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**SPECTACULAR FLESH: EROTIC HORROR AS FEMINIST PRAXIS IN
WOMEN'S LITERATURE & FILM**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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With an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

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Abstract

Spectacular Flesh: Erotic Horror as Feminist Praxis in Women's Literature & Film

Shelby Wilson

“Spectacular Flesh: Erotic Horror as Feminist Praxis in Women's Literature & Film” asks, “What happens when women take horror to heart?” The query that inevitably follows—why would they want to? —is perhaps even more provocative. In order to answer these questions, I look back to what I identify as a genealogy of women writers whose work serves as literary precedents for the viability of erotic horror as a feminist tool, beginning with Rachilde at the fin-de-siècle and ending with Angela Carter's postmodern fantasies in the 1970s. Three film directors are then presented as case studies. I begin with Jesús “Jess” Franco because his films are a useful baseline for low-budget erotic horror and offer a compelling example of the genre's interest in feminine performance. With Franco's work as a touchstone, I turn to horror films directed by women, including the robust and groundbreaking filmography of Roberta Findlay, whose work throughout the 1970s and 80s combines horror and pornography in productive and surprising ways, and Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), a contemporary feminist horror film that is in many ways indistinguishable from 70s erotic horror. “Spectacular Flesh,” by articulating the links between erotic horror film and an antecedent genealogy of women's literature, crafts meaningful connections between feminist film studies and scholarship on women's literature. The literary foundations laid in Chapters One through Three supply evidence for a longstanding interest on the part of women writers in the horror genre

as a site for feminist praxis. Taking psychoanalysis as its main theoretical approach, the project grapples with established readings of novels and films that are generally assumed to be “bad” or, possibly worse, complicit in patriarchal misogyny.

Ultimately, this project identifies horror as the key for negotiating a more egalitarian theory of gendered gazing and an opportunity for thinking about women’s phenomenological experience in our contemporary moment, which many would argue is itself a kind of horror film.

Preface

Good Girls Just Want to be Bad

Briefly banned in France for its supposedly blasphemous material, Jöel Séria's 1971 horror film *Don't Deliver Us from Evil* [*Mais ne nous délivrez pas du mal*] is a movie on the perils of taking horror to heart. The wandering plotline follows two teenage girls, Lore and Anne, who form a Satanic cult of two and go on to terrorize the members of their rural town as well as the faculty of their religious boarding school. Based on the famous Parker-Hulme murder case that took place on June 22, 1954 in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which best friends Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme murdered Parker's mother in an effort to prevent their impending separation, Anne and Lore's story ultimately centers on their knowledge and use of horror as a generic platform for agential feminine embodiment.

Throughout the film, the girls are shown participating in two distinct categories of actions: (1) attempted seductions of various men that always result in real or imagined assault and (2) callous crimes such as murdering the gardener's pet birds or setting a neighboring farm's hay on fire. Characters in *Don't Deliver Us* interpret these two sets of actions as comparable and even entangled, a reading that makes it all too easy to equate the precocious sexuality of Anne and Lore with the "evil" of criminal acts. According to this logic, the girls' attempts at seduction are equivalent to any of their other crimes and warrant appropriate punishment (i.e., rape). This reaction posits Anne and Lore's deviant sexuality as the primary site of horror in the film, the ultimate evil that must be overcome. However, if the viewer

pays close attention to the girls' interpretations of their supposed wrongdoings and their expectations regarding how their actions should be interpreted by others, it becomes clear that Anne and Lore do not understand sexual seduction and criminal act in the same way at all. Privileging Anne and Lore's perspective permits a reading of the film as a critique of the common cultural association between feminine agency and/as feminine evil and shifts the true site of horror in *Don't Deliver Us* from the actions of Anne and Lore to the reactions of their diegetic audience.

The primary inspiration for Anne and Lore's actions is their passion for provocative, Decadent-inspired reading.¹ Over the course of the film, Anne and Lore are shown exploring three texts together. The first is an erotic novel with no title or author that Lore has snatched from the attic at their boarding school, the second is Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror* [*Les Chants du Maldoror*] (1874), and the third is Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du Mal*] (1857). These texts instruct Anne and Lore not only on how to be wicked but also on how to be women, a function revealed to the audience early on when they read the unnamed erotic novel aloud to each other while hiding under the covers at their boarding school in a scene that mimics the clandestine lovemaking they jointly narrate. While this unconventional reading offers the possibility of a complete communion between Anne and Lore, a fantasy realized both in a Satanic initiation ceremony for two that

¹ In Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, another film adaptation of the Parker-Hulme case, Decadent literature is replaced by an imaginary, alternate dimension called the Fourth World, "an absolute paradise of music, art, and pure enjoyment." In both cases the two young women look to art and literature as a screen with which they can cover over their material circumstances. We see this literally in Jackson's film when the girls' imaginary gardens are laid over the "reality" of the New Zealand landscape.

plays more like a wedding and in their favorite Lautréamont quote (“When this fleeting life is done we will be together forever. One single being, my lips pressed against yours.”), the price they must pay for their closeness is the continued threat of physical assault.

Their Decadent homework teaches Anne and Lore by example and gives them the power to influence outside perception of their bodies by sticking to pre-established codes of feminine behavior. However, it soon becomes clear that their personal narration and presentation of themselves never manages to translate to their diegetic audience—hence the slippage between moral evil and feminine sexuality. This slippage, and the subsequent inability of Anne and Lore to be more than a body whose interpretative control is out of their hands is the subterranean horror of the film. On the surface, it is easy to condemn *Don't Deliver Us* for its titillating presentation of the supposedly teenage girls' bodies, its voyeurism, exploitation, and acts of random violence. These characteristics are all par for the course in the genre of the horror film. However, for Anne and Lore, horror, specifically Decadent horror, is initially interpreted by them as a way to lay claim to their bodies by crafting them out of an existing literary tradition. By deploying the tradition of horror to assume control over their bodies and sexualities, the girls fashion an affirmative feminine horror. To live alongside horror as a way of taking control of their bodies and of owning their sexuality is to dwell within the space of an affirmative feminine horror, which is not the same as horror of the feminine. The film's response to this radical action is to conflate the girls' sexuality with unethical behavior, a consolidation that ultimately

comes to a head when they murder an unnamed man in self-defense after their performed seductions lead to an attempted rape.

In our current moment, struggle over the right to define the perception of female bodies and control the actions those bodies take is especially topical. The explosion of the #MeToo movement, the resurgence of abortion-related legal debate, and the rising popularity of body positivity campaigns all point to the importance of the material conditions of women's bodies, in particular their sexual autonomy, as unfinished business in the fight for equality. Séria's film, produced in 1971, was made at an analogous moment in terms of second wave feminism's focus on bodily difference and sexual freedom. This dissertation considers these issues in the context of the horror film, a genre heavily critiqued for the way it capitalizes on violence against women and its graphic exploitation of female sexuality, and asks whether there is a way to approach them from a perspective of feminine horror. What does it mean for a woman to dwell in or occupy horror when the genre works to exclude her both as diegetic character and as potential spectator? In our present moment, when the body horrors of classic films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Carrie* (1976) appear disconcertingly close to our supposedly progressive reality, this seems a more than worthwhile question to ask.

In the case of Anne and Lore, to occupy horror is both to transcend the boredom of aristocratic and bourgeois norms and to exert power over others for the benefit of one's own pleasure. Their multiple attempts to gain power and agency by mimicking the Decadent anti-heroes in their books always end in failure, though,

since their audiences' responses reveal their actions can be interpreted only as embodied acts rather than representations: they are never more than seductive bodies. Their efforts to exert independence through a performance of feminine horror are almost exclusively taken at face value. This willful misreading of Anne and Lore's femme fatale seductions not only confirms their inability to be more than sexually available bodies, but it also wrests control over the perception and interpretation of that body entirely from their hands.

While Séria's film alters the original narrative of the Parker-Hulme case significantly—it takes place in rural France in the late 1960s, there is no matricide, and the girls bond over their desire to do “bad” rather than their mutual status as invalids—the seed that grows into supposed psychosis here, as in the actual murder case, is the flourishing of a female friendship rooted in the mutual desire to contest expectations regarding feminine behavior. Anne and Lore are presented as two girls who refuse to recognize their place in the world as given and, as a result, are punished by the plot of the film. For example, early on the two girls are shown striking up a conversation with a local farmer named Emile as he watches his family's sheep. Over the course of small-town chit chat, Anne casually mentions that Lore is interested in Emile. Right on cue, Lore begins to pull up her skirt, roll around on the grass, and even spread her legs open. Overcome with lust, Emile attempts to grab Lore and a spirited chase ensues. While Anne manages to run ahead, Lore is captured by Emile who immediately begins to remove her clothes. The situation is made all the more uncomfortable by the fact that Lore can't be more than sixteen years old, while Emile

is a grown man.

The violence of the assault, in which the camera voyeuristically wanders over Lore's struggling body, is one that the viewer has already been prepped for by prior "peeping tom" camerawork of Anne undressing and examining herself in her bedroom mirror. To compare Anne's display before the mirror with Lore's seduction of Emile reveals that the girls' performances are never entirely under their control, despite their efforts to play the deadly seductress as a means of gaining agency by engaging with horror. In the first of these mirror shots, the viewer watches from Anne's point of view and can thus only see her body as it is reflected for her. Anne's performance as mirror image is a means by which she can take control over her own representation while she simultaneously denies the film spectator access to her material body. The positioning of the camera ensures Anne's materiality is lost from view, despite its obvious presence in the room, and initially appears to caution against the assumption that she is on display for the viewer at all.

