THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE ROLE IN HORROR CINEMA

Sólrun Gleðisheygg Weihe

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolving representation of women in horror cinema, tracing the shift from passive victims to complex figures who are given agency. By using feminist film theory as its foundation, this study examines eight key films across decades spanning from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024). Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Laura Mulvey, Carol J. Clover, Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva, and Cynthia A. Freeland, the thesis investigates how female characters have been framed, fetishized, and ultimately reimagined within the horror genre. The analysis highlights how early horror films often reinforced patriarchal narratives, positioning women as objects of violence and desire. However, later works, especially those written and directed by women, such as *Jennifer's Body*, *Promising Young Woman*, and *The Substance*, subvert these conventions by presenting female characters who confront, embody, or weaponize their monstrosity. These films use horror not only as a genre of fear, but as a political and affective space in which the traumas and injustices of gendered experience can be critically exposed. This thesis argues that contemporary feminist horror, what Barbara Creed terms the "Feminist New Wave," reclaims female monstrosity as a symbol of empowerment. By exaggerating, duplicating, or undermining traditional horror tropes, these films resist the voyeuristic dynamics of the "male gaze" and rewrite the cultural scripts around femininity.

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The Evolution of the Female Role in Horror Cinema

Introduction

In the comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For," Alison Bechdel first introduced the rules for what is widely known as the "Bechdel test." Her cartoon episode titled "The Rule," published in 1985, included a set of "three basic requirements:" 1. the story has to have at least two (named) women in it, 2. who talk to each other, and 3. about something besides a man (Selisker 505). While deceptively simple, these criteria expose the overwhelming male-centered bias embedded within mainstream cinema. This inclination is particularly striking in horror, one of the most enduring genres in film history. For decades, horror has been shaped by narratives that revolve around male protagonists, male killers, or the "male gaze," often reducing female characters to helpless victims, eroticized bodies, or cautionary figures.

As Linda Williams notes in her study of horror film spectatorship, "Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulders of their dates" (Williams 17). This quote encapsulates a long-standing cultural assumption that horror is a genre meant for men and for women to endure.

This thesis examines the evolution of the female character's role in horror cinema from a passive object to an active subject, with a particular focus on the intersections of gender, agency, and monstrosity. Through a close analysis of eight key films spanning several decades, this study examines how the horror genre has evolved into a crucial site for feminist critique and creative resistance. Drawing on foundational feminist film theories, including Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," Carol J. Clover's theory of the "final girl," Barbara Creed's work on the "monstrous-feminine," and Cynthia A. Freeland's "intra-filmic" approach to gender ideology, this thesis explores how horror films both reflect and challenge dominant cultural anxieties about femininity. While many of the films discussed fail the "Bechdel test" outright, the underlying question of how women are represented, whether they speak, and what they say, remains central.

Films directed by women and centered on complex female characters offer a radical departure from earlier horror tropes. They reveal the ways in which female embodiment, trauma, and revenge are now being reclaimed and recontextualized through a feminist lens. In a genre so often accused of exploiting women, it is crucial to ask not only who is looking and who is being looked at, but who is speaking, and what is being said. Horror cinema, particularly

when created by women, has become a vital space for reimagining female identity, agency, and the concept of monstrosity.

Literature Review

Although there is a gap in the number of male and female directors within the horror genre, women have historically been involved in the creation of horror cinema for a considerable period (Paszkiewicz 61). Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's research explores the complex interplay between women filmmakers, horror genre conventions, and the female spectator. In her book, *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, published in 2018, she states that:

> "While, arguably, in the past few years there has been a significant breakthrough of women horror practitioners in film (and TV), there is still a substantial gap in academic thinking about female filmmakers working in this genre, which urges us to rethink critical and methodological tools deployed by feminist film theory to address the complex relationship between women and horror" (Paszkiewicz 61-62).

The question of why there is a "complex relationship between women and horror," given that women have been involved in making horror films since the 1950s, is an intriguing one (Paszkiewicz 61). As Paszkiewicz mentions, the lack of feminist film theory analyzing the female spectator and the female filmmaker in horror is practically non-existent. "Despite overtly feminist readings of the horror genre offered by Clover and Creed, their analyses are still based upon the assumption that heterosexual men are the primary consumers of horror films" (Paszkiewicz 76). This observation highlights a persistent gap in critical approaches to horror that exclude or marginalize female perspectives. The divide between research on men's and women's viewing of horror is a direct result of the prevailing belief that men are the primary audience for the genre. This is reflected in the commercial failure of the film *Jennifer's Body*.

The female-directed and written *Jennifer's Body*, although not critically acclaimed, has gained a feminist cult following years after its 2009 release. The film is centered around Jennifer, a high school girl who becomes possessed by a demonic entity after a failed satanic ritual and begins murdering her male classmates. It was revealed that the marketing team for *Jennifer's Body* focused on selling the movie to male viewers, inadvertently miscalculating that women would likely be the ones who would truly appreciate this cinematic work of horror (Howell & Baker 156). Director Karyn Kusama and screenwriter Diablo Cody have both made remarks post-release, stating that they feel the "male-centered marketing strategies," chosen by the film's production company, proved ineffective in reaching its female audience

(Paszkiewicz 64), inherently overshadowing the allure that the film is "told from a female point of view, starring women, and written and directed by women," as the producer of *Jennifer's Body* Jason Reitman says (Paszkiewicz 63). This discrepancy between intention and reception reveals the challenges women face when creating subversive horror under a patriarchal commercial structure.

Paszkiewicz mentions Ben Kooyman and his observations of *Jennifer's Body* in one of his articles, from 2012, where he says, "that the negative responses […] in most cases, openly aggressive and hostile – were partly influenced by the enduring prejudice against horror films" (Paszkiewicz 65), while also giving her own thoughts on his remark:

> "Kooyman is right when he argues that the cliché that horror films are made purely for and by men in order to indulge sadistic, voyeuristic fantasies against women (and therefore have little social value) persists in debates regarding this genre. […] This prejudice might be one of the main reasons why horror films authored by women create such a public disturbance, and at the same time why they have received so little theoretical attention from feminist film criticism" (Paszkiewicz 66).

Here, Paszkiewicz articulates how women's participation in horror continues to be met with skepticism, and sometimes hostility, especially when their work resists traditional genre expectations. Her opinion highlights the multifaceted nature of feminism and feminist film criticism as a whole.

> "There are multiple ways of understanding feminism, as well as infinite interpretations of it in the popular press, which additionally do not necessarily correspond to academic feminisms; as a result, it should not come as a surprise that Jennifer's monstrous femininity might be read in completely different ways" (Paszkiewicz 65).

This multiplicity of feminist interpretations explains the ambivalent reception that *Jennifer's Body* has generated. Some see it as a powerful reclamation of the "monstrous-feminine" trope; other arguments can perform as a critique for not fully breaking away from male-centered visual codes. Laura Mulvey's famous concept of the "male gaze" and its prevalence in the horror genre is noteworthy in this context. Paszkiewicz mentions Mulvey in relation to *Jennifer's Body* in her book:

> "If we adopted Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of visual pleasure […] together with the moment when Jennifer unzips her sweater, partially exposing her breast while her face remains out of frame, clearly correspond to fetishistic scopophilia: Jennifer's body is a spectacle, an object of desire that is isolated, displayed and made beautiful – in other words, a fetish offered to the (male) spectators' gaze" (Paszkiewicz 72).

Thus, even though the film has garnered a feminist cult following, it is not devoid of male-centered horror conventions. In this sense, *Jennifer's Body* may appear to fall into the trap of using the female body as a visual commodity. However, Paszkiewicz pushes this interpretation further, showing how the film both adopts and critiques these visual tropes.

> "*Jennifer's Body* heightens spectatorial pleasures and disrupts the gender coding and power relations not by distracting us from, but rather by intensifying, our pleasures. In other words, if Cody and Kusama's film moves away from typical gender representations in horror cinema, it does so not by overtly criticising or opposing them, but rather by duplicating and exaggerating them" (Paszkiewicz 82).

This exaggeration functions as a kind of intertextual parody, a knowing engagement with horror's exploitative visual legacy. The use of voyeuristic imagery in *Jennifer's Body* is deliberate. The film's hyper-stylized femininity and erotic visuals become tools for critique rather than submission. The "male gaze" is, in this situation, not passively reproduced, but actively undermined. It becomes part of a larger feminist strategy to expose and reverse horror's gendered power dynamics.

More recent films, such as *Promising Young Woman* (2020) and *The Substance* (2024), further illustrate how women filmmakers are reshaping horror and horror-adjacent genres through rebellious narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and explicit critiques of patriarchal systems. These films also complicate the relationship between the female filmmaker, the female spectator, and genre conventions, continuing the feminist cross-examination outlined by Paszkiewicz.

Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* is not a traditional horror film, yet it employs horror-inflected techniques and tonal shifts to challenge the viewer's expectations and confront systemic misogyny. The film follows Cassie, a woman traumatized by her best friend's sexual assault, who embarks on a disturbing mission of psychological retribution. Like *Jennifer's Body*, *Promising Young Woman* uses stylized femininity, pop aesthetics, and conventional genre motifs to draw attention to deeper political and social critiques. The film's shocking third act, which culminates in Cassie's death at the hands of her friend's rapist, unsettles narrative closure and highlights the real dangers women face when they challenge male violence. Its ending deliberately denies viewers the catharsis typically offered by revenge narratives, positioning the female body as a battleground for justice and, ultimately, sacrifice. This subversion aligns with Paszkiewicz's observation that feminist horror often exaggerates or disrupts gendered pleasures rather than eliminating them.

Similarly, Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* pushes body horror into explicitly feminist territory, using grotesque imagery to literalize the violence of patriarchal beauty standards. In the film, Elisabeth, an aging celebrity, consumes a mysterious substance that creates a younger, idealized version of herself named Sue. The film explores female embodiment, aging, and internalized misogyny through a visceral horror lens, as Sue eventually takes over Elisabeth's life and violently supplants her. Like *Jennifer's Body*, *The Substance* interrogates the voyeuristic expectations placed on the female body. However, it does so by making visible the painful, grotesque transformations required for women to remain desirable under male-dominated beauty standards. Elisabeth's ultimate erasure by her own "better" version speaks to the self-destructive extremes of performative femininity, echoing Paszkiewicz's critique of horror as a space where female authorship can both reflect and resist patriarchal pressures.

Fargeat, like Fennell and Kusama, engages with the aesthetics of the "male gaze" only to rupture it. Rather than flattering male fantasy, *The Substance* weaponizes it. Sue, the "perfect" body born of Elisabeth's desire to remain youthful and relevant, becomes a source of horror, not titillation. As with *Jennifer's Body*, the film amplifies scopophilic pleasure only to make it uncomfortable and disturbing. In this way, Fargeat's work exemplifies what Paszkiewicz identifies as a "duplication and exaggeration" of gender codes that ultimately serves as feminist critique (Paszkiewicz 82).

Together, these films demonstrate how contemporary women filmmakers utilize horror and adjacent genres to deconstruct gender norms, interrogate the concept of the "male gaze," and explore the embodied consequences of misogyny. Despite their differences in style and narrative, all three films destabilize the assumption that horror is a genre made by and for men, illustrating how women's voices are reshaping its boundaries and possibilities.

Methodology

This thesis bases its research on horror films within a historical context, beginning with *Psycho* (1960) and progressing forward, culminating in *The Substance,* released in 2024. Grounded in feminist film theory, I was able to analyze the evolution of the female character in horror films throughout their contemporary release periods. These films are cultural and ideological texts that can be "read" for meaning, particularly in terms of gender representation, genre subversion, and the changing role of women in horror cinema. Rather than quantifying audience reactions or box-office data, this project is invested in how films represent and communicate ideas about women, particularly in relation to feminist film theory, cinematic tropes, and the cultural frameworks in which the films were produced.

Firstly, I analyzed five movies directed by men and then included three movies written and directed by female filmmakers. *Psycho* (1960), *Carrie* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *Aliens* (1986), and *Scream* (1996) are the films that provide my foundation for arguments about how female protagonists have adapted to cultural changes over time. Historically, the movies, I have chosen, portray the movement within cinema that allowed for the female perspective to be explored within the horror genre, as shown in the subsequent three films, *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and *The Substance* (2024), all released in the new millennium.

