

*Dorota Wiśniewska*

# A BEAUTY IN DISTRESS OR THE ATTACK OF THE 50FT. WOMAN? SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN HORROR FILMS

I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them murdered than an ugly girl or a man.

*Dario Argento*

From the eighteenth century onwards, Gothic writing has been conceived in gendered terms. The division of Gothic writing into male and female traditions is customary and usually follows the gender of the author. It distinguishes between masculine plots of transgression of social taboos by an excessive male will, involving explorations of the imagination's battle against religion, law and limitations of contingency. For example, in the novels such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), rape, murder and mortgaging of the self to the devil are variously attempted.

At the same time, among the earliest and most celebrated practitioners of Gothic fiction were women, such as Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Dacre and Mary Shelley, whose "romances" customarily share a basic pattern. In this female tradition, the male transgressor becomes the villain whose authoritative reach as patriarch, abbot or despot seeks to entrap the heroine, usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape.

Distant as the "male" and "female" Gothic plots may seem they conspicuously come together – they cast women as victims. The heroines of the Gothic romance, however, are not vaporous, swooning creatures, undone by their female sensitivity; their troubles are real. In most of such plots a young female is stripped of any human support, her mother usually dead before the novel begins, and her father or her guardian dying in early chapters. The lover (if any) who might protect her is sent away or prevented

from seeing her. Depending upon the period in which the novel was written she may be kidnapped, or fall into the hands of an unscrupulous guardian, go out as a governess, or marry hastily. Out in the world her troubles multiply. People want to kill her, rape her, lock her up in the convent for life, and make off with her small or large fortune. She may suffer imprisonment and cruelty at the hands of her pursuer; above all, she is a potential victim of his lust. Her task is to defend her virtue and liberty, to resist evil, and thereby to rebuild the support system that will restore her to a peaceful and stable life. With pluck and luck she manages to overcome numerous impediments and apparent impossibilities and eventually is rewarded with the discovery of lost relations or reliable love in a household of her own. Portrayed in relation to contemporary notions of the proper lady, the Gothic heroine usually demonstrates a passive courage in the face of such dangers. Yet at time she dares to act. In such plots it is the heroine's ego and her inner maturing transformation that step forward and take the principal ground.

Similarly, since the inception of the horror film, women have routinely been cast in the role of the persecuted. Robin Wood proposes two simple explanations: (1) Filmmakers assume that audiences will be more afraid when women – traditionally “the weaker sex” – are placed in danger, and will then more readily identify with the hero/protector, (2) Filmmakers are providing the predominantly male audience with a particular kind of catharsis. Wood further theorizes: “As men in patriarchal society have set women up on pedestals and, thereby, constructed them as repressive and restrictive figures, they have developed a strong desire to knock them down again.” (Wood 196)

This second idea may also partially explain why, as early as in the 1930s, horror films began featuring women as monsters – diverging from the stereotypical Gothic portrayal of women as helpless victims. Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) were among the first horror films to treat female characters as monstrous threats to normality – after the women's respective encounters with the Count each of them undergoes a dramatic change in her character. They are drawn to the vampire's eroticism – “I think he's fascinating,” declares one of them shortly before she is attacked and becomes one of the living dead. During the following decades a growing tendency toward representing women-as-monsters produced classics such as *Cat People* (1942), *Weird Woman* (1944) and *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958).

In the late 1960s, the socio-political implications of America's sexual liberation and the feminist movement profoundly influenced the genre's popular subtext. The subsequent onscreen “battle of sexes” has been a subject of intense critical analysis, resulting in some compelling arguments that

the horror genre offers some of "the most significant documents in America's public debate over the status of the independent woman in a society still dominated by men." (Waller 5) Pioneering examples of the female-centered modern horror film include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), on one level an allegory of the invasion anxieties of pregnant woman, and *The Exorcist* (1973), interpreted by at least one critic as "a male nightmare of female puberty." (Biskind 223) A deeply rooted fear of independent women also informs Brian DePalma's *Carrie* (1976), described by Pauline Keal as "a film noir in red." (Keal 698) Stephen King, who wrote the source novel, comparing it with *The Stepford Wives*, says, that "[...] Carrie is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality." (King 171) DePalma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), like *Carrie*, begins with a voyeuristic shower scene in which a woman's pleasure is interrupted by signs of violence. What is interesting about DePalma's adaptation, is that the victim/monster, Carrie White, is persecuted almost exclusively by women. In the terms of the narrative, the men in the film version, in terms of the narrative, are practically impotent.