While viewers might not automatically equate Anne's playful performance before the mirror, in which she is "safe" by virtue of the fact that she postures for herself alone, with Lore's seduction of Emile, for which she is violently molested, the similarity of the two scenes explicitly signals to the viewer their complicity in voyeuristic violence. How is our watching Anne different from Emile watching Lore? Because Anne and Lore assume that their actions in front of and away from the mirror operate under the same system of spectatorship, the violence of Emile's attack comes as a shock. By tapping into a self-selected lineage of Decadent horror, the girls

are committing to a particular way of being in the world, of dwelling within horror, that they believe grants them bodily agency. When Anne narrates Lore for Emile and Lore performs accordingly, Lore isn't meant to be read as a body at all—she is a reflection of Anne's desire. To perform horror is, to their minds, to be a reflective surface, something to gaze upon, but not to touch. The bodily assault that results is not only a denial of Anne's status as narrator (had she been recognized as such and Lore as her muse, Emile would not be able to touch Lore at all) but also a violent reminder to Lore that she will never be more than a body.

This lesson comes to a head when the girls invite a stranded, middle-aged male motorist back to their clubhouse. As good hostesses, they ply him with alcohol and titillating questions about his sex life all the while stripping before the fireplace. From this point forward, the two girls are at their Decadent best. Down to her underwear, Lore busies herself with offering their guest a drink while Anne seats herself sideways in an armchair and begins to pull on lace-up knee-high boots. Positioned on a chest of drawers at the rear of the room, a portrait of Baudelaire presides as the officiate of the proceedings. Once the drinks have been served, Anne and Lore begin interrogating their unnamed guest about his wife, his children, and even his virility. The man's startled query, "Do you know what you're saying?" prompts the pair to simply push the situation even further: "Do our questions annoy you? Would you rather see our legs?"

This reaction, in which the girls appear to act as femme fatales but are read as adolescent imposters, recalls the words of Jean Lorrain in reference to Rachilde, a

female Decadent author whose writing, though “monstrous,” reveals its author’s “perfect innocence” since “everything that is theoretical is perfect, [but] everything that is practiced is done with the naivety of a little girl” (“Miss” 6).² Here the vice of the female Decadent author and the woman who performs horror are read as superficial, the embodied follies of a child who may understand in theory but not in practice. But if Lore and Anne are only dressing up as sultry seductresses, if they are, in fact, “little girls” who know in theory but not in practice, then why do these performances cause spectators to react as if the opposite were true? Anne and Lore assume the books they have read and subsequently act out will encase their bodies like a protective shell, figurative armor that is pretty to look at and to admire but that betrays no underlying interiority. In her famous essay on body genres, Linda Williams notes that film genres such as horror, melodrama, and porn can all be considered “low” because they encourage an imitative response in the spectator—the woman who watches a family torn apart in the aptly named weepie sheds tears, the voyeur who watches a hardcore porn gets off alongside the actors, the spectator of horror screams in tandem with the victim. While this approach is useful from the standpoint of affect studies and audience reception, it often bars attempts to read the film at levels other than the performative. This visceral reaction is exactly what Anne and Lore are met with when they “perform” or embody horror in the film. Their male spectators can only imitate, they cannot interpret. The multiple attacks reveal, in this context at least, the limits of legibility for feminine embodiment.

² « ...toute ce qui est théorique est parfait, tout ce qui est pratique est d’une naïveté de petite fille... »

Before the girls' seductions are taken at face value, when the scene plays out like an absurd cocktail hour over which Baudelaire presides as if he is some kind of patron saint, the motorist notices a bound stack of papers lying on the coffee table. The title is *Cruel Plays* [*Pièces Cruelles*],³ and it is a collection of vignettes that Anne and Lore have composed in preparation for their school play. He narrates a portion of the text aloud, and we hear the tale of a little girl who decapitates her sister's dolls only to place them on display under a glass cloche and beckon rats to come feast upon them. Upon reading this gruesome story, the motorist seems equal parts indulgent and wary, but ultimately refuses to take Anne and Lore seriously as horror authors. Anne and Lore become, just like the dolls, headless bodies who are up for grabs. Their attempt not only to physically perform but to write a feminine horror (the medium, in their opinion, that best communicates feminine phenomenology) is cast aside as uninterpretable. When Anne leaves Lore alone with the motorist to get more firewood, his attempt at rape is a refusal to recognize Lore as figurative performer. This action, which comes as a surprise to Anne and Lore but perhaps not to the viewer, prompts the question of who occupies the role of monster in this film. Is it the two girls who commit petty crime and ultimately murder? Is it the men who repeatedly attempt to rape them? As far as the internal ethics of the film, the men are never depicted as evil or even truly culpable. Instead, the narrative dwells and even revels in the delicious disobedience of Anne and Lore as "bad" girls. The girls'

³ The title recalls Decadent author Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's anthology *Cruel Tales* [*Contes Cruels*] (1883).

position is one of extreme vulnerability, since the film never quite makes clear just what it is that makes Anne and Lore bad. Their crimes? Their sexuality? Or are these one and the same?

When Anne returns and finds her friend under attack, she quickly takes one of the logs near the fireplace and kills the motorist. The murder is the catalyst that transforms the girls' playacting into irrevocable reality—they are truly wicked now. It is at this point that *Don't Deliver Us* ceases to distinguish between Anne and Lore's sexual precociousness and their crimes. The murder of the unnamed motorist is the scene of convergence for these two categories and ensures that from now on the girls' sexual desire will be forever chained to their illegal actions. For Anne and Lore, the only option to disentangle their desire from conservative morality, itself a result of the failure of their spectators to correctly interpret their embodiment of feminine horror, is to give one final performance.

The school play is the setting for the film's fiery conclusion, and when Anne and Lore take the stage in matching white dresses they are met with a round of enthusiastic applause. There are no props, and they are lit by a stark spotlight that throws everything behind them into darkness. Together, they recite a Jules Laforgue poem titled "A Poor Young Man's Lament" [« Complainte du pauvre jeune homme »] (1894) followed by Baudelaire's "The Death of Lovers" [« La Mort des amants »] and the final section of "Travelers" [« Le Voyage »] (1857). Once again, Anne and Lore turn to Decadence as horror, here in a venue socially set aside for performance, as the means by which they communicate their desire. Like the two

lovers in Baudelaire's poem, they claim that their "hearts will be as two / torches reflecting their double fires / in the twin mirrors of our minds" (*Flowers* 149).⁴ Lore and Anne lean on each other for validation but also demand the spectatorial attention of their audience in a social situation that guarantees a certain level of distance. On this stage, in this moment, Anne and Lore finally hold complete control over the way their bodies are rendered legible without fear of physical assault.

The audience, particularly the men, are enraptured. One male spectator even goes so far as to shush the nuns who are trying to decide what action to take to stop the girls' unscripted speech. However, Anne and Lore have played this game before: they know it is only a matter of time before scopophilic desire (the realm of representation) is transformed to physical assault (the affirmation of the material) and act accordingly. Upon completing their recitation, they step forward, douse themselves with the contents of bottles hidden in the folds of their dresses, and light themselves on fire. This shocking display is at first taken by the audience to be no more than a continuation of the performance, and, in some ways, they are not wrong. Anne and Lore have made the text they have only just spoken literally appear on their bodies; they are, quite literally, twinned "great flames." At first, this obvious literalization is totally illegible to the audience. Although the girls' performances have been systematically refused throughout the film, the moment they rupture the

⁴ « Nous deux cœurs seront deux vastes flambeaux, / Qui réfléchiront leurs doubles lumières / Dans nos deux esprits, ces miroirs jumeaux » (327).

supposed rift that separates high art (their recitation) from the material (their bodies burning) they are not so easy to read. It takes a surprisingly long time for someone in the audience to call out that the figures on stage are truly burning alive.

The relation between self and world, of occupying a body that moves through space, here becomes a continuously re-circulating reflection between two mirrors that each rely on the other for visibility. Anne and Lore manage their legibility by manipulating perception. The world which they inhabit and create on stage is thus an illustrative example of phenomenological becoming. Only by making their flesh seamlessly synonymous with feminine horror can Anne and Lore achieve any sort of freedom or agency over the means by which their bodies are interpreted. Only by burning, an acknowledgment of their status as both form and content, are they free to gain mutual recognition, to carve out a place in the surface of the world that they can call their own.

Anne and Lore transform their physical bodies into surfaces that are both amorphous and promisingly polysemous. In order to reconcile their tether to feminine materiality with their aspiration toward feminine horror, they make their bodies horrifying. The possibility of misreading, of using their performance as an excuse for assault, is now impossible. Anne and Lore perform for the audience to be sure, but their true relation has always been to each other—the grounding influence of men an unwelcome reminder of the ways their bodies are and are not permitted to move through the world. In becoming twin flames, Anne and Lore reclaim their flesh through a literalization of Decadent horror. Their ability to interpret and adapt its

meaning to their desires as a means of asserting agency is the beginning of a model that I hope to expand upon in the dissertation that follows.

Introduction

Thinking Through Horror

As the patron saint of Anne and Lore, Baudelaire watches over the girls in the moment that their performative wickedness evolves into genuine murder. His presence at this auspicious moment foregrounds him as the requisite representative of Decadence as well as an influential instructor in the art of being a “bad” girl. For Baudelaire, woman is “for whom, but above all *through whom*, artists and poets create their most exquisite jewels” (*Painter*, original emphasis, 30). Despite this ostensible honor, however, women teach him “nothing, or practically nothing” and are “incomprehensible because [they have] nothing to communicate” (Baudelaire, *Painter* 31, 30).¹ Women, according to Baudelaire, exist by default in the non-place of an eternal, inconceivable elsewhere, a grave from which the Decadent artist resuscitates them in the guise of an all-encompassing, primordial nature, an Eve for the new century.² This naturalized figure, who is in actuality an overwrought representation, is a “femme fatale,” a “temptress” whose “specter...haunts nineteenth-century French male writing [and] is one of the central motifs of the Decadent text” (Holmes, *French* 66). Following this logic, the unnatural excess of the

¹ Baudelaire’s stance is later echoed by Lacan: “There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing they themselves are complaining about enough at the moment, it is well and truly that—only they don’t know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me” (*Feminine* 144).