Central to my research is the suggestion that horror films, especially those directed by women, function as reflections of and responses to patriarchal cultural systems. They offer a unique vantage point for examining social anxieties surrounding gender, power, sexuality, and violence. Feminist film theory provides the necessary tools to deconstruct how horror films construct womanhood, whether as victims, survivors, monsters, or something else entirely.

To effectively illustrate the historical changes, I drew upon theories by Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva, Laura Mulvey, Carol J. Clover, and Cynthia A. Freeland. Each of these theorists offers a lens through which to interpret women's roles in horror cinema.

Of particular relevance to this project is Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," which she introduced in her foundational essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey argues that classical cinema positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure for both the characters within the film and the male audience watching. In my research, I use Mulvey's framework to examine how visual pleasure is constructed in the analyzed films, and whether the female characters conform to or disrupt the binary of active/male versus passive/female. In the male-directed films *Psycho*, *Carrie*, and *Halloween*, Mulvey's theory proves especially valuable in showing how the camera's framing of women reinforces the visual hierarchy of patriarchy, often placing women in positions of sexual vulnerability before subjecting them to violence. These examples support Mulvey's contention that cinema historically works to maintain male dominance on-screen. However, as the thesis progresses into contemporary female-directed movies, Mulvey's theory becomes a critical tool for identifying how feminist filmmakers intentionally exaggerate or subvert the "male gaze."

Carol J. Clover's theory of the "final girl" is crucial for understanding the shifting dynamics of spectatorship and gender in the slasher subgenre. Her concept complicates Mulvey's model by demonstrating how male viewers can identify with a female protagonist, provided she exhibits sexual restraint and embodies traits deemed masculine-coded. In my analysis of *Halloween*, *Aliens*, and *Scream*, I employ Clover's theory to examine how female

characters, such as Laurie Strode, Ellen Ripley, and Sidney Prescott, transition from potential victims to empowered survivors. These characters challenge passive female tropes, but they also remain tethered to patriarchal expectations through their suffering, trauma, and "purity."

Creed's concepts of the "monstrous-feminine" and, more recently, her elaborations of a Feminist New Wave in cinema, are particularly relevant in my readings of *Jennifer's Body*, *Promising Young Woman,* and *The Substance*. Her concept of a New Wave in cinema and its reflections on the female role in female-directed films gave a proper template for depicting female monstrosity. In her book *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022), where she expands on the framework for the "monstrous-feminine," established in her original book, she acknowledges a shift in how contemporary women filmmakers approach the anti-heroine as a protagonist. Her theory highlights a movement in cinema where female horror directors reclaim the image of the "monstrous-feminine," not as a misogynistic construct but as a space for feminist revolt. These films do not merely invert patriarchal tropes; they expose and exaggerate them in ways that reveal the violence of the "male gaze" and offer alternative frameworks for feminist readings. In *Jennifer's Body*, the protagonist's transformation into a literal man-eater becomes a metaphor for reclaiming bodily agency after being ritually sacrificed; her monstrosity is not a descent into evil, but a direct response to male violence. The "monstrous-feminine" in *Promising Young Woman* is not supernatural, but psychological. Cassie's calculated vigilante agenda invokes her character into what Carol J. Clover terms the "victim-hero." *The Substance* arguably takes Creed's updated model of the "monstrous-feminine" to its most extreme. The imagery of both Elisabeth's deteriorated outer appearance and Sue's violent tendencies reflects an internalized misogyny in the literal sense. Rather than reproducing the monster-woman as an antagonistic force, these directors position monstrosity as a mirror to the default in the patriarchal system. Creed's concept of the "monstrous-feminine" is thus not only an analytical tool for reading female characters in horror but also a critical lens through which to understand the transformative potential of feminist horror filmmaking itself.

Theory

Feminism within cinema

Barbara Creed's *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, published in 2022, is a sequel to her infamous book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) and concerns itself with the concept of a Feminist New Wave within horror cinema. It builds heavily on her theoretical framework of the "monstrous-feminine" from her first book, but

"returns" to the subject with new ideas. In her first book, Creed elaborates and analyses female monsters in horror films (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 3), then, in her second, develops the thought of a feminist movement within horror based on the concept of an abject female monstrosity. This cinematic character confronts patriarchal violence, oppression, and systematic injustice by embodying diverse and divergent monstrous forms. An awareness of the frailty of the patriarchal symbolic system fuels her. "Monstrosity is an empowering concept in Feminist New Wave Cinema" (Creed, *Return* 4). *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* focuses on the evolution from the patriarchal construct of female monstrosity into a liberating force of women's resistance, influenced by "contemporary liberation movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTIQ, Earth Day, and PETA" (Creed, *Return* 4). These films use monstrosity to critique normative social structures and celebrate women. "New Wave films evoke the power of the monstrous-feminine to upend and undermine patriarchal myths about woman as weak and ineffective" (Creed, *Return* 5). Feminist New Wave cinema reclaims monstrosity and transforms it into a symbol of feminist defiance, disrupting patriarchal myths and reasserting female power.

Creed emphasizes that the Feminist New Wave emerged as a radical cinematic movement in the new millennium, seeking to challenge dominant patriarchal narratives and reimagine the representation of women on screen. Rooted in feminist film theory and political activism, these films reject the traditional "male gaze" and instead center female agency and resistance by portraying what Creed terms the abject female. By subverting conventional storytelling structures and aesthetic norms, Feminist New Wave filmmakers, primarily female directors, have created a space for the under-represented voices, thereby giving women a spotlight that makes it possible for a portrayal that resonates with female experiences.

> "The horrific is complex and varied; it draws on physical, psychological, and psychic horror. These films focus on the horrific as it occurs in the family, relationships, political systems, the law, religion, race relations, and environmental destruction. […] These films are inspired by feminist goals of social justice and empowerment of the other. They explore the dynamics of revolt but in so doing take the viewer on a journey into the underworld - into the dark side of the human psyche" (Creed, *Return* 3-4).

Barbara Creed discusses horror within the scope of the Feminist New Wave movement, which both embraces and expands upon the genre. The "horrific" in these films is multifaceted and is not limited to the general violent elements which the horror genre is traditionally known for; instead, horror emerges from real-world structures. These films are rooted in feminist objectives, aiming to achieve social justice and empowerment for marginalized groups. This

suggests that the horror in these films functions as a critical point of view of the dominant patriarchy and its repercussions for the people who are inadvertently oppressed by this social system.

Creed quotes Laura Mulvey's book *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*.

> "When women make films, cinema mutates in their hands and through their eyes. This is not to argue that there is an essential or coherent 'women's cinema' but rather that a 'women-inflected cinema' can take up topics and perspectives hitherto neglected or simply not imaginable by a male-dominated culture" (Creed, *Return* 6).

This quote supports the notion that female directors of the horror genre can portray women in a way that is authentic to a female audience, evoking a more relatable and immersive experience. In the dominant patriarchal structure, the female director understands the oppressed in a way that the oppressor never can.

To deepen the understanding of Creed's analysis of Feminist New Wave cinema, it is helpful to turn to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. While Creed explores how the "monstrous-feminine" challenges patriarchal norms by being abject, Kristeva provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the unsettling power of the abject in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982).

> "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility" (Kristeva 4).

Kristeva explains that abjection disturbs the boundaries civilization relies on to define itself, the very defiance of "identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). It can manifest as acts of violence which oppose a collective moral code, or to be more exact, abjection is an uncomplicated conceptualization of evil disguised as good. These abject characters are unsettling as they expose the fragility of the lawful systems that each populace depends on to maintain order in society.

In the context of Barbara Creed's concept of Feminist New Wave cinema, abjection becomes a robust framework for understanding how female protagonists confront external horrors such as patriarchal violence and systematic oppression. However, Creed's *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* concerns itself with the abject "monstrous-feminine" within the

horror genre. A concept recently developed, where women are exempt from society's laws and moral codes. The abject woman is thus able to confront violence with violence, stepping out from the indoctrinated gender specific role that the patriarchy has internalized within women. The woman's banishment of internalized guilt, repression, shame, etc., materializes her as a monster capable of fighting these external forces.

The movement of Feminist New Wave cinema is an evolution, a direct revolt against what Laura Mulvey has labeled the "male gaze," a highly impactful term within film theory, which first materialized in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1975. Her theory states that the image of the woman on screen functions only as an object to the male, both the male characters within the film narrative, and the male audience watching.

> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 715).

Mulvey starts her essay by explaining the significance of scopophilia, literally meaning pleasure in looking. This love of looking is translated to looking at oneself and looking at others. This definition of the desire to look is the foundation for Mulvey's theoretical framework of the "male gaze." She explains one of Freud's interpretations of scopophilia: "Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality, which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point, he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 713). As mentioned, scopophilia is the desire to look. Still, when looking actively at others, these observing eyes mean only to find pleasure in the act, thus, ultimately ending up objectifying the observed target within the spectrum of eroticism and perversion. While the oppositional aspect of actively looking and observing oneself, the individual's ego needs to be recognized. "The other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 715). Therefore, the man looking towards the screen wishes to see a mirroring of himself he can relish, and simultaneously, he feels pleasure in watching the portrayal of the objectified female, passively included within the scope of his egotistic narrative. "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the

characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 716).

> "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate […] male movie star's glamourous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 716).

This indicates that the "male gaze" not only functions as a means to eroticize the objectified woman and what can be considered her "feminine" traits, but it also includes a hegemonic patriarchal male protagonist, which the men in the audience can mirror to boost their ego as the dominant gender.

Sofia Johansson reflects on Mulvey's essay by situating the text within its contemporary release time. The Second-Wave Feminism movement gained momentum in the 1960s and continued to strengthen into the 1970s. "The second wave brought a broader range of issues involving economic and social equality into focus, including the right to fair pay, workplace equality, the sharing of domestic responsibilities and women's right to make decisions involving their bodies" (Johansson 197). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in 1975, at the height of Second-Wave Feminism and its community's outcry for change in the social system. "Mulvey's aspiration, just like that of her fellow sisters in the women's movement of the time, is thus to instigate change, and her contribution is to point out how the cinema's ability to create a pleasurable viewing experience is interlinked with repressive social and cultural structures" (Johansson 200). Mulvey's ability to dig deep into the psychoanalytical writings of Freud enables her to reveal a hidden misogynistic element to golden age films from the 1930s and well into the 1960s (Johansson 199). By considering the "visual pleasure" of cinema, not in a woman's eyes, but in the eyes of men, Laura Mulvey exposes the "male gaze."

In Laura Mulvey's follow-up essay to "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," titled "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," published in 1981, she comments on the question "what about the women in the audience?" (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts* 12). She stands by her original concept of the "male gaze" but elaborates on Freud's analysis of masculinity and femininity. Freud frames masculinity as active and femininity as passive in a way that seems metaphorical, though he reinforces this notion by distinguishing these labels as "natural" truths. This identification

suggests that male dominance is an inherent biological reality rather than a cultural construct. Thus, Mulvey establishes that Freud cannot conceptualize femininity in its terms. Instead, he defines it only in "opposition" to masculinity as "passivity," the woman exists only in contrast to man, or in terms of "similarity" through "the phallic phase," the woman is defined by her resemblance to man. In both cases, femininity is constructed through a masculine lens, never existing independently. This emphasizes a patriarchal structure where men are the norm, and women are either secondary or incomplete versions of men.

> "This definition in terms of opposition or similarity, leaves women also shifting between the metaphoric opposition 'active' and 'passive'. The correct road femininity leads to increasing repression of 'the active' (the 'phallic phase' in Freud's terms). In this sense Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the *active* point of view, allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis" (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts* 13).

Even though most films are built around male-centered perspectives and pleasures, they can still unintentionally give female viewers a chance to reconnect with a sense of agency. When women identify with an active male lead, they may momentarily access parts of themselves that are typically pushed into the background, those assertive, autonomous traits that are not often represented in traditional femininity.

