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How the Characterisation of Women in Horror Films Changed from the 1970s to the 2010

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Introduction

The portrayal of women and their fears in the horror genre have not been kind, often portraying them as victims and equating their femininity with weakness (Lazard, 2009). The research in this thesis will examine the use and exploitation of women's fears in the horror genre and how it developed from the 1970s to the 2010s, aiming to discuss the imposition of victimhood and fragility upon women within this genre and the progression to female liberation within a horror context.

This will be explored through expert opinions of the horror genre as well as its foundational elements to understand why these archetypes exist and the function they have served in the genre as a whole. Thus, this thesis will provide an analysis of the audiences' projection of monster and victim, the male gaze, and how these apply to iconic 1970s horror films such as the following:

Halloween (1978), Stepford Wives (1975), and Rosemary's Baby (1968).

These films will then be discussed in contrast with films of the late 2010s which completely diverge from these themes of female victimhood, such as the following:

Hard Candy (2005), Gone Girl (2014), and Jennifer's Body (2009).

Chapter 1

The Morality of Monster

Commonly, horror films feature a monster who reflects the strange or ‘queer’ characteristics shunned by the society in which it resides. (Rieser, 2001) The etymology of the word monster derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which is itself derived from the verb *moneo* meaning “to remind, warn, or foretell” (Dictionary, O.E., 1989). From this we can infer that monsters often play an important role in stories other than to terrify and entertain. As suggested by George Ochoa (2017), they are “a form of therapy” (p.7), here to teach us a moral, they help us to grasp the difficult and sometimes ugly truths of our societies and in turn our very reality. It can be argued that horror films solidify the fear that challenging the status quo will only result in painful and monstrous consequences. This thesis argues that the problem arises when we start to examine which transgressions are being punished in these stories and why.

A large portion of horror films star a young female protagonist, and oftentimes paint the picture that her behaviours, such as sexual promiscuity or an indulgence in the feminine ideal, are deemed punishable by torture and even death. (Mulvey, 2013) This can be seen in films like *Scream* (1996) or *Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984) where the villain’s first victim is notoriously a blonde, feminine, sexually uninhibited teenage girl. This archetype was adopted frequently in the 20th century, with horror films mirroring and policing societal expectations of women’s morality and behaviour (Mulvey, 2013). This paradigm is only magnified when we also examine the female characters who do survive the film; this protagonist is often called the “final girl”(Clover, 2015). This term was coined by film theorist Carol J. Clover in her 1992 book, “*Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.*” As the title suggests, the *Final Girl* confronts the villain at the end of the story, either killing him

herself or being saved by an authority figure, typically a male character. The *Final Girl* has been “allowed” to survive due to her implied moral superiority over the other female characters, she is considered ‘pure’ due to her abstinence from morally reprehensible behaviour such as sex, drug usage or a dependency on her femininity.

At first glance, the *Final Girl* could appear to be a feminist icon, however this thesis argues that the audience should recognise that she has been subject to terror and abuse at the hands of a masked killer for the duration of the piece, even though she has made it to the end. Often she is covered in blood and in various states of undress. (Mulvey, 2013) Regardless of the characterisation, it can be argued that all female protagonists in these horror films are victimised in one form or another. There is no redeeming act that can save them from the pain and torture they must endure. The monsters of horror often mirror societies' insidious need to police the morality of women, and more concerningly audiences can take great pleasure in this. (Mulvey, 2013). The *Final Girl* archetype was also recontextualised later in 2015 by Carol J Clover. In the preface to the 2015 edition of her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* she remarks upon how her original conception of the *Final Girl* has changed throughout the following decade after she coined the term. ‘Detached from her low-budget origins and messier meanings, she now circulates in these mostly cleaner and more upscale venues as “female avenger,” and “triumphant feminist hero.”’ (Clover, 2015) Rather than a ‘tortured survivor’ (Clover, 2015), the contemporary *Final Girl* is often understood through the fantastical lens of “girl power.”