² The connections between the Decadent muse, Eve, and the monstrosity of the natural world are common topics in scholarship on fin-de-siècle writing. In addition to Holmes, Bernheimer identifies “the insatiable desire of the sadistic woman, the rampant sexuality of flowers, [and] the vital energy generated from organic decomposition” as “certain received topoi of decadent literature” (102). Downing classifies “the monstrous woman and the destructive ‘natural’ power of the feminine” as characteristic stereotypes propagated by male Decadents (*Desiring* 93).

Decadent muse is the direct result of the male artist's transformative intervention. He alone is responsible for re-shaping her outward appearance so that it no longer reflects her presumed connection to primordial nature. It is at this crucial point that Anne and Lore sharply deviate from standard fin-de-siècle configurations of the woman-as-muse in favor of what I call the woman in/as horror. Although the girls obviously idolize authors like Baudelaire and Lautréamont, their construction of themselves as Decadent muses is a project that they independently instigate and perform, primarily for their own pleasure, as a way of navigating adolescence in rural 1970s France. That their model for this newly imagined way of existing as women is founded in fin-de-siècle Decadence is particularly significant for this project since it is a penchant shared by authors like Angela Carter, who also explores the ramifications of a seemingly anti-feminist theatricality in her fiction, and by a plethora of horror film directors, in particular those producing films in Europe in the 1970s.

While it may seem that horror film and Decadence are unrelated, I argue that they are connected in two key ways: (1) through their decision to approach horror through the body of feminine characters, specifically the ways these bodies move through and occupy space and (2) through their shared formal qualities, namely an obsession with surfaces, narrative discontinuity, and a philosophy of style over substance that at times stands in the way of narrative clarity.³ These shared formal

³ In reference to Euro horror specifically, Olney claims that its tendency toward excess, which is not relational and does not contribute to the idea of a unified whole, has meant that the genre "genuinely lacks much of the standard narrative equipment with which classical and contemporary Hollywood cinema is outfitted" (*Euro Horror* 33).

qualities, which could potentially be applied to any number of other subgenres and movements, also serve as a formal marker of horror, at least for the purposes of this project. Horror scholar Isabel Pinedo argues that postmodern horror film is characterized by “a violent disruption of the everyday world” and “the transgression and violation of boundaries,” a practice that “throws the validity of rationality into question and repudiates narrative closure” (*Recreational Terror* 5). This definition resonates with John Reed’s description of Decadent literature as that which “consciously exploits unfulfilled anticipations” and “purposefully violates expectations while creating a new structure to replace the apparently implied structure assumed by the audience” (9). On a more formal level, the Decadent text’s abandonment of traditional narrative patterns in favor of “a sequence of highly wrought, ornamentally detailed, almost detachable segments united by mood, motif and image rather than by a generative storyline” (Reed 42) is echoed in the postmodern horror film’s “tend[ency] to dispense with or dramatically minimize the plot and character development that is thought to be essential to the construction of the novelistic” (Modleski, “Terror” 622). Self-reflexive and driven by repetition, both the Decadent text and the postmodern horror film are genres of the superficial. They are obsessed with two primary surfaces: that of the medium of transmission, whether it be printed page or cinema screen, and the (female) body.

The Decadent predilection to create scenes that would be right at home in twentieth-century horror film is nicely laid out in Baudelaire’s famous poem “Carrion” [« Une Charogne »] from *The Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du mal*] (1857).

“Carrion” tells the grisly tale of a man (the narrator) and his female companion who come across an unidentified, decaying carcass on the side of the road. The majority of the text is occupied with intimate descriptions of the rotting meat, which fascinates the man, and it soon becomes apparent that the worth of this flesh is its translatability to Symbolic abstraction. This quality—and its value—is similarly projected onto the poet’s mistress, who is made to metaphorically exchange places with the remains on the roadside. From the beginning of the poem, the carcass is associated with the feminine. Its “legs [are] in the air, like a whore” and its body is “open wide” like a flower (35).⁴ Strikingly, these two descriptions, in addition to feminizing the carcass, also point to its active ability to display itself, a capability later credited to the flies whose movement over the body give it the appearance of drawing breath. In the end, the narrator reduces the corpse to an amorphous shape, a non-space which he fills with meaning through the power of his verse: “Shapeless—nothing was left but a dream / the artist had sketched in, / forgotten, and only later on / finished from memory” (36).⁵ Once he has mastered this simultaneously fascinating and horrifying image, the poet proceeds to threaten his companion with the idea that she too will “come to this offence, / this horrible decay” (36).⁶ Having risen above the threatening materiality of the dead body on the roadside, its presence becomes a gateway for the poet to imagine how he will eventually savor “the sacred essence” left behind by the

⁴ « Les jambes en l’air, comme une femme lubrique » (212) ; « Comme une fleur s’épanouir. » (213)

⁵ « Les formes s’effaçaient et n’étaient plus qu’un rêve, / Une ébauche lente à venir, / Sur la toile oubliée, et que l’artiste achève / Seulement par le souvenir » (213).

⁶ « —Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure, / A cette horrible infection » (213).

deceased body of his muse (36).⁷ Consequently, his “Beauty,” whose consciousness is limited to a fleshy materiality, is unceremoniously banished to a grave where her only companions are the worms that consume her.⁸ In “Carrion” the poet utilizes the power of verse as a means of savoring the spectacle of a rotting body while distancing himself from the idea that he bears any intimate relation to the spoiling flesh. His mistress fills this role instead and becomes indistinguishable from the spectacular horror of raw meat. She has no access—according to the narrator—to the more refined pleasures of spectatorship, which he enjoys, or to the ability to transform abject materiality into a dignified, abstract form. She must talk with worms instead.

“Carrion” reads like a horror film: man and woman stumble across a dead body, man is captivated and repulsed by the corpse, which is lingered over in much detail, and the live woman and the dead carcass become interchangeable. This trope, where a live woman is made to replace or inhabit a dead body (and vice versa), is a common plot point in horror films, perhaps one of the most famous being Mario Bava’s *Black Sunday* (1960), and does an exemplary job of illustrating the way women’s bodies, in horror, are often the surface upon which space and time collapse. What the poet in “Carrion” does not consider is that his mistress might find a kind of pleasure or agency in being associated with the horror of decay. This possibility is one birthplace of the woman in/as horror. In closing, I turn to the third feminine figure in the poem: the “anxious bitch” who eyes both the poet and his muse

⁷ « l’essence divine » (214)

⁸ “But as their kisses eat you up, / my Beauty, tell the worms / I’ve kept the sacred essence, saved / the form of my rotted loves!” (36).; « Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine / Qui vous mangera de baisers, / Qui j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine / De mes amours décomposés! » (214).

“reproachfully, / waiting for the chance to resume / her interrupted feast” (36).⁹ The dog is both a formidable spectator—her gaze affects even the self-important narrator—and a feminized horror-creature who eats rotting flesh. In some ways, she has more power than the mistress, since she is not subject to the linguistic machinations of the poet and approaches the corpse on her own terms. Indeed, she is yet another example, like the carcass and the imagined cadaver of the dead muse, of the ways horror can be deployed as a tool for asserting feminine agency even in the most unlikely of situations.

The philosophic formulation of woman as a surface for male articulation has been taken up by numerous feminist scholars, most famously Luce Irigaray, whose work argues that ethical relationships between men and women need to begin with a resignification and reoccupation of space.¹⁰ As the means by which bodies come into being as recognizable objects for ourselves and for others, movement through and across space is both incredibly powerful as a means of rethinking a more livable world, but also, historically, a barricade set up to ensure certain bodies do not occupy space at all. Irigaray takes this one step further by arguing that not only does woman have no space to occupy, but that she is also forced to represent the idea of space itself as that which ensures masculine subjectivity and legibility. The concept of woman-as-space in the context of film studies is in turn taken up by Laura Mulvey, who moves toward a more specific argument of woman as two-dimensional or

⁹ « Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète / Nous regardait d’un œil fâché, / Epiant le moment de reprendre au squelette / Le morceau qu’elle avait lâché » (213).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the ways Irigaray approaches space and gender see Grosz, Rose.

screen-space in contrast to the highly legible, three-dimensional body of the male film protagonist.¹¹ According to Mulvey, cinema's main function is the creation and preservation of masculine subjectivity, a goal primarily achieved through the metaphorical flattening of the woman-on-screen into a two-dimensional surface that both threatens and forestalls male anxiety. In short, if the man-on-screen is a "figure in a landscape," this is true only because "woman" acts as a proxy for the very ground he walks upon ("Visual Pleasure" 716).¹²

Additional feminist film theorists who, along with Mulvey, take a psychoanalytic, text-based approach to film that renders cinema a medium specifically tailored to an imagined male spectator include Mary Ann Doane, Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis. According to this line of criticism, not only are women excluded from cinematic spectatorship by dint of the inherent structures that make cinematic narrative possible, they themselves are "synecdochic representation[s]" of the "various losses which haunt cinema" (i.e. castration anxiety) from which the imagined male viewer must distance himself in order to attain spectatorial pleasure (Silverman 31, 32). In contrast, women are synonymous with their image onscreen and can only exercise the privileges of spectatorship within a narcissistic framework that collapses the distance and eliminates the difference

¹¹ "In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition in which the alienated subject internalized his own representation of this imaginary existence. He is the figure in a landscape" ("Visual Pleasure" 716).

¹² For a reading of woman as unformed ground upon which the male subject bases his ability to legibly move across literal and figurative landscape, see de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* and Johnson's *The Feminist Difference*, Chapter 1, "Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?"

between the subject and object of a gaze (Doane, “*Caught*”).¹³ These scholars’ focus on the symbiotic relationship between cinema and the formation of masculine subjectivity anticipates affect studies and scholarly work on the feminine glance¹⁴ and has even influenced women’s scholarship on horror film.¹⁵

“Spectacular Flesh” extends the work of these foundational theorists by also taking a text-based, feminist, psychoanalytic approach to film. However, rather than 1940s and 50s melodrama, I instead turn to the horror film as my main point of analysis in order to demonstrate the ways this particular genre enables the woman-on-screen to participate in intentional (even when monstrous) performances rather than function solely as an inactive repository for masculine anxiety on the part of diegetic characters and imagined spectators. More specifically, I look closely at the kinds of horror film that Jeffrey Sconce would associate with “paracinema”: “a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus...[that] valorize[s] all forms of cinematic ‘trash’, whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture” (372). To this end, the particular kinds of horror films that “Spectacular Flesh” addresses include slasher, softcore and hardcore pornography, Euro horror, and (s)exploitation.

