

**The Monstrous Feminine: A look into the use of female autonomy in
horror media**

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire, in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (programme name). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the concept of the monstrous feminine through the lens of horror media. Coined by Barbara Creed, the concept examines the intersection of femininity and monstrosity in cultural narratives. By analysing various representations of women as monstrous figures in film. This thesis seeks to understand the societal anxieties surrounding female identity, sexuality, body, and power dynamics. Also, the monstrous feminine challenges the traditional notions of femininity, portraying women as both powerful and threatening, thus subverting patriarchal expectations.

Through a close reading of key texts and visual media, this thesis finds patterns such as the monstrous mother figure and the femme fatale archetypes. It reveals how these archetypes encapsulate fears of female autonomy and desire. Ultimately, this exploration of the monstrous feminine not only sheds light on the cultural perception of women but also invites a broader conversation about the use of the female anatomy as a medium of expression. Through this lens, the thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation surrounding the potential of embracing the “monstrous” aspects of femininity.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I aim to explore the ways in which the female body is both weaponised and symbolic in horror media, with an emphasis on how these representations reflect fears surrounding gender, sexuality, and power. The concept of the monstrous feminine comes from the idea that women, because they are perceived as “different” in their embodiment of sexual and reproductive power, are often depicted in horror as threatening and dangerous. They are destructive and overpowering. According to Creed, the horror genre uniquely allows these anxieties to manifest in extreme and visually stimulating forms, where female figures are not only oppressed but transformed into terror itself. Creed brings some interesting food for thought by stating, “when a woman is presented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions.”¹ These transformations often revolve around the female anatomy, which is shown as overwhelming, uncontrollable, or even literally alien. Through this lens, female monstrosity is not just a reflection of physicality but also of a deeper cultural fear surrounding female autonomy, sexuality, and reproductive roles.



Figure 1 *The Substance* (2024) screenshot, by Coralie Fargeat.

The primary focus of this thesis is to explore the demonisation of the female body in horror cinema, analysing how films such as *Alien* (1979), *Carrie* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973), and even a newer release now, *The Substance* (2024), represent the monstrous feminine. These

¹ Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge

films each feature iconic depictions of female characters whose bodies become sites of horror and transformation. However, they also each offer distinct narratives about the relationship between gender, power, religion, and monstrosity, providing great material for analysis. I plan to delve into the patriarchal influence sustained to the female characters in each of these films and discuss the effect it had on their relationship with their bodies and how they carried themselves. The suggested events of terror are not all necessarily done, or perpetuated even, to the women by men. In some cases in these films, the main conflict happens due to the strained relationships these women had with each other or even themselves. Some may argue that the male gaze is the cause for these strains, hence, the patriarchal nature is still to blame men. This angle is also something I find endlessly interesting and will be touching on it further. I would love to dive into and learn more about the deeply intertwined relations these women have with themselves and inadvertently with other women, how their self-worth is tied to their place in the patriarchy, and how their relationship with men changed the narrative and eventually caused their monstrous power to erupt. Was there any correlation? How did women's bodies become such a scary sight?

There are many interesting concepts that I have decided to leave out of this piece of work, but which I still find very important to the topic. The vagina dentata for example being one of them. This ridiculous idea that the vagina can grow teeth to prevent and protect against sexual abuse is one that was represented in the 2007 horror film *Teeth* directed and written by Mitchell Lichtstein. Though at the time of its release in the early 2000s the film did not gain popularity and was actually considered a box office failure, it has had a second chance at life now nearly twenty years later. It addressed the purity movement and abstinence only education in an obvious and harsh way and commented on “the cultural perceptions of sex, consent and the ownership of women’s bodies.”² It is a myth that has actually been prevalent in quite a few cultures and served as a warning to men that a woman’s vagina is a monster that must be conquered. It’s a concept that was completely dismantled in the film and was rather interpreted as a cautionary tale about consent. The heroine of the film, through a few scary events, ends up manipulating her unique anatomy to punish her abusers and other predators standing in her way. I considered this topic very fascinating and therefore consider it important to mention it here, allow it to set the tone for the thesis.

² Hockenbroch, Olivia. (2019). Fear, Power & Teeth. University of Montana ScholarWorks at University of Montana.

Chapter 1

DEFINING THE MONSTROUS FEMININE

The monstrous feminine, as defined by Barbara Creed, hinges on the notion that the female body is inherently other, abnormal, and threatening. Creed's analysis tends to border psychoanalytical territory, particularly the work of Julia Kristeva and her concept of the "abject", to understand how horror films foreground the fear and fascination that the female body evokes. The abject is that which is disregarded or rejected from the order of things, things that threaten identity and categorisation, such as bodily fluids, decay, and death. "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark re-volts of being"³. The female body, especially in its reproductive or sexual forms, embodies the abject in horror narratives, as it symbolises both creation (birth) and destruction (death), pleasure and pain. The menstrual cycle, in particular, is proof that death is a part of our anatomy, if not only literally, also symbolically. As the egg travels down and fails to be fertilised, it dies and causes so much pain in the process. The blood, pain, and gore of menstruation generously mirrors the tropes of horror and often becomes the spectacle or even catalyst in the narrative, many of which I plan to discuss in regard to the films. The monstrous feminine is, therefore, a manifestation of the deep-seated fear that women, in their ability to reproduce and in their non-conformity to patriarchal norms, challenge the said established norm. This topic is just as timely now as it was decades ago, with the 4B movement demanding global attention and women adamantly advocating for their reproductive rights worldwide.