It can be opined that the female protagonists of 1970s horror films, regardless of their characterisation, are not written for real female audiences to empathise with or connect to. So if not for women, then who are these characters for? Film theorist Laura Mulvey believes that these *Final Girls* tap into the male fantasy of the ideal passive woman. In her essay *Visual*

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema she describes how women in cinema “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.” (Mulvey, 2013) Women in these films are not written to truly be anything of substance, they are designed to be gawked at. They are simply a vessel through which the male gaze can be fulfilled rather than written with a female audience in mind. (Mulvey, 2013)

Chapter 2

The Hunted Becomes The Hunter

With women’s rights liberation coming to the forefront of society, horror film narratives began to change significantly regarding who is hunter and who is prey (Clover, 2015). In 1970s slasher films it is noticed that the killer is generally a masked male, stalking his mostly female victims, usually hunting them with an array of weapons such as knives, chainsaws, and axes (Mulvey, 2013). Classic examples of this antagonist can be found in films such as *Friday the 13th* with Jason, who stalks and kills teenagers staying at a holiday cabin, (*Friday The 13th*, 1980) and in John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween* with Michael. The film opens with a flashback of a murder; the camera following a point-of-view sequence as we stalk a young couple in a bedroom following sexual relations. The girl sits topless at a dresser fixing her hair as the camera creeps up on her, completely unaware of her impending fate. Suddenly, as quickly as she notices the killer, he begins to stab her. Notably her screams of anguish resemble that of moans of pleasure; the camera makes sure to capture her bare chest as she falls backward to the ground covered in blood. Only after we experience this murder are we made aware of who the killer is, the victim’s six year old brother.

This opening scene can be looked at through the lens of John Berger's essay in "Ways of Seeing." (2003) Throughout the scene we can hear the heavy breathing of the character whom we are embodying, the tone of the breath immediately revealing we are in the body of a man. In Berger's essay he describes how "a man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you" (Berger, 2003). Immediately we sense that anyone who encounters this character is in danger, even though we cannot see who it is, we can deduce that the masculine breathing indicates that they are a large and potentially dangerous man. This scene would be very different if shown in a normal mid-shot, since viewers would know they are watching a six-year-old child's actions. This scene forces the audience to reevaluate their beliefs regarding what qualifies as a threatening intruder. Although his presence may be false, as in this case the audience is fooled into believing the child is a large and imposing killer, his pretence always leads the audience to believe in his implied power over others. (Berger, 2003)

Berger's essay proceeds to discuss how a woman is surveyed. He states, "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated." (Berger, 2003) This echoes the opening scene of *Halloween*, the male viewer walks into the room, watching the woman as she watches herself in the mirror. Berger notes in his essay that a "woman's self is split into two" when it comes to how she navigates life. She has been taught to survey herself continually, to visualise herself moving throughout the world and to monitor how she is perceived. (Berger 2003) This scene seems to parody this phenomenon by creating a woman so enthralled by watching herself that she is completely unaware of who is watching her. The camera moves slowly, stalking the woman and allowing the audience to pick up on every part of her body, while she is unaware of her immensely vulnerable position. The viewer understands the danger posed to the woman as the camera creeps towards her. Although we can't see the antagonist it is assumed that the

woman is intrinsically weaker, her nakedness, her girlishness, her ignorance of the surroundings, all suggesting that she will be unable to defend herself. As she is being brutally stabbed to death it can't be ignored how her cries of pain simulate cries of pleasure. She moans and flashes her breast to the camera. It can be argued that everything about her death is sexualised, the aforementioned 'passive woman' of the male gaze being embodied by her empty attempts to fight back. (Berger, 2003) Berger's point of what a man "can do to" women is particularly evident here. The killer can stalk her, stab her, kill her, please her.