¹³ This image functions as “an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film” and as cinema’s primary instance of scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey, “Narrative Pleasure” 715).

¹⁴ For an early reading on the feminine glance as a mode of female spectatorship, see Foss & Foss. For an overview of “glance theory” as it relates to television viewing practices and the advent of VHS, see Hawkins, Chapter 2, “Medium Cool: Video Culture, Video Aesthetics.”

¹⁵ For example, although horror scholar Brigid Cherry takes real-world audiences into consideration in her surveys of self-identified female horror film fans, her analysis also incorporates psychoanalytic theories invested in the subjection of imagined spectators. Cherry begins with the question, “What is at stake for the female fans and followers of the horror film?” and discovers that “female viewers of the horror film do not adopt purely masculine viewing positions, nor do they simply, as Clover asserts, respond to the literal level of the text” (“Refusing” 169, 176).

Rather than the subjectification of an imagined male spectator, “Spectacular Flesh” focuses instead on diegetic female characters who consciously perform their role as “monstrous” and engage with the generic conventions and expectations of horror. Anne and Lore’s fiery display at the climax of *Don’t Deliver Us* is one example of this type of performance. Others include a woman posturing for herself in front of a mirror, or stage performances that foreground the relationship between a female actor and a particular female spectator. Following the work of scholars such as Doane, who claims that the traditional forms and conventions of Hollywood narrative cannot sustain an exploration of female subjectivity or desire, “Spectacular Flesh” turns to low-brow horror instead to see if the answer to the problem of accommodating feminine subjectivity in film can be found in the seemingly unlikeliest of genres (“*Caught*” 71). Building off psychoanalysis’ claim that woman is akin to a flat façade or mirror (or cinema screen) who both reflects and retains male loss and whose primary function is as a corporeal placeholder who helps men create meaning, this dissertation asks what would happen if this position were interpreted as purposeful and performative rather than as passive and punitive. I name this form of ontological resistance “feminine horror.”

“Spectacular Flesh” also engages and extends foundational feminist horror film criticism. Within this genre of scholarship, the two most influential writers are Carol Clover and Barbara Creed, whose landmark texts, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) and *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) respectively, continue to exert a prodigious

influence over contemporary horror film scholarship.¹⁶ Notably, neither Creed nor Clover ultimately locate the possibility of feminine pleasure (spectatorial or otherwise) in the context of the horror film. Clover because she is only concerned with the imagined male spectator's stake in the genre¹⁷ and Creed because, although she reads iconic female horror characters, such as Nola in David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979), as immensely powerful, she concludes that "the monstrous-feminine in patriarchal discourse tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific" (*Monstrous* 63). In addition to being the first female scholars to explore the gendered implications of horror on such a large scale, Creed and Clover are also significant because their focus "on the cinema of the 1970s and early 80s" means that they are "largely responsible for that era's films being so central to the academic film studies canon" (Humphrey 39).¹⁸ Golden-era 1970s slasher films, described by Clover as "drenched in taboo," "encroaching vigorously on the pornographic," and "beyond the purview of respectable criticism," have in the intervening half a century become the canonical films of the horror genre (21).¹⁹ Included among them are titles such as Wes

¹⁶ In addition, Cynthia Freeland's essay "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Film" (1996), Isabel Pinedo's *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), and Linda Williams' "When the Woman Looks" (1984) and "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" (1991) are important feminist considerations of the horror genre published around the same time as Creed's and Clover's studies.

¹⁷ "I have consigned to virtual invisibility all other members of the audience" (7).

¹⁸ Hantke also acknowledges the influence of Clover and Creed on prevailing trends in horror criticism: "The case of Creed and Clover shows that feminist readings in a psychoanalytic tradition—whether they follow, as Creed does, Lacan and Kristeva, or, as Clover does, the subject as defined by gaze theory—have been far more influential than, say, Marxist or neo-Marxist readings" ("Academic Film" 198-9).

¹⁹ For readings that emphasize the revered and canonical status of classic 1970s horror films in the context of post-millennium horror film criticism, see Hantke ("Introduction"), Humphrey, Hutchings ("International Horror"), Jancovich ("Introduction"), Kendrick, Mathijs & Sexton, Sharrett.

Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). In these classic films, horror's tendency toward the visceral, its shocking immediacy, and its ability to appeal to its audiences' base instincts are all overcome by the genre's "radical potential to comment on such violence in the form of social and allegorical critique" (Tompkins 33). This appeal to the horror film's inherently "apocalyptic" (Wood 23) and politically subversive nature transforms films otherwise deemed "disreputable cultural objects" into legitimate objects of study (Tompkins 45).

In criticism over the last twenty years, there has been significant backlash against horror films produced from the mid-1980s (often labelled as unnecessary slasher sequels or rehashes of tired plots) through the early 2000s (generally associated with "bad" remakes of classic horror films and the rise of torture porn).²⁰ This "crisis" in the horror film has been met in the past several years by a strong uptick in "cinematic" horror (Hantke, "Introduction" 7). By "cinematic" horror, I am referring to popular high-budget horror films that are recognized as intentional and artistic according to the standards of the Academy and, like their brethren from the 1970s, are read as important social commentary—their violence is purposeful, not performative. Examples include David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2015), Jordan

²⁰ Sharrett finds contemporary horror offerings overwhelmingly disappointing and claims that "over the past twenty years, motivation of any type has faded as films tend increasingly to deluge the spectator with computer graphics and bloodshed entirely removed from narrative purpose" (69). Writing in 2004, Stephen Prince argues that graphic violence "has helped make the [horror] genre today a very disreputable one that major filmmakers actively avoid working in," since "to the extent that much contemporary film has equated horror with gore, the genre arguably has been trivialized" (9).

Peele's *Get Out* (2017), Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), and Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021).²¹ These modern-day descendants of "smart" 70s horror films are precisely the kinds of movies that this project does not consider. Instead, I look to films that lie outside the parameters of cinematic horror entirely and consider those pictures that are often left behind in discussions of 1970s and 80s horror. This is not to say that these lesser-studied kinds of film have been entirely neglected by feminist theorists. In her essay "Sexploitation as Feminist Territory: The Films of Doris Wishman," Moya Luckett makes a case for sexploitation as a uniquely feminine film medium, and Tania Modleski advocates for a counterphobic cinema practice that validates feminine pleasure in exploitation in "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory."²² Despite the intervention of these scholars, however, low-brow and paracinematic horror studies remains an overwhelmingly male-dominated field characterized by approaches that foreground auteur studies (as in the robust scholarly and fan-scholar research on directors like Jess Franco and Lucio Fulci), issues of legitimacy and provenance, and assessments of genre divisions and their accompanying fan bases.²³

In Sconce's words, the scholar of paracinema "engage[s] it ironically,

²¹ The tension in horror reception between the grimy violence of exploitation cinema and the more elevated approach of 1970s horror films is addressed in two recent *New York Times* articles by A.O. Scott and Jason Zinoman, who both point to Ti West's *X* (2022), a film that plays on the long-standing association between horror and pornography, as an example of a kind of happy medium.

²² Additional scholars whose research covers trash, Euro horror, and other "low" forms of horror film include Cherry, Joan Hawkins, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Joanne Hollows, and Jacinda Read.

²³ Often, scholarly work on the subject combines these approaches. For example, see Cherry ("Beyond *Suspiria*"), Crane, Hunter, Hutchings ("International Horror"), Lázaro-Reboll & Olney, Thrower, and Tohill & Tombs.

producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation” (393). Following this approach, the content of individual films is of far less importance than their function as pieces of a director’s larger body of work or as examples of unique film production and distribution practices in 1970s Europe. “Spectacular Flesh” addresses a lacuna in feminist engagement with exploitation and trash cinema at the level of plot. Departing from paracinema’s focus on socio-cultural and auteur studies, I draw on the legacy of early feminist film theorists and build off feminist critics who have treated cinematic horror at length, such as Clover and Creed, as well as those who have grappled with the implications of exploitation as a genre with the potential for feminism, such as Luckett and Modleski, in order to posit the significance of erotic and exploitation horror as genres particularly suited to feminist expression and reimagining.

I have chosen fin-de-siècle Decadence as the starting point of my archive not only for the wealth of formal and thematic similarities between it and the postmodern horror film, but also because of the strong presence of feminine horror in the work of Rachilde, a controversial feminist and the only widely recognized female Decadent. On a superficial level, Decadence as a genre is interested in depicting and re-depicting the very same images for which horror film is shunned: gratuitous violence, sexual licentiousness, exploitation of female characters, etc. In Chapter One, I argue that Rachilde’s work is a starting point for a reconsideration of Decadence from an affirmative feminist standpoint that does not take women’s position within the genre

at face value. This is a method I draw on throughout the dissertation's examination of feminine horror.

Chapters Two and Three explore the fantastic, postmodern fictions of Angela Carter, an author who, like Rachilde, was accused of misogyny. Chapter Two takes as its case study Carter's picaresque novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972), a text that reveals Carter's deep-seated interest in the conventions of pornography and cinema seven years prior to the publication of *The Sadeian Woman* (1979). Dr. Hoffman's peep show machines—devices that anticipate feminist theory on cinematic spectatorship in the latter half of the 1970s—and the cinematic muse Albertina are of especial importance in the text's perpetual troubling of its protagonist's assumed powers of perception.

