

# The Occult, the Body and Gender: Representations of Gender in Horror

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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 fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (Animation). 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**

My thesis 'The Occult, the Body and Gender: Representations of Gender in Horror' analyses the representation of women in Horror Films as they navigate challenging and formative women's issues such as puberty, pregnancy, and rape across the genres of the occult, body horror and the rape/revenge film. I will analyse these films by looking at how they fit into and adapt the tropes found within their genre of film and how the films depict and discuss sensitive issues for women. I will examine the criticism given to such films by Creed and Clover during the 90s and look at how modern horror films stand to the criticisms given by them. I will also examine the films in relation to texts from modern feminist critics such as Pisters and Harrington. To conclude I will discuss how female directors are shifting the primary viewer of horror from the male to the female through their cathartic telling's of women's experiences. I will also examine how they are redefining the narrative of these genres to frame the stories and the female characters in a more positive and feminist light.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	PP. 8
Chapter 1: Occult Horror	PP. 9
Crazy Enough to be Female	PP. 9
Periods and Other Unholy Things	PP. 11
Chapter 2: Body Horror	PP. 15
Grotesque Feminine Power	PP. 16
Beauty with a Bite	PP. 18
Chapter 3: Rape/Revenge Film	PP. 22
The Penetrating Knife	PP. 22
Bitter-Sweet revenge	PP. 25
Conclusion: Female Directors	PP. 30
Filmography	PP. 35
Bibliography	PP. 36

## List of Figures

**Fig. 1.** Film Still, *Rosemary's Baby*, Dir. Roman Polanski, (Paramount Pictures, 1968), PP. 10

**Fig. 2.** Film Still, *Carrie*, Dir. Kimberly Peirce, (Sony Pictures, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Home Entertainment, 2013), PP. 13

**Fig. 3.** Film Still, *Carrie*, Dir. Kimberly Peirce, (Sony Pictures, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Home Entertainment, 2013), PP. 13

**Fig. 4.** Film Still, *Huesera: The Bone Woman*, Dir. Michelle Garza Cevera, (Cinépolis Distribución, 2022), PP. 14

**Fig. 5.** Film Still, *The Brood*, Dir. David Cronenberg, (New World Pictures, 1979), PP. 16

**Fig. 6.** Film Still, *The Brood*, Dir. David Cronenberg, (New World Pictures, 1979), PP. 17

**Fig. 7.** Film Still, *American Mary*, Dir. Jen & Sylvia Soska, (XLRator Media, 2012), PP. 18

**Fig. 8.** Film Still, *Teeth*, Dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein, (The Weinstein Company, FilmFlex, Roadside Attractions, 2007), PP. 19

**Fig. 9.** Film Still, *Raw*, Dir. Julia Ducournau, (Wild Bunch, 2016), PP. 20

**Fig. 10.** Film Still, *I Spit on Your Grave*, Dir. Meir Zarchi, (Deja Vu, 1978), PP. 23

**Fig. 11.** Film Still, *American Mary*, Dir. Jen & Sylvia Soska, (XLRator Media, 2012), PP. 25

**Fig. 12.** Film Still, *I Spit on Your Grave*, Dir. Meir Zarchi, (Deja Vu, 1978), PP. 26

**Fig. 13.** Film Still, *Teeth*, Dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein, (The Weinstein Company, FilmFlex, Roadside Attractions, 2007), PP. 27

**Fig. 14.** Film Still, *American Mary*, Dir. Jen & Sylvia Soska, (XLRator Media, 2012), PP. 28

**Fig. 15.** Film Still, *M.F.A.*, Dir. Natalia Leite, (MPI Media Group, 2017), PP. 29

**Fig. 16.** Film Still, *M.F.A.*, Dir. Natalia Leite, (MPI Media Group, 2017), PP. 29

**Fig. 17.** Film Still, *Carrie*, Dir. Kimberly Peirce, (Sony Pictures, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Home Entertainment, 2013), PP. 31

**Fig. 18.** Film Still, *Raw*, Dir. Julia Ducournau, (Wild Bunch, 2016), PP. 32

## Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to examine the representation of women in horror films through the genres of occult, body horror and rape/revenge films. Due to this I have selected films that I feel fit under the overarching theme of the horrors of the female coming of age journey, we meet many of these women at various stages of this such as puberty, starting college or pregnancy. For the purposes of this thesis I will examine the films *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Carrie* (1976), *Carrie* (2013), and *Huesera: The Bone Woman* (2022) under the category of occult films; *The Brood* (1979), *Teeth* (2007), *American Mary* (2012) and *Raw* (2016) under the category of body horror; and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Teeth* (2007), *American Mary* (2012) and *M.F.A.* (2017) under the category of rape/revenge films. I will discuss common tropes found in these genres and how they play into a modern feminist interpretation of horror film. I will do this by looking at these films through the categories of female hysteria and depictions of the female reproductive system in the occult section; abjection and monstrous female sexuality in the body horror section; and male violence and female revenge in the rape/revenge section. I will discuss how these films fall into, break out of and advance these tropes for the modern viewer through these categories with reference to camera and costume. I will look to the work of scholars such as Clover, Creed, Pisters and Harrington to aid my analysis of these films, to do this I will examine how these films stand next to the feminist critiques offered in the 90s and how those sentiments fit into modern criticisms. I will examine how this has affected the portrayal and treatment of women in horror films by linking back to horror films in general and where these films fit within the framework created by them. To conclude I will focus specifically on female directors in horror by discussing the influence they have had on the genre and its evolution over the last few years. I will discuss how female directors represent women in horror films and whether that differs from male director's depictions of women, touching on if feminist film critique has had any effect on this.



## Chapter 1: The Occult

To examine representations of women in occult horror we will analyse the films *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Carrie* (2013), and *Huesera: The Bone Woman* (2022). I will also briefly compare 1976's *Carrie* with the 2013 one. Firstly I will discuss the hysteria the female characters are often put through in occult horror before moving onto the abjection of the female reproductive cycle. Occult films typically push their female characters through hell and back solely to allow the man in the film to access his feminine side and mature. If the female is not forced into a position of hysteria it seems 'impossible' for the men to accept the unexplainable. The word hysteria is derivative from the Greek word for uterus, both commonly being depicted in occult horror. "*For a space to be created in which men can weep without being labelled feminine, women must be relocated to a space where they will be made to wail uncontrollably.*"<sup>1</sup> The male story in occult horror is that of growth but only through the woman's pain, and for all that she goes through she comes out the same.<sup>2</sup> The occult film also links the female reproductive system with that not of this world. The vagina is often seen as a portal which ties in with the route of the word vulva being valve, a type of gate.<sup>3</sup>

*Rosemary's Baby* follows Rosemary and Guy as they move into a new apartment that has rumours of witches. Guy joins the coven and helps them give birth to Satan's child through the unaware Rosemary. We follow her as she slowly uncovers the truth about her neighbours, her husband, and her baby. *Carrie* is a teen so sheltered by her religious mother that she knows nothing of periods. After her first period she gains telekinetic powers. Everyone in her life polices and humiliates her, until she takes revenge on them all with her telekinesis. *Huesera: The Bone Woman* tells the story of Valeria and Raul who are trying for a baby. When they get the good news Valeria begins experiencing paranormal delusions which Raul wipes off as pregnancy induced hysteria. After the baby is born, she still experiences them and goes to the local mediums for help exorcizing the trouble.

### Crazy Enough to be Female

Rosemary starts the movie as society's image of the ideal mother until she is impregnated by the devil. This is an example of the womb being linked with hell, which is a hallmark of horror because of the male fear of sexual difference<sup>4</sup> with the woman and her ability to reproduce.<sup>5</sup> She becomes paranoid of her neighbours being witches and begins to lash out at the oppressive restrictions those

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<sup>1</sup> Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*. Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 98-103.

<sup>3</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 76-80.

<sup>5</sup> Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Routledge, 1993, pp. 45-46.

who surround her have placed on her, like not reading, not taking medicine, or staying quiet for the benefit of men in her environment.<sup>6</sup> But when she breaks free and makes her own choices she is brought back to the men who oppress her by Dr. Hill who views her as hysteric and in need of a man's help. He might feel he is doing what's best for her but really, he is forcing the societal image of the mother on her. Rosemary goes through the door linking her and the Castevet's apartments, another opening to hell, to find out she gave birth to Satan's child.



*Figure 1 Still from Rosemary's Baby*

In the end rosemary once again conforms to the role society has given to her as a mother, ignoring her own religious beliefs to uphold those of society.<sup>7</sup> The ending seemed to undermine the growth that rosemary experienced through the middle of the movie by bringing her back to the position she was in at the start of the film while Guy has changed as a character. This plays in with the trope of pushing women to hysteria for the sake of male advances so commonly found in occult horror.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Grant, Barry Keith. *The Dread of Difference*. University of Texas Press, 2016, pp. 450.

<sup>7</sup> Grant. *ibid.*, pp. 451-454.

<sup>8</sup> Clover. *op cit.*, pp. 97-103.

Throughout Valeria's pregnancy she is haunted by a contorting human looking monster which represents how she is breaking herself to fit what society expects of her. Her boyfriend Raul never experiences any of these supernatural visions and chalks it up to pregnancy induced hysteria. This is a view held by many of her family and friends who uphold the social standard of heteronormativity and motherhood.<sup>9</sup> The only people who can sense the supernatural are those who reject the norm in favour of spirituality or queer ideals. After her baby is born Valeria is possessed by this entity and leaves her child in the fridge. This can be seen as her embodying the bad mother stereotype her family label her with. She gets help from the other outsider women and cleanses herself of this being and the societal pressures place on her. This female led exorcism opposes the traditional trope of the male priest swooping in and solving the supernatural issues, instead telling the viewer of the power women have, especially in a group. *Huesera: The Bone Woman* also breaks occult norms as Raul's belief in science never waivers<sup>10</sup>, even wishing to commit Valeria to hospital instead of help with the issues she's facing. This could be part of her motivation to abandon the role of straight mother she is playing in favour of a community that accepts and helps her as she is. Valeria being pushed to hysteria serves a narrative function in this film as it helps her grow as a character and make choices that are best for her and not others. Raul never embracing the supernatural makes the film about the horrors of pregnancy and accepting who you are as a person, as opposed to a man's journey to understanding. I believe this to be a refreshing feminist telling of the occult film.

## Periods and Other Unholy Things

Rosemary's impregnation takes place in a fever dream like sequence that leaves the viewer questioning whether rosemary was hallucinating it or not. Rosemary is enterable due to her vagina which acts as a gateway for the devil.<sup>11</sup> She has symbols painted on her in red symbolising blood which draws connotations between summoning circles, satanic witchcraft, and menstruation. She sees the Pope in her delirium letting the viewer know of the hope she places in religion but even that is not powerful enough to protect her from the devil. Rosemary's body is used by the coven as a portal for hell to come to earth. The coven members as midwives harks back to ancient beliefs of midwives stealing babies to give to Satan, which in a way is what happens.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately Rosemary is the one the film places the burden of original sin on to despite her being the most religious of the characters. The film blames her for wanting the apartment, friendship with her neighbours and bringing the devil's child to earth instead of Guy who was blinded by greed and freely gave up Rosemary and their child to Satan.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 451-454.

<sup>10</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 97-103.

<sup>11</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 76-80.

<sup>12</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 445-446, 450-451.

<sup>13</sup> Harrington, Erin. *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge, 2018, pp. 105-106.

Carrie unlocks her telekinetic powers simultaneously with her first period, she is ripped from her innocence and instantly categorised as monstrous, signified by the flickering light bulb.<sup>14</sup> Carrie's classmate's chants of "*plug it up*" call to the idea of supernatural forces being able to enter through the vagina, they can be taken as them telling Carrie to hide her powers from the fearful eyes of men. But unlike De Palma, Peirce doesn't portray this power as an uncontrollable force of nature but as a controlled power that can be improved with knowledge. Peirce tells of how with knowledge the female sex organs become demystified and are no longer the feminine monstrosity they are so often portrayed as in film.<sup>15</sup> "*Carrie's feminine powers are not just wild, uncontrollable forces of nature that become unleashed under great (social) pressure, but can be learned and practised.*"<sup>16</sup> This control is evident during the prom massacre scene where Carrie targets specific students who were her tormenters even going so far as saving her gym teacher<sup>17</sup> as opposed to De Palma's massacre of all in attendance. Carrie's mother perpetuates the relationship between blood and sin. Carrie's mother equates women with original sin, it is a burden passed down from mother to daughter an idea that plays into the generative power of the mother.<sup>18</sup> She sees Carrie as the living embodiment of her own sin and takes this out on Carrie by oppressing her power and her sexuality. In Peirce's film she overcomes her mother's oppression through knowledge<sup>19</sup> and is able to break free from her, ruling the household for a while. Before returning to her religious beliefs in favour of the simpler life they offered her. Her mother now blinded by Carrie's apparent monstrous nature tries to rid her sin from the world, but instead Carrie crucifies her for her sins. Sue tries to rescue her (Fig. 2) but Carrie recognising her own sins chooses to die in her mother's embrace as opposed to De Palma's Carrie who ran to their prayer closet in hope of salvation from Christ. Peirce's ending represents a better world for women, one of choice, Carrie had the ability to escape but chose death while De Palma's Carrie could only hope for a miracle for her and her mother. Peirce's new ending of Carrie's hand coming out of Sue's womb (Fig. 3) ties Carrie's powers back to the relationship between menstruation, the womb and the supernatural<sup>20</sup> and the generative curse of childbearing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 333-334.

<sup>15</sup> Pisters, Patricia. *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Pisters, New Blood. *ibid.*, pp. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Paszkiewicz, Katarzyna. "When the Woman Directs (a Horror Film)." *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*. Edited by Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Pisters, New Blood. op cit., pp. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 77-78.

<sup>21</sup> Pisters, Patricia. "Carrie's Sisters: New Blood in Contemporary Female Horror Cinema". *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn and Audrey Yue. Routledge, 2020, pp. 123.



*Figure 2 Still from Carrie (2013)*



*Figure 3 Still from Carrie (2013)*

Valeria lives in a community with a strong religious belief that has a tight grip on the expectations of women. Throughout the film we see Valeria struggle to conform to the ideals society puts on her. She is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and was a bit of a rebel in her youth but chose to go to college and live the life expected of her for her family's sake. It's clear she still desires the life she had before as throughout the film she goes to her ex-girlfriend, Octavia. At the start of the

film, it seems she has truly adapted to the life expected of her as she seems so excited about having a baby but as the film goes on her mask slips and her anxieties are realised in the form of a haunting. When Valeria goes to cleanse herself of the haunting, she turns to the spiritual women of her area for help turning her back on the religion that so oppresses her. It is revealed that Valeria was the woman on fire that the statue of Mary faded into during the opening (Fig.3), this symbolises Valeria's severance with the church and its repression of her identity. In *Rosemary's Baby* "Maternal 'instinct' triumphs; ambivalence is quashed...Even in the hands of the devil, the dominant (Christian) ideology of mothering obtains."<sup>22</sup> But *Huesera* challenges this by having Valeria give up the role of motherhood and embrace her life with Octavia. This opposes the common ending of such stories where the mother conforms to the wishes of society and takes up her role as mother.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 4 Still from *Huesera: The Bone Woman*

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<sup>22</sup> Waldman, Diane. *Horror and Domesticity*, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1981, pp. 314-315.

<sup>23</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 451-454.

## Chapter 2: Body Horror

In this chapter we will dissect the representation of women in body horror to do this we will look at *The Brood* (1979), *Teeth* (2007), *American Mary* (2012) and *Raw* (2016). In order to discuss body horror, we will first look at how abjection is used to portray the female body as monstrous, in the second section we'll examine the demonification of female sexuality through body horror. Body horror often uses abjection to invoke fear in the viewer. Abjection is understood as expelling part of yourself to where it borders between two opposing entities, as described by Kristeva, "*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.*"<sup>24</sup> The abject often deals with things that are familiar in ways that are unfamiliar to us, the body, blood, pregnancy. This coupled with cinematic devices allows us to easily imagine how it would feel to have these horrors done to us making it all the more real. Male castration anxiety and fear of the 'unknown' female reproductive organs informs body horror too, it manifests itself in the form of monstrous female sexuality. This can be seen in the form of alien wombs, gnashing teeth, the vampire, or vagina dentata.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Brood* we are introduced to Nola who is undergoing therapy at Dr. Raglans Somafree institute of psychoplasmics. He uses psychoplasmics to help his patients expel their issues by manifesting them as sores and blisters on their bodies. Nola's rage manifests itself in the form of an external womb that gives birth to essentially overgrown fetuses known as the brood. They are mindless creatures swayed by Nola's emotions and extract revenge on all those who Nola bears anger for. *Teeth* follows Dawn, an abstinence advocate, as she falls for Tobey and struggles to keep her thoughts pure. The two end up alone together and Tobey rapes her which leaves her to discover she is a living version of the vagina dentata myth when she castrates Tobey accidentally. The story follows her as she struggles with her morals and a vile patriarchal society, which leads her to use her 'teeth' as a source of power. *American Mary* brings us Mary a medical student who is struggling financially. She finds herself doing back-alley body modifications to pay her way through college. Her professors invite her to a party where she is drugged and raped by one of her professors which causes her to drop out of medical school. She continues doing increasingly bizarre body modifications for her clients while honing her skills on her professor on the side as an act of revenge. *Raw* tells of Justine's initiation week at veterinarian college. She is a vegetarian but is forced to eat a raw rabbit's kidney as part of initiation. This unlocks a desire for flesh in Justine and we follow her transformation into a cannibal.

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<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Pisters, New Blood. op cit., pp. 96-100.

## Grotesque Feminine Power

*The Brood* brings us the abject horror of Nola's tumorous womb which in the true sense of the abject sits on the outside of her body (Fig. 5). Nola's womb and the brood it births is the physical manifestation of her rage. This anger is directed at those who have wronged her but ultimately boils down to Franks disgust at her maternal functions. In one scene she bites open the womb and releases a foetus covered in blood and placenta from within, she licks off the blood much in the way a cow would its calf linking Nola with the perceived uncleanness of the animal kingdom.



Figure 5 Still from *The Brood*

This reminds the viewer, particularly the male one of his own connections to nature and his birth from his mother which disgusts him, similarly to Frank. Pregnancy opens a wound of sorts in the skin<sup>26</sup> which symbolises infection and toxicity<sup>27</sup> implying to the viewer that the monstrous comes from within. The womb being a manifestation of Nola's anger tells of the disease like generative rage passed down from her mother. This idea is further cemented by the ending of the film when we can see small sac like growths forming on Candy's arm (Fig. 6) implying Frank has failed to save her as the rage has still been passed down to her. Nola's ability to give birth parthenogenically threatens the necessity of men which could be why Cronenberg depicts a female led family as inherently dysfunctional.<sup>28</sup> Because of this parthenogenic birth Nola's destructive power is

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<sup>26</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott-Smith, Darren. *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*. I.B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016, pp. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 264.



inherited by the brood, who attack all who enrage Nola, this implies a woman's rage is inherently destructive. Something that must be stopped in order for men to hold their place in society. The brood can be seen as Nola's rage manifesting in the form of maternal desire, hence implying that maternal desire is the origin of monstrosity, furthering the male fear of women's ability to reproduce.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 6 Still from *The Brood*

*American Mary* concerns itself with the gory horror of being chopped up and sewn back together to a point you may no longer be recognised as human. The film explores two sides to this coin, that of those wishing to present their inhuman side to the world and those who are forced into it. Her first Patient, Ruby, wishes to turn herself into a doll so she can no longer be sexualised by removing all her sexual organs and sealing access to them. Through this act Ruby aims to take control of how the male gaze can view her by denying it the lustful stare it often takes.<sup>30</sup> “*Ruby creates an unnatural body for herself to hide from the less-controlled female body she is so afraid of.*”<sup>31</sup> Later in the film when her husband finds out he is enraged by this, murdering Ruby, Beatress, and Mary for their parts in this ‘castration’ of his gaze. For the female viewer, this branch of body horror in *American Mary* can be quite freeing as it shows a world where women are free to exist as they wish. For the misogynistic viewer though this freedom is horrifying as it removes their position of male authority, when this is threatened it can cause frightening results for women like those carried out by Ruby’s husband. On the flip side *American Mary* also tackles the horror in the unconsenting victims of Mary’s body modification. She performs unconsensual body

<sup>29</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>30</sup> Corriveau, Arielle. “A Spectacle of Modified Bodies,” *Monstrum 2*, Montréal Monstrum Society, 2019, pp. 167-179.

<sup>31</sup> Corriveau. *ibid.*, PP. 175.

modifications on her professor as an act of revenge for raping her. The first procedure she carries out on him is splitting his tongue (Fig. 7) which can be seen as an act of silencing him much like rape victims would be.



Figure 7 Still from American Mary

She performs a series of horrifying body modifications on him leaving him as nothing more than a hanging torso with an unspeaking head, Mary remarks how some of her work was a bit sloppy and infected. She takes pictures of him like this submitting him to her gaze. Looking at it from a victim's perspective this can be telling of the mental and physical scars that victims of abuse and sexual violence bear, and how they are something they will always carry with them, with no reset button. But looking at how villainous the professor was this reading doesn't apply to him, in this case the infection symbolises his monstrous nature seeping out and becoming visible on the outside.<sup>32</sup>

### **Beauty with a Bite**

*Teeth* deals with Dawn's sexual awakening but approaches the subject from the angle of repression and anger rather than that of desire. We are introduced to Dawn as a member of her local evangelical church where she is giving its younger members a lecture on abstinence. Dawn at this point in time is very frightened of and is against sex, she also has no interest in it. This speaks of the slut shaming of young women's bodies which leads to their sexual repression which is perpetrated by many religious schools. When she meets Tobey the idea of sex seems more enticing, but she only imagines it during consummation on their wedding night telling us she is still repressed in a sexual sense by her religion. Her fantasies are cut short by gnashing monstrous teeth that snap her into reality and remind her of the perceived danger of sex. The monstrous teeth are a less literal representation of her vagina dentata. After this she whispers a mantra of purity to

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<sup>32</sup> Elliott-Smith. op cit., pp.65.

herself.<sup>33</sup> Dawn's first sexual experience is being raped by Tobey, it is also her first remembered encounter with her monstrous sexuality that leads to Tobey's castration. Dawn is portrayed as a victim of sex, linking victimhood and shame with female sexuality is something very common in film this could be an attempt at trying to enforce the woman as submissive and without power in society.<sup>34</sup> She is riddled with anxiety, religious fear, and mistrust after the occasion. This leads her down a path of sexual discovery that is coupled with understanding and harnessing the power of her monstrous genitalia.

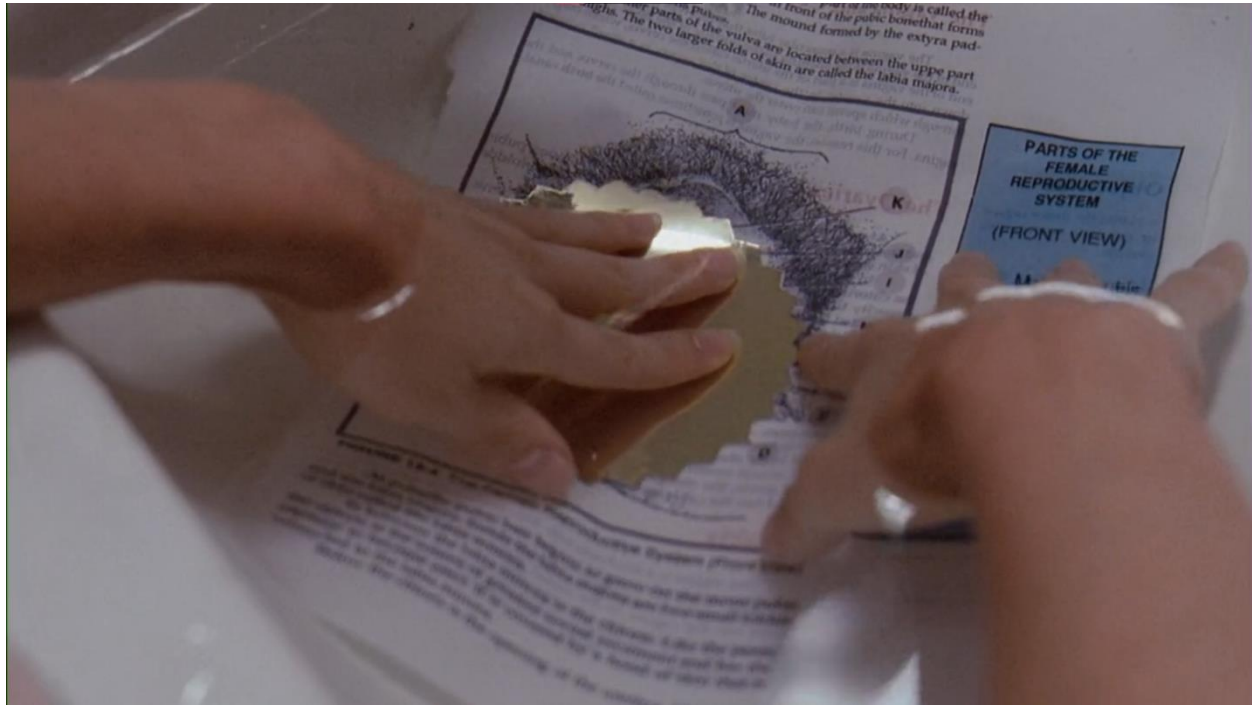


Figure 8 Still from *Teeth*

She tries to understand what is wrong with her vagina and how it could have happened, starting with the textbook her school covered in the name of modesty. She removes the sticker in a motion that can be seen as her caressing the page<sup>35</sup> (Fig.8). She struggles with the knowledge that something monstrous is growing inside her and what that means for her identity.<sup>36</sup> The more she learns about her vagina and her monstrous nature, the more horrible men swarm to her like sharks to the scent of blood. She finds her teeth can be tamed by consensual sex and she is satisfied by this solution till that is ripped from her when she finds Ryan was just using her too. This scene signifies a shift in how Dawn views her teeth no longer as a curse to lament over but as a powerful defence mechanism against the men who pose a threat to her. Dawn has her own moment of sexual power as she weaponizes her perceived innocence against Brad who has been creepy to her her whole life by luring him with sex only to castrate him. This is shown with a dramatic shot of his

<sup>33</sup> Harrington, Erin. *Gynaehorror: Women, Theory and Horror Film*. University of Canterbury, 2014, pp. 89-95.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, Ryan. "Demon(ized) women: Female punishment in the 'pink film' and J-Horror", *Asian Cinema*, Vol. 23, no. 2, pg 199-216.

<sup>35</sup> Harrington, 2018. op cit., pp. 70-71.

<sup>36</sup> Pisters, New Blood. op cit., pp. 194-196.

castrated penis falling from between her legs only to be eaten by Brads own dog, Mother. This plays in with the male fear of castration which returns them to the state of the mother which they so fear.<sup>37</sup> Despite this Dawn has not gained sexual empowerment, she just has an effective defence mechanism against the misogynistic world she lives in.<sup>38</sup>

In *Raw* the body horror is seen through Justine's journey to cannibalism which is paralleled by her sexual awakening. There are uncomfortable shots of animals being put down for surgery which remind us of our butchering of animals for consumption, this is unsettling for both Justine as a vegetarian and us as the audience, making us conscious of the horror we inflict on animals to satiate our hunger<sup>39</sup>, which can help us relate more to Justine's desires. This ties into Justine's craving for flesh in both a cannibalistic and sexual sense. When exploring body horror in *Raw* Ducournau uses uncomfortably close shots of Justine's body as she experiences growing into a cannibal and a woman. Like the shots of her physical manifestation of an itch for flesh, the camera focuses on her raw and blistered skin as she continues to scratch the rash (Fig. 9) that represents the hunger that consumes her.



Figure 9 Still from *Raw*

The itch is the first external hint to her monstrous nature growing underneath.<sup>40</sup> Another such scene is when her sister Alexia decides to give Justine a Brazilian, and we see close ups of Justine's skin and hair entangled in the wax that won't let go as they struggle to pry it from her skin, threatening to pull her flesh from her inner thigh. These close ups make it easy for us to identify with the uncomfortable pain Justine is in. Ducournau doesn't give you space to look away though you might beg for relief as you almost feel yourself experiencing the same pain. It becomes even worse when her sister goes to get scissors to remove it. The idea of genital mutilation is brought to the forefront

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<sup>37</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 48.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly, Ryan. "Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous-Feminine in *Teeth* (2007)." *Women's Studies in Communication*, V39, no. 1, Routledge, 2016, pp. 86-106.

<sup>39</sup> Pisters, New Blood. op cit., pp. 106-107.

<sup>40</sup> Pisters, New Blood. *ibid.*, pp. 194-196.

of the mind by this and the fear of losing one's sexual identity grips as the scissors draw near with all the horrible possibility's that spring to mind. During this altercation Alexia loses her finger and falls unconscious, this is when Justine's cannibalistic tendency's first fully take over as she is first tempted to lick Alexia's finger, then nibble it before swallowing the whole thing. She tests the waters before fully committing to the act, much as one would when exploring a new relationship. The way Ducournau depicts Justine's desire is very real and human which makes it easier for us to identify this feeling in ourselves making it all the more horrifying.<sup>41</sup> *"Cannibalism is part of humanity. Some tribes do it ritually and have no shame doing it. You have this feeling when you bite someone's arm for fun, that you want to go a bit further, but you don't because you have a moral canvas [sic]. This thing is in us, we just don't want to see it. So I thought, since my characters always feel like monsters deep inside, I want the audience to feel like a monster as well, and to understand what she's doing. Because we are all monsters, really."*<sup>42</sup> A lot of horror focuses on victimhood, helplessness, and self-doubt when it explores female sexuality<sup>43</sup> but in *Raw* Justine's experience with sex is depicted as animalistic and powerful. The power can be seen in her control of the situation with her roommate and the animalistic nature in its intensity, her biting her arm satiating her desire and hunger, her lust for flesh. This upsets the misogynistic wish for submissive women<sup>44</sup>, which helps empower young women to embrace their sexuality instead of fear it.

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<sup>41</sup> Pisters, *New Blood*. *ibid.*, pp. 106-108.

<sup>42</sup> Godfrey, Alex. *Raw Director Julia Ducournau: 'Cannibalism is part of humanity'*. *The Guardian*, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, Lou. *Raw director Julia Ducournau: 'I'm fed up with the way women's sexuality is portrayed on screen'*. *British Film Institute News*, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor. *op cit.*, pp.199-216.

### Chapter 3: Rape/Revenge

We will analyse the films *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Teeth* (2007), *American Mary* (2012) and *M.F.A.* (2017) in our look at rape/revenge films. We will first examine the violence committed by men against women and then later the revenge the women take against these men. In order to examine the films, we will look at their portrayal of women as victim, as hero and how the camera treats them. The rape/revenge film as indicative of the title, consists of our victim/hero experiencing some form of rape at the start and in the later portion of the film them becoming some sort of hero/villain as they take revenge on the offenders of their rape. The placement of the rape varies from era to era ranging from taking up the entire first half of the film to being something mentioned at the start as a motive for kicking the film off. Often the camera focuses on the women's reactions to the rape than the act itself, this is commonplace in most rape/revenge films<sup>45</sup>, especially from the post classical era to the modern day. Many rape/revenge films don't end with a true victory for the woman as the world around them never changes so it will continue to happen in their world. Despite this the woman will not be punished for how she saw fit to take revenge.

In *I Spit on Your Grave* Jennifer rents a house in the countryside to write a novel. But her peace is short lived as four local men rape her on three consecutive occasions before attempting to kill her. She then exacts revenge on all four of them in different ways. *Teeth* is about Dawn who believes in abstinence being raped by the first guy she likes, and *American Mary* is about Mary a medical student raped by her professor. For a more detailed description of these two films refer to the previous chapter. *M.F.A.* brings us Noelle an art student in her final year. She is raped by her classmate who she then accidentally kills. This inspires vengeance in her, and she targets other known rapists in the area. It also inspires her art practice helping her grow creatively.

#### The Penetrating Knife

I find it interesting to note that many scholars have let Mathew off of his crimes by speaking of only three rapists in there writings on *I Spit on Your Grave*,<sup>46</sup> this is wrong as even if he did not climax he still penetrated and violated her, he also actively helped the others gain sexual gratification from Jennifer. The film contains almost thirty minutes of violent rapes scenes which are quite disturbing. Clover argues that despite this the film is still relatively feminist which is a statement I don't agree with. She argues that the violence mostly focuses on Jennifer's hurt,<sup>47</sup> claiming the rapes are "*almost sexless acts of cruelty that the men seem to commit more for*

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<sup>45</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 114-124, 137-154.

<sup>46</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 122.

<sup>47</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 114-116.

*each other's reaction than their own physical pleasure.*"<sup>48</sup> While I agree that it does focus on her pain, I feel, despite what Clover claims it paid too much attention to the satisfaction the four men derived from their heinous acts. While the acts of rape clearly displayed Jennifer's struggle against these men and her rape could not really be seen as sexy, it is portrayed as humiliating and degrading which is an aspect the men clearly derived enjoyment from.



Figure 10 Still from *I Spit on Your Grave*

They read aloud the story Jennifer has been writing poking fun at it and mocking her all while she lies beaten, almost dead, on the ground (Fig. 10). I am inclined to agree with Creed's observations of the representations of male and female violence, being violence committed by men is degrading and drawn out while that performed by women is seen as desirable and almost pleasurable. The degradation of women can further be seen during the final rape when one of the men tells Jennifer he likes his women "*in total submission*" which as Creed says, "*could mean only one thing: he likes his women dead or nearly dead.*"<sup>49</sup>

Nearly all of Dawn's sexual encounters are a rape of some form, her first is with Tobey who after gaining Dawn's trust betrays it by raping her. He is a little physically violent like slapping her in the face, but his real malice is in his words, he tries to guilt her into it by saying things like, "*I haven't jerked off since Easter.*" This is common among the rapes Dawn experiences; she is less so physically assaulted as a display of male strength and manliness, as she is manipulated into feeling safe before being trapped by the men's lust for her. This lack of physical violence against Dawn contrasts greatly with that shown in *I Spit on Your Grave*. There is also little gore or extreme

<sup>48</sup> Clover. *ibid.*, pp. 118.

<sup>49</sup> Creed. *op cit.*, pp. 130-131.

violence shown as Lichtenstein opts to show reactions over violence.<sup>50</sup> This is something I believe can be attributed to second wave feminism. The men in *Teeth* have a calculated nature to their friendliness, all with a means of getting sexual access to Dawn. I find this almost more horrifying than the erratic physical violence committed against women as it leaves one questioning whether you can truly trust any male in Dawn's universe.<sup>51</sup> Dawn is also made a victim of the religious beliefs her church places on her, they promised to protect her from the 'evils' of sex but ultimately just lead her to be hurt by misinformation.<sup>52</sup>

The B plot of *American Mary* is a rape revenge film, the rape occurs early enough into the movie but more toward the end of the first third. The camera treats the rape with humanity as it focuses more on Mary's pained face and struggle rather than the actual rape or the rapist's enjoyment. This allows the viewer to empathise more with the victim. The camera never films the actual rape only the facial expressions so there is no eroticism to the act. We see the rape mostly from the POV of the camera her professor uses, but the film distances itself from being the rapist's POV making the camera a representation of the gaze in film.<sup>53</sup> When the rape is filmed from the room as opposed to the camera a bit of blur is used which helps portray the disconnect between Mary and the world in this moment (Fig. 11), this almost directly parallels Fig.7 in terms of composition and positions of power. The rape is very brief, and Mary is not degraded by her professor as Jennifer is. Rape is not the only form of violence against women in *American Mary*, Mary is murdered by Ruby's husband. He feels castrated by Mary for removing his wife's sexual organs which spurs him into a murderous rampage as an act of 'revenge.' He brutalises three women in his destructive rage all because he feels ownership of his wife's appearance. We don't see him committing most of his violence only the aftermath which means his violent nature isn't glorified or sexualised as it often is in slasher films. He can also be seen as a representation of the invisible threat of misogyny in everyday life and how despite Mary's growth she still can't escape it.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Harrington, 2018. op cit., pp. 72.

<sup>51</sup> Kelly. op cit., pp. 86-106.

<sup>52</sup> Harrington, 2018. op cit., pp. 69-71.

<sup>53</sup> Vena, Dan. *Unfinished Business: The New Wave of Women's Horror Cinema*. Queen's University, 2018, pp. 95-98.

<sup>54</sup> Vena. *ibid.*, pp. 113-115.





Figure 11 Still from American Mary

In *M.F.A.* the rape itself is very brief and appears within the first few minutes of the film but rape still happens throughout the film such as the video of Lindsey's rape that Noelle watches before deciding to extract revenge on those men too. The camera treats the rape of Noelle with humanity as it focuses on her pained face and struggle as opposed to the sexual gratification Luke is deriving from the act. We still see how violent Luke is to Noelle and how he takes advantage of her through physical power and alcohol, all of this comes together to help us empathise with her. Luke has a complete lack of empathy and is unable to see the wrong in his actions, he refuses to apologise and thinks Noelle would still have interest in sexual relations with him. This makes it near impossible for an audience member to relate to him. Lindsey's rape is distressing to watch as it's a gang bang filmed at a frat party, but despite this it doesn't feel sexualised as it focuses on Lindsey's fear and distress calling our attention to the horrific actions of the men. The film highlights the effect this has had on Lindsey as when we meet her, we can tell she has retreated into herself and tries her best to blend into the background. The men in the video are violent but the film doesn't give you a chance to identify with them as it forces you to watch through the phone's camera.<sup>55</sup>

### **Bitter-Sweet Revenge**

As Creed pointed out Jennifer's revenge is filmed in a much more erotic light than that of her rape and humiliation, the male deaths have an aura of masochistic pleasure surrounding them. This links love with death, which is something often seen in the animal kingdom, as Horney said, "*even the death – after mating, which occurs frequently in male animals? Are love and death more closely bound up with one another for the male than the female, in whom sexual union potentially produces*

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<sup>55</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 118.

*a new life? Does man feel, side by side with his desire to conquer, a secret longing for extinction in the act of reunion with the woman (mother)?*"<sup>56</sup> This is clearly seen in both the erotic filming of the men's death and Jennifer's use of sex appeal in luring the men to their deaths (Fig. 12). Jennifer murders two of them at the point of climax, one by castration linking male pleasure with masochistic pain.<sup>57</sup> This all serves the purpose of representing the woman as monstrous due to her castrating ability. The depicting of women as equally as dangerous and scary as men also serves to rid men of any guilt they may have had for her degradation as she is now seen as able to stand up for herself and be just as violent.<sup>58</sup> Despite Jennifer committing murder she still gets away with no punishment, I find this interesting as in the later films the women are punished for their acts of revenge. I wonder if the male ability to escape the law due to their position in society is something that informed this decision, or maybe it's an admission of male guilt at their escape from justice in many rape incidents.



Figure 12 Still from *I Spit on Your Grave*

The first half of Dawn's revenge is involuntary, it's established that her vagina dentata have grown in her body her whole life. They naturally castrated men as a defence mechanism when she feels threatened by them. But the last two are more purposeful, Dawn has experienced the horrors of the men who have demanded their sexual gratification from her and takes matters into her own hands. She initiates sex with her stepbrother as revenge for constantly perverting on her and for causing her mother's death. The last scene of the movie shows her smirking at the camera (Fig. 13) aware of and embracing her castrating vagina. Dawn finds power in the vagina she once feared as a response to the horrifying world she lives in, it's upsetting as there is no real solution to her

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<sup>56</sup> Horney, Karen. *Feminine Psychology*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1967, pp. 138-139.

<sup>57</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 128-130.

<sup>58</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 143-144.

predicament only a dangerous reaction.<sup>59</sup> Although her embracing her vagina dentata can be seen as growth it doesn't seem like something she would naturally gravitate to if it wasn't for the world she lives in. While the movie as a whole critiqued patriarchal ideals the ending reinforces the misogynistic trope of the fear inducing castrating vagina found in horror film.<sup>60</sup> This is because there is no way for dawn to free herself from the predatory males who surround her, the ending implies she will be stuck in this cycle with no end in sight.



Figure 13 Still from *Teeth*

In *American Mary* the revenge takes two forms, that of personal growth and that of cold hard revenge. Mary finds a practice she is happy doing with her med school skills that she can no longer put to use after dropping out of college due to her professor raping her. She was initially grossed out by the body mod community that she fell into but as the movie goes on, she grows more comfortable with it even going so far as to ridicule and kick out someone who came to her to try getting a piercing. We also see growth in her skills as the movie goes on, we see her getting bigger clients like the body mod famous twins, this is also evident from when she looks back at the professor and the work she did on him, she mentions how she thinks the work was a bit sloppy and how things could have been done better. Mary's brutal revenge is having Billy's men capture her professor for her to practice body modification on almost like a test dummy, she is reducing him to below human in her eyes, someone without any of their own feelings just like he did to her. She also photographs him while she scrutinises her work, by doing this she is forcing him to preform for her camera and to submit to her gaze, just as he had done to her.<sup>61</sup> Violence committed by women is portrayed as precise and calculated which is reflected in Mary's choice of using surgery

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<sup>59</sup> Kelly. op cit., pp. 86-106.

<sup>60</sup> Harrington, 2018. op cit., pp. 72-75.

<sup>61</sup> Vena. op cit., pp. 108.

as her form of revenge. This opposes the messy destructive violence men like Ruby's husband commit in the film. Mary is killed by him which is a punishment she receives for the justified violence and pain she brought on others as revenge. This shows women recognise that despite the wish to kill rapists that is just a fantasy and in reality, you can't take the law into your own hands as crime still needs to go punished no matter how justified it is. Mary tries to escape this fate by performing surgery on herself as she dies (Fig. 14) but ultimately, she is unable to escape the violent nature of the men who surround her.<sup>62</sup>



Figure 14 Still from American Mary

Noelle's revenge is both violent and peaceful. Noelle's first act of revenge is an accident, when she goes to confront her rapist about what he did to her she accidentally shoves him over a banister killing him which sparks a taste for revenge in her. Her revenge is messier and more brutal than that of Mary's, often with more physical violence and almost bordering on committing the same act of rape back on the men. As Noelle's methods of revenge get messier (Fig. 16) and more 'manly' she is riskier and winds up getting caught. The peaceful side of her revenge is seen in her art practice. This duality in terms of growth and motivation gives life and agency to Noelle's character and her story, she doesn't just act out because of what happens to her but actively tries to improve her life unlike Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave*. She uses her experience of rape to transform her once criticised artworks in to work that gains her the position of top of her class (Fig. 15) once held by her rapist. This is her triumphing over what once held her down. She is asked to give her classes graduation speech<sup>63</sup> which is seen as a victory for her, but it is short lived as she is arrested directly after for her crimes. This tells of how women are afraid to take action against their rapists as if they do, they will get blamed for it just like Noelle is in the end.

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<sup>62</sup> Vena. *ibid.*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>63</sup> Vena. *ibid.*, pp. 168-169.



*Figure 15 Still from M.F.A.*



*Figure 16 Still from M.F.A.*

## Conclusion: Female Directors

To conclude I would like to draw attention to the work female directors are doing towards a better representation of women in horror films. This tends to stem from their grounded, realistic, and intriguing female characters, which manifests itself in narratives of women gaining control of their lives, confidence in themselves and cathartic outlets for their rage. These relatable women allow the female viewer to vicariously express their fear, rage, and dissatisfaction with the misogynistic world they live in through these characters. All of this has helped female directors shift the primary viewer of horror from the male audience to the female audience, just as Peirce has done by moving *Carrie's* story from the world of man to that of the woman.

Female directors are redefining the occult film, they are breaking genre conventions set by male directors of the past and reimagining them in a progressive and feminist light. These female directors are refocusing the primary viewer from that of male to female, by writing realistic and relatable female characters.<sup>64</sup> Such as Valeria who struggles with her queer identity in a world that demonises anything but heterosexuality, this is a struggle many young people face allowing us to empathise with her more easily. Peirce's choice to focus her retelling of *Carrie* on the relationship with her mother as opposed to that of castration anxiety done by De Palma allows the female viewer to connect with the film better. Peirce explores Carrie and her mother's relationship as she attempts to become an individual and the trial and tribulations that come with it,<sup>65</sup> which is a relatable story for most young women as the relationship with their mother tends to be a complicated one similar to that explored in *Carrie*.

Women directors are breathing life and purpose into female characters in the occult film. They are less of a means for male transformation and in fact go through their own instead. For example in Peirce's *Carrie*, Carrie is given knowledge which offers her control over her powers (Fig. 17) and the ability to choose at the end of the film. Carrie still comes full circle like the traditional occult female, but this isn't her only option like it is in De Palma's but one she chooses out of the guilt she feels at the destruction she caused. Peirce promotes the power of knowledge in women about their own bodies which isn't something achieved by De Palma's version.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Vena. *ibid.*, pp. 166-168.

<sup>65</sup> Vena. *ibid.*, pp. 48-85.

<sup>66</sup> Pisters, *New Blood*. *op cit.*, pp. 17-18.



Figure 17 Still from *Carrie* (2013)

Often female characters are pushed to hysteria for no narrative or growth reason, but female directors are giving these women purpose and motivation. They are also allowing them to break free from the mould society has placed for them like how Valeria is able to give up the role of motherhood unlike Rosemary who is forced to conform to it and care for her demonic son despite her personal beliefs.<sup>67</sup> Which is a reductive view of women as nothing more than a womb. *Huesera: The Bone Woman* also breaks the occult mould by having Raul never believe in Valeria's vision's forcing her to fix the issue herself with the help of other women. Unlike how in many films the problem is solved when the male opens up to the idea of the supernatural and a male priest will help them solve their problems<sup>68</sup>, Garza Cervera promotes the power of women, especially the power of united women with this film.

Female directors are rewriting the woman's role in the body horror genre. Initially body horror was used to turn women monstrous, but female directors are using it as a way to empower women.<sup>69</sup> Jen and Sylvia Soska write Mary as the one causing the body horror and not the one who is experiencing the body horror like Nola is in *The Brood*. They still portray body horror happening to women, but it is seen as an act of self-expression and subverting the male gaze. They also subvert the norm by having the male characters in the film experiencing more of the horrific and unconsensual body horror which draws parallels with the female experience of sexual violence.<sup>70</sup> This positions the body horror as a form of revenge and female power as can be seen in Mary's use of a scalpel over a knife, as the scalpel can be seen as clitoral compared to the phallic nature of the knife.<sup>71</sup> They are also aware of Mary being a flawed character and hold her

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<sup>67</sup> Grant. op cit., pp. 451-454.

<sup>68</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 97-107.

<sup>69</sup> Vena. op cit., pp. 166-168.

<sup>70</sup> Corriveau. op cit., pp. 167-178.

<sup>71</sup> Vena. op cit., pp. 107-108.

accountable as such which is not so often seen in male directed horror. This can be seen in Mary's punishment through death while Dawn continues on her cycle of castration.

Ducournau also challenges the norm with *Raw*. She uses the abject to give strength to Justine's sexuality by pairing her animalistic qualities with those of her sexual ones. In a sense her use of the abject is in itself abject, it encourages the viewer to feel both desire and horror at the site of it, for example when Justine animalistically bites herself during sex with Adrian (Fig.18). Film tends to portray women as timid victims in their sexual encounters but Ducournau throws this away by depicting Justine's desires as animalistic and powerful.<sup>72</sup> Justine's cannibalism goes hand in hand with her gaining control and power in her life, she is able to stand up for herself and has gained confidence in her body which she had previously lacked.



Figure 18 Still from *Raw*

Female Directors are bringing more depth to the rape/revenge film, in the past the woman was initially depicted as solely a victim and then solely a violent vengeful woman. But in both *American Mary* and *M.F.A.* the women have more depth and nuance to them they have struggles and lives outside of their statuses as rape victims,<sup>73</sup> for example Mary has financial struggles due to being in med school and Noelle is struggling with her final project in her art degree. This allows us to be more invested and connect with them as characters, Liechtenstein explores this a little in *Teeth* with Dawn starting out as an abstinence advocate being confronted with sex, but this story is dropped in favour of the horror of castration as the film goes on.

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<sup>72</sup> Pisters, *New Blood*. op cit., pp. 106-110.

<sup>73</sup> Vena. op cit., pp. 168-169.



Many male directed rape/revenge films try to other the rapists by portraying them as dirty, unruly and ‘not like us’ like in *I Spit on Your Grave*. This allows the male viewer a scape goat where they can think I’m not like this, so this doesn’t apply to me allowing them to distance themselves from the rapists.<sup>74</sup> But films like *American Mary* and *M.F.A.* don’t allow men that freedom. Mary’s rapist is her professor and a medical professional, someone seen by society as pristine and worthy of praise this is someone the audience is more likely to relate to or aspire to be like which doesn’t allow them the luxury to think themselves different. The same can be seen in *M.F.A.* as majority of the rapists are college students, something many audience members would relate to. This opens a better conversation around rape/revenge media and rape itself as people are forced to identify with the stories and are unable to brush it off with ‘not all men.’<sup>75</sup> “If women are as capable as men of acts of humiliating violence, men are off the guilt hook that modern feminism has put them on.”<sup>76</sup>

It can be argued that in films like *I Spit on Your Grave* the violence against women is glorified, this is a sentiment I am inclined to agree with especially when you consider the run time of the rape, and the degradation Jennifer is forced through. This isn’t seen as often in female directed rape revenge films like in *American Mary* where a lot of the actual violence is cut out and we only witness the aftermath removing any chance of glorifying the violence against women. *Teeth* makes a stab at this by having a lot of the violence happen through manipulation. Another factor to consider is the violence done by women, in *I Spit on Your Grave* it is shown as erotic as she gives them pleasure before pain,<sup>77</sup> this seems to be something that is still common in rape revenge films though I would argue that in films like *M.F.A.* Noelle dressing more provocatively and inviting attention is part of her growth as a character as she gains more confidence in herself and her art as opposed to Jennifer’s erotic murdering for the sake of eroticism.

There is room for more research on this topic but the conclusion I’ve reached is that female directors have made significant changes to how women are represented across occult, body horror and rape/revenge films. They have pushed the boundaries of what these film genres can be both in terms of the representation of women in horror and the narratives explored in the horror genre. They are shifting the role of the primary spectator from that of the male viewer to that of the female, which I believe can only lead to the growth of the genre as it will make horror more accessible to an audience that may have previously felt alienated from it. Many male directed horror has previously used the abject and experiences of violence to portray monstrous women trapped by a misogynistic society that denies their humanity, this has caused many women to avoid the genre, but female directors are turning this around by using horror as a cathartic outlet for their rage at the society they are being trapped in. This makes female directed horror an enjoyable experience

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<sup>74</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 143-144.

<sup>75</sup> Vena. op cit., pp. 94-95.

<sup>76</sup> Clover. op cit., pp. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Creed. op cit., pp. 128-130.

for the feminist viewer. In conclusion, I do believe that female directors represent women differently to their male counterparts, but I feel that as more female directed horror films are made, and feminist writings are written about horror films that male director's portrayals of women will slowly adapt into a more positive representation of women by learning from their female counterparts.

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