The revelation that this crime was committed by a six year old boy is a comical plot twist to the scene. How a small child could stab a woman to death, how she never tries to fight back, all of this adding to the scenes' inappropriately humorous image. Additionally, it makes the "death moans" displayed in the scene all the more disturbing, as now the audience understands that the pair were siblings. However it can be argued that this exposes the expectations of the audience when watching a horror film. We never see the killer yet we assume them to be a large man, and that there was no way for the woman to defend herself. In horror films we have been conditioned to see female characters as weak creatures being hunted for sport by these male villains.

This trope of the frail feminine and murderous masculine is completely turned on its head in the film *Hard Candy* (2005), directed by David Slade. The film opens with a fourteen year old girl, Hayley, speaking with an older man named Jeff in an online chatroom. She agrees to meet him in person at a coffee shop before heading back to the man's house, the infamous villain's lair. Once again Berger's 2003 commentary on the promised power of the male presence comes into play. The audience is encouraged to imagine what Jeff is capable of doing to this young and naive girl, there is an instant build up of tension as we watch Hayley

fall into his trap. When they return to his house he tries to make her an alcoholic drink, but Hayley refuses stating that adults teach young girls “not to drink anything they haven’t mixed themselves.” (Hard Candy, 2005, 13;11) As they drink, Jeff asks to take nude pictures of her, when suddenly he loses consciousness and collapses.

It is from here that the narrative structure which dominated the horror genre for decades is reconstructed. We discover that Hayley is not as gullible as Jeff or the audience is inclined to believe. She has, in fact, been personally hunting Jeff online to punish him for the disappearance of another local teenage girl. The film unravels as we watch Hayley ransack the house for evidence of Jeff’s pedophilia, all the while she has him tied up and is torturing him. The film feels cathartic as we watch Jeff beg and plead for his freedom. He tries using the manipulation tactics commonly utilised by so many abusers to quell and manipulate their victims into submitting to their desires (Katz and Barnetz 2016), but Hayley anticipates this and holds him accountable for his actions.

The comparison of this narrative to that of *Halloween* serves to show how different female characters are permitted to exist in film. In *Halloween* the woman is oblivious, she has no awareness of her surroundings and is easily stalked by her killer. Hayley in *Hard Candy* is cunning and bright. Using mental manipulation, she convinces her victim she is naive so that she can trap him for her own revenge, she uses this expectation of female fragility to her advantage effectively turning the hunter into the hunted. In *Halloween* the woman’s death is sexualised for the audience. The violent act of murder becomes an erotic display of the masculine overpowering the feminine and affirming a position of power. This is contrasted with *Hard Candy*’s handling the topic of pedophilia. Although Jeff is caught in possession of child pornography, director David Slade chooses never to show or describe anything lewd on

camera. The pain of the girls who were harmed by Jeff is not exploited, this is only suggested. Women's suffering, while central to the plot, does not become a spectacle to be consumed.

A major change in the portrayal of female characters in horror films is their newfound agency in the telling of their own story. In the 1970s the female protagonists were depicted as weak and airheaded. With the horrors of their deaths being disregarded frequently in favour of sexualisation to appeal to a male demographic. This provides a stark contrast with these liberated representations of the female experience in the horror genre of the 2010s. In these films women are granted permission to be deceitful, controlling, and inflict pain on those who have or would dare to wrong them. They have now become the predator in their story.

Chapter 3

The Horror of Housewife

In Mathias Clasen's Ted Talk; "Lessons From A Terrified Horror Researcher" (Clasen, 2017), he discusses how our real life fears are exploited in horror films. Human's evolutionary ancestors lived in a world fraught with fear and danger. The threat of predators, insects, and illnesses caused them to develop a sense of "fear" that would keep them alert, meaning if they came into contact with something dangerous, their brains pumped adrenaline to ensure they acted quickly. (Clasen, 2017) There is now much less need for humans to have these qualities in the modern day, particularly people from the western world. Nevertheless, people are still just as fearful and vigilant as their ancestors.(Clasen, 2017) Horror media takes advantage of this evolutionary reaction. Films help create catharsis by amplifying the

audience's greatest fears and giving them the opportunity to experience them in a safe and controlled setting.