Chapter Three begins with an analysis of the late nineteenth-century novel *The Future Eve* [*L'Eve future*] (1878) by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and reads it as an important link between Decadence, the invention of cinema, and Carter. As an obvious predecessor to Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), which takes up the second half of the chapter, special attention is given to how *Future Eve* creates a specifically gendered mode of spectatorship in which the birth of a female android is rendered synonymous with the birth of cinema. My reading of *New Eve* looks at the ways in which the novel constructs melodrama and horror as political ideologies that foster specific gender dynamics. From the aging starlet Tristessa, who relies on the pathos of melodrama to sustain a mythic ideal of womanhood, to the femme fatale Leilah, who transforms her image in the mirror into her own private horror film,

genre affiliation becomes a matter of life and death.

Chapter Four marks the dissertation's turn to horror film specifically and begins with a broad overview of the various strands of horror film criticism that the dissertation subsequently weaves together in its film analyses. Jess "Jesús" Francos' *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971), a loose adaptation of Sheridan le Fanu's lesbian vampire novella *Carmilla* (1872), is presented as a typical example of a Euro horror film from the 1970s. Although male-directed, *Vampyros* provides a baseline for the ways in which low-budget Euro horror films depend heavily on the use of female performers and female-led storylines to carry the genre. In turn, I argue for a feminist reconsideration of these kinds of films as important pieces of women's film history.

The final chapter of "Spectacular Flesh" takes a close look at the work of two women directors of horror film, one from the 1970s and 80s and another from our contemporary moment. Roberta Findlay was a prolific pornography director in the 1970s and got her start by working as a cameraman for her husband Michael, most famously on the South American slasher *Snuff* (1976). Findlay moved on to direct straight horror films in the 80s, a shift prefigured by her proto-slasher porn *A Woman's Torment* (1977), a decidedly anti-erotic XXX film in which the protagonist murders nearly everyone she comes across. Findlay's female characters are not only avid spectators of both horror and porn, they also must navigate worlds that demand they adhere to the structures of both genres even when it is to their disadvantage (this is not always the case). This exploration of Findlay is followed by an analysis of Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), a film that fully embraces the spaces and

spectacles of the horror genre as a material history that can be strategically exploited by women even as they are caught up in its voyeuristic structures. In addition, I also consider Biller's response to her film's critical and popular reception, which raises important questions regarding the viability and usefulness of exploitation and erotic horror films from the 1970s for modern-day feminism.

To be a woman in/as horror in the context of this project is to actively take up generic characteristics and expectations—primarily the idea that women's bodies must be flattened into a screen that reflects and safeguards male anxiety and loss—and to performatively inhabit them as a means of ontological resistance. To this end, “Spectacular Flesh” reevaluates erotic and exploitation horror film by first looking back to a genealogy of woman-authored, feminist horror texts that not only engage with the genre from a critical perspective but also actively occupy and enact horror from a feminine position. By centering my project around the self-conscious performance of the trope of the woman in/as horror, I hope to show the ways these diegetic characters consciously inhabit their role as monstrous, reflective surface, whether that be as the originary and inaccessible space of mother earth or as a mechanized, artificial television screen. To do so, I turn to theoretical discourses such as psychoanalysis and phenomenology that concern themselves with both the cultural construction of the body and the ways that the body negotiates its legibility and the legibility of the material world that surrounds it through a navigation of space.

To be synonymous with the materiality of the landscape or the cinema screen is to lose any sense of perceptible distinction between figure and background; in these

cases, the woman in/as horror draws attention to her collapse onto surface through a highly stylized performance of literalized ontology. In short, she becomes the very thing for which she is meant to serve as metonym. The result, to some extent, is that she must play the hysteric. Pantomiming her seduction by space, she seemingly gives in to its temptation by actively assimilating to her surroundings.²⁴ In doing so, she takes what cinema assumes to be the natural order of things and shows it to be artificially constructed and endlessly adaptable. She becomes a figure who gains the power to re-signify what her body can do and how it can be made intelligible and reveals “the masculine formalization of nature” as “a double masking: first of nature itself and then of its own status as artifice” (Murphy 86). If, as Gail Weiss claims, “the idea of the self is partially reliant on place for its constitution” and “place and self mutually feed off each other for legibility,” then the woman in/as horror must by default rely on the conventions of the genre in order to re-constitute herself (81). However, that this is a necessary imbrication does not exclude the possibility that there is also pleasure to be found for women who exist in these particular kinds of generic spaces. “Spectacular Flesh” depends on an understanding of the woman in/as horror as a figure who is both subject to representation and who actively intervenes in dominant representations in order to shift perceptions of her status as a formulaic trope even as she gains pleasure and agency from structures long deemed oppressive. The effect of this action is an attempt to construct a space for women to occupy, a

²⁴ Her behavior is not dissimilar to Caillois’ theorization of legendary psychasthenia, in which an organism experiences “a real *temptation by space*” that produces an uncanny “*assimilation to the surroundings*” (original emphasis, 28, 27).

place where their pleasure in performance, misogynistic though its roots may be, can enable a livable materiality that is also enmeshed in Symbolic structures of meaning.

By inhabiting a state of constant ambivalence between surface (the artificial excess of the page or screen that needs no symbolic translation and is apprehended viscerally by the reader-spectator) and depth (the unsignifiable ground of the material that is necessary as a foundation for the Symbolic yet is completely disparate from its structures), the woman who occupies horror dwells within the interstice between bodily materiality and textuality. Building on the theories of Judith Butler, de Lauretis, Elizabeth Grosz, and Irigaray, who link the feminine (non)occupation of space to Plato's chora, and Jacques Lacan's reading of woman as always partially excluded from the Symbolic, my interpretation of the woman in/as horror is a direct confrontation with traditional psychoanalytic readings of the feminine. Here I argue both alongside and against Irigaray when she speaks of the "body of the text" in which the male subject has "made himself a prisoner," a jail cell that manages to simultaneously be artificial surface and natural (non)space: "It is Nature he finds, Nature who, unknown to him, has nourished his project, his production. It is nature who now fuses for him with that glass enclosure...from which—imaginary and therefore absent—she is unable to articulate her difference" (*Speculum* 228). Irigaray's conflation of nature, woman, and glass enclosure troubles traditional binaries that associate "surface" with mirrors and the Symbolic and "nature" and/or "woman" with an abyssal and unfathomable depth. Instead, for Irigaray, the glass surface that separates male textual place from female material space is a two-

dimensional surface whose clarity reveals troubling depth.

Irigaray's woman is situated precariously in between these two locales. Neither trapped on the inside of the imaginary cloche nor able to peer in from the outside, she is spread across its surface as the means of its becoming. For Irigaray, this ambivalent position is one that is taken for granted as enforced; it is not a place that a woman would occupy by choice. However, the woman in/as horror inhabits this space purposefully. The performance of her body as a site of horror gives that body a sense of place. The ground she simultaneously enacts and occupies is the site of horror for a genre predicated on her erasure. The effect of performing horror is the unravelling of a tautology: woman signifies surface/screen signifies woman. Instead, both surface/screen and the feminine body become shifting signs whose semiotic relationship is fractured and in flux. In calling attention to her figurative erasure by embodying that which is assumed to occur naturally—her collapse onto surface, whether that be landscape, mirror, water, or screen—the woman in/as horror makes space for her body to be. Her subversive mimicry draws attention both to her corporeal displacement and to her renegotiation of what it means to move through the world in a feminine body.

Chapter One

A Literary Monster: Rachilde's Decadent Landscapes

Hailed as the only female Decadent, Rachilde was born in 1860 in La Croix in the Périgueux region of France.¹ However, despite multiple biographies dedicated to her, the facts of Rachilde's life are tricky and tangled at best and simply unknown at worst. The result of this lack of reliable history is that Rachilde has been free to make up her own—or, perhaps more precisely, her own made-up account has been allowed to stand. The preface to her 1886 novel *To Death* [*À Mort*], for instance, has become *the* defining narrative of her birth and serves as proof that Rachilde, even over a hundred years later, remains a product of her own imagination. As her biographer Melanie Hawthorne notes, “Ultimately, if all the biographical accounts derive from the preface to *À Mort*, and if this preface is unreliable, then ‘what we know’ about Rachilde also becomes much more unstable” (15). This oft-cited preface also touches upon a theme that will continue to haunt Rachilde's work throughout her lifetime: the tension between surface and depth as a condition of bodily legibility and mobility.

For Rachilde, the primary location of this interplay between surface and depth most often takes the form of a pond, but also appears as the surface of the moon, the sea, mirrors, etc. That Rachilde marks her own birth as enabled by landscape² reveals how both in her life and in her fiction Rachilde played at being the Decadent woman,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Rachilde are my own.