Carol J. Clover expands upon the notion that cinema is targeted at a male audience, whether the character on screen is male or female. As the horror genre evolved into the immensely popular subgenre labeled slasher films, Clover wrote her essay "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," first published in 1987, on what she termed the "final girl." The "final girl" refers to the movement within horror films where a female character is "the last man standing."

> The Final Girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character. The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film. She is the girl scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends […] she is not sexually active. […] The Final Girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore she takes in and turns over. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in extreme situations (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 204).

These character traits, which the "final girl" embodies, were not evident in female protagonists within the horror genre prior to the emergence of slasher films. Although it may seem that these qualities in a female main character would attract a larger female audience, the demographic of slasher viewership is primarily male. "The audience for that story is by all accounts largely young and largely male - most conspicuously groups of boys who cheer the killer on as he

assaults his victims, then reverse their sympathies to cheer the survivor on as she assaults the killer" (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 192). Because the "final girl" exemplifies heroic traits, she becomes, what Laura Mulvey explains, a "similarity." She is not a man, still, she acts like one (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts* 13). The woman or girl heroine in slashers features masculine traits. Thus, the male audience identifies with her. In this context, Clover adopts Mulvey's word "gaze," and coins a new phrase relevant to her objective, the "active investigating gaze."

> "The gender of the Final Girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of the cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the "active investigating gaze" normally reserved for males and hideously punished in females when they assume it themselves" (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 210).

Clover highlights how the "final girl's" "active investigating gaze" refers to her role as an observer and seeker of truth. This defies conventional cinematic norms, where men typically look, while women are looked at. In most horror films, when female characters take on this "active investigating gaze," they are violently "punished," however, the "final girl" is an exception. She is allowed to survive precisely because her unfemininity aligns her more closely with the male perspective. This, for Clover, complicates her potential as a feminist figure, as her survival depends on her partial detachment from traditional femininity (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 214).

Even though Clover proves that the heroine is inadvertently masculine in appearance and qualities, the trauma she endures throughout the second half of the slasher film is stylistically exposed in a "damsel in distress" representation. "The Final Girl's "tits and scream" serve continuously to remind us that she really is female - even as, and despite the fact that, she in the end acquits herself "like a man"" (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 217). When male sub-characters are killed in slashers, they are often killed off screen, quickly, and do not scream or show emotion, oppositionally the women are brutally murdered by inclusion of vivid shots of violence, intentionally focused on their feminine body parts, and long shots of their faces as they scream in terror (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 212).

> "The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality" (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 212).

The “final girl,” like her co-female-characters is exposed in the “tits and scream” before she ultimately fights back and embodies “masculinity.” Thus, Clover answers her own question: “but if it is so that all of us, male and female alike, are by these processes “made to” identify with men and “against” women, how are we then to explain the appeal to a largely male audience of a film genre that features a female victim-hero?” (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 207). She is both victim and hero, both female and male. She does not threaten the engagement of a male audience by being a female with masculine traits, as the camera highlights the weaknesses traditionally associated with women in horror. Moreover, Clover mentions the most important of the “final girl” tropes; she is the epitome of a virgin, in every aspect possible, she abstains from sex and general interest in boys.

> “Her sexual inactivity, in this reading, becomes all but inevitable; the male viewer may be willing to enter into the vicarious experience of defending himself from the possibility of symbolic penetration on the part of the killer, but real vaginal penetration on the diegetic level is evidently more femaleness than he can bear” (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 212).

The reminder that the “final girl” is, in fact, a female, cannot be more visually displayed than through “vaginal penetration.” The act that proves a woman’s lack of a “phallus” defines and alters the male viewer’s connection to the “victim-hero.”

Carol J. Clover’s concept of the “final girl” reveals how slasher films both reinforce and complicate gender stereotypes. While these heroines often adopt active, survival-driven roles usually reserved for male characters, their portrayal is still entangled in a visual framework designed for male spectatorship. Even as the “final girl” outlives her peers, her suffering is usually prolonged and graphically depicted, a reminder that she is still a spectacle before she becomes a survivor. Her perceived innocence, particularly her sexual inexperience, seems to act as a kind of moral armor, allowing her to survive without threatening traditional gender norms too directly. This duality, victim and victor, aligns closely with what Laura Mulvey describes as the “male gaze.” The woman can act, but only within boundaries that maintain the male viewer’s dominance.

The texts mentioned above base their theoretical frameworks on considerations made by psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan, among others (Freeland 639). In her essay “Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films,” first published in 1996, Cynthia A. Freeland proposes a method of analyzing horror films that differs from the psychoanalytic. She states that creating theories of feminist film criticism solely based on the works of psychoanalysts is counterproductive in the sense that it proves to be uninclusive of all oppressed groups within patriarchal society.

> "Many feminist and other critics have pointed out that assertions about fears of castration, or about the masculinity of logic and language, may be radically culture- and era-bound. To make very broad generalizations about "male" or "female" viewers blocks the recognition of significant individual differences among viewers that surely affect how they experience films. These include significant differences of social class, sexual orientation, age, race, and so on" (Freeland 633).

Freeland's declaration that psychoanalytical feminist film theories lack all-encompassing structures suggests that these theories only function in a gender normative classification. They perform critically only when the female is heterosexual and white, and do not function inclusively when the minority viewer does not fit into this box (Freeland 633). Thus, Freeland offers a new analytical approach.

> "Within my recommended framework, we must shift attention away from the psychodynamics of viewing movies, and onto the nature of films as artifacts that may be studied by examining both their construction and their role in culture. To study their construction we look at such standard features as plot, characters, and point of view. To study their role in culture - that is, to inquire about this as feminists - we examine their gender ideology" (Freeland 637).

The focus on gender ideology is what she calls the "intra-filmic" instead of the "extra-filmic." The "extra-filmic" approach examines horror films in broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. This includes exploring women's roles in film production and analyzing how different audiences interpret films. Freeland's "intra-filmic" method focuses on the movie, its narratives, characters, and visual structures, specifically concerning how they portray gender, sexuality, and power. Rather than analyzing audience psychology, this method studies films as cultural artifacts that reflect and reinforce gender ideologies (Freeland 637).

This flexible feminist film analysis framework, focused on gender representation rather than theoretical models, allows feminist critics to adapt, making it possible for different readings of the same film. The approach avoids the limitations within feminist film theory, such as over-reliance on psychoanalysis, rigid gender binaries, the "male gaze," etc. Instead, it broadens the analysis to consider race, class, and other intersecting factors, making feminist criticism more nuanced (Freeland 640-641).

The representation of women in horror cinema has generated a wide range of theoretical perspectives, each offering a different lens through which to examine gender, power, and spectatorship. Laura Mulvey's influential concept of the "male gaze" exposes how traditional cinema tends to reinforce patriarchal structures by positioning women as passive objects of visual pleasure. Within horror, this gaze often manifests through the graphic punishment of

female characters, particularly those who display sexual agency. However, Carol J. Clover's "final girl" theory complicates Mulvey's stance by highlighting how audience identification can gradually shift toward a female protagonist, one who survives by adopting traits traditionally coded as masculine, such as resourcefulness and physical endurance. While both theories focus primarily on female victims or heroines, Barbara Creed takes a broader approach. Her notion of the "monstrous-feminine" invites us to consider anti-heroines and even antagonists as sources of female horror, rather than simply as targets of violence. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection," Creed suggests that the monstrous woman often embodies what is culturally repressed or feared about femininity, the unruly, the grotesque, the maternal. Finally, Cynthia A. Freeland takes a different approach to horror by focusing less on the psychoanalytic or strictly feminist readings and more on how the genre explores issues rooted in gender ideology. She argues that horror does not just shock or entertain; it also raises deeper questions about identity, morality, and social power. Her work encourages viewers to think about horror films and how they reflect gender roles, though more importantly, it also forces audiences to confront complex ideas about ethics, identity, and human nature.

These film theorists present various aspects of analyzing the female character throughout cinematic history. Creed, Kristeva, Mulvey, and Clover engage with each other's works through their theories based on psychoanalysis, where Freeland ventures into the somewhat unexplored territory, countering the well-established notion of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. Even so, these abovementioned concepts of the "monstrous-feminine," "Feminist New Wave," "abjection," the "male gaze," the "final girl," and the "intra-filmic" encompass some of the most important ideas which will enable a thorough analysis of the evolution of the female role, not only in cinema, but in horror cinema explicitly.

An affective genre

Horror, as opposed to many other genres, is not solely based on setting, like the western (Carroll 14), or a "certain proportion" of song and dance, like a musical (Carroll 15). To categorize a work of art within the scope of the horror genre, the characterization is predominantly based on the work's ability to affect its reader, viewer, onlooker, etc. "The cross-art, cross-media genre of horror takes its title from the emotion it characteristically or ideally promotes; this emotion constitutes the identifying mark of horror" (Carroll 14). The horror genre is recognized by its emotive capabilities, as is prominent given the very nature of the word "horror."

Noël Carroll identifies specific characteristics of horror in his book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. He associates horror with the inclusion of "monsters or

other supernatural (or sci-fi) entities" (Carroll 15) to differentiate horror from other emotions adjacent to horror, such as suspense or terror. Though he mentions that monsters, whether supernatural or science fiction-based, do not exclusively belong to works of horror, because they also appear in other stories like "fairy tales, myths and odysseys" (Carroll 16). Therefore, Carroll further extends his theory on monsters within the scope of horror. He explains that the characters' reaction to the monster must be considered to identify if a work adheres to the horror genre.

> "In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe […] in examples of horror, it would appear that the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world, whereas in fairy tales the monster is an ordinary creature in an extraordinary world" (Carroll 16).

The "extraordinary" monster must inflict a horrific response on the characters within the "ordinary world," otherwise, the work cannot be considered part of the horror genre. Furthermore, the "extraordinary" monster needs to be viscerally revolting. "The character's affective reaction to the monstrous in horror stories is not merely a matter of fear, i.e., of being frightened by something that threatens danger" (Carroll 22).

> "Within the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean. They are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one's skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust" (Carroll 23).

The characters' reactions to the monster are not only portrayed through responses of fear but also intentional visuals of their distressing discomfort with the monster's exterior appearance. It is imperative to acknowledge the emotional reactions of the characters because "horror appears to be one of those genres in which the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of characters" (Carroll 17). The viewer mirrors the characters' reactions on screen, thus creating an affective response within the audience.

Carroll explains that not all genres provoke this synchronized emotional state between characters and the spectator.

> "The emotional reactions of characters, then, provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction […] This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of the horror genre. For it is not the case for every genre that the audience response is supposed to repeat certain of the elements of the emotional state of characters" (Carroll 17-18).

Other genres, such as thrillers, dramas, and romances, imply an emotional ambiance. Nevertheless, they do not instill a replication of the emotion shown on screen onto their audiences, as horror does. The widely acknowledged assumption that works of art are subjective to the individual is, by this notion, contradicted. If the emotion shown on screen affects the audience collectively, then individual responses are eliminated.

Carroll defines the words "emotion" and "horror" in their original Latin contexts. "Emotion" means "to move out" and "horror" means "to stand on end." Carroll concludes that "to move out" "involves a physical state - a sense of a physiological moving of some sort […] or feeling sensation." Whereas "to stand on end" indicates the physical reaction of becoming upset. In their Latin translations, the words "emotion" and "horror" signify a reactiveness of bodily functions. Thus, it can be assumed that a response to horrific visuals will present as sudden occurrences of affective and physical reactions (Carroll 24).