A theme in films which centre the female experience is the discussion around the oppressive expectations of them in marriage. As marital partners, women are responsible for maintaining emotional intimacy within the family, adapting to the sexual desires of their husbands, as well as monitoring the relationship and resolving conflicts from a subordinate position, all the while remaining as independent as possible without threatening their husbands' status. (Fishman 1983) This work, although intrinsic to the success of a relationship, is often devalued as something purely just expected of the female partner. This can lead to some women developing a fear of entering into traditional married life entirely as they worry they will be victim to unfair expectations and social exclusion. (Chitsaz, 2021)

Horror films which explore this topic can show the social expectations of the housewife from the era in which it is created. *The Stepford Wives* (1975) directed by Bryan Forbes, is a film which examines women's marriage fears during the second wave movement of feminism of the 1970s. Joanna Eberheart moves with her family from New York City to the picturesque town of Stepford, Connecticut. Upon arriving her husband Walter joins the local Men's Association and becomes increasingly distant and critical of her. In addition she notices how bland and robotic the other women in the town are. They only care about taking care of their children, pleasing their husbands, and doing housework. Joanna is very perturbed by the other women's lack of interest in matters outside of the home, she finds refuge in the only other woman in the town with similar opinions to her, Bobbie Markowe. As the film progresses the two women start to suspect there might be some insidious reason as to why the women are "changing" into submissive housewives. The two friends try to

investigate leads such as possible additives to the water supply. Bobbie's husband notices how stressed she's becoming and takes her on a weekend holiday. Joanna goes to visit Bobbie after her trip but is confronted with a totally different Bobbie. She is wearing a modest dress with her hair in curls, different from her usual jeans and messy hair. Joanna is very confused by Bobbie's change; "Why are you wearing all that make-up? I mean you never even used to clean your own kitchen much less wear make-up." (Stepford Wives, 1975, 1:21:25) It is revealed that the Men's Association that her husband belongs to has been replacing the wives of Stepford with robots. It is never explicitly stated why the husband's of Stepford started to kill their wives to replace them with robots, but it could be interpreted as a dramatisation of fearful reaction towards second wave feminism. "Many women were no longer content to hold the same socio-cultural roles they always had – roles which benefitted men. Their efforts to gain equality in educational and professional spaces threatened men's status as the dominant group." (Hess, 2016) The film ends with Joanna being strangled to death by her own robot clone which then replaces her in her family.

The Stepford Wives film was adapted from a novel of the same name by Ira Levins in 1972. Levins explains his inspiration from Betty Friedan's feminist book *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963, which details the pervasive dissatisfaction among white middle-class American women of post World War II. Although the film bases much of its points from Friedan's book, the film received mixed reviews from feminists at the time. This included Friedan herself, who saw the film at a special screening, she is quoted leaving the cinema stating that the film was "a rip off of the women's movement." (Klemesrud, 1975) The special screening was met with "frequent hisses, groans and guffaws" from the audience, a woman referred to as Arken saying that she "couldn't believe the film. It dumps on everyone - women, men, suburbia. It confirms every fear we've ever had about the battle of the sexes,

and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives.” (Klemesrud, 1975) However, it did receive some good ratings, with Gael Greene stating that she “loved it - those men were like a lot of men I’ve known in my life. They really do want wives who are robots.” (Klemesrud, 1975) From these aforementioned mixed reactions, It would seem that audiences were unsure of how to respond to *The Stepford Wives*. Although it contained elements of their own discussions, feminists were not enthralled with seeing the female protagonists of the film victimised by the Men’s Association, or how they were denied the opportunity to fight back against their oppressors.

Conversely, the film *Gone Girl* (2014), directed by David Fincher, turns the stereotypical view of the helpless female housewife on its head. As Nick returns home to celebrate his wedding anniversary, he discovers that his wife, Amy, is missing and there are signs of a struggle. As the police investigation takes place, evidence starts to suggest that Nick has killed Amy. The general public starts to suspect Nick of the murder and his life begins to turn upside down. It is then revealed that Amy is alive and well, and creating an elaborate scheme to frame Nick for her murder as revenge for him cheating on her. What differentiates Amy from Joanna Eberheart is that her character is allowed to be aware of her situation. This is most evident in the “Cool Girl” monologue, where Amy explains her reasons for doing what she did.

“ When I met Nick Dunne, I knew he wanted a cool girl and for him, I’ll admit, I was willing to try. I wax stripped my pussy raw. I drank canned beer, watching Adam Sandler movies. I ate cold pizza and remained a size 2. I blew him... semi regularly. I lived in the moment. I was fucking game. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy some of it... Nick teased out in me things I didn’t know existed. A lightness, a humour, an ease. But I made him smarter, sharper, I inspired him to rise to my level. I forged the man of my dreams.” (Gone Girl, 2014,1:11:01)

Amy’s character contrasts Joanna’s, choosing to play the dutiful and demure housewife role. She chose to become the ‘robot woman’ her husband wanted her to be.

Dissimilar to Joanna, Amy always controlled how she was perceived. Amy notes how she feels that her relationship with Nick benefited from her playing into this fantasy, and that Nick was also complicit in the “act”. It could be argued that it was Amy who was in fact morphing her husband into the role of a perfect spouse by manipulating him. As a protagonist, Amy continues to diverge from Joanna; her willing participation in this game of societal expectation yet unwillingness to be forcibly oppressed by her husband serves to create a much more complex and arguably more interesting character. On the outside she is the stereotypical blonde, bouncy and frankly perfect wife, but on the inside she is cold and conniving, prepared to attack at any moment. Amy possesses full awareness of the character she is playing, however, once Nick stops holding up his end of the unspoken deal, she punishes him for it.

“But Nick got lazy. He became someone I did not agree to marry. He actually expected me to love him unconditionally then he dragged me, penniless, to the navel of this great country and found himself a newer, younger, bouncier Cool Girl. You think I’d let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fucking way. He doesn’t get to win.” (Gone Girl, 2014, 1:11:57)

Although *Gone Girl* is arguably just as unfeminist as *The Stepford Wives*, it garnered a positive reaction from audiences. Film critic Emily Van Der Werff states that; “This is perhaps the most feminist mainstream movie in years, a forthright depiction of the ways that society controls women and forces them into certain roles, then lets men basically do whatever they want.” (2014) Audiences found catharsis in the flawed character of Amy taking control of her situation and additionally seeking revenge for her husband's mistreatment of her. The author of *Gone Girl*, Gillian Flynn argues that what makes Amy such a feminist character is the fact that she is not a good person; “Is feminism really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it’s also the ability to have women who are bad characters ... The one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing. In literature, they can be

dismissively bad – trappy, vampy, bitchy types – but there’s still a big push back against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish” (Burkeman, 2013)

Though *Gone Girl* and *The Stepford Wives* thematically explore very similar topics, it's the characterisation of Amy that audiences notably seem to favour more. Joanna Eberheart was clever and tenacious, but viewers did not enjoy watching her suffer and eventually be killed only to be replaced by a robotic clone of herself built in her husband’s image. Although the film’s message did not support the Men’s Associations’ plot to replace their wives with robots, by making the female protagonist succumb to their evil, there was no pleasure for female audiences as they did not want to watch a film that only supported their fears of an inescapable and constrictive marriage. This contrasts with *Gone Girl*, where Amy has full awareness of her situation in life and chooses to play the part of the perfect housewife, and in turn manipulates Nick to play the part of the perfect husband. As a protagonist she is duplicitous and intelligent, and although her actions towards Nick are criminal, it can be argued that audiences couldn’t help but love seeing a woman taking on this villainous, anti-hero role.

Chapter 4

The Body Possessed

Horror films have often included explicit rape and sexual assault as a terrifying element to their storytelling. (Clover, 2015) Films such as *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and *Sudden Impact* (1983) discusses rape and rape revenge as its central plot, while other films such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) use it as a means of torture within the story. Demonic possession is used thematically to explore rape and sexual assault in horror media. Films such

as *The Exorcist* (1973) likens the intrusion of a demonic spirit into a body as a form of rape in itself. The young protagonist of the film, Regan, under the control of the demon Pazuzu, stabs herself in her genitals with a crucifix and shoves her mother's face into her bleeding crotch. Noticably, in the majority of films which explore this theme of sexual assault, the character forced into a position of suffering is female. Carol J. Clover discusses in the second chapter of her 2015 book, titled "Opening Up", that satanic possession is gendered as feminine in the horror genre. Clover suggests that women are depicted as portals for evil to channel through; "where Satan is, in the world of horror, female genitals are likely to be nearby. The word vulva itself is related to valve—gate or entry to the body—and so it regularly serves for all manner of spirits, but the unclean one above all, in occult horror" (Clover, 76, 2015). This thesis proposes that perhaps this "possession" of the protagonists' bodies serves as an expectation for how women audiences should react towards the sexual assault or rape of their own bodies. Through a comparison of how these female characters are depicted responding to their "possessions" throughout the decades, it becomes increasingly clear how societal expectations towards the "raped woman" have changed.

Rosemary's Baby (1968) follows the titular character Rosemary as she moves with her husband, Guy, into the Bramford, a large Renaissance apartment building in New York City. Guy befriends them and strikes a deal with them to use Rosemary as a vessel for Satan to spawn a child. In return Guy's career as a stage performer takes off and he becomes very successful. However, Rosemary distrusts the Castevets, she finds them far too interested in her and Guy trying to have a baby and they invite themselves into her apartment at all times with no warning. Mrs Castevet gives them chocolate mousse desserts and Rosemary notes that the chocolate mousse "has a chalky undertaste" (*Rosemary's Baby*, 1968, 40:09) but her husband insists she's imagining it. After a short disagreement Rosemary concedes to eating it but only if he turns over the record in the player. While he is gone she scoops most of the

mousse into a napkin and disposes of it. Soon after, Rosemary starts to feel dizzy and faint so Guy leads her to the bedroom to lie down. She passes out and starts hallucinating that she is on a boat with the other tenants of Bramford.

In her dreamstate she goes below deck of the ship as simultaneously she is raised from her bed into the Castavets' apartment. She is laid on a bed as the Castavets and other Bramford tenants close in around her, all standing naked. They begin to chant as runes are painted in red paint onto her naked body. Mrs Castavet assures that if Rosemary ate the mousse she's not at risk of seeing or hearing what happens next. Rosemary's legs and arms are tied to the four corners of the bed as Guy walks towards her. The camera flashes between Guy's face and that of a demon. It climbs up the bed and starts to scrape Rosemary's body, the camera captures every inch of her torso and legs as it drags its horrible claws over her skin. It caresses her breasts as it mounts her. It's at this point where Rosemary makes eye contact with the red demonic eyes of whatever is sexually assaulting her and she realises; "This is no dream! This is really happening!" (Rosemary's Baby, 1968, 48:00). Her face is covered by a pillow and she awakens in her own bed again next to Guy in his pyjamas. She sits up and discovers that her body is covered in deep dark scrapes. She looks to Guy for answers who explains that he "didn't want to miss baby night" and that "a couple of his nails were ragged." (Rosemary's Baby, 1968, 49:36) Rosemary is horrified that he had sex with her while she was asleep; "while I was passed out?" (Rosemary's Baby, 1968, 49:40). He explains it away that he was drunk and it was nothing to get upset about.

Clover notes that; "Rosemary's possession comes about because, as a female, she is naturally enter- able. When Guy tells Rosemary that he "didn't want to miss baby night," he acknowledges not just an act of "necrophile" penetration, as he puts it the morning after, but

impregnation as well.” (Clover, 76, 2015) Rosemary is reduced to what her body can be used for, her humanity is stripped from her by everyone - including her husband. She falls pregnant and gives birth to the baby but is told it was stillborn. Rosemary stops taking her prescribed medication when she starts to notice her breast-milk is being saved and not disposed of. This reinforces the argument of her reduction to a body of parts with function rather than as a person with thoughts and emotions. Rosemary eventually discovers that the Castevets have taken her baby into their own apartment. When she confronts them she is shocked to find her baby in a black bassinet with an upside down cross hanging from it, surrounded by the Bramford cultists. Rosemary stares horrified into the face of her child and exclaims; “What have you done to it? What have you done to its eyes?” but again her fears are dismissed; “He has his father’s eyes.” (Rosemary’s Baby, 1968, 2:10:15) Rosemary screams in fear and horror as the cultists chant “Hail Satan!” Mrs Castevet tells her she should be grateful, that: “he chose you out of all the world.” (Rosemary’s Baby, 1968, 2:11:04) The baby cries and Rosemary can’t help herself from approaching the bassinet where one of the cultists is rocking the baby too hard and fast. Rosemary insists the cultist is being too rough and she is encouraged to take over in soothing of the child; “Just be a mother to your baby” (Rosemary’s Baby, 1968, 2:11:54) The cultists group gather round to watch Rosemary, her facial expression revealing to the audience that she is succumbing to the role of mother to this demon child.

Rosemary is reduced to the role of a vessel for the cultists and Satan to use. As she shrieks and claws at herself in horror at what they have done to her and her baby, they stand around smoking and drinking as if they were at a regular dinner party. Nobody cares for Rosemary’s torment, belittling her pain by telling her she should be honoured to have been chosen to fulfil this role. Her body has been “possessed” by the demon, taking away her

ownership. Her torment isn't respected by those around her, in fact she is encouraged to be a mother for the demonic baby she has birthed. Rosemary gives into her mothering instincts and begins to care for the child, the final shot of the film insinuating that she has accepted her fate. This concludes the full "possession" of her body and mind to the cultists, she is no longer an independent person but as a receptacle for their use.

The thematic use of demonic possession diverges greatly in the film *Jennifer's Body* (2009) directed by Karyn Kusama. The film follows the protagonist Needy, an insecure teenage girl, and her best friend Jennifer. One night the two girls attend a dive bar to see a band Jennifer likes perform live. As they're performing the stage catches fire and everyone runs to escape the engulfing flames. In all the chaos Needy spots Jennifer get into the tour bus of the band and leave without her. Hours later, Needy is awoken to the sound of Jennifer breaking into her kitchen. She is covered in blood and dirt. Jennifer rifles through Needy's kitchen and attempts to eat a meal but starts vomiting up black blood before disappearing into the night again. The next day Jennifer seems completely normal again and refuses to acknowledge Needy's fears. She lures a football player into the woods beside the school, flashing him before she unlatches her jaw and disembowels him. Jennifer begins to seduce more and more boys in the school over the next month, killing each of them with her supernatural abilities.

Eventually Needy becomes very concerned by the string of deaths at the school and starts to suspect it may have something to do with Jennifer. She confronts her and Jennifer reveals what happened to her the night of the fire. The band took her deep into the woods and attempted to sacrifice her to Satan in order to achieve fame and fortune. However because Jennifer was not a virgin the ritual didn't work and she became permanently possessed as a

succubus. She must consume human flesh in order to maintain her strength and beauty. She chooses to pursue men, notably refusing to kill Needy because she is her friend. As the film progresses, Needy comes to the conclusion that she must stop Jennifer from killing any more people. The film culminates in a brawl between the two best friends, with Needy sustaining a bite wound but managing to kill Jennifer. Needy develops some of Jennifer's supernatural abilities through the bite and escapes the asylum she was placed in for murdering Jennifer. As the credits roll we see newspaper articles stating that the band from the dive bar have been found murdered in their hotel room.

Jennifer's Body and *Rosemary's Baby* have many similar elements in their plots. Both films depict men willingly sacrificing women to Satan as a means of ensuring their own fortune and fame. For *Rosemary* this sacrifice involves her rape and subsequent pregnancy of a demonic child. Her sexual assault is shown explicitly to the audience, her pain and fear made a spectacle for public consumption. In contrast to *Jennifer's Body*, where Jennifer never confirms whether she was sexually assaulted by the band. The assault is implied by the leering looks shared between the band members and their actions while she is in their van that they have insidious intentions for her. It can be argued that The film uses the sacrifice and subsequent demonic possession as a metaphor for Jennifer's sexual assault, however her misery is never exploited for the viewer's pleasure. *Rosemary* and *Jennifer* both exhibit extreme reactions to their possessions. *Rosemary* is notably meeker than *Jennifer*, and although she screams at the cultists and shrieks in anguish, her reaction is quelled very quickly as she descends into her role as mother for the child. She is portrayed as no match for the power of the cult which surrounds her. While *Jennifer* similarly succumbs to the power of the demon that possesses her, the film leaves it open for the viewer to decide if the *Jennifer* we see after she returns from the woods is a mixture of *Jennifer* and the demon, or simply just

the demon in Jennifer's body. Nevertheless, Jennifer is not the victim of the film, she instead becomes the predatory antagonist of the boys in her school, this element of the film providing a stark comparison between her and Rosemary. Jennifer is devious and vengeful, luring her prey using her sexuality and femininity before killing them brutally.

A similarity can be noticed in how Both Rosemary and Jennifer are ultimately defeated by their possessions in the end. Rosemary surrenders to her fate as a mere vessel of Satan. Her initial outcry towards the cultists proves futile as she is easily dismissed and simply gives into the role she's been forced into; the film implying that she might find joy in this role as she smiles at the demon child. Diverging from this, Jennifer is conclusively killed by Needy, but not before she has taken her vengeance on the many boys who attend their school. Jennifer is angry and refuses to let her anger be dismissed by anyone. Needy's eventual retribution for Jennifer by murdering the band that sacrificed her to Satan also provides great contrast to the ending of *Rosemary's Baby*. Where Rosemary's story deeply exploits the anguish and pain of her sexual assault, *Jennifer's Body* explores the rage and vengeance a woman may exhibit following such an event. Where Rosemary is beaten down and expected to mother the offspring of her rape, Jennifer diverges into something less tolerable and even monstrous. She is hostile and deceptive, refusing to be timid in the aftermath of what has happened to her. While there is no 'correct' way for a person to respond to an experience of sexual assault, the development of this characterisation from the 1970s to the 2010s reveals the movement to acceptance of woman's rage in response to such a violation, rather than the reservation and compliance presented and expected in the 1970s.

Conclusion

Women in the horror genre have been denigrated and objectified for the entertainment of male audiences, and as warnings against misbehaviour for female audiences. They are victims of stalking, torture, rape, and of murder. Sexuality, attractiveness, or not being attractive enough is berated and punished. The central spectacle of horror films is almost always women's pain, whether it is physical or emotional. With the improvement of conditions for women in real life, women in horror films have become more complex over time. Women characters in the horror films of the twenty-first century are no longer binary figures of "perfect" or "monstrous," but are instead allowed to be both "good" and flawed, sexual or not, without being punished or praised. Although their pain is still the central spectacle, women are even allowed to tell their own stories and drive their own narratives.

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