² “Stripped of the suggestive language of the supernatural, this account still succeeds in implying that the landscape created and nurtured the writer, that Rachilde, in other words, is still the product of another narrative already unfolding at her birth” (Hawthorne 18).

a creature ultimately natural, even animalistic,³ whose true self was covered over by a veneer of fin-de-siècle ornamentation. Rachilde's affinity for Decadent theatrics has, in turn, become a contentious topic in scholarship on her work, where debates over Rachilde's complicity, or lack thereof, in a literary movement that was notoriously misogynistic are commonplace. This supposedly damning allegiance is further compounded by Rachilde's propensity to dress in men's clothing, her public denunciation of other women, and her publication of an essay entitled *Why I'm not a Feminist* [*Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*] in 1928 that, despite its containing more biographical anecdotes than political polemics on gender equality, is nevertheless filled with bias against other women. Many feminist literary scholars, such as Hawthorne, read Rachilde as an author who employed resistant mimetics, someone whose writing appeared "superficially" to carry a "reactionary message" but that still contained "different forms of female resistance" (227). In a more pointed statement, Diana Holmes notes, "Rachilde wrote consistently within the terms and conventions of Decadence—a literary and visual aesthetic of the fin-de-siècle period characterized by intense melancholy, a preference for the artificial over the natural, and a degree of misogyny which heightens and almost parodies the gender ideology of late-nineteenth-century France. She was not a feminist..." (*French* 64). This sentiment is echoed by Michael R. Finn, who betrays an uneasiness with the idea that Rachilde

³ "...I don't do anything contrary to my nature, and my animal instinct, which is never disarmed when I am among the milieu of the *modern jungle*, helps me to avoid the danger of certain fashions. I don't imitate the gestures of humanity when I feel myself to be far from that humanity" (*Why*, original emphasis, 72). [« ...Je ne fais pas ce qui m'est contraire et mon instinct d'animal qui n'a jamais désarmé au milieu de la *jungle mondaine*, m'avertit du danger de certaines modes. Je n'imité pas les gestes de l'humanité quand je me sens très loin de cette humanité-là. »]

was able to have her cake and eat it too when it came to dynamics of gender and power: “When, however, the nineteenth-century woman takes on a male pseudonym for her writing, is there not an encroachment on her femininity? Is she in some sense, ‘enjoying’ the opportunity of playing both sexual roles?” (184). Despite Rachilde’s banishment from the feminist camp, Holmes recognizes that there is still a possibility for a “different reading” that interprets Rachilde’s reproduction of Decadent norms as a purposeful textual resistance that “fixes, in violently memorable images, the repressions and constraints on women’s lives at the end of the nineteenth century,” since “there are contradictions in her texts which both set her apart from her male contemporaries and signify the difficulty of her position as a woman writer working within masculine forms” (*French* 65, 69-70). Lisa Downing echoes this opinion and argues that Rachilde “deploys—but also, crucially, transforms—Decadent conventions and the language of nineteenth-century sexual science in order to undo the construction of the normative discourses of womanhood, the family, sexuality and reproduction” (“Sexual Perversion” 197). Hawthorne makes what is likely the most radical argument for Rachilde’s resistance to Decadent misogyny when she writes that Rachilde’s identity as an author is not rooted in imitation but radical difference: “Of course, she may choose to view herself in relation to male writers, but, if she feels that her sex sets her apart from men in important ways, with whom does she identify in such agonistic struggles?... Rachilde’s anxiety, then, may have been an anxiety of originality (rather than of influence)” (197). This argument for Rachilde’s identity as an author hinging on gender rather than genre diverges from the opinion of

scholars such as Liz Constable, who read Rachilde as a Decadent writer who corrupts literary genealogies through her perversions of them (“Yellow” 25).

Thanks to biographers like Finn and Hawthorne, we now know that despite Rachilde’s authorial stance on women as inherently neurotic, jealous, and inferior,⁴ she did develop close female friendships with bluestockings such as Camille Delaville and Georges de Peyrebrune and even participated in Natalie Barney’s literary circle (Finn 35; Hawthorne 224-5). Having been, as she claims, “tricked” by her mother and her grandmother, the two “new Eves” of her youth, Rachilde would henceforth present herself, in terms of her writing especially, as the exception rather than the rule of her sex. For while “Rachilde can happily accommodate the notion of a strong, independent woman, [she] loathes the idea of female solidarity in a collective cause” (Holmes, *Decadence* 77).⁵ To make matters even more complicated, Rachilde played the hysteric to great effect in her autobiographical writings, claiming to be touched by neurosis, unable to distinguish between dream and reality, and open to spiritual penetration. She even goes so far as to assert that she was struck by

⁴ Rachilde warns against the dangers of trying to educate women with masculine knowledge: “To try and stuff feminine brains with all sorts of sciences that they will never have the time to sift through their understanding and to which they will never be able to adapt is absurd and probably very dangerous” (*Why* 23). [« Bourrer les cranes féminins de toutes sortes de sciences qu’ils n’auront jamais le temps de faire passer au crible de leur entendement personnel ou qu’ils ne pourront pas adapter, c’est absurde, probablement très dangereux. »]

⁵ Rachilde explicitly defines herself as an exception to her sex in *Why I’m not a Feminist*: “The allure of masculinity has never inspired the desire in me to seize rights which are not my own. I have always acted as an individual, not thinking of founding a society or upsetting a pre-existing one. I love, above all, logic, and if I accept myself as an exception (one cannot do otherwise in certain cases) I cannot hear it confirmed and take my personal errors for new dogmas” (6). [« Cette tendance à des allures masculines ne m’a nullement inspiré le désir de m’emparer de droits qui n’étaient pas les miens. J’ai toujours agi en individu ne songeant pas à fonder une société ou à bouleverser celle qui existait. J’aime, par-dessus tout, la logique et si je consens à être une exception (on ne peut pas faire autrement dans certains cas) je n’entends pas la confirmer en prenant mes personnelles erreurs pour de nouveaux dogmes. »]

paralysis of the lower legs following her romantic break with fellow author Catulle Mendès: “[Rachilde] was not Catulle’s mistress, and Dr. Lassègue came (on a charitable visit) to study the astonishing problem of a hysteria that manifested in a paroxysm of chastity within a vicious milieu...” (*Death* 17).⁶ Rachilde composes her best-known novel, *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), under the influence of this self-described psychosomatic delirium, and, one could argue, it is only through her performance of a pathologized, hysterical, female body that her writing can be accepted as authentic or valid. In a move that follows the same tactics she used in the creation of her authorial pseudonym, taken on during the course of a seance in which she claimed the spirit of a Swiss nobleman inhabited her body and instructed her on what to say, Rachilde frames her writings as products of embodied experience while she simultaneously claims her mental faculties are separate from rather than dependent on her material condition. As a Decadent writer, but also as a self-styled Decadent femme fatale, Rachilde occupies the space in between literal and figurative, material experience and immaterial transcendence. It is this line between the real-world experience of making her body legible to her social milieu and her fictionalized account of herself, which in many ways marks her, like a heroine from Baudelaire, Mirbeau, or Lorrain, as a natural hysteric, that characterizes Rachilde the author, like her characters, as a Decadent woman.

In this chapter, my goal is not to lay claim to Rachilde as a feminist or a

⁶ « [Rachilde] ne fut donc pas la maîtresse de Catulle, et le docteur Lassègue dut venir (visite de charité) étudier l'étonnant problème de l'hystérie arrive au paroxysme de la chasteté dans une milieu vicieux. »

female Decadent but to illustrate the ways her fiction (her autobiographical work included) plays with Decadent expectations concerning the relationship between women and nature/surface on the one side and men and culture/depth on the other in subversive and often surprising ways that enable her work to be described as feminine horror. Rather than read Rachilde's treatment of nature as "hostile and always characterized in feminine terms," I interpret the Rachildean landscape as both a byproduct of and identified with misogynistic Decadence (Holmes, *French* 65). To be a woman in Rachilde's texts is either to be a monster or be killed.⁷ This is equally applicable to Rachilde's own perception of herself as a kind of hysterical fiend whose "animal instincts" ensure her survival as an infiltrator among the enlightened men of the fin-de-siècle literary circles (*Why* 72). When berated by a bourgeois woman for simply not starving while she lived in poverty before writing *Monsieur Vénus*, Rachilde tellingly quips, "Ah! Madame! To live is still for monsters, as for everyone else, the greatest joy" (*Death*, original emphasis, 22).⁸ As early as the turn of the 20th century, Rachilde recognized the representational power she gained by embracing horror as a mode of self-presentation. Rachilde's use of the term monster for herself as a Decadent author who re-narrates her life to imitate her art points toward later, fictionalized performances of woman in/as horror that this dissertation will explore.

In the autobiographical preface to *To Death*, Rachilde gives a brief but telling narrative of her birth, childhood, and youth as if she herself is a character in one of

⁷ Here I refer to Angela Carter's astute observation that "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" (*Sadeian* 30).

⁸ « Ah ! Madame ! c'est que vivre est encore pour les monstres comme pour les autres la suprême joie ! ... »

her novels. On the moment of her coming into the world, she writes:

Mademoiselle Rachilde was born in 1860 at Cros (one would say “hole” in Patois) between the Château l’Evêque and Périgueux. Cros was a humid place around which grew a multitude of periwinkle, ivy, creeper, willows and truffles. In front of the house was a pond filled with frogs; behind were farms filled with badly raised, illegitimate children. The humidity in the garden prevented the strawberries from ripening, the radishes were eaten by a beast that was never seen, and the cows in the stable, when they lost themselves in the garden, would run dry...Rachilde came into the world in a chamber that faced the frog pond lined by wild oats. (original emphasis, 5)⁹

Here Rachilde narrates her coming into existence as an event intimately linked to infectious, unhealthy nature. The frog pond as locale is a site that gains especial significance in her work and plays an important role in her autobiography. It is the place both where she possibly attempts to commit suicide by drowning as a young woman and also the pool that births the figure of the drowned man, a specter from Rachilde’s nightmares who reappears throughout her fictional texts and her memoirs. Critics have made much of the figure of the drowned man, or “*noyé*.” Hawthorne reads him as a representation that oscillates between a prohibitive, patriarchal injunction that demands Rachilde’s authorial voice be silenced and the author’s desire to join the realm of the dead as a rejection of traditional marriage and an embrace of “a maternal connection to writing” (62). Finn, by contrast, locates in the figure of the

⁹ « *Mademoiselle Rachilde naquit en 1860 au Cros (ça veut dire trou en patois) entre Château-l’Evêque et Périgueux. Ce Cros était une propriété humide autour de laquelle poussait trop de pervenche, trop de lierre, trop de vigne vierge, trop de saules et trop de truffes. Devant la maison, des grenouilles dans un étang ; derrière, des fermes remplies de petits enfants peu légitimes, malpropres. Au jardin l’humidité empêchait les fraises de rougir, les radis étaient mangés par une bête qu’on ne voyait jamais, et les vaches de l’étable, quand elles s’égarèrent dans ce jardin, tarissaient...Rachilde vint donc au monde dans une chambre du Cros en face de la mare aux grenouilles, côté des folles-avoines. »*

noyé a repressed memory of possible childhood abuse (153). Perhaps what is most uncanny about the *noyé*'s characterization in *À Mort* is the way Rachilde parallels her own birth with the emergence of the terrible figure from the family frog pond and, in doing so, ensures a link between herself and the monstrous realm of the dead.