The films I will be discussing in my analysis embody various surfaces of the monstrous feminine, from the terrifying sexually maturing of the young girl to the abjection of the pregnant or possessed woman. The female body in puberty is often subject to demonisation in itself. Virginity and the taking of it has also been a striking symbolism of the wrecking of youth, becoming woman and losing value, "'female anatomy' in *Dead Ringers* is 'monstrous' while Beverly Mantle's desire to penetrate her is a desperate attempt to 'respecularise' the female figure."⁴ Unruliness and changes in body and mind are all strikingly common themes that appear in films such as *The Exorcist* and *The Substance*.

³ Kristeva, Julia. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (pp.10). Columbia University Press.

⁴ Humm, Maggie. (2022). *Feminism and Film* (pp. 67). Edinburgh University Press.

Alien (1979), directed by Ridley Scott, is perhaps one of the most iconic horror films to explore the concept of the monstrous feminine. At its core, *Alien* features a terrifying extraterrestrial creature, an abject one that is birthed from the protagonist's body. The Alien itself is a manifestation of male fears surrounding female reproduction, particularly the violence of pregnancy and childbirth. The chest-bursting scene, in which the alien violently tears itself out of the male character's body, is one of the most viscerally unsettling images in horror cinema, iconic. The female body in *Alien* becomes both a site and a sight, literally considering the spaceship itself was fittingly named Mother. It becomes a site for destruction and survival, with Ripley's strength and independence contrasting with the horror of being a passive vessel for the alien's violent birth.

Carrie (1976), directed by Brian De Palms and based on Stephen King's novel, is another film that explores the monstrous feminine through the lens of adolescence, sexuality, and revenge. Carrie White is a shy and socially awkward young high school girl. She experiences a terrifying transformation as she enters puberty, with the story beginning in the shower as we see blood dripping down her legs. The film uses telekinesis as a metaphor for the eruption of Carrie's repressed emotions and sexuality, making her body both a site of power and danger. Her menstruation, a significant marker of her transformation, is where she uses her brand new powers to cause a hellish outbreak on her peers and mother. The mother owns and abuses her own power over Carrie throughout the story. The film represents the female body's potential for both victimhood and vengeance, using it as a weapon of self-destruction and violence, as Carrie's monstrousness emerges from the rejection and bodily shame.

The Substance (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, presents a fresh version of the monstrous feminine. It has a unique focus on the intersection of the relationship of a woman with her age and sexuality and the conflicts she develops with her younger self. The film follows a carbon copy of her peak self, Sue. The female body in this film is depicted as feed and the fed; it is a site for grotesque change and disintegration, reflecting the fear and fascination with female biology, aging, and autonomy. The horror is not just in the substance itself but in how Elizabeth treats herself, how it amplifies her agency and personal transformation, making her more monstrous and powerful. Sue depends on Elizabeth's body to live and vice versa, they have a symbiotic relationship which inevitably becomes unbalanced and wreaks havoc on both their bodies, turning them into one gruesome monster. They have a sort of mother daughter relationship which amplifies the controlling and violent, soul sucking disrespect they have for one another. The men in this film also play the role of the enabler. Elizabeth was disregarded

due to having aged and become “useless” to the man who milked her for all she’s worth. So she goes through a painful process to revert back to the time she was somebody worth watching, Sue, who is an attractive young sexual woman that plays into the fantasy of the audience. Elizabeth’s disdain and jealousy emerge in boils, broken bones, and blackened dead fingers, which she cannot hide from Sue and which mirror her weakness and vulnerability. The Substance highlights the horror of the female body becoming uncontrollable, even when it is a woman herself who chooses to embrace the transformation. The film engages with themes of bodily autonomy and the fear of being overwhelming, where the female body, often constrained and regulated by societal norms, becomes a site of terrifying rebellion. The visceral, gory imagery of flesh mutating, growing, and decaying forces the viewer to confront uncomfortable truths about the female body’s power. Through its use of gore and body horror (all practical effects by the way, which makes it all the more horrifying and impressive), The Substance emphasises how the monstrous feminine is not just a symbol of destruction but also of rebirth and defiance. It pushes the boundaries of traditional horror tropes by presenting a woman who is both victim and agent of monstrous transformation. The monstrous feminine works as a symbolic representation of female power gone crazy, and through these films, the boundaries of what is considered “normal” or “acceptable” for women are violently challenged. In doing so, these films reflect a cultural obsession with control over the female body. By examining these films, this thesis will contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of women in horror.

Chapter 2

GIRLHOOD AND TRAUMA

In *Carrie*, directed by Brian de Palma, puberty serves as a powerful metaphor and medium to show the transition of an innocent girl into a monstrous young woman, mirroring Carrie White's own evolution throughout the narrative. As Carrie's own experiences of physical and emotional disruption of her childhood, her newly developed telekinetic powers become a manifestation of her repressed rage, isolation, and the overwhelming pressures of societal expectations as well as her mother's. Humiliated and immensely vulnerable, now at the mercy of her fellow students, she finds herself in a period of discouraged energy.

The onset of menstruation is a pivotal moment in her life, it symbolises not only the awakening of her supernatural power but also highlights her vulnerability and the monstrous potential of her peers and oppressive mother. This duality of her period, both as a source of horror and as a natural part of growing up, complements Carrie's tragic transformation into a figure of vengeance, suggesting that the very forces of maturing can be weaponised against those who feel powerless and alienated.

For Carrie, puberty symbolises a rite of passage filled with potential and promise. In this approach, we see De Palma carefully include the themes of adolescence, monstrosity, and revenge, creating a chilling commentary on the struggles faced during this critical phase of her life.

The shower scene in the beginning serves as a very literal reminder of Carrie's lack of control when it comes to her powers, though not expressed yet, are slowly seeping out for everybody to see. This serves as a catalyst to the story and Carrie's transformation. The blood, often associated with femininity and maturity, becomes a source of horror rather than celebration, highlighting the societal stigma surrounding female bodily functions. In this way, we interpret Carrie's puberty as a battleground where her natural monstrosity leaks out onto the surface. It disrupts her life, which is already full of pressure, reflecting how growing up distorts one's identity. The familiar negativity she's felt radiating from her mother is now quickly seeping into the physical world. Her telekinesis is initially just a response to her inner turmoil, it evolves into a means of exerting her control both over her mind and body. It enacts revenge on those who have wronged her.

The climax of the film, the prom night disaster, serves as a breaking point for our heroin and reminds us of her repressed anger and humiliation one last time. She is drenched in pig's blood, a filthy symbol of the ultimate degradation. This moment forced her to unleash her powers in a frenzied outburst, transforming her from a victim of a heartless prank into a terrifying monster. This underscores the idea that the very changes associated with puberty, which should signify a new beginning and growth, not only don't symbolise power but can instead manifest as monstrous rage when coupled with trauma and abuse.

Not only that, De Palma's use of visual and cinematic techniques amplifies the connection between puberty and monstrosity in a way that is chilling and thought-provoking. The film makes use of close-ups and slow-motion sequences to emphasise Carrie's emotional state, allowing viewers to viscerally experience her fear and loneliness. To create a powerful commentary on the immovable nature of adolescence, De Palma uses skillful instances of juxtapositions of serene moments of self-exploration with chaotic outbursts of violence.

Carrie's character embodies the fear of the unknown and the sense of uncertainty that we often feel growing up. It is a great fear of becoming something other than yourself, something uncontrollable and monstrous.

Ultimately, *Carrie* serves as a chilling exploration of how pubescence can act as both a metaphor for graphic violence and for Carrie's monstrosity in her experience of growing older. It is a great reflection on the anxieties set up in our society surrounding female anatomy, sexuality, and freedom. It can suggest that the transition of a girl into womanhood can be stunted through bullying and neglect. Through Carrie's journey, De Palma critiques certain ways in which society usually demonises young women and how sometimes the members of said society are often women themselves. Through fearing being seen as unruly and less than, they stunt each others growth, putting pressure on one another. Once said pressure becomes a little too much to bear, the inevitable outburst reveals the monstrous potential that can arise from a combination of trauma and societal rejection.

A similar theme can be discussed in great detail in an earlier film also. *The Exorcist* (1973) employs the theme of puberty as a multifaceted metaphor and weapon to underscore the transformation of Regan into a vessel of monstrosity. As a representation of the tumultuous transition from childhood to adulthood, Regan's possession sets a perfect example of the fear and chaos associated with puberty. The physical and psychological upheaval that accompanies this stage of development is mirrored in Regan's alarming transformation, her once innocent

demeanour turns into violent outbursts and grotesque behaviours that terrify those around her. This transformation serves not only as a reflection of the societal anxieties surrounding adolescence but also as a catalyst for the horror that unfolds. Her body similarly becomes a battleground, a site where the innocence of childhood clashes violently with the chaotic emergence of sexual maturity and identity.

Regan's possession in the film can be viewed as a metaphor for the loss of control often associated with puberty. The initially sweet and playful girl, full of youthful energy and charm, is overtaken by an alien force, paralleling the way adolescents may feel as they grapple with their evolving identities and experiences. This loss of control is particularly intense in a society that often marginalises the voices and experiences of young women. Regan's body, once a symbol of purity and innocence, becomes a site of horror and monstrosity. It highlights the societal fears surrounding female sexuality. Her transformation is visually represented through her physical deterioration and the graphic manifestations of her possession, serving as an intensely graphic reminder of the often misunderstood forces that come with the transition into adulthood.

The film uses Regan's monstrous behaviour as a weapon to critique societal expectations of femininity and the inherent fear of female empowerment. As she becomes more erratic and violent, her possession challenges traditional ideas of how girls should behave, mirroring the fears of a society grappling with the changing roles of women in a very similar way to what De Palma did with Carrie. The juxtaposition of Regan's innocence with her horrifying actions reveals the fragility of societal norms and the anxieties surrounding the emergence of a female identity that defies conventional expectations. This transformation into monstrosity can be interpreted as a rebellion against constraints placed upon young women, showcasing how puberty can be both a source of empowerment and terror.

Furthermore, the conflict between the characters of Father Karras and Father Merrin underlines the struggle between rationality and the irrational fears associated with adolescence. Karras, a psychologist, represents the scientific approach to understanding Regan's condition, while Merrin embodies the spiritual and religious battle against the evil that has taken hold of her. This contrast reflects the broader societal struggle to understand the complexities of puberty, particularly in the context of gender. The film ultimately suggests that the monstrosity of Regan's possession is not solely rooted in supernatural forces but is also a manifestation of the fears and anxieties surrounding the journey into adulthood, particularly for young women.

The Exorcist masterfully intertwines the themes of puberty and monstrosity through the character of Regan, using her possession as both a metaphor for the chaos of adolescence and a weapon to critique societal norms. The film serves as a haunting exploration of the fears associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood. It exposes the underlying anxieties surrounding female identity and empowerment. Through Regan's harrowing journey, Friedkin not only delivers a chilling horror narrative but also invites viewers to confront the complexities of growing up in a world that fears change.

The feeling of being absolutely petrified of the unknown and losing control over your body is something we can observe to be a common theme in the two films. Though Regan and Carrie both lose control over their own bodies in one way or another, they gain power that grants them strength and an opportunity to be more than just weak little girls. These horrifying events that happen to these young women do so not only to further the plot but to establish them as strong leading characters. They were dismissed in their own worlds and deemed passive by their peers and parents. In changing their demeanour, the writers also change their perception of the world and once they realise the power they held, the strong blood that flown through them, they became uncontrollable. This newly found sense of invincibility and confidence, involuntary for some, came as an unexpected and unpreventable result of the pressures put on them by society. The people surrounding them were the ones affecting the heroines' actions and inadvertently causing their own pain also.

The pain, blood, and puberty serve as powerful metaphors and mediums to show the transition of an innocent girl into a monstrous young woman in both *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*.

Puberty and Transformation

The idyllic appearance of her classmates is misleading in terms of actually showing their true nature. The pretty popular girls with perfect hair and soft features act cruelly and obnoxiously toward Carrie as she struggles to understand what's happened to her. The girls throwing things and shouting vulgar things at her completely contrasts the expectations the audience would have held for them. Their mocking and snickering deeply hurt and traumatised Carrie in her most vulnerable state. What was most striking was that not only was it the popular girls bullying her, but it was also the non-stereotypically threatening girls joking about the harassment.

Bigger girls, with big glasses and simple features that would usually find themselves in Carrie's position, were also bullying her, almost as though it would have been their only chance to be on the giving end of the fight. This lack of empathy, despite likely having been in her position, is what drives the horrific feeling through the scene.

De Palma suggests in the tempo and writing of the shower scene that the blood streaming down Carrie's legs is not due to her period but rather to a self-inflicted wound as a result of her overly sensual touching. The shots of her legs and breasts, zoomed in and slow, suggest that the blood leads to the destructive and sadistic acts she performs later in the film. As though awakened something in her, she begins her descent into madness, and a lightbulb breaks. Carrie goes through a moment of panic, reflecting on all the times her mother preached abstinence and purity. Surely, as she looked down at her hands in disbelief, she had somehow come to the conclusion that her illicit touching hurt her and was deadly, hell worthy even. She was not raised in a house that considered menstruation natural; it was gross and sexual, and she was never even told of the possibility of it happening. The viewer knows that periods are not caused by masturbation; they will happen no matter how steamy Carrie's showers can get. She seems to believe that she has so little control over what she does that even the blood pouring down her legs doesn't seem like it's something she's capable of. Her whole life, beliefs and education censored, we can only imagine the awful things she was thinking amidst the screaming and crying.

These young women, who surely all must have gone through the process of menstruating for the first time, knew how painful, sudden, and unpleasant it is. They took this opportunity to make Carrie even more repulsed by her own body. This is not the only time in which the beautiful young girls at Bates High School act like monsters towards Carrie. This crazy behaviour multiplies and continues up to the climax of the film in the iconic pigs' blood scene. These students, dressed so elegantly in soft dresses, with done-up hair and makeup, concocted a sinister plan to sabotage Carrie at her happiest. Going as far as swapping the ballots and hiding under the stairs on their own important night. What should have been a night of vindication against her tormentors and mother became a night of for Carrie. This devilish plan took the confidence slowly building up in Carrie over the course of her date and crushed it the moment that bucket dropped. A vivid image of Carrie standing there, humiliated by her fellow girls, dressed in just as soft a dress, eyes wide and no longer full of hope but shock. At this moment, the monster they had all made Carrie out to be had finally realised. Some consider it a loss of control whilst others contemplate if Carrie had actually just allowed herself the

freedom of fighting back. The perfect Chris Hargensen at the steering wheel of a car also let her monster loose as she sped towards Carrie. By thinking she had any control over Carrie's life, she consequently ended her own, as the car rolled in a rough car crash just at Carrie's glance.

Blood and Period Representation

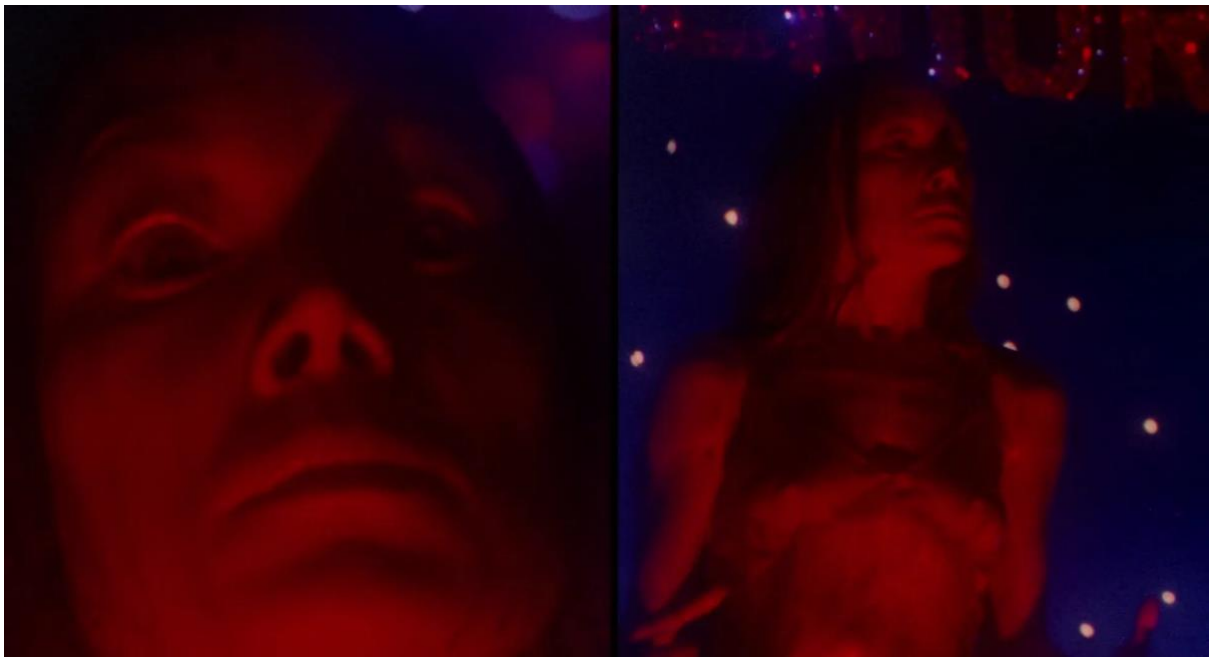


Figure 2 Carrie (1976) by Brian De Palma, iconic pig's blood scene.

A late bloomer, Carrie's blood directly symbolises her telekinetic power, gradually going out of control and slipping through her hands without her even noticing or anticipating it. The serene music of the opening scene stops, and Carrie is put in a state of shock and fear. She's got no idea what's going on with her body, and just as the blood unexpectedly flows, so does her power. Her shouting breaks the light in the shower, and the room is stunned. This lack of control and discipline in her power is mirrored in Carrie getting her first period in front of all her peers. Just as she would have been shunned and criticised by society had her powers come to light, she was ridiculed by the room full of women. None took pity on her, and none stopped for even a second to consider what she must be going through. "It hurts to be a monster."⁵

⁵ Briefel, Aviva. (2005). *Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film* (pp. 16). Film Quarterly.

Her powers, still unknown to the audience, are foreshadowed in this scene. Just as she begins to learn about her body and what a period even is. Her growing fascination with the coincidences around her led her to start exploring. She learns about her body just as she begins to ponder the possibilities of telekinesis.

Throughout the film, Chris plans this “revenge” on Carrie. The visuals of the bucket filling up with pigs' blood I interpret to be a vivid metaphor for Carrie's powers growing. With the two being undoubtedly connected, it isn't unexpected to draw the parallels between the two. The bucket overflowing with specifically pigs' blood, something that's been deemed dirty and impure by many religions and cultures, perfectly mirrors the words of warning Carrie's mother preached to her just before the prom. Her abilities, her womanhood, and her body were all criticised to such an extent that it took all of Carrie's willpower to believe in the possibility of something true and good. The juxtaposition of the young girl, dressed in light fabrics and light flowing hair, angelic in appearance, covered in blood pouring down on her is arguably the most iconic scene in the entire film. The pig's blood pouring out on her head for everybody to see struck her right in the heart. This rancid action broke her spirit and evoked emotions she had been doing her best to control since the day of her first period.

“Horror's misogyny is a far more complicated matter than the 'bloodlust' formula would have it.”⁶.

As the light turns red and Carrie and the blood become one, we see in her eyes the realisation that actually, the only person she could trust all along was herself; the teacher told her everything will be alright and to trust her, her peers cruelly orchestrated the most vile prank in her most special moment, and her mother has been abusing her ruthlessly her entire life. She embraces the evil she's been convinced she is. “While male monsters wound themselves before turning to violence, female monsters menstruate.”⁷ This threshold was crossed, and Carrie became the person she was always told she was: evil, a sinner, her blood as impure as a pig's and as violent as the way they were slaughtered. Male monsters in cinema are masochistic, women on the other hand have enough pain inflicted upon them that they don't need to do so themselves, “they tend to commit acts of violence out of revenge for earlier abuse by parents,

⁶ . Clover, Carol J. (1992). *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (pp. 20). Princeton University Press.

⁷ Briefel, Aviva. (2005). *Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film* (pp. 21). *Film Quarterly*.

partners, rapists, and other offenders.”⁸ When the female monster participates in masochistic behaviour, it is either due to pressures from an external influence or as a means of alleviating her monstrous identity.

This collision of her reality and nightmares led to the murder of all of her peers, and in this moment of absolute power, Carrie reaches her potential. In her return home, covered in blood, she finds her mother crazy, overcome with fear and madness. Carrie being covered in blood symbolises the power coming out to the surface and, hence, becoming visible to everybody. Covered in proof of her actions, her classmates’ blood on her hands, she returns home with the hope of finding sanctuary. She tries to wash the blood off, to hide her monstrosity, and is horrified at the evil she’s discovered in her peers and herself. She yearns to find comfort in her own body, in her home, and in her mother, covering herself in modest cotton dress and praying on her knees for forgiveness. She bled once again after being stabbed in her back by her mother, both literally and figuratively. This ties in the violence we’ve seen in this film with the contexts of women viewing each other as threats and as things to control, a mother not being able to control her own daughter, jealous of her free thinking and purity, trying to live through her vicariously whilst also committing the most harrowing sin, murder.

⁸ . Clover, Carol J. (1992). *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (pp. 20). Princeton University Press.