Such early "alteration" in the depiction and, most of all, the role of a woman in horror, is most evident in Nikki, the character of Howard Hawks' *The Thing from Another World* (1951), who, in many respects is not the kind of female heroine typical of this genre. She is a Scientist secluded in the North Pole with the rest of an all-male-crew; we learn that in her previous "date" with the captain of the crew she outdrank him and left him passed out on a bed with a note that his "legs aren't very pretty." In their onscreen courtship she ties his hands behind his back and pours him drinks. Such masculine characteristics, however, do not mark Nikki as undesirable. On the contrary, her competence and toughness seem to make her even more attractive. As Naomi Wise put it, horror films "frequently show a merging of sexual roles for the benefit of both sexes – the women learn certain 'masculine' values while men become 'feminized'. Frequently the men have more to learn than the women, who are already mature at each film's beginning." (Wise 113–114) Indeed, as the men struggle to devise a plan to kill the Thing, it is Nikki who suggests the way to destroy it, and it is her ability to comfortably accept both her feminine and masculine traits. The same combination makes Riply, the only woman-officer on a spaceship, the sole survivor in her confrontations with the monster in the *Alien* science-fiction horror series.

As seen from the above, most horror films are obsessed with femininity, playing out plots which coincide with an image of (masculinized) female power and offer visual pleasures which are organized not around a mastering gaze, but around a more radical "victim-identified" look.

It is in the slasher film, however, where the relations between sexes are revealed most clearly. A slasher or a stalker movie is the immensely generative story of a psycho killer who slashes to death a string of victims, one by one, until he is himself subdued or killed, usually by one girl. The killer is with few exceptions recognizably human and distinctly male; his fury is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are almost all sexually active beautiful young people, yet while men and women are killed in about equal numbers, women suffer the more dramatic and lengthy murders.<sup>1</sup> The surviving girl, on the contrary, is usually a virginal tomboy who becomes the target of the killer's attention but, unlike her friends, stays alive after the attack. She is usually introduced at the beginning and, importantly, is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail, although some of the films' titles may suggest otherwise: *Prom Night* (1980), *Terror Train*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), *My Bloody Valentine* (1980), *He Knows Your're Alone* (1981), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and *Scream* (1996).

The prevalent view is that this genre, in particular, offers sadistic pleasure to its viewers, and not much else, since neither the killer nor the victims in most of these films have any real identity (the killer is usually masked, the victims always dumb, audiences responded primarily to the destruction, often cheering the killer on). I argue the reverse. These films are designed to align spectators not with a male tormentor, but with the tormented female – with the suffering, pain, and anguish that the “final” girl or any “damsel in distress” endures before rising eventually to vanquish her oppressor. Therefore it comes as no surprise that in most cases the survivor figure has been female. In William Schoell's words: “The vast majority of contemporary shockers, whether in the sexist mold or not, feature climaxes in which the women fight back against their attackers – the wandering, humorless psychos who populate these films. They often show more courage and levelheadedness than their cringing male counterparts.” (Schoell 55–56)

But the slasher genre and its multi-leveled reading does not only “provide” females with whom male viewers are quite prepared to identify on the most profound levels; Robin Wood explains its appeal as the “revenge of the repressed,” in which the female avengers as a victim of repressed sexual

<sup>1</sup> There is some suggestive evidence for this. Feminists have pointed out that, in many recent horror fictions and films, often the victims of the monster's grisly onslaught are sexually active adolescent women. One interpretation of this is that they are being taught a lesson: “Fool around and this is what you can expect/deserve.” Moreover, the female victim has been a staple of the horror genre since the days of the Gothic. The abduction of women – often as a thinly veiled euphemism for rape – might be seen as the articulation of an enduring sexist warning that women should keep in line because they always are and ought to be at the mercy of males in patriarchal society. (Modleski 278)



desires that fuel both their identification and the carnage in the story, as it is illustrated in the following "classic" films, that should be discussed in more details. (129)

The appointed ancestor of the slasher film is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). It has been deemed responsible for several decades of films which revolve around the bodily mutilation of women. Its elements are familiar: the killer is a psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness.

What is particularly interesting is that *Psycho* can be read as two interrelated stories. The film's first half is Marion's story – her flight from Phoenix, her sympathetic encounter with Norman Bates, and her brutal murder. The second half is Norman's story as he is pursued by Lila, Sam, detective Arbogast, and ultimately, the psychiatrist. The two halves are separated by the brutal shower scene and Norman's tedious cleanup. The shower scene deliberately casts both Norman and the viewers in the position of voyeurs (the scene conspicuously brings "male gaze" into play) but it also marks the "emergence" of the "final" girl – the sole survivor – Marion's sister, Lila, who unlike her, does not come across as sexually active; instead, she is confident, assertive, and capable; she brings us, almost inevitably, to the fruit cellar and the final confrontation with the Mother.

A dedicated follower of this vein was John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), a blood relative of Hitchcock's masterpiece. Unlike Marion, this movie's heroine, Laurie, is shy, independent and, apparently, a virgin. The only man in her life is her psychopathic stalker. Unlike her friends, who are too preoccupied with sex and gossip to anticipate the danger, Laurie is not only able to see the killer – she is watchful to the point of paranoia – but is able to fight back – precisely because, according to co-writer Debra Hill, she is not sexually liberated. "The one girl who is the most sexually uptight," she says, "just keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife. She's the most sexually frustrated. She's the one that's killed him... because all that repressed sexual energy starts coming out." (Fischer 126)

Contrary to *Psycho*, *Halloween* intimately synthesizes killer and victim (or target). Carpenter's film masterfully switches us back and forth from the perspective of the killer to the perspective of the victim. Such a formulation takes the ambiguously sympathetic relationship of Norman Bates and Marion Crane to another level. Where in *Psycho* we moved from one perspective to another (as mentioned earlier – the two separated by the shock of the famous shower murder) – in both *Halloween* and *Scream* series (Wes Craven revitalized the genre in 1996) we are made to juggle these two positions almost from the beginning. This shifting point of view allows the

audience to inhabit almost simultaneously both wicked behavior and its punishment. The murderous moment, thus, becomes a culmination of both the urge to punish (embodied by Michael in *Halloween* and Billy in *Scream*) and the urge to be punished for inappropriate behavior (embodied by the victims). Eventually, we are freed from this potentially sadomasochistic cycle of punishing and being punished by the female figure (Laurie in *Halloween* and Sidney in *Scream*) who, through her goodness and uprightness, breaks the cycle of punishment, kills the monster and survives. Such drastic "ultimate solution" may be seen by some viewers as an act of empowerment; I argue, however, that these "final" women are only acting in the same violent ways that male protagonists would – orchestrating widespread menace and carnage. Like Stretch in the final shot of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986), when she stands atop the ruins of the Sawyer's underground carnival, screaming manically with a chain saw raised above her head. It seems that in the process of destroying the monsters, she not only has been acting like a man but she has virtually become a monster.

As I have been trying to demonstrate, women have been central to the production of horror as well as its consumption, from the Gothic novel to the contemporary cinematic blockbusters. Although the treatment of gender in horror genre may, at first sight, seem heterogeneous, I argued in this essay that horror fictions and films should no longer be thought to have the function of scaring people into submissively accepting their social roles. Rereading the genre might challenge the simplistic assumptions about the relationship between gender and culture as the genre remains highly correspondent to the social and cultural upheavals to which it runs parallel. Above all, the "low tradition" represented by and in horror fiction and movies possesses positive subversive potential, a space to explore gender ambiguities and transgress the traditional boundaries of masculinity and femininity, even though – bearing Edgar Allan Poe's words in mind – it still seems that the "death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical subject."

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## Portret kobiety w amerykańskim kinie grozy

Od początku jej istnienia, tj. od końca XVIII wieku, twórcy literatury gotyckiej nieustannie eksploatowali wątek „piękności w opresji”, ze szczególnym zacięciem roztrzaskając perwersyjne lęki i udręki nadobnych bohaterów. Podobnym upodobaniem wykazują się twórcy horrorów, niezmiennie obsadzając przedstawicielki płci pięknej w rolach ofiar i prześladowanych, porwanych i przetrzymywanych, tłamszonych i więzionych, stawiając je jednocześnie w roli „obiekta mrocznego pożądania” najczęściej męskiej widowni. Wydaje się, że stopniowo taki stan rzeczy zaczyna się zmieniać, a przynajmniej coraz częściej można zaobserwować od niego chlubne wyjątki.

Na przykładzie amerykańskich produkcji, w eseju ukazano ewolucję postaci kobiecych w horrorach filmowych, które z eteryczno-pasywnych ofiar przejmują rolę mścicielek, a z czasem oprawcy, bynajmniej nie z blizszykiem na ustach.