Rachilde describes the *noyé* as

A monstrous thing which raised itself above the dark water of the mysterious pond, a sort of large, immense, and pale cadaver, its arms hanging before it, the head bobbing on its shoulders, and the water all around it seemed to raise itself, horrified, in large, mute waves. She felt a quiver, opened her mouth to call for help. The deformed drowned man walked through the water, stretching himself in the direction of the willows which moved to let him pass...and in a voice that was not human he cried across the night: 'You will never speak, never.'
(*Death*, original emphasis, 10)¹⁰

This “simple imagination of a young girl” with its “green, inflated head” is connected to Rachilde not only geographically (both are intimately linked to the pond) but also physically. Rachilde makes special note that she “*came into the world with a deadly pallor*”¹¹ that she kept always as a result of her mother’s viewing of a corpse while pregnant. (*Death*, original emphasis, 5).¹² The interplay of these gazes and their respective reproductions (Rachilde’s mother’s gaze upon the corpse that births Rachilde and Rachilde’s gaze upon the *noyé* that births this autobiographical preface)

¹⁰ « ...Rachilde vit une chose monstrueuse s'élever au-dessus de l'eau sombre du mystérieux étang, une sorte de grand, d'immense cadavre blême les bras tendus en avant, la tête ballottant sur les épaules, et l'eau tout autour semblait se soulever d'horreur en grosses vagues muettes. Elle eut un frisson, ouvrit la bouche pour appeler au secours. Ce *noyé* difforme marchait dans l'eau, il s'éloigna dans la direction des saules, les saules s'écartèrent pour le laisser passer...et une voix qui n'était pas humaine cria à travers la nuit : “Tu ne parleras jamais, jamais...” »

¹¹ « Il paraît que Rachilde en venant au monde était d'une pâleur mortelle... »

¹² Despite Baudelaire’s assumption in “Carrion” that only the male poet has the ability to transform abject materiality into art, Rachilde’s mother proves him wrong by gazing at the corpse and transforming the impression into what would become Rachilde.

is a complex one with obvious connections to the horrors of materiality and of giving birth more generally. Rachilde's birth and the emergence of the *noyé* closely link the interplay of surface and depth not only within Rachilde's budding career as a young author but also within the female body which is simultaneously projective surface (the mother's eyes report back the image of the corpse onto the infant's skin) and threatening depth (the womb as a site of horror as well as desire, the pond's murky waters, its unknown measure). Rachilde situates herself somewhere in the middle. As a Decadent woman, a "savage plant" who totally embraced both her familial connection to the legend of the werewolf¹³ and her gendered identification as a hysteric as well as a writer,¹⁴ Rachilde overcomes the threat of the *noyé*'s injunction and his lair of "*glaucous water at the base of which there is nothing*" by "*penetrat[ing] right away to the bottom of the abyss, sure that she would never again encounter the drowned man*" (*Death*, original emphasis, 12, 13).¹⁵ This penetration, a much debated possible suicide attempt, is both a return to a monstrous womb (that Rachilde herself has created) and an affirmation of the ineffectiveness of this very trope. Rachilde plays into the stereotype of the abject by plumbing the depth of the

¹³ For a succinct account of Rachilde's family history and the legend of the werewolf, which is passed down through her mother's side of the family and is instigated as a result of her great-grandfather turning his back on the church, please see Hawthorne (21). When Rachilde learned of this family curse she was "filled with a wild joy; I finally belonged to the animal race!" ["« Je fus remplie d'une joie folle ; j'appartiens enfin à la race animale ! »] (*Face à la peur* 55, qtd. in Finn 151).

¹⁴ "I am a creature gifted, like all women, with excessive nerves, and if I am not a *neurotic* because I carry myself well, I can take the tone, like all of them, when I move away from good common sense" (*Why*, original emphasis, 7). ["« Je suis une créature douée, comme toutes les femmes, d'excessives nervosités et si je ne suis pas une *névrosée* car je me porte fort bien, je peux en prendre le ton, comme elles toutes, lorsque je m'éloigne du commun bon sens. »]

¹⁵ « ...cette eau glauque au fond de laquelle il n'y a rien...rien... » ; « Elle pénétra d'emblée au fond du gouffre, sure de ne plus rencontrer le noyé... »

pond as primordial abyss, all the while denouncing this characterization as nothing more than titillating fodder for her self-construction as a monster. Rachilde's self-presentation as simultaneously the subject and the product of the Decadent text places her in a liminal space between the material and the figurative, the inscribed, artificial surface of the genre and its frightening depth which her materiality as a woman both stands for and covers over. Throughout her short stories and novels, this tension between material landscape and figurative language is the main source of horror and is much more terrifying than any of the literal monsters. Among these ghastly creatures are a young boy who endlessly repeats the moment of his mother's murder and the discovery of her infidelity through the skinning and selling of frogs; a necrophilic lighthouse keeper who preserves severed female heads in glass jars; and a dead doppelganger who arises from the deep waters of a tranquil forest pond to interrupt a romantic tryst. Even after Rachilde's self-described suicide attempt in the frog pond, her newfound freedom is tainted by the fact that she still "carries at the base of her darkened eyes...the reflection of the far away pond," an admission eerily echoed by her friend and colleague Jean Lorrain in an editorial piece entitled "Miss Salamander" [« Mademoiselle Salamandre »]: "Oh! Those eyes! Eyes that are long, very long, weighed down by incredible eyelashes and with the clarity of water, the eyes of a flower or a child, eyes that ignore everything, and one would believe that Rachilde didn't see at all with those eyes, but that she had others behind her head for searching and discovering fragrant truffles, and with these heady spices she seasons

her wild imaginings...” (6).¹⁶ In this excerpt Rachilde’s eyes are disorienting reflections of a phantasmatic landscape that do not actually see anything since they are simply a mirage. Her true eyes, which she must conceal on the back of her head, take on the wrong sense and become organs of smell rather than sight. With these curious orbs she plucks the bounty of the landscape, and it is this connection to the earth that, finally, enables her to produce text. Lorrain’s description of Rachilde transforms her into what she knew herself to be all along: a monster. She is a creature with false eyes at the front and “true” eyes at the back of her head that smell rather than see. In addition to unintentionally revealing male Decadence’s fear of feminine powers of representation (a problem solved by making Rachilde blind) Lorrain credits the earth for Rachilde’s textual production. So, while he admits that Rachilde produces exquisite writing, the words only come into being when she forages like an animal, harvesting words like a pig does truffles. Feminine language roots in the material, the bodily, and the earth rather than the figurative, the intellectual, or the transcendent.

Once again, Rachilde’s body and her mind are mapped onto the landscape in such a way that she becomes indistinguishable from the country in which she was raised. This connection is unsurprising when one considers that “Decadents identified nature with woman—or, more specifically, with woman as a sexual being” (Holmes,

¹⁶ « ...et des yeux...oh ! les yeux ! Des yeux longs, longs, alourdis de cils invraisemblables et d’une clarté d’eau, dans yeux de fleur ou d’enfant, des yeux qui ignorant tout, à croire que Rachilde ne voit pas avec ces yeux-là, mais qu’elle en a d’autres derrière la tête pour chercher et découvrir les truffes odorantes et les piments enragés dont elle assaisonne ses élucubrations ... »

French 65).¹⁷ The image of the Baudelairean femme fatale whose eyes are empty, reflective surfaces that conceal a terrifying depth is here brought to the fore. For both Lorrain and Baudelaire, the Decadent woman's eyes are a feature of utmost importance, but as mirrors that reflect text, not as organs that produce it. Because of Rachilde's disorienting status as both woman and author, Lorrain transforms her physical body into a kind of authorial freak show. The purpose of this metaphorical abnormality is the covering over of a feminine materiality that enables text. While male writers assume the transcendent realm of the figurative, Rachilde is left to teeter between the uncanny realm of representation (her false eyes like any other woman's: empty mirrors) and the base materiality of her "real" eyes with which she must acknowledge her debt to the earth. In Lorrain's editorial, Rachilde's dependence on nature becomes an open secret that, though common knowledge, must not be directly acknowledged.

In Baudelaire's "You'd Sleep With Anyone..." [« Tu mettrais l'univers entier... »] the impure yet desirable muse is a "blind and unfeeling instrument of pain" whose "eyes, lit up like shops to lure their trade...insolently make use of borrowed power / and never learn...what law it is that governs their *good looks*" (*Flowers*, original emphasis, 32).¹⁸ Likewise, the narrator of "Beauty" [« La Beauté »] is equipped with eyes that are also powerful mirrors: "...to bind these docile lovers

¹⁷ Bernheimer makes much the same argument when he claims that in "the fantasy world of Decadent naturalism," when the woman is also a desiring subject, "the entire economy of nature is eroticized in function of female desire" (98).

¹⁸ « Machine aveugle et sourde... » ; « Tes yeux, illuminés ainsi que des boutiques... Usent insolamment d'un pouvoir emprunté / Sans connaître jamais la loi de leur beauté » (209).

fast / I freeze the world in a perfect mirror: / the timeless light of my wide eyes”
(*Flowers* 25).¹⁹ Lorrain’s short story “Glaucous Eyes” tells a similar tale, of a woman named Nelly Forah, whose eyes contain “the fatal attraction of the Void” and hold “the reflection of the fond farewell of a dying man. They retain within their tears the eternal youth of a worshipful lover who died while looking into them” (*Nightmares* 63). Like Rachilde’s mother, whose impression of a corpse left an indelible mark on her unborn child, Nelly’s eyes both reflect male subjectivity and promise its erasure in feminine indifference. They are “the incarnation of the death-wish, the fatal attraction of the void...She is a sorceress, and not merely because her eyes are blue, the color of the sky, of the ocean and of dreams. That is part of it, certainly, and without that primordial and celestial coloration Nelly’s eyes could not possess that which now lives and dreams in them...” (63).