Religious and Familial Contexts

Something that connects the stories of Carrie and The Exorcist is the undeniably strong influence that religion had on the plot. The heartbreaking story of a young girl raised with an abusive and extremely religious mother on one hand, and on the other, the story of a young girl and her mother in despair resulting to a religious approach to Regan's suffering as a last resource. This contrast in the stories aligns perfectly when discussing the possibilities of possessions with relation to familial contexts.



Figure 3 Carrie (1976) by Brian De Palma, Carrie is locked in closet.

Their family dynamics are similar whilst also being entirely different. Both Carrie and Regan have single mothers for carers and fathers who are no longer in the picture. This is something to note. Regan's mother, a loving and free-spirited woman, has a gentle approach to curing her daughter's ailments. She holds her daughter's well-being in the highest regard, physically and mentally. Flinching at any suggestion of her daughter going through tough medical procedures or being restrained during her episodes. The fear that Chris experiences is caused by the empathy she feels for her daughter and the pain the medical world has caused them both.

In the midst of the violent punishments and bible readings, Carrie's mother is convinced she also had her daughter's best interests at heart. Through her screaming and beating Carrie, she is desperately trying to convince her daughter to seek god, whilst also convincing her it's too

late. Margaret is disgusted with Carrie getting her period, and her locking Carrie in the closet simultaneously hides her from the world and god and also forces her to face his presence face to face. This horrific and violent outburst stems from the trauma she suffered at the hands of Carrie's father and her denial of enjoying the sex act. In her own wicked ways, she spent her whole life protecting her daughter from the world, trapping her in the dark and making her afraid of trying new things. This alienating causes Carrie to become an outcast and eventually is exactly the reason she becomes everything her mother had feared. It raises the debate of nature vs nurture. Was she always destined to become a powerful and monstrous entity due to the nature of her conception, or was the treatment she received from her mother the reason for her wickedness? The repressed nature of Carrie's spirit, curious and strong, is exactly what Margaret prayed would never develop in her. Years of crushing her spirit and silencing the creativity in her daughter only had the opposite effect. Her excuse for such behaviour was always god, the bible, preaching about the first sin and also later admitting to loving it. her hypocrisy tore her in two different directions, and when she felt Carrie slip from her grasp, she herself was wicked.

Chris and Regan were living peacefully, happily, in a nonreligious household before the possession took place. Regan was never shut down in her creativity, never punished for her boisterous spirit, and always encouraged in her talents. Her loving mother raised her in an atheist household, so religion was not the catalyst in Regan's transformation. Her parents' rocky divorce is what leads me to believe that it was the reason she became susceptible to the influences of evil. What both girls have in common is a lack of stability in their lives. Carrie had a rocky relationship with her own body and mother and was bullied ruthlessly in school, and Regan was put through moving home, an absent father, and her parents often arguing over the phone. This consistent imbalance in their lives is what draws a parallel in their stories and connects their monstrous behaviours. Their attempt to repress these emotions of guilt, impatience, and sadness over the occurrence led to the emotions escaping and expressing themselves in much more sinister ways. Medically, Regan was also put through a lot; even the thought of her going through another procedure made her mother flinch., "Even the doctor's diagnostics are distorted into invasions of Regan's pitiful body with alien instrumentation that parallel the Demon's vicious invasion of her mind"⁹. The demons they fought inside manifested

⁹ Greenberg, Harvey R. (1975). *The movies on your mind* (pp.247). New York : Saturday Review Press.

themselves in their bodies, and the young, beautiful, and kind girls became the object of their mother's worst fears.

Camera and Colour

The dreamy opening sequence, with a slowed camera movement and serene music, serves as a sort of misleading representation of what a women's locker room is believed to be like. The playful and cutesy behaviour of the girls inside is a played-out cliché. The soft string and woodwind instruments and the dizzying shots of the steam filled room make you entirely unsuspecting of the cruelty Carrie is about to be put through.



Figure 4 Carrie (1976) by Brian De Palma, shower scene.

Just as she is lost daydreaming in the shower, sensual and undoubtedly sexualised, caught up in the seemingly peaceful moment, so are we watching the opening scene unfold. The music abruptly comes to a halt, and the fog over her body clears for a moment as she looks down at her hands and sees blood. There, we see a shot of Carrie standing there dumbfounded, only her hands in focus of the camera as her head is still foggy, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

This shot tells us that it wasn't just an unexpected appearance of her period; she is mortified, completely unaware of what is happening to her. The audience fixates on the blood on her hands, as Carrie does. The rest of the girls fail to notice her petrified state and ruthlessly mock her, it causes a vertigo of emotions which we can sense ourselves through the whirl of the lens and the claustrophobic close ups of their laughing faces. She's forced into a corner like a beast or a monster, laughed at and ridiculed.



Figure 5 *The Exorcist* (1973) by William Friedkin, Regan stabs herself "masturbates" with the cross.

Her hands are covered in blood coming from down below, we see an almost familiar scene in *The Exorcist* more than halfway through. In what is known to be one of the most horrific scenes of the entire film, Regan, or rather Pazuzu, is stabbing herself in the vagina with a crucifix. As the demon yells profanities, "Let Jesus fuck you." amongst other perverse things, we hear the poor girl screaming in agony. It pans down to show her beautiful white nightgown covered in blood. There are certain connotations had with seeing blood between a girl's legs, a period, menstruation, monthly cycle, most cultures consider it to be entirely unorthodox and dirty. Menstruation is the only source of blood that is not made from violence, and yet it is one that is still considered most shameful.

This scene connects the two in a graphic and highly symbolic manner. Regan is violated and humiliated by the merciless demon that has taken her body hostage. The very object that was

snuck into Regan's room to protect her, put under her pillow for safe keeping, was used as a weapon and virtually a sex toy. She had it to protect her, but the demon is making a mockery of it, and when we see Regan's face, we see her eyes glaze over with horror. She is mortally ashamed of what she is made to do in that moment.



Figure 6 The Exorcist (1973) by William Friedkin, Regan's head twists.

This shame, fear, and guilt surrounding masturbation and period blood is turned up to a whole new level, literally demonising it on screen. The gore and sacrilegious themes are not all that frightens the viewers: “we witness Regan’s bodily rebellion, and are shocked by her repressed sexual desires”¹⁰. In the same scene but the very next shot, we see Pazuzu twist Regan’s head a clean one hundred and eighty degrees, mocking Denning’s death and at the same time confirming to Chris that her daughter, possessed with a murderous alien entity, killed a grown man. This scene of total terror protests the power of god by abusing its symbols and disrespecting it entirely.

¹⁰ D’Avella, Katy. (2020). Pathological States: ‘The Exorcist’ and Monstrous Sexualities. Screen Queens.

Chapter 3

REPRODUCTION AND BIRTH

Sexual Violence and Conception

It has been discussed and widely accepted by the public that the film *Alien* has undisputed themes of rape and sexual violence. These themes take the form of an aggressive alien species that wreaks havoc on the spaceship. In one of the most iconic scenes of the movie, or even cinema, Kane is attacked by the facehugger. The facehugger is a subspecies of the Xenomorph monster whose only known role is to reproduce. It does so by forcing itself onto the host, as we see happen with Kane. This violent attack is not necessarily sexual in nature, it is reproductive. Dan O'Bannon, the writer behind this classic sci-fi horror, states in the documentary (*The 'Alien' Saga*) that his goal when writing the script was to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible. Part of the reason why the film is so scary is because feminine agency dominates throughout. Ripley's presence as a female protagonist, a strong-minded one at that, among a male crew in a male-dominated genre meant that she was an extremely alien figure herself.



Figure 7 *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott, the Xenomorph and its phallic-shaped head.

Ripley was “one of the first ever female heroines in sci-fi. Her character is empowering for women in a way that transcends both time and genre.”¹¹ As O’Bannon put it, “I’m not going to go after the women in the audience, I’m going to attack the men. I’m going to attack them sexually.” Typically and statistically most often the victims of rape are not men, so being put in a feminine position of violation the male audience members were forced to face the horrors of the reversed roles. The Alien itself is not a feminine creature, designed by Giger, the alien is a mix of penile and vaginal imagery. Even the ship itself, “is full of tunnels and cavernous spaces that can be read as vaginal.”¹²

The Xenomorph’s infamous design and its phallic shaped head and the facehugger example being its mouth, with a dripping wet exterior that hides a penetrating reproductive organ that it shoved down Kane’s throat. It is a true example of the ‘other’ figure in its androgyny. O’Bannon describes this scene as “oral rape” and as something that “will make the men in the audience cross their legs”¹³. “When male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies”¹⁴. In this specific scenario, he becomes a host.



Figure 8 *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott, facehugger latched onto Kane.

This scene of the first step in the xenomorphs life cycle, the so-called conception, is violent and forceful. The conception scene in *The Substance* is entirely less violent but nonetheless just as graphic and uncomfortable. It borders on the concept of IVF or even immaculate

¹¹ Holtz, Jenni. (2024). Celebrating the Monstrous-Feminine: The Legacy of Alien. Fourteen East Magazine.

¹² Holtz, Jenni. (2024). Celebrating the Monstrous-Feminine: The Legacy of Alien. Fourteen East Magazine.

¹³ Brent Zacky. (2002). *The Alien Saga*. Brent Zacky.

¹⁴ Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (pp.86). Routledge.

conception if you're leaning more of a religious route, which is what I admit I've chosen to lean toward. Though it is medical in nature, Elizabeth injects herself with the activator and, without the help of any other creature, man or alien, creates new life. She barely manages to step away from the mirror before the process begins. It's painful and scary, but it's consensual, though Elizabeth didn't really know what she was getting herself into.

She is alone in this. Kane was attacked alone in the dark with nobody around, but his crew mates brought him back on board and did everything they could to help. not entirely lonesome even though nobody really knew what was happening. Elizabeth, in this shot, is squirming in pain on the cold, sterile tile floor, like a patient abandoned on the hospital floor. Both of these scenes inspire fear in the viewers; they are disturbing and raise uncomfortable emotions up to



Figure 9 The Substance (2024) by Coralie Fargeat, Elizabeth in pain on the bathroom floor.

the surface surrounding the concept of sex and conception.

“Together, Demi Moore and Margaret Qualley represent the duality of womanhood, with each vying for control while simultaneously being trapped in a desperate and destructive cycle of dependency.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Underwood, Erin. (2024). The Substance, Movie Review - This movie is wildly insane. Medium.

Violence in birth

Just mere moments after Sue takes the suspicious injection, she begins to contract and falls to the floor in agony.

When a pregnant woman senses movement in her belly, it is a miracle of life, you can even see it sometimes, the baby making itself known. For Elizabeth, the foreign presence in her body was akin to the chest burster in *Alien*.



Figure 10 The Substance (2024) by Coralie Fargeat, Sue looks down at Elizabeth's unconscious body.