While Noël Carroll's way of identifying and categorizing films within the horror genre is substantial, Brigid Cherry might consider it too generic. In her book *Horror*, published in 2009, Brigid Cherry argues that merely labeling a film as adhering to the horror genre is too simplistic. The movies categorized as works of horror, throughout the long history of horror, are extraordinarily diverse in their plot directions. Thus, Cherry contends the idea that horror films are identifiable through "characteristics, formulaic plots and identifiable visual style" (Cherry 1) in and off themselves, but rather that the acknowledgement of subgenres, within the scope of horror, is a more definite way of comprehending the primary genre (Cherry 4). "We might, therefore, want to think about horror as an umbrella term encompassing several different sub-categories of horror film, all united by their capacity to horrify" (Cherry 4). The longevity of horror within the film industry is a crucial factor in recognizing its subgenres. "What might be classed as the essential conventions of horror to one generation may be very different to the next, and what one person considers to be the defining features of a horror film may be in total disagreement with another's classification" (Cherry 2-3). Horror films reinvent themselves through emerging subgenre trends, thereby, preventing the horror watching demographic getting to the point where they cannot be "scared" "shocked" "revolted" or "horrified" anymore. "In all these ways, notions of what the horror genre might be - or should be - are constantly shifting, creating new conceptual categories to keep on scaring the audience" (Cherry 4). The boundaries of horror have evolved over time, allowing people of different ages to associate various tropes with the genre (Cherry 7). Noël Carroll's overall concept of the audience affectively mirroring the horror on screen is, by this notion, somewhat void. What was generally thought of as visually horrifying for an audience one hundred years ago might

not affect someone who is used to watching the newest horror movies of today. As mentioned, boundaries have been pushed, and new, more visually explicit subgenres have been broadcast. What once was on the verge of "too much" has now long since been done and overdone; the limit has been passed repeatedly to keep horror fans on their toes.

Horror cinema, throughout its more than one hundred years span (Cherry 2), has evolved immensely and has maintained its relevance, unlike other genres that go in and out of fashion. According to Cherry, this consistency of horror productions, throughout fluctuating cultural, political, and social changes, is owed to the genre's flexible concept of inducing fear (Cherry 11). Additionally, horror is, within the film industry, the genre of "independent filmmakers and the smaller or less powerful studios" (Cherry 10), which makes horror free from, what Barry Keith Grant states is "those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (Cherry 9). The big Hollywood studios use genre labels as a marketing strategy; thus, they are prone to produce repetitive blockbuster films to gain prosperous box-office results. Audiences are often drawn to the familiarity of repeated patterns in genre films, finding comfort in recognizable tropes and structures. Yet, genre popularity is never static. As cultural tastes evolve, some genres lose their appeal while others rise in prominence. This ongoing shift reflects the film industry's tendency to respond to changing audience interests, adjusting its output to align with current cultural trends (Cherry 10).

> "Horror cinema has invariably been revitalized by new forms of the horror film, or variations on existing forms of horror cinema, sometimes combined with elements of other genres, often provided by low-budget, independent or international crossover hits. […] On this level of course, horror's longevity is then simply explained by the artistic expansion of the conceptual categories. If horror cinema is a collection of evolving sub-genres and cycles, new forms can simply be added into the whole without destabilizing the genre as a whole" (Cherry 10).

By the combined efforts of independent filmmaking, the simple agenda of instilling fear in the audience, and a lack of fixed stylistic conventions, horror has elevated itself and grown subgenre branches, establishing the genre's relevance and keeping its timelessness.

In the early years of horror cinema, as Laura Mulvey proposes, female characters were portrayed as the passive female. Women did not retain main-character status; they were instead cast in roles where they played a maiden in distress or the male protagonist's love interest. As the Second Wave of feminism emerged late in the 1950s and gained momentum through the 1960s into the 1970s, the female role in horror films changed. There was a shift in the genre; it evolved from mainly including monstrous antagonists to the subgenre of psychological

horror. Films deemed timeless classics, such as *Psycho* (1960) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), altered the previously male-dominated genre. This change of the main protagonist's gender identity paved the way for what was next in genre fashion, the slasher subgenre. The "final girl" trope and iconic killers dominated horror in the 1970s and 1980s. Films like *Halloween* (1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) canonized the slasher subgenre and influenced trends that affected later horror works. Gore was a big part of slasher films, and it was only natural that subgenres like splatter films and body horror were introduced in the 1990s. This decade was also the period when meta-horror came to the screen. Earlier works of horror tropes and "rules" needed to be played with and deconstructed to keep up with the times. In addition to these evolutions, styles and tropes from other genres were incorporated into the horror mixture, resulting in many genre hybrids. These ranged from horror-thrillers and, as the 2000s arrived, went all the way to horror-comedy. This leap into genre hybridity and the breaking away from other horror conventions made possible the 2010s subgenre of elevated horror, also known as post-horror, where social commentary and psychological depth is visualized. Horror films from this period onward have increasingly reflected a genre willing to engage with complex themes while experimenting with style and narrative form. This ongoing transformation illustrates how horror continues to evolve in response to cultural changes, shifting audience expectations, and cinematic innovations. Every subgenre, from psychological horror to slasher, body horror, and meta-horror, has shaped contemporary horror cinema, ensuring that the genre remains reflective of societal fears and a space for creative reinvention.

Analysis & Discussion

Violence is a core characteristic of horror, or more precisely, the violent actions of the antagonist. Noël Carroll directly associates the antagonist with a monstrous killer who evokes disgust and terror (Carroll 23). This notion aligns with Brigid Cherry's idea that the violence portrayed on screen is only recognizably horror if a monstrous personification carries out the heinous acts of violence and not the "ordinary" person (Cherry 29).

> "Different forms, cycles and subgenres produce different reworkings of the basic pattern. In a film such as *Psycho*, the monster is a psychologically disturbed individual and the metaphysical element is scientific (a psychiatrist is called on to explain Norman Bates's delusion), whereas in the Gothic forms of horror, for example, adaptations of *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*, the monster is clearly beyond human" (Cherry 30).

The film *Psycho,* directed by Alfred Hitchcock, redefined horror by shifting its focus from otherworldly monsters to the horrors of the human psyche. Unlike traditional Gothic horror

films, *Psycho* presents its monster, Norman Bates, as a psychologically disturbed individual whose violent actions are based on deep-rooted trauma. The film's shocking narrative twists, alongside its exploration of madness parallel to identity, gave way to a new format of monstrosity and established the template for psychological horror, one where the most terrifying monsters are not supernatural beings but rather the ordinary person who no one would suspect of harboring a dark side.

In the movie *Psycho*, Marion Crane, the female protagonist of the first half, is a groundbreaking character. She is not merely a passive victim or a love interest. Instead, she is given agency. She makes morally complex decisions, drives the plot forward, and is the audience's point of identification. When she is killed halfway through the film, her sister Lila Crane takes on the "active investigating gaze." These female characters challenge the male-centric narratives of previous horror films, paving the way for later female-led horror stories and the eventual emergence of the "final girl" trope.

Nevertheless, as much as *Psycho* moved forward regarding the inclusivity of female characters, the movie still bears unmistakable notations of the "male gaze." The film starts by establishing Marion Crane as a promiscuous woman. She is having a secret love affair with Sam Loomis, a divorced man who refuses to marry her because he lacks the financial means to enter into such a contract. She is first shown lying half-naked in bed, looking up at Sam, admiring him as he dresses, though his body is not shown in full. As she gets out of bed and dresses, the camera focuses on her body features, and she is directly positioned frontally towards the audience; the entire time she is subjected to Sam's voyeuristic eyes as he watches her walk around the motel room (*Psycho* 00:03:15-00:04:40). This focus on her body appears a second time as she packs her get-away luggage wearing nothing but a bra and an undergarment skirt as her whole upper body is shown. This seems to be for the audience only, as no other character is around during this scene (*Psycho* 00:11:08-00:11:42). The third time, she is being watched by Norman, the motel owner, through a peep hole in the wall between his lounge and her room (*Psycho* 00:44:32-00:44:55). The difference here is that she is undressing and getting ready for the infamous shower sequence. She takes off her robe as she steps into the shower, the camera shifts its angle, showing her legs, her upper body, her arms, up until Norman, wearing a wig and his mother's clothes, appears behind the shower curtain to then violently stab her with a knife. This sequence is filmed from the killer's point of view. Her naked body is displayed in and out of focus. Her legs, torso, back, and arms are in focus, while her more private areas are shown out of focus. Yet, her whole body is separated into frames visible to the audience as she screams in terror (*Psycho* 00:46:52-00:48:44). These four scenes

and sequences, where Marion's body is a focal point, are unnecessary for the plot. The only time her features are a narrative drive is when Norman sneaks a peek at her physical attributes, as this provokes his mother's possessive neurosis and triggers his bodily identity change.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" is highly applicable to these examples from *Psycho*, as the film repeatedly subjects Marion Crane to a voyeuristic lens that positions her as an object of desire before violently punishing her. Marion's objectification occurs in multiple layers. The first two instances, the motel room scene with Sam and the moment she packs her getaway bag, align with what Mulvey terms "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 715), where the female character is framed for erotic spectacle rather than narrative necessity. The audience is forced into the perspective of a voyeur, watching her in moments of private intimacy, reinforcing the idea that she exists visually for male pleasure. Moreover, in the peeping scene where Norman spies on Marion, his voyeurism directly represents the audience's gaze. Marion's body is framed and consumed by both Norman and the audience, reinforcing her role as a passive subject of male desire. *Psycho* also demonstrates Mulvey's theory of sadistic voyeurism, in which the "male gaze" not only objectifies but also punishes the female subject. "The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 719). The shower scene is crucial in this regard; Marion's fragmented body is once again exposed, but this time it is violently destroyed. The camera, adopting the killer's point of view, makes the audience complicit in her murder, transforming her sexualized body from an object of desire to one of terror. This forced alignment with the murderer's perspective blurs the boundary between viewer and assailant. The spectator does not merely witness the violence; through Hitchcock's framing, they enact it. In doing so, *Psycho* subtly confronts viewers with their own role in the spectacle of gendered violence. The gaze becomes not just a tool of pleasure, but a mechanism of complicity.

Marion Crane's violent fate in *Psycho* is not only a result of the "male gaze" subjecting her to voyeuristic desire and punishment, but also a reflection of Norman Bates' internalized maternal identity. "Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 3). Marion's killer, Norman Bates, or rather his dual identity, that of his mother, Mrs. Bates, epitomizes the female monster as theorized by Barbara Creed. Concerning the monster of *Psycho*, Creed expands upon Freud's theory of man's fear of castration. "Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be castrated, man's fear of castration has, in my view,

led him to construct another monstrous phantasy - that of woman as castrator" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 9). The female monster in horror is "woman as castrator," the ultimate male fear. Creed has three examples of these castrators: "woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother and the *vagina dentata*" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 9). In *Psycho,* the figure of "the castrating mother" appears within the film's killer, Norman Bates. His mother, a very coddling and possessive woman when she was alive, instilled in Norman a toxic codependency and twisted image of herself as a parental figure. When it happened that Mrs. Bates took on a lover in later years, it triggered a jealousy in Norman, who had gotten used to having his mother to himself ever since his father's death, resulting in Norman killing his mother's boyfriend and committing matricide. Norman could not handle his actions or his grief, so he developed a dual personality. His mother's identity within him gave rise to some of his jealousy towards her, thus creating a self-made castration effect (*Psycho* 01:43:37-01:45:31). In the sequence where Norman looks at Marion through the peephole, Marion arouses him with her womanhood. This brings forth his mother's jealousy, culminating in her invasion of him and the subsequent murder of Marion. The mother performs a castrating act by killing what he desires, thereby eliminating her son's sexuality.

The abject maternal, which invades his body and acts on its own accord, suppressing his ability to control his autonomy, violates the line between the self and the other.

> "The possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed. When the subject is invaded by a personality of another sex the transgression is even more abject because gender boundaries are violated" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 32).

Norman Bates' dual identity, as both himself and his mother, exemplifies what Creed defines as "the possessed or invaded being." This psychological split and adoption of his mother's persona reflects a fundamental disruption of his identity, one that Creed argues becomes even more abject when it involves an invasion by a being of the opposite sex. He murders Marion, not as himself, but as a maternal figure who seeks to eliminate the threat Norman's desires impose on their mother-son relationship. Nevertheless, her murder is not simply the result of voyeuristic desire turned violent, but rather the consequence of Norman's total loss of self under the weight of his mother's presence. In this way, the horror does not solely lie in Norman's act of murder, but in the abject "monstrous-feminine" which materializes from within.

> "The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity. However, this presence does

> challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 8-9).

The male fear of castration and the notion that the female monster is horrific precisely because of her lack of phallus is, in the case of *Psycho,* a crucial factor in its impact on the genre to which it adheres. The character of Norman and the male spectator's mirroring of his maleness are challenged by the inclusion of the mother's identity. Moreover, it can be argued that the female audience cannot be solely in an active spectator role. Both men and women viewing become "sadistic" and "masochistic" onlookers.

Psycho explores the "monstrous-feminine" through an internalized maternal identity, not far from the novel's plot to film adaptation titled *Carrie* (1976), directed by Brian De Palma, which includes the castrating mother figure. Carrie White is shaped by a dominating and puritanical mother whose obsession with sin and sexuality represses Carrie's physical and psychological maturation. She is severely benighted in the ways of the female body and the changes that happen throughout the adolescent years. Her mother, Margaret White, castrates Carrie in this way, by denying her knowledge and punishing her if she wants or asks for something Margaret deems outside her strict moral regime. In this way, the movie *Carrie* includes two of Creed's concepts of the monstrous-feminine: the "castrating mother" and the abject woman. Creed exemplifies some definitions of what the story looks like in the presence of a castrating mother:

> "We can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent. […] In these films the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 14).

Margaret White's refusal to release her daughter into symbolic adulthood ensures Carrie psychologically remains trapped in a child's state of mind. Margaret functions not only as the castrating mother but also as the source of Carrie's journey towards abjection herself.

The second opening sequence of *Carrie* begins with a slow-motion pan in the girls' locker room, where the camera lingers sensuously on the nude bodies of high school girls, and lastly Carrie White as she stands alone in the showers. The framing of this scene is done with soft lighting, slow pans, and extended shots of bare skin, constructing Carrie as an eroticized object. The audience is positioned voyeuristically, watching Carrie in an intensely private and vulnerable moment. Eventually, this eroticized gaze is abruptly disrupted when blood runs

down Carrie's leg. As her face shifts from calm to one of panic, confusion, and horror, the steamy scene turns into a deranged one. The appearance of blood between her legs scares Carrie to the point where she thinks that something is critically wrong with her. Through this reaction, it becomes evident to the audience that this is the first time she has had her period. Moreover, it becomes clear that she knows nothing about the changes her body will experience throughout adolescence (*Carrie* 00:01:13-00:06:25). However, her first menstruation not only signifies the start of her puberty and her forced entry into womanhood, but also a means to split from the castrating mother's grip. Margaret's refusal to acknowledge this biological change, framing it instead as sinful, demonstrates the mother's desire to control her daughter's autonomy and sexuality. Yet it is precisely through this moment of abjection that Carrie accesses her telekinetic powers. This transition marks Carrie's simultaneous liberation and transformation into the "monstrous-feminine" herself, no longer a passive daughter, but a figure of terror and disruption who ultimately mirrors the violence and repression inflicted upon her (Clover, *Men, Women* 8). "Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" (Kristeva 4). Kristeva's description of abjection encapsulates the horror of Carrie's transformation. Carrie's body, once the site of innocence and ignorance, becomes a weapon. Her menstruation unlocks supernatural powers, which she uses to retaliate against those who have humiliated and suppressed her. These powers are linked to Carrie's emotions and only surface when she is in distress or emotionally vulnerable. They eventually become her means of executing vengeful impulses as she embodies a victim and the "monstrous feminine" in the shape of Carol J. Clover's concept of a "victim-hero" (Clover, *Men, Women* 4). The notion that abjection in a vengeful setting is evil disguised as good is very prominent in the context of *Carrie*. Her mother and her peers abuse her, and in the second half of the film, she takes her revenge. She burns down her high school with everyone attending prom (*Carrie* 01:20:03-01:20:47) and stabs her mother to death multiple times (*Carrie* 01:29:41-01:30:39); in both instances, she uses her telekinetic powers. "A hatred that smiles," as Kristeva writes, appeals to Carrie White and the audience watching. There is an aspect of catharsis when people who have done her wrong are violently punished for their actions, and a sense of karmic justice is implied.

In *Carrie*, blood operates as a central symbol that encapsulates the film's exploration of a woman's bodily transformation throughout adolescence. The film begins with Carrie's first menstrual experience in the locker room showers. Her terror, coupled with her classmates' cruel laughter, reveals how blood becomes an immediate marker of otherness and shame

(*Carrie* 00:03:55-00:05:07). The motif of blood returns most famously during the prom sequence, when a bucket of pig's blood is dumped on Carrie, symbolically repeating the trauma of her first period (*Carrie* 01:15:42-01:15:57). This act of humiliation becomes the final rupture between Carrie and the social world, triggering her telekinetic massacre. Blood here shifts from symbolizing shame to representing repressed rage. Finally, in the quietness after Carrie's murder spree, she attempts to cleanse herself in the bathtub, her body covered in pig's blood and the blood of her victims (*Carrie* 01:25:05-01:25:50). The scene serves as a futile attempt at reconnecting with the child again, the person she was before blood instigated her bodily changes. Across these three pivotal moments, blood is not merely a visual element but a narrative device that charts Carrie's arc from repression to empowerment, and ultimately to her undoing, tying the natural transformation of female puberty directly to monstrosity.

"A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psychokiller" (Clover, *Men, Women* 13). In horror films, the roles of monster and hero are typically portrayed by men, while women are more often cast as victims. This suggests that gender is defined by behavior, characters are seen as feminine because they display vulnerability, and as masculine if they exhibit power or aggression. This idea that gender roles in horror are defined by function rather than biology resonates with Cynthia A. Freeland's "intra-filmic" approach, which emphasizes analyzing gender ideology within the film itself. In the film's first half, Carrie embodies the culturally constructed feminine ideal as shy and submissive, and she is visually framed as fragile, both physically and emotionally. However, once her telekinetic powers emerge, she gradually shifts into a role more aligned with the masculine-coded functions of hero or, more importantly, monster. Her transformation complicates traditional gender roles in horror; a hero does not save her, nor does she survive as a "final girl." Instead, she asserts her power in a spectacle of rage and vengeance, dominating the prom sequence with a presence more typically associated with the male characters in horror films.

Cynthia A. Freeland's concept of "intra-filmic" analysis enables an examination of how gender norms are embedded within the film itself (Freeland 637). In *Carrie*, power is not simply flipped; the story does not end with the victim rising as a clear hero. Instead, Carrie's moment of power is steeped in tragedy. Her outburst is followed by destruction, both to others and against herself, suggesting that stepping outside the expected rules of femininity comes at a heavy cost. Her story becomes a warning about what happens when women reject the roles society sets for them. Carrie's mother, Margaret, takes these rules to an extreme. Her obsession

with sin and control paints female sexuality as dangerous, shameful, and something that must be hidden or punished. By doing so, she functions as an individual antagonist and a symbolic enforcer of the patriarchal social system. Patriarchal influence is also reflected in Carrie's female classmates. When Carrie begins to menstruate, where it is treated not with care or solidarity but as a grotesque spectacle, the other girls' mockery exposes how even female characters are complicit in upholding a culture that shames women (*Carrie* 00:04:45-00:05:46). Menstruation, a marker of biological womanhood, becomes horrific rather than empowering.

Carrie's telekinetic powers, which emerge at the arrival of her first period and then subsequently become the end of her, are an example of how the horror genre often punishes female characters for their natural expressions of femininity. This theme continues in *Halloween*, which similarly positions female sexuality as a trigger for punishment and violence. While *Carrie* turns horror inward, linking it to the repression of female sexuality, *Halloween* pushes that horror outward through its masked killer, Michael Myers, whose victims are often sexually active young women. Unlike *Carrie*, *Halloween* introduces a kind of survival logic based on sexual behavior, where characters who abstain, particularly the "final girl," have a higher chance of making it out alive. Still, both films tap into broader cultural fears about gender roles, suggesting that a woman's morality, especially in terms of sexuality, is deeply tied to whether she survives or perishes. Released just two years after *Carrie*, John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) did not just follow a trend; it helped define a new one, setting the template for countless slasher films that followed (Molitor & Sapolsky 234). Fred Molitor and Barry S. Sapolsky reference film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert in their essay "Sex, Violence, and Victimization in Slasher Films." Siskel and Ebert announced the arrival of a new genre in 1980, which they termed "women-in-danger" films. "Unlike traditional horror films, "women-in-danger" films feature the grotesque and sadistic victimization of women. "Slasher" films, as they have come to be known, are said to hate women and to appeal to men who harbor hostility toward women" (Molitor & Sapolsky 233). Molitor and Sapolsky comment that these slasher films "frequently contain a mixture of sex and violence" (Molitor & Sapolsky 233). This "women-in-danger" aspect presumably predicts that the female characters are threatened, and the vital thing to recognize is that sex, nudity, and violence against women are interconnected in the slasher film. Molitor and Sapolsky include a quote by Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod:

> "Immediately before a woman is brutally assaulted… she is seen disrobing, masturbating, engaging in sexual intercourse, sunbathing, etc. During and after her assault… these

> presumably mildly arousing, pleasing scenes are juxtaposed with the violent images" (Molitor & Sapolsky 233).

Because horror films, and by extension the slasher subgenre, are viewed mainly by male audiences, it is evident that there is a sadist angle to be considered. Even though there is research into slasher films which proves that there are just as many male characters, or perhaps more, who die, the scenes in which women are killed are extended and more visually violent (Molitor & Sapolsky 234). This is also apparent in *Halloween* when the protagonist's two girlfriends are brutally murdered. Annie, after she has undressed and is in her car on her way to have intercourse, and Lynda, right after she has had sex and lies naked in bed. Lynda's boyfriend Bob is killed fully dressed in the kitchen and does not utter a scream or sound as he is stabbed by Michael Myers (*Halloween* 01:05:16-01:05:50). Lynda, on the other hand, is murdered in the bedroom, strangled from behind, her breasts fully visible and turned towards the camera, or rather, the audience. As she is strangled with the telephone cord, she screams out in what can be argued an orgasmic spectacle (*Halloween* 01:07:40-01:08:03). These examples correlate with the abovementioned quote which indicates the aspect of arousal in the male viewer before a violent image, though concerning Lynda's death, there could be arousing elements even during the scene where she is murdered. As with *Psycho* (1960), when Marion Crane is murdered in the shower, the spectacle found in the deaths of Annie and Lynda is a mirror image of Marion's death. Just as Lynda is exposed during her strangulation, Marion is similarly vulnerable when she is stabbed mid-shower. The camera lingers on Marion's nude body as it does with Lynda's, fragmenting her into parts. The voyeuristic point of view is not only employed by the killer (Norman Bates or Michael Myers) but by the camera itself, inviting the audience into a complicit position. In both scenes, the line between arousal and aggression is disturbingly blurred, with the women's nudity setting the stage for their deaths.

In *Halloween,* the protagonist, Laurie Strode, is portrayed as a rule-abiding, withheld, and, more importantly, sexually inactive teenage girl. Compared to the two minor female characters, Lynda and Annie, she avoids attention, whether from boys or a suspicious car driving by. When Annie asks her on their walk home from school why she never goes out, Laurie retorts "guys think I'm too smart" (*Halloween* 00:24:37-00:24:44), indicating that her intellectuality is of a higher caliber than her two female counterparts, which both, incidentally, have dates planned with boys the same evening. Pursuing boys is beneath her, and she would rather focus on doing her job well as a nanny and prioritizing her studies as a high school student. This lack of interest in the opposite sex, combined with her conservative clothing style,

resourceful qualities, and ultimate survival, Laurie epitomizes the "final girl" trope coined by Carol J. Clover.

Laurie's strength lies in her watchfulness, a key trait Clover highlights in the "final girl." From early on, she senses that something is amiss. She repeatedly sees Michael Myers watching her from afar, near her school from across the street, in a drive-by car, and outside the house where she is babysitting. Clover calls this the "active investigating gaze," a feature usually reserved for male characters in traditional horror. Laurie especially embodies this role as she acts on her suspicion after she loses contact with both her friends. Instead of remaining passive, she enters the house where Annie and Lynda were last seen. When she discovers her friends' corpses, arranged grotesquely by Michael Myers, it shifts her from passive victim to a protagonist capable of self-defense, embodying masculine-coded traits.

Even so, *Halloween* continues to emphasize the voyeuristic and violent tendencies that both Clover and Laura Mulvey have critiqued in slasher films. Laurie's trauma is not just part of the story; it is highlighted visually in ways that underline her vulnerability. The camera often lingers on her ragged breathing, her terrified expressions, and the aftermath of the violence she endures. These moments, while helping to build tension, also serve to underscore her femininity. Although she ultimately survives, her fear and pain remain a focal point, reinforcing how the film appeals to the gaze of a predominantly male audience by centering her suffering as spectacle. While the "final girl" survives, Clover notes that her suffering still marks her. Laurie never entirely escapes the victim role; her survival is contingent on her ability to resist, but also on her being punished and brutalized for the audience's engagement. Though she ultimately defeats Michael, her victory is not triumphant. She screams, cries, and cowers, reminders, as Clover argues, that even the "final girl's" strength must be visually balanced by her vulnerability. "The Final Girl's "tits and scream" serve continuously to remind us that she is female" (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 217). Her virginal status and eventual need for rescue by Dr. Loomis reinscribe her within traditional gender hierarchies. The fact that Laurie does not kill Michael herself but must be saved by a male authority figure (*Halloween* 01:26:45) underscores the limits of her agency within the genre's framework. Laurie survives because she conforms to the required traits, yet her survival is visually and narratively framed in a way that continues to satisfy the "male gaze." As such, Laurie does not upend the gender roles; she is empowered but within limits. Her behavior is inherently masculine, though her trauma is visually displayed by the female stereotype of a maiden in distress (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 212). Laurie Strode represents the emergence of a new kind of female horror protagonist who

disrupts gender binaries without completely dismantling them. As Clover argues, this hybrid figure intrigues the male viewer without threatening his identification with the "victim-hero."

"How does the film depict/represent women - as agents, patients, knowers, sufferers? or, what role do women play vis-a-vis men in the film?" (Freeland 638). In Freeland's terms, *Halloween* presents a gendered contrast; Michael Myers and Dr. Loomis act, pursue, and protect, while the women are primarily observed suffering. The film's gender representation reflects a tension between passive femininity and emerging female agency, though restricted by these male characters. One drives the narrative by killing teenagers, and the other with his all-knowing instincts and last-minute rescue of Laurie. The visual suffering of Michael Myers' victims are somewhat irrelevant to the plot's progression and can therefore be argued to be present only for the thrill of the scare, or, as Molitor and Sapolsky theorize, be present so that the horror watching demographic can look at women being tormented (Molitor & Sapolsky 234). The sexually free women must die for their misconduct, and the virginal female protagonist, who adopts masculine traits, must suffer as a reminder that she inherently is not a man. This fine line that Laurie walks between masculine and feminine is, as Clover writes, crucial for the engagement and acceptance by the male viewer. Virginal so as to block any thought of penetration, which is the ultimate reminder of femaleness, indicating a lack of phallus (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 212), though still she must be displayed like a "woman-in-danger" by the inclusion of her screaming in terror.

Halloween reinforces many of the voyeuristic elements targeted at female characters, which have previously been present in the horror genre and films of other genres in general. However, *Halloween* and the long list of subsequent slasher films opened the possibility of a female protagonist. In horror movies, a woman can defend, fight, and, in the end, survive by adopting what were then considered attributes traditionally associated with males. This became apparent when Ridley Scott released his science fiction/horror classic *Alien* in 1979*,* only a year later. The genre hybrid evolved into an entire franchise, with the first four films following the main character, Ellen Ripley, as she fights off ferocious Aliens called Xenomorphs. The installment in the Alien franchise that most fully embraced female agency was its 1986 sequel, *Aliens*, directed by James Cameron. Released less than a decade after *Halloween*, the film marked a significant shift in how female protagonists were portrayed in horror. Ripley transcends the "final girl" archetype entirely, no longer merely surviving or suffering, but actively leading, protecting, and commanding authority, pushing the boundaries of gender representation in horror.

In the Alien franchise, Xenomorphs are the focal point of all individual stories. These aliens come to life from a "mother" or "queen" Xenomorph, much larger than her offspring, who lays eggs in her lair containing parasitical creatures. These head-sized parasites hatch when they are ready to impregnate another living organism, or in this case, humans, by penetrating them orally with their phallic member. This results in the Xenomorph being born by a human with an explosive force through the abdomen.

> "Mother Alien is primarily a terrifying figure not because she is castrated but because she castrates. Her all-consuming, incorporating powers are concretized in the figure of her alien offspring; the creature whose deadly mission is represented as the same as that of the archaic mother - to tear apart and reincorporate all life" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 23).

Barbara Creed characterizes different forms of the "monstrous-feminine" within the context of the horror genre. One is the "archaic mother" figure. "If we posit a more archaic dimension to the mother - the mother as originating womb - we can at least begin to talk about the maternal figure as *outside* the patriarchal family constellation" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 26). This female creature, which can give birth without being penetrated by the male phallus, poses a threat to men as a necessary component for reproduction, essentially disturbing the foundation of men's animal instinct to procreate. The archaic mother destabilizes the patriarchy and invokes a matriarchal order.

In the original film *Alien*, a male character finds the mother's lair filled with her eggs. One hatches, jumps out, and attaches to his head (*Alien* 00:34:17-00:34:29).

> "When one of the alien creatures orally rapes Kane, one of the male astronauts, it implants its embryo in Kane's stomach. But the primeval mother does not need the male as a 'father', only as a host body, and the alien creature murderously gnaws its way through Kane's belly. Its birth leads to the male mother's death" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 28).

The mother alien's parasitic offspring castrates the male by penetrating and impregnating him, a reversal of nature's order where woman is the womb and man is the seed. "She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. She is outside morality and the law" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* 27). The laws of nature are disturbed by this mother, and her established role as matriarch is shown through the fully developed Xenomorphs, her submissive protectors. The social and natural laws of mankind do not apply in the context of these alien creatures.

The theme of motherhood throughout the sequel, *Aliens,* is likewise displayed by the main character, Ellen Ripley, who finds herself protecting and caring for the little girl, Newt. The sole survivor of a human colony positioned on the same planet where Ripley encountered

the Xenomorph species in the first film. She is a consultant on a military mission to rescue survivors and eliminate the alien threat. At the colony establishment, she finds Newt and immediately forms a strong maternal bond with her. By the end of the movie, after Ripley has just sent the mother Xenomorph through the airlock, she crawls over to Newt and as they embrace Newt calls out "mommy" to Ripley (*Aliens* 02:12:30-02:12:42). Ripley's constant attunement to Newt's safety and comfort climaxes at this moment as the girl acknowledges Ripley as her mother. The parallel between the mother Xenomorph and the maternal Ripley is the lack of penetration for the title of mother. Both accomplish motherhood in the absence of the opposite sex. Therefore, concerning Ripley, she encompasses the sexual inactiveness priorly established by the slasher "final girl."

Other factors in Ripley's survival sustain the pre-existing idea that female protagonists adopt male characteristics to overcome murderous antagonists in horror. Firstly, her last name, Ripley, which her comrades call her, is somewhat gender neutral. It is not inherently feminine or masculine; therefore, the female viewer can identify with her as a woman, and the male audience is not intimidated at first glance. In *Aliens,* her appearance is likewise not discouraging to the male viewer, as a main character, she conforms to traditional notions of maleness. The short hair and uniform outfit desexualize her, inherently making her outwardly identifiable as masculine. Ripley is not eroticized even when she is vulnerable. This deliberate resistance to objectification marks a significant departure from the depiction of women in horror. Her trauma is contextualized as a narrative consequence, not spectacle. Her vulnerability exists, but it is not lingered upon for the audience's visual pleasure; it is part of her human complexity.

Viewed through the lens of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the film subverts the concept of the "male gaze." Mulvey's assertion that cinema aligns spectatorship with the male perspective, where men act and women are passively looked at, is directly challenged by the figure of Ellen Ripley. When some of the marine soldiers are attacked by Xenomorphs, the leader of the operation, Gorman, fails to communicate with them as they are being slaughtered. Ripley exclaims, "Get them out of there, do it now." Gorman freezes and proves incapable of taking any action. Ripley then shakes him while shouting, "Do something!" As he still seems immovable, she secures Newt, takes the wheel at the driver's seat of a military automobile, and drives straight into the war zone, successfully rescuing the soldiers left alive (*Aliens* 01:03:00-01:06:48). Ripley defies Mulvey's model by being neither a sexualized object for the male viewer nor a passive character, only there to accessorize and

promote men. Instead, she embodies a strong, authoritative persona and depth rarely granted to women.

As Carol J. Clover proposes, Ripley is a gender paradox that satisfies the male audience's need to have a masculine-coded character to identify with (Clover, *Her Body, Himself* 214). Mulvey discusses how male protagonists often function as ego ideals for male spectators, who project themselves into their heroic conquests (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 716). In *Aliens*, Ripley becomes the protagonist through whom identification is channeled. Both male and female viewers are invited to align with her as she dominates and acts on her impulses successfully.

Most importantly, for the female audience, *Aliens* does not reject femininity altogether; instead, it redefines it. Ripley's maternal instincts ultimately distinguish her from the marines. Her capacity for embodying both feminine and masculine traits in moments of extreme pressure makes her an androgynous figure.

Following the representation of females in horror, from Laurie Strode's restrained "final girl" in *Halloween* to Ellen Ripley's embodiment of female agency in *Aliens*, the genre enters a reflexive phase by the mid-1990s. This development is crucial when considering the arrival of *Scream* (1996), a film that belongs not just to a new era of horror but to a distinctly postmodern one. *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven, introduces a meta-horror film that acknowledges its cinematic predecessors and actively deconstructs them. The film self-consciously references genre conventions, thereby making it capable of immersing the well-established horror consumer and turning their expectations into narrative material. Postmodernism, with its tendencies towards meta-commentary, profoundly influences the structure and tone of *Scream*. Thus, *Scream* revitalizes slasher tropes for a new generation and embeds a critique of them within its framework. It reflects a horror audience that has grown up watching films like *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13th*, an audience capable of recognizing and even laughing at the rules of survival. The protagonist, Sidney Prescott, also personifies the "final girl," though in *Scream*, this trope is both used and scrutinized. Sidney inherits traits from Laurie and Ripley, as she embodies the "active investigating gaze," is resourceful, and emotionally layered. Though as an extra aid, she also gradually becomes aware of the horror genre markers which threaten to determine her fate, using them to her advantage.

Throughout the movie *Scream,* the characters reference previously released horror films, and multiple times, there are inclusions of characters stating that they are living through movie events. A conversation between Sidney and Billy Loomis, the later revealed killer,

concentrates on this topic after he compares her life to Jodie Foster's character in *Silence of the Lambs*. Sidney: "But this is life. This isn't a movie" Billy: "Sure it is Sid, it's all, it's all a movie. It's all one great big movie. Though you can't pick your genre" (*Scream* 01:10:46-01:11:08). This is a form of breakage in the fourth wall, as the characters on screen are somewhat aware that the actions within the film are predetermined. They indicate that the fictional world, in which their lives unfold, is based on movie principles, or more accurately, as Billy states, on the genre to which their story adheres. This self-reflexivity is a key marker of postmodern cinema, where genre conventions are acknowledged and openly dissected within the narrative. When Billy declares that "it's all a movie," he isn't just exposing their situation; he is also reinforcing the gendered power structures inherent within the horror genre. By invoking the rules of genre, he positions himself as a director, guiding the narrative and outcome. Though Sidney does not merely watch or succumb to the male-driven conventions of horror, she steps into the traditionally male-coded position of the aggressor. At one point she hides in a closet, dressed in the Ghostface costume, which is the disguise killers Billy Loomis and Stu Macher use, she antagonizes them through the phone, as they have done their victims, and eventually jumps out stabbing Billy with an umbrella (*Scream* 01:38:17-01:40:02). In doing so, the film offers a moment where the female protagonist not only recognizes the patriarchal script written for her but actively rewrites it.

Scream and *Jennifer's Body* both operate within the postmodern tradition of self-aware horror. While *Scream* deconstructs the "final girl" from within the slasher formula, *Jennifer's Body* completely blurs the line between victim and monster, making space for a more complex form of female agency. *Jennifer's Body*, released in 2009 and directed by Karyn Kusama, a female director, portrays the "monstrous-feminine" through the central character Jennifer Check, a teenage girl who shares her body with a demonic entity. The possession occurs after a failed satanic ritual, aimed at achieving a boy band's success in the music industry, hinging on the false assumption that Jennifer is a virgin. This demon craves human flesh and must be fed periodically, and as Jennifer has some say in the matter, she chooses to base her diet solely on young-adult boys. The boy band's moment of mistaken identification reveals horror's obsession with female purity, a trope also central to *Scream*'s examination of survival lore within the horror genre. Jennifer lures her victims with her female sexuality; she weaponizes the very thing that the slasher subgenre inherently punishes. The visual punishment that sexually active women have historically experienced in horror is in *Jennifer's Body* reversed. Instead, boys who seek intimacy from Jennifer are the ones screaming in terror.

Barbara Creed has labeled *Jennifer's Body* as a "fascinating and intelligent example of Feminist New Wave Cinema" (Creed, *Return* 114), especially as a representation of feminist queer cinema. Jennifer and her best friend Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki, the other central character, are intricately connected. There are subliminal messages throughout the film that suggest they have a relationship that transcends the conventional, sometimes through a telepathic link e.g., Needy can sense when Jennifer arrives at her house before Jennifer announces herself (*Jennifer's Body* 00:08:27-00:08:34), and the scene where Needy has intercourse with her boyfriend Chip, at the same time as Jennifer tortures a boy, Needy is somehow in synchrony with Jennifer, seeing visions of blood and feeling the emotion of hopelessness that Jennifer wants her victim to experience (*Jennifer's Body* 00:59:43-00:54:50). Eventually there is a scene where the two friends show their true feelings and become visually intimate. Jennifer kisses Needy, and the kiss turns into a passionate display of repressed desire (*Jennifer's Body* 00:58:34-00:59:50). "It is only after Jennifer's metamorphosis into the monstrous-feminine of Devil's Kettle that queerness rises to the surface of Jennifer and Needy's desires" (Creed, *Return* 116). The queerness that surfaces post-transformation, as Creed notes, is inseparable from Jennifer's embodiment of the "monstrous-feminine." This deep, often telepathic bond between Jennifer and Needy pushes the film beyond conventional friendship, entering a realm of queer subtext that becomes explicit with the narrative turning point of the kissing scene. In becoming monstrous, Jennifer sheds the limitations of patriarchal femininity. Her monstrosity is not just a metaphor for vengeance, but also for repressed identity.

> "When she is transformed literally into a man-eater, we witness a reversal of her heterosexual cheerleader performance as Kusama deconstructs the meaning of Jennifer's 'body'. This is no longer the sexually objectified beauty queen playing to the male gaze whose body is 'owned' by those who look; it is now her body, and she is no longer interested in being the cheerleader or engaging in sexist mating games. Now she is a deadly femme fatale and will harness the supernatural powers of the demon and the forest and use her body, not for the pleasure of men, but as a powerful weapon to trap and devour them" (Creed, *Return* 116).

The intentional play on words in the film's title, *Jennifer's Body*, referring directly to her "body," is incredibly provocative. It suggests ownership, but the film repeatedly challenges the notion that Jennifer owns her body. She is sacrificed by a boy band hoping to gain fame, and her body is treated as a means to an end, echoing real-world gendered exploitation. Jennifer's body is not truly hers until she begins to use it to exact revenge, reclaiming agency through monstrous femininity. *Jennifer's Body* as a title nods to the objectification of women, where the question of whether Jennifer is the one with the body, or if she is reduced to being nothing

but a body? It is not just about Jennifer's body, but about what it means for a woman to have, or be, a body in a patriarchal society.

Jennifer becomes the "monstrous-feminine" because of the boy band's actions of killing her for their profit. This act involves abduction, tying her up so she cannot move, stabbing her multiple times with a knife while they sing enthusiastically, and lastly leaving her to die (*Jennifer's Body* 01:00:36-01:05:16). A traumatic experience so metaphorically similar to the act of rape, making *Jennifer's Body* into somewhat of a rape-revenge film. She takes her revenge on young men, and in the end, Needy avenges her by brutally killing the boy band (*Jennifer's Body* 01:36:54-01:38:11). Creed argues that the film draws on "the supernatural to explore same-sex desire, the queering of identity, and feminist revolt against the patriarchal symbolic order. The misogynistic and/or homophobic males of these texts are no match for the queer nonhuman female" (Creed, *Return* 111). Needy is by the time she murders Jennifer's assailants also a supernatural force, with Jennifer's demon bite, Needy absorbs some of Jennifer's powers and becomes a "queer nonhuman female." Thus, both Jennifer and Needy embody Creed's "monstrous-feminine" and perform as such only after they have become women with supernatural abilities.

> "The central unifying figure in all Feminist New Wave films is the monstrous-feminine […] *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Creed, 1993) discussed her as abject in relation to her sexual and reproductive functions, a misogynistic fantasy, which I argued was a construct of patriarchal ideology" (Creed, *Return* 4).

By connecting Jennifer's transformation to the brutality of the ritual, which mirrors the traditional "tits and screams" of slasher film killings and also symbolically resembles sexual assault, it serves as a turning point for female characters within the horror genre. In embracing the "monstrous-feminine," Jennifer reclaims her body from the male gaze and, by extension, traditional gender roles, seen through her enactments of revenge on patriarchal figures. Likewise, Needy's transformation from the "normal" girl to the one wielding a supernatural force that once belonged to Jennifer, the film refuses to reduce her to a traditional "final girl." Instead, she becomes the monster who avenges her friend by killing a boy band. Needy's final act of cathartic vengeance blurs the line between right and wrong.

In the scene where Needy kills Jennifer by stabbing her in the heart (*Jennifer's Body* 01:31:54), Needy is not in the survival position of the "final girl." She seeks out Jennifer on her own and attacks her, unchallenged by the demonic Jennifer. When she succeeds in killing the monster, she begins mourning her friend, a display more like a tragic climax than one of triumph. This emotional ambiguity undermines the typical moral clarity of horror, instead

gesturing toward a more nuanced understanding of good and evil, or the innocent victim and the revolting monster.

Promising Young Woman (2020), written and directed by Emerald Fennell, updates this revenge narrative portrayed in *Jennifer's Body*. While there is no demonic possession, Cassandra 'Cassie' Thomas, like Jennifer, is a woman transformed by trauma and driven by vengeance in a culture that not only permits violence against women but systematically erases it. Both films center female characters who weaponize their bodies, though Cassie's agenda against men is a revenge-induced performance. Her monstrous purpose contains careful deception, manipulation, and lastly, confrontation with rapists who seek out intoxicated women to take advantage of. *Promising Young Woman*, like *Jennifer's Body*, is plastered with themes important to the feminist movement, but in a much more flagrant, bold, and thought-provoking way. The story of self-proclaimed justice fighter, Cassie, is a tension-building horror-thriller, more grounded than the horror films previously analyzed, but equally chilling in its depiction of realistic patriarchal violence and rape-culture.

Cassie, a thirty-year-old woman, is heavily traumatized by the rape of her best friend Nina Fisher, which occurred seven years before the happenings of the film. Her life is at a standstill as Nina's tragic fate consumes her every day. The assault on her friend, both the college's and the law's systems' failure to procure justice, and Nina's eventual suicide, is too much of a senseless evil to rationalize. She mourns her friend by punishing men who act the same way Nina's rapist did, by going to night clubs, acting too drunk to walk, and appearing helpless as men pretend to care for her in her performative drunken state. Eventually, they all take her home and try to have their way, despite her repeated pleas of "no" and "I want to go home." Unlike traditional horror villains, Cassie does not kill her victims; her power lies in confrontation and exposure, a symbolic form of retribution. Her vigilante routine becomes a ritual for catharsis; an outlet which exemplifies her refusal to be a passive victim of the male violence which led to her trauma.

The "shameless rapist," as Barbara Creed terms it, is a protruding figure in the Feminist New Wave horror film embedded with realism. "Female directors and scriptwriters focus specifically on male abjection and what I have termed his *aggressive phallicity*" (Creed, *Return* 10). The men that intend to rape Cassie label themselves "nice guys" or excuse their behavior in some way when they realize that their actions have consequences. One of her assailants, Neil, excuses himself with "I'm a nice guy" twice during his and Cassie's confrontational exchange as a form of defense. Cassie remarks back "Every week, I go to a club, and every week I act like I'm too drunk to stand. And every fucking week a nice guy like you comes over

to see if I'm okay" (*Promising Young Woman* 00:18:39-00:20:18). She exposes that the "nice guy" label that men attach to themselves is a specific form of masculine toxicity. Men taking advantage of women while delusionally thinking that they are innocent makes the rape itself violating in a whole other way. It implies that they can brush the assault off and go on with their lives with a clear conscience. Hence the abject male is mirrored in *Promising Young Woman* as the "shameless rapist" or, in other words, the "nice guy."

"The goal of the female protagonist of Feminist New Wave Cinema is to speak again in her own voice in order to call out the abject male whose abjection is not liberating but designed to keep an oppressive patriarchal order in place" (Creed, *Return* 11). Each confrontation is carefully executed; her deliberate choice to not kill her almost rapists forces them to reckon with their own complicity. Her method of verbally antagonizing these men by turning their own words against them functions as a mirror, exposing the cognitive dissonance between their self-perception as "nice guys" and their sinister actions.

> "To the male spectator she might be a monstrous figure (avenger, lesbian, femme fatale, witch, angry wife) but to the feminist spectator she is a woman—an empowering, inspirational figure who is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the violence of the patriarchal symbolic order" (Creed, *Return* 17-18).

The "monstrous-feminine" takes the form of an avenger in the character Cassie. Creed quotes director Emerald Fennell:

> "Emerald Fennell (2021) director of *Promising Young Woman* explains how she wanted to create a 'subversion of the revenge genre', and not show a woman getting revenge through killing but to depict a woman 'exacting revenge—if that's what this is—in a particularly female way'. She says that the character Cassie 'is violent ... but the violence she commits, the maiming that she does, is completely psychological'" (Creed, *Return* 7).

The concept of "exacting revenge in a particularly female way" aligns with the notion that female directors, who have released films in the new millennium, indeed make movies for the woman spectator. It is essential to note the comment from Fennell that Cassie does not inflict physical violence but "maims psychologically," her understanding of a feminine means of punishment. Thus, the women watching *Promising Young Woman* might not see Cassie as a monster, but as "an empowering and inspirational figure," and the men, precisely because her revenge is not masculine-coded, will see the "monstrous-feminine." As the quote from Laura Mulvey states in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*: "'Women-inflected cinema' can take up topics and perspectives hitherto neglected or simply not imaginable by a male-dominated culture" (Creed, *Return* 6).

Even the title of the film *Promising Young Woman* is a play on words.

> "What's at its core is exactly what the title suggests - *promise*. Whose promise and potential do we protect, whose bright futures do we safeguard and whose do we find disposable? Whose lives are sacrosanct and who, conversely, is 'ruining' the fun? […] In fact, its central tenet is exactly this question - why are we willing to sacrifice promising young women for promising young men?" (Chappet).

When Cassie confronts the dean at the college where Nina and she were studying prior to the sexual assault, the dean, which is played by a female character, says: "What would you have me do? Ruin a young man's life every time we get an accusation like this?" (*Promising Young Woman* 00:46:19-00:46:28). Nina and Cassie were top of their class, promising young women, but the future of Nina's rapist Alexander Monroe is deemed of higher importance then hers. The dean's indication that this accusation of rape is not a singular happening at the college, but a recurring one, underlines that specifically college rape-culture is a systematic issue all on its own. The dean's disregard for the sexually assaulted women on campus and the fact that she is a woman herself indicates that protestors against feminism are not so "black and white as men vs women," but entirely more nuanced (Chappet). Some women are indoctrinated in the patriarchy and, as shown in the movie, also uphold its systems of oppression.

The climactic sequence of *Promising Young Woman*, in which Cassie confronts Al Monroe at his bachelor party, serves as the collapse of her long-gestating plan for justice. It is the most direct confrontation with the source of her trauma. She infiltrates a deeply patriarchal space, a bachelor party, in disguise, literally drugs the men with her performance of femininity, and isolates Al, chaining him to the bed with the intent to carve Nina's name into his body. Yet, the scene violently undercuts any expectation of a satisfying revenge fantasy. Al frees himself and smothers Cassie with a pillow in a prolonged scene that refuses to end. The camera does not cut away or offer catharsis; it forces viewers to sit with the full, horrifying duration of Cassie's murder (*Promising Young Woman* 01:24:09-01:36:14). It underscores the brutal reality that women like Cassie and Nina often face when challenging male power. Even when methodical and prepared, Cassie cannot physically overpower the man who once overpowered Nina. In a genre that typically rewards the "final girl" or the avenger with survival, Cassie's death brutally breaks with convention.

However, her death proves not to be the end of her resistance. In an unexpected posthumous twist, Cassie's plan unfolds beyond the grave. Having anticipated the possibility of her death, she has set in motion scheduled messages, mailed evidence, and police alerts, which ultimately lead to Al's arrest at his own wedding. Her last words, "Enjoy the wedding.

Love, Cassie & Nina ;)," are conveyed through a text message (*Promising Young Woman* 01:45:30-01:48:31). In the end, Cassie and Nina get their justice against the men who wronged them. Though by the sacrifice of their lives, a portrayal of the uncomfortable reality that justice for women often comes at a price. Cassie's confrontation with Al Monroe, then, becomes the emotional triumph of the film, not because she survives it, but because she refuses to let the story end with silence. Her death, like Nina's, is the product of male violence, but unlike Nina, Cassie ensures that the world cannot ignore it. In this way, *Promising Young Woman* upends the rape-revenge genre by stripping away fantasy and foregrounding reality.

The five-time Oscar-nominated *The Substance* (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, takes some of these feminist themes to a visceral, body-horror extreme. In this film, transformation is not just metaphorical but physical. Like Cassie, the protagonist of *The Substance*, Elisabeth Sparkle, is a woman deeply marked by a patriarchal culture that devalues, discards, and commodifies the female body, specifically as it ages. But rather than accept her older appearance, she literally sheds her old body to become something new. Through the use of a mysterious serum called "The Substance," she creates a younger version of herself, Sue, who soon begins to rebel, turning the process of self-improvement into one of bodily horror. Where *Promising Young Woman* grounds its critique in realism, *The Substance* exaggerates it through the grotesque, offering a satire of beauty culture, ageism, and the violent lengths to which women are pushed to maintain desirability. Sue becomes a "monstrous-feminine" figure, born from Elisabeth's trauma and transformed into a product of the system that provoked her creation.

The first time Elisabeth transforms into Sue, her younger body double, Sue's body emerges from a long slit in Elisabeth's spine. The entire sequence is visually shown in full, with no hiding of the horrifying, bloody imagery (*The Substance* 00:26:37-00:28:34). They take turns inhabiting each body, precisely seven days at a time. The conscious one has to take care of the other, feeding and respecting "the balance." As the provider of the substance repeatedly states, "There is no she and you. You are one" (*The Substance* 01:03:31-01:03:35). When Sue starts to steal time from Elisabeth, Elisabeth becomes more and more physically deformed. Sue ends up resenting Elisabeth for the seven days she must give up so that Elisabeth can have her time, eventually stealing three coherent months from her older self, resulting in Elisabeth's appearance becoming unrecognizably monstrous (*The Substance* 01:37:15-01:38:22). Elisabeth finally decides to end her usage of the substance and kill Sue, but while in the process of terminating her younger double, she regrets it saying, "I can't do this. I need you. I need myself." And "You're the only lovable part of me. You have to come back" (*The*

Substance 01:44:00-01:44:31). The time-sharing arrangement between Elisabeth and Sue only works beneficially for both, provided they follow the strict rules about balance and mutual care. Yet, as Sue increasingly asserts dominance and robs Elisabeth of time, the allure of youth overshadows the underappreciated beauty of aging. Elisabeth's physical degeneration is not just body horror for shock; it is a visual portrayal of how women are discarded by patriarchal systems that acknowledge and give notability only to the appearance of youthfulness. The substance provider's insistence that "you are one" echoes the importance of loving both the younger and older self. Elisabeth and Sue are not two people, but one fractured identity split into two bodies. Her plea, "You're the only lovable part of me," when she changes her mind in terminating Sue, expresses the profound alienation she feels from her own body and the societal conditioning that convinces her that only her youthful reflection is worthy of affection or acceptance. The fact that she cannot complete Sue's termination speaks to how deeply this ideal has been embedded in her self-perception. In this moment, *The Substance* is not simply a body-horror that performs a spectacle of abominable metamorphosis, but the psychological terror of being taught to love only a version of oneself that the world deems valuable.

"Feminist New Wave cinema […] explores the corrosive power of the authoritarian and violent patriarchal order, its repression of the feminine, and the effect of this on the lives of women" (Creed, *Return* 10-11). The character of Harvey in *The Substance* embodies this authoritarian figure that Creed refers to. He is the television studio executive who controls Elisabeth's fitness show, titled "Sparkle Your Life with Elisabeth." On Elisabeth's 50th birthday, she overhears Harvey speak on the phone while she is in the bathroom cubicle.

> "Look, I made it simple. We need her young. We need her hot. We need her now. How the old bitch has been able to stick for this long that's the fucking mystery to me. Oh, Oscar winner my ass. When was that, back in the 30s? What, for King Kong? No, I don't give a fuck what we promised her. This is network TV, not a fucking charity. Find me somebody new. Now. Hey, did you know that a woman's fertility starts to decrease by the age of 25?" (*The Substance* 00:06:30-00:07:16).

When Harvey fires Elisabeth later that day, the audience gets thrown into the ending of his explanation: "I mean, that's just the way it is. So you know what I mean? People are just people, and I have to give people what they want. That's what keeps the shareholders happy. And people always ask for something new. Renewal is inevitable. And at 50, well, it stops" (*The Substance* 00:08:03-00:08:34). He mentions a decrease in fertility on the day when Elisabeth turns 50, the age at which women generally experience menopause. While firing her, he is vulgarly displayed eating a plate of shrimp. The focus on a singular shrimp, in his hand, as it

limply flaps around, is visually shown at his utterance of the words “at 50, well, it stops.” Meaning that men do not find women sexually arousing at that age, while also connoting that infertility equals expendability. Harvey’s authority is dehumanizing as it represses Elisabeth’s right to exist by reducing her to an expired product. He functions as a symbolic enforcer of the very system that polices, punishes, and eventually discards aging women. His obsessive focus on Elisabeth’s body and harsh judgment when she fails to meet the expectations of physical perfection illustrate the insidious ways patriarchal control is exercised.

In contrast, when Harvey first meets Sue, he is instantly captivated. She gets cast in the remodeled and renamed fitness show, “Pump It Up with Sue,” which Elisabeth once hosted. The show’s aesthetic is fully transformed; the fitness moves are more explicit, the camera angles focus on intimate body parts, and the costumes leave little to the imagination (*The Substance* 00:52:26-00:54:35). The same woman he once discarded is now desirable again, only because she conforms to his fantasy of youthful feminine perfection. His attraction to Sue underscores how women are often valued not for their inner qualities but for their bodies, particularly when those bodies fit into narrow, hyper-sexualized ideals.

The final act of the film takes a deeply tragic and symbolic turn when Sue kills Elisabeth (*The Substance* 01:49:21-01:50:35). What can be seen as a simple murder is complicated by Sue’s identity as an extension of Elisabeth; she is not just the younger version, but the product of Elisabeth’s deepest desires and traumas. Killing Elisabeth is both a literal act of violence and a metaphorical erasure of the self, an internalized form of misogyny bred by a culture that teaches women to hate their aging bodies, to fear irrelevance, and to seek worth only through youth. Sue, now fully detached from the woman who created her, becomes monstrous not because she is evil, but because she has internalized a system that pits woman against woman, even when they are one and the same.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the evolving representation of women in horror cinema, tracing a trajectory from passive victims framed by the “male gaze” to complex figures of agency. The eight movies analyzed, spanning from *Psycho* (1960) to *The Substance* (2024), have shown how horror, a genre long associated with voyeurism and violence, has become an essential site for feminist critique and creative rebellion.

By drawing upon foundational feminist film theorists, I have been able to employ a multi-theoretical framework to examine the ways women are positioned within horror narratives. Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” helped expose how classic horror films often

rendered the female body as a passive object for visual pleasure, punished for its sexuality and transgressions. In contrast, Clover's "final girl" theory offered insight into a transitional archetype, one that, while still confined by patriarchal expectations, began to assert agency and narrative centrality. Barbara Creed's "monstrous-feminine," especially her recent work on the Feminist New Wave, became crucial to understanding contemporary horror films in which women no longer merely survive horror; they embody it, reframe it, and weaponize it.

The films analyzed illustrate the complex shifts in female representation over time. Early works like *Psycho* and *Carrie* depict female protagonists who are punished for their sexual expression or independence, often reduced to visual spectacle or monstrous projections of male fear. However, they also introduce early cracks in the patriarchal influence on horror films. *Halloween* and *Aliens* presented characters like Laurie Strode and Ellen Ripley, who begin to embody agency, though their survival is still predicated on chastity and emotional restraint. *Scream* marks a further evolution, employing meta-commentary to challenge genre conventions while still relying on some traditional tropes.

In contrast, the female-directed films, *Jennifer's Body*, *Promising Young Woman*, and *The Substance*, usher in a more radical reimagining of horror. These films intentionally subvert genre norms, not only by centering women's stories but by destabilizing moral binaries and challenging the structures that traditionally define monstrosity, victimhood, and heroism. Jennifer becomes a literal man-eater as a metaphor for sexual trauma and revenge; Cassie manipulates her own image to expose systemic misogyny, ultimately sacrificing herself; and Elisabeth/Sue's bodily fragmentation in *The Substance* becomes a grotesque critique of beauty culture and internalized misogyny. These characters do not simply resist horror; they become its source and its subject, wielding it on their own terms.

The horror genre, once criticized for its misogynistic undertones, has become, particularly in the hands of female filmmakers, a site of feminist rebellion. The horror film is uniquely suited to express affective experiences of fear, trauma, and transformation, making it fertile ground for feminist storytelling. As horror continues to evolve, it offers women new ways of being seen not just as victims or survivors, but as storytellers, critics, and creators of fear itself. Ultimately, the female role in horror has evolved from one of passivity and silence to one where the woman's story is relayed in, as director Emerald Fennell aptly puts it, "a particularly female way" (Creed, *Return* 7). By reclaiming the monstrous and embracing the abject, contemporary female horror filmmakers are reshaping genre conventions and redefining who horror is for and what it can do.

Even so, despite the progressive strides made by female directors and the subversive qualities of contemporary feminist horror, a clear pattern persists across the eight films analyzed in this thesis. Only three female characters survive by the film's end: Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*, and Sidney Prescott in *Scream*. All embody Carol J. Clover's concept of the resourceful male-coded female. Their survival hinges on their adherence to specific behavioral patterns, which, while allowing for some agency, are still shaped by patriarchal standards. Moreover, it is essential to note that all the central women in the films examined are white, and seven of them are fully portrayed as heterosexual. Whether victim, survivor, or monster, whiteness and heterosexuality are implicitly treated as the normative lens through which horror is constructed. This lack of racial and sexual diversity, even in films celebrated for their feminist innovation, reveals the limitations of the genre's inclusivity. While female directors have expanded the scope of horror, the genre has yet to meaningfully incorporate and embrace intersectional feminist concerns around race, sexuality, and identity. Thus, horror cinema, despite its evolution, remains haunted by a legacy of exclusion, one that calls for further reimagining of who gets to survive, who gets to speak, and whose bodies are seen as sites of resistance.

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