Rachilde also tackles the theme of women’s eyes as reflective surfaces in a variety of her texts. For example, in her 1916 novel *The Tower of Love* [*La tour d’amour*] a middle-aged, necrophilic lighthouse keeper embalms the severed head of one of his drowned conquests in a glass jar. The head is discovered peering out from the porthole of a locked cabinet from which it has a view of the sea by the keeper’s apprentice, Jean, while he is completing repairs on the lighthouse walls: “It was like the wall of an aquarium where a rare monster swam. But one could see well enough, all the same, to discover long, tear-stained hair, blond, discolored, nearly white,

¹⁹ « Car j’ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants, / De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles : / Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles ! » (202).

surrounding the oval of a horribly sad face, the young countenance of a woman contemplating the sea with eyes full of tears...” (146).²⁰ This “head of the ocean” keeps watch over the sea better than the two lighthouse keepers ever can (150). Her eyes, perpetually open, take in and reflect an ocean repeatedly described in feminine terms; however, her status as treasured object—Matthias, the head lighthouse keeper, has preserved her meticulously as his “*dessert of love...so good, so sweet, so complacent*”²¹—comes at the cost of extreme material violence (original emphasis, 165). The beloved’s eyes, rather than “windows to the soul,” are rather pure surface, a smooth and superficial covering whose reflections confirm male mastery over landscape through their function as its subjugated double.

The eyes of the Decadent woman, whether they be the subject of poetry or those belonging to the author, are constructed as two-dimensional mirrors, planar surfaces that reflect the world back at the artist who then transforms these immaterial projections into truth, beauty, and art. This is why Rachilde must conceal her true eyes behind her false ones, for the eyes she displays to the world, according to Lorrain, do not (or rather, cannot) see at all. Her hidden eyes, rather than reflect, enable her to produce writing through an intimate, olfactory engagement with the landscape. Incapable, according to Lorrain, of producing text by the same means as her male colleagues, Rachilde must rely on the far more unsophisticated sense of a

²⁰ « C’était comme les parois d’un aquarium où nagerait le monstre rare. Mais on y voyait assez, tout de même, pour découvrir une longue chevelure éplorée, blonde, décolorée, Presque blanche, entourant l’ovale d’un visage horriblement triste, un jeune visage de femme contemplant la mer de ses yeux pleins de larmes... »

²¹ « ...pour mon dessert d’amour...Oui, bien bonne bien douce, bien complaisante ! »

smell masquerading as sight. It is Rachilde's monstrous materiality that enables her to create Decadent text; however, this corporeal grounding, this transformation of a "young girl" into "a literary monster"²² must always operate under cover (Lorrain, "Miss" 6).

Rachilde's work, despite its alternative, secretive means of production, is in the end construed by Lorrain as conventionally Decadent in its status as reflective surface. Lorrain reads Rachilde's style as actively engaging the reader on a superficial level, enabling literary comprehension through intense and unconscious affect: "She also has the charm of her style, a style over-sensitive and silky, full of light touches and of caresses that scarcely press against you, a provocative invitation that sometimes is as cutting as a razor; a style where there are flourishes as of a feathered fan and bites as of polished steel" ("Miss" 7).²³ Both cruel and kind, the Rachildean text promises a garden of sensual delights, pleasures that serve as replacements for the physical body. Her intimate, potentially subversive relationship to the earth, which she breathes in through hidden eyes, is lost when Lorrain treats Rachilde's prose as a simple mime of male writers' work. Whereas Baudelaire can write about his desired muse as an art object that inspires his prose, Rachilde is trapped by her female body. She must write as the inhabitant of femininity, not as the spectator. In short, if woman is the placeholder between the male Decadent artist and the natural landscape, then Rachilde must occupy both the position of artist and that of muse

²² « Ce jeune monstre littéraire »

²³ « ...elle en a fait aussi le charme de son style un style chatouilleux et soyeux, tout de frôlements et de caresses à peine appuyées, provocantes comme des invites et parfois coupantes comme un rasoir ; un style où il y a des effleurements d'éventails de plume et des morsures d'acier poli. »

simultaneously. Lorrain struggles to conceive of Rachilde as both a woman and an author who produces text comparable in style and content to her male peers. Hence the lengthy explanation of a bodily deformity that allows her to compose such alluring prose. Rachilde's presentation as a woman whose femininity is entirely the product of self-construction points to the falsehood of "natural" feminine corruption. That Rachilde herself enjoys occupying the space of the monstrous-feminine in her own work points to the importance of the Decadent movement as a space that enabled women to not only express their interest in horror, but also their own integral role in the structures of the genre.

Occupying Horror in "The Frog Killer" [« Le Tueur de grenouilles »]

Rachilde's short story "The Frog Killer" [« Le Tueur de grenouilles »] follows a young peasant boy named Little Toniot (his father is Big Toniot), who, after catching his mother in an act of infidelity, immediately reports the indiscretion to his father. Big Toniot promptly pulls his gun off the wall and murders both mother and lover on the spot. Despite feeling justified in his actions, Big Toniot is sent to prison, leaving Little Toniot to fend for himself in the family's ramshackle forest cabin. Since he is frightened of being sent to jail for poaching, Little Toniot traps, kills, and sells frogs in order to survive, an action which he treats as a repeated performance of his discovery of his mother's sexuality and also her violent death. What separates this chilling tale from the common stereotype of Decadent literature as an eternal face-off between masculine culture and "the monstrous woman," representative of "the destructive 'natural' power of the feminine," is the representation, from the

beginning, of Little Toniot as an animal who is always in complicity with the earth and totally disassociated from linguistic structures of power (Downing, *Desiring* 93). While the transgressive mother is also associated with nature symbols such as the moon and the frogs that her son will eventually hunt down and kill, these connections are presented as the product of the father's and son's imaginings and are not intrinsic to her per se. Perhaps what is most telling in Rachilde's complication of the male/culture—female/nature binary of Decadence is that the women speak while the men remain silent. The only voice that Little Toniot listens to with pleasure is that of the earth, an element that produces sound rather than language:

The earth had cried out. The earth has a means of crying that is truly *terrible*. It is a mute who can only produce the grinding of teeth. If someone, man or beast, did something forbidden, she would try to alert him, and, more faithful than a good dog, she would not spoil things by an unnecessary blow of her muzzle; a piece of rolling gravel, a pressed grain of sand, the imperceptible sound of a snail's shell breaking would suffice. (original emphasis, 83)²⁴

This understanding between Little Toniot and the earth runs so deep that its “heart...beat[s] in the little savage,” and it is not until he responds to its call, which has alerted him to his mother's extramarital affair, that he becomes a man: “It's much stronger than him, the spirit of the earth, the ancient pact concluded between men to protect themselves against the Enemy, and it pushes him past his bed and towards the bed of his father” (93, 95).²⁵ Here Rachilde presents the earth as that which is both

²⁴ « —*la terre a crié*. La terre a une façon de crier vraiment *terrible*. C'est une muette qui n'émet que des grincements de dents. Si quelqu'un, homme ou bête, fait une chose défendue, elle essaye d'avertir, et, plus fidèle qu'un bon chien, elle ne gâte pas les affaires à coup de gueule inutiles ; un gravier qui roule, du sable qu'on presse, le bruit imperceptible d'une coquille d'escargot s'écrasant lui suffisent. »

²⁵ « le cœur de la terre bat dans la poitrine du petit fauve » ; « ...c'est plus fort que lui, l'esprit de la terre, l'ancien pacte conclu d'homme à homme pour se protéger contre l'Ennemie, le pousse plus loin

loyal to and dependent on men. Woman is the enemy of both, and this shared animosity results in the joint policing of feminine bodies.

The explicit coupling of man and natural landscape united against women in “The Frog Killer” runs counter to the typical Decadent treatment of women as reborn Eves who are by nature in collusion with Mother Earth against men. In *Decadent Subjects*, Charles Bernheimer writes that in “the fantasy world of Decadent naturalism,” where the woman is also a desiring subject, “the entire economy of nature is eroticized in function of female desire” (98). While this certainly applies in the case of “The Frog Killer,” rather than render the mother’s desiring, sexually deviant body as indistinguishable from an equally perverse landscape, Rachilde reveals the ways the visibility of her body, in the case of Little Toniot at least, is entirely dependent on the projection of two-dimensional surfaces onto her all-too-real three-dimensional materiality. In short, the mother is only available as metaphor; she is not accessible beyond her similarity to other things. Just as in Downing’s interpretation of Baudelaire’s poetry, in which the continual probing and prodding at surface images of the female body results in the erasure of the other, leaving only “reflections of [the poet’s] desire” in her place, Little Toniot refashions the mother as a series of interchangeable signifiers based on symbolic free association (*Desiring* 81, 88). She is by turns a mirror, a moon, a pond, and, ultimately, a great white frog.

In the first example of this line of shifting disguises, we are introduced to the mother as the moon, as seen through the eyes of Little Toniot:

que son lit, jusqu’au lit de son père. »

Ah! Why didn't she enter when his teeth clattered, and he was frightened in the corner of his box? The light is so nice! And voilà, she miraculously opened the door that had been closed with a latch from the inside. Yes, it was certainly the moon, in the form of a human being, a beautiful woman, who appeared very white, due to the blackness of the night, a woman totally naked, a little fat, the hips well rounded and full such as befits a living star... (85-6)²⁶

At first, Little Toniot is comforted by this spectral apparition, especially since she seemingly materialized as a result of his desire. The situation takes a turn for the worse, however, when, after moving his hair away from his face, he sees “with an inexpressible horror, the gesture echoed on the face of the moon, as if he had seen his reflection in a mirror” (86).²⁷ It is only after bearing witness to “this huge white reflection of himself” that Toniot admits that the vision is not the moon, but actually his mother (86).²⁸ The complete loss of figurative distance between woman and natural landscape in this passage results in a metonymic slippage that characