can most certainly be advocated with a number of particular exploitation films. However, Clover's theory argues against that, effectively flipping round the idea of the final girl being the damsel in distress and instead, we find her either outsmarting or defeating the antagonist. This is notable in the film *Halloween*

(1978, John Carpenter), where we see Laurie Strode struggle and eventually survive the clutches of psychotic killer Michael Myers.

Although Clover's theory is highly progressive, things have changed in regards to the genre and we are now seeing an increase in female protagonists in the films, driving the story forward and not being solely the last character alive. A prime example is the French/Belgian film [Raw](#) (2016, Julia Ducournau), a film which hosts a number of complex and taboo themes including cannibalism, social identity, fraternity culture, [sexual awakening](#), the introverted vs. the extroverted, coming of age and sisterhood. The story centres around a vegetarian student studying at veterinary university, and can be seen as a very macabre interpretation of Creed's 'Monstrous Feminine' theory.

It is here that she, along with the other first year students, is forcefully inducted into a fraternity like culture that enforces humiliating hazing rituals. It is with this induction and through the gradual encouragement of her sister that she begins to break the shell of her introverted personality and instead embrace the ways of the extroverted. Through this medium she begins to find herself in the state of a sexual and social awakening, which, in turn, acts as a catalyst for her desire to consume human flesh. In an interview with Julia Ducournau in [filmcomment.com](#) in March 2017, she states:

'I like to watch and make genre films that blossom from reality, from a place you don't expect. I like to transform trivial things into strange things. It's really unsettling when you think you know your body and all of a sudden it starts erupting.'—*Film Comment, 2017*

It stands out as a horror film that truly embraces the ideas of Creed's theory. We see two authentically written female characters in the story, their sexual and social awakening used as a rebellion against their parent's ideals and as a conduit for their passionate desires of flesh and blood. One can also say that this is further re-enforced by the cannibalistic elements within the film, that are almost displayed in an erotic aesthetic which further enhances the mental condition of the characters and the disturbing feelings the film evokes. In his film review, UK critic Mark Kermode states:

'A movie which manages to take an intimate tale of an identity crisis and somehow blend with Cronenbergian body horror and humour and heartbreak'

- Mark Kermode Film Review,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTzP0X00P_c

Desires of the flesh can be argued to be a common theme when it comes to films of this nature and there is no better example than *Possession* (1981, Andrzej Żuławski). This is a film which has always conflicted opinion, with some claiming it to be a straight up exploitation film and others claiming it to be a dark, art house feature. An argument made all the more controversial by the fact that it was one of many films banned during the UK's Video Nasties scare.

The film centres around a spy, just returned from a mission to his home in West Berlin. Upon his return he discovers that his wife wants to separate and that she may potentially have someone else that she loves. Angered and obsessed over this matter he proceeds to delve deeper into the situation, soon discovering that his wife is partaking in an affair with something much more sinister and unnatural. Namely, her affair with a creature of unknown origins that she claims is a gift to her from god.

It is a truly strange and surreal film that deals with the themes of family disruption, gender roles, miscarriage, religion, misogyny, sexuality, corruption and fetishes. The trance like plot and visceral scenes, create a truly deranged nightmare that encapsulates the viewer. The film immediately screams 'Monstrous Feminine', clearly demonstrated in the scenes involving the miscarriage and the husband's first encounter with the [creature](#) that lies with his wife.

The fear of his wife exploring herself sexually with someone else, is what drives the story forward, perfectly demonstrating Creed's idea of female sexuality, acting as a male fear factor. The film ends with the creature fully manifested into a clone of the husband. The clone then proceeds to kill the husband and his wife, before moving onto the final scene, where we end with the manifested doppelganger clawing at the door of the teacher, who is caring for the dead couple's son. The son then drowns

himself in the bathtub and the sounds of bombs, planes and air raid sirens echo in the background.

The film ends very ambiguously, leaving it open to many different interpretations. Zulawski was supposedly going through a very difficult divorce when writing the script, and it has often been suggested that his feelings and experiences of the divorce are reflected within the film. Whatever the film's overall meaning is, is down to the interpretation of the audience. It could be, like some suggest, a reflection of the director's own experiences or maybe it is displaying how the exploration of the taboo and the excess of lust can lead to tragedy, as well as pleasure. Whatever the meaning, the film still remains divisive amongst the film community, to this day.

Not as divisive, however, as fellow video nasty, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978, Meir Zarchi). This highly intense and graphic exploitation film has sparked huge debate throughout society and filmmaking circles. The story revolves around a writer who retreats to a country home for the summer, she is then brutally raped multiple times by a group of local men, who she eventually commits a bloody revenge against.

When it comes to academic debate the film is possibly one of the most diverse examples of a controversial horror film, with the majority of people seeing it as a distasteful, exploitation film, both amongst conservative moralists and feminist communities. However, there are a number in the feminist community who, in fact, see the film as an advocate for feminist empowerment and a criticism of both rape culture and toxic masculinity. Whether this is the actual case, it has been very much obscured by the exploitation aspect of the film, but a number of feminist advocates still maintain this idea. It is in fact discussed in Carol J Clover's book, *Men Women and Chainsaws*, in which she also applies her 'Final Girl' theory to the film:

'I have talked to several viewers, including feminist critics, who hate themselves more for seeing Dirty Harry or Rambo First Blood II or the rape-murder in Hitchcock's Frenzy, than I Spit On Your Grave, which for all its disturbing qualities at least problematizes the issues of male (sexual) violence. One such viewer (female) went so far to call it a radical feminist film; another (male) found it such a devastating commentary on male rape

fantasies and also on the way male group dynamics engender violence that he thought it should be compulsory viewing for high school boys.' –Clover 1992, Page 115.

It is highly intriguing how the film has divided opinion, as its graphic honesty is still considered by most to be purely exploitative and used solely for shock value, but as is made clear in Clover's book, there are individuals who believe it is in fact empowering for women. The disturbingly realistic rape scenes are actually much closer to reality than most other films, and are used to painfully highlight the issue of rape, establishing the idea that women should take a stand against rape culture and not wait for the male white knight to come and save them. Effectively, the film it could be argued, is adopting shock tactics to apply social commentary and potentially influence change.

In an interview, Meir Zarchi, stated that the film was in fact inspired by an actual event, where he helped a young woman who had just been sexually assaulted:

'Out driving one day in 1974 with his daughter and a friend, Zarchi discovered a girl, the victim of an assault, crawling out from some bushes "bloodied and naked". They helped the girl up and took her to the police station, but were so horrified by her treatment at the hands of the callous constabulary as to be inspired to write a film about her ordeal.' –Barry, 2010, for the *Quietus*.

Discussions about the film have not only divided opinion but also changed it. In a 2011 article in the Guardian journalist Julie Bindel, who among others protested the release of the film, describes how she believes it is not as harmful to the feminist movement as she originally thought and now argues that a number of mainstream Hollywood films are, in fact, more damaging. In her article she states:

'I stand by the pickets against the video-nasty genre 30 years ago, but on reflection I was wrong about ISOYG being harmful. It was and still is exploitative, but at least it does not present the criminal justice system as a friend to women. If rape remains as easy to get away with as it is at present, films in which women get even through the legal system will become as

unrealistic as ISOYG. But I know which one will give me, and many other women, the most comfort.' –Bindel, 2011, for the Guardian.

Despite what one thinks about the film, it cannot be denied that it has generated many diverse opinions and viewpoints. As was previously stated at the start of this article, horror is often used to satire major social, political and taboo aspects of society and to do that it uses shock to painfully highlight the issues and make them impossible to ignore, a tactic which is very present in this film.

It can also be argued that there are a number of worse examples of the horror and exploitation genres, examples that take things too far and embrace far worse an excess of distastefulness and an exploitative representation of gender. For example, mainstream torture porn films, such as *Hostel* (2005, Eli Roth) and *The Human Centipede* (2009, Tom Six), are films that display over excessive violence and unfavourable portrayals of gender that, it could be argued, are done for the sake of nothing more than pure sensationalism and do not truly drive forward a story or advocate any kind of message or commentary.

Alongside these you see the works of exploitative art house features, like [Salò or 120 Days of Sodom](#) (1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini). There is even the bizarre 'Nazisploitation' genre with films such as *Last Orgy of the Third Reich* (1977, Cesare Canevari). Finally you get to some of the more infamous Video Nasties, most notably [Cannibal Holocaust](#) (1980, Ruggero Deodato). All of them contain over excessive depictions of the taboo, very often implementing the idea of the male gaze and presenting an unfair and demeaning depiction of gender.

Though these examples clearly demonstrate that there is a number of films in the horror genre that have been, and in some cases still are, exploitative of gender, there are also a number of other films that stand out from the crowd and show a clear change in their depictions of the aforementioned themes. A notable number of them were produced very recently, the first case study of this article, *Raw* (2016, Julia Ducournau) being one of them.

A slightly older example would be [Silence of the Lambs](#) (1991, Jonathan Demme), a film where we see the strong-willed Clarice Starling combating the misogynistic ethics of her fellow FBI agents, finding only some true understanding with infamous cannibalistic, psychopath Hannibal Lecter, who assists her in trying to catch the gender confused serial killer, Buffalo Bill. Alongside this, you have [The Devils](#) (1971, Ken Russell), a film where the narrative centres around the idea of gender being used as a political weapon, applying Creed's 'Monstrous Feminine' theory to maximum levels through a distinct conflict of gender ideals.

There are also films such as [Suspiria](#) (1977, Dario Argento) and its remake [Suspiria](#) (2018, Luca Guadagnino). Both implement methods of using female physiology and mindset as a male fear factor, all while the films display strongly written and independent female characters fully embracing Barbara Creed's 'Monstrous Feminine' theory, through visceral nightmarish scenes of witchcraft, gender and sexuality.

In regards to witchcraft there is also the recent folk horror film [The Witch](#) (2016, Robert Eggers). This film is influenced directly by folklore in relation to witchcraft and sees the rebellious young Thomasin defy her parent's puritan ideals, as her family breaks down around her, and is consumed by the 17th century paranoia of witchcraft. These examples, along with a number of other recent productions, demonstrate that there has been a definite application of favourable representation of gender and the taboo, as well as applications of the theories by Creed and Clover.

Despite the fact it is true that there has and still are cases of horror films being purely exploitative, it can definitely be seen that there is a significant change happening. More and more, we are seeing horror films that display strongly written female characters and the subjects of the taboo portrayed in a way that it is not purely sensationalism, but instead carries forth a story and a message. Horror films will still constantly generate controversy no matter how they approach these issues, but it can definitely be argued that we are seeing the beginning of a change.

We can now see that horror film's use commentary to adopt more the ideals of feminist empowerment and equality rather than the sensationalist claws of

exploitation and the male gaze, applying more favourable representations of gender within the genre. It has been found that during this investigation, the change is clearly happening and is unquestionably gathering momentum; and has been since the 60s but only recently has it been fully realised. This, of course, has influenced a number of horror filmmakers to create similar productions, that could not only lead to a much more beneficial opinion of the horror genre in regards to gender, but also potentially encourage a significant change for gender representation in the industry as a whole.

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