Her back split right down the middle, and a second spine emerged from within, like a spider shedding its exo skeleton. When a woman gives her body for the sake of birthing a child into this world, it is selfless and brave, celebrated by those around her. What Elizabeth put herself through was not natural; the way the scene was filmed made the birth of Sue appear as though Elizabeth herself was the egg hatching. This inhumane treatment of her own body mirrors the way she's been used by the industry she belongs to. Fired for being too old, boring, and irrelevant. Her shell, her looks, and her entire being were carelessly tossed aside once the studio deemed her undesirable. Sue was shocked at first, but once she saw her new reflection, a younger, a better Elizabeth, she forgot all about the old version lying down on the cold, hard floor. The bright lights and white tile bathroom provide a sinister environment for Sue's birth, and it reads as more of a twisted experiment that unsettles the viewer. It turns the act of birth into a monstrous act of selfishness and greed. Greed for a second chance at life, a new body, and new possibilities. This birth scene literally depicts reproduction; Elizabeth was delivering

a carbon copy of a better new her. Sue is her, she's her daughter, and her mother too, as evident in a few scenes where they take care of each other. "Everything comes from you, and everything is you," as said by the supplier of the substance. This concept comes from that of reincarnation, the idea that everybody you encounter is you in another life.

This film explores this topic in depth, preaching the lesson of self-acceptance whilst also providing horrifying visuals specifically of the female body. This idea of Elizabeth and Sue being one singular life doesn't sit right with them; they consider their counterpart selfish and do things to spite them, coincidentally hurting themselves in the process. By the end of the film, they've merged, not like before in blood and spirit, but rather physically. On screen appears a nasty, bloody, and bloated Frankenstein-like creature. They were so fuelled by hatred for one another, and therefor themselves, that it became evident in their outward appearance. This greed and inability to follow rules for the sake of their partners and own wellbeing was the cause of this disturbing monster being born. It all comes down to the horror of the film being the strained relationship between the two women and the pain they've caused each other, physically and mentally. This worked exceptionally well with the reviews for the film being overwhelmingly positive, with the audience loving the innovative approach to telling a horror story.



Figure 11 Alien (1979) by Ridley Scott, mother.

Audiences in the late 70s were surprised with the emergence of a strong female lead in a horror, a genre saturated with powerful male leads. Alien was one of the first films to implement the idea that a strong female lead could fight off a vicious alien species while every male character

in the story dies in her stead. It was visually incredibly striking and had built an incredible atmosphere. Mother, the server on board the Nostromo, was an intelligent woman personified. Her constant presence was comforting to the crew, the server room was warm and comforting like a gentle womb, a safe space. Mother carried the crew of six people safely through space until they received that distress signal and went off-course. The film has received great scrutiny given its cultural presence and resonance for debates concerning gender, technology, and genetics. Of course it wasn't possible for an alien and man to have a baby, it wasn't about sexual compatibility, it was about impregnation, rape and the horror behind those two. Used as a weapon to assault the audience, Kane's submission under the power of the facehugger was shocking for the audience at the time due to the fact that aliens were quite an unimaginable concept even during the rise of the sci-fi genre. Alien used body horror to push through to the foreground of this thriving genre.

The iconic chest burster scene, hatching the alien inside a male character like an egg was innovative, it was brand new. He was screaming in pain on the table with a crowd observing him with caution, like a woman on a hospital bed in labour. The chestbuster ejected and murdered Kane in the process. This graphic depiction of the alien birth had a very clear but violent association to labour, tying in the themes of femininity and female anatomy as a horror in general.



Figure 12 Alien (1979) by Ridley Scott, alien eggs and unsuspecting Kane.

The Alien egg, from which the facehugger had jumped out, was designed with the visuals of a vagina in mind – it representing labias in an effort to disturb the male audience and it had to be dialled down by Giger for the sake of being able to screen the film in catholic countries, so instead of two flaps there was four in total. These harsh visuals became the main source of terrorising imagery in Alien. These scenes inspired discomfort in the viewers and critics alike, with its vivid imagery allowing for extensive analyses of the film more than 40 years after its initial release, consciously manipulating the concepts of the monstrous feminine in the character and prop designs.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the various representations of the female body in horror media, particularly focusing on how these portrayals both weaponise and symbolise femininity through the lens of the monstrous feminine. The films that I've analysed – *Carrie* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Alien* (1979), and *The Substance* (2024) - serve as examples of how horror reflects the anxieties surrounding women's autonomy, sex, and power dynamics. By discussing the transformation of the female body into that of a monster, we discover the underlying fears that shape the narratives of these stories.

Throughout this exploration, a repeating theme appears: the demonisation of the female body is not only a reflection of societal fears but also a critique of the very structures that created them. The complex relationships between female characters, whether they are positive or negative, reveal the internalised misogyny that is often present in patriarchal societies. These interactions between characters often end in repeating cycles of violence and misunderstanding, continuing the circle of conflict.

With these exciting new steps being taken in the horror genre and its ever-growing possibilities, I am very excited to witness the creativity that is bound to continue gracing the big screen. I predict in the near future a rise of playful and even more camp horror, with themes of self-acceptance and gore. This horror renaissance has been such an overwhelming era to witness, and I believe that with the rise of female directors like Coralie Fargeat and great examples like Ridley Scott, the future is very bright.

In conclusion, the horror genre has the potential and ability to dissect and reflect on the female identity in our cultures. By embracing the monstrous feminine, these films challenge the viewer to confront their own beliefs and values surrounding gender. Through their visceral imagery and evoking stories, these films compile some of the most compelling examples of how by reclaiming these narratives, we can begin to redefine monstrosity in film not as a source of terror but as a powerful assertion of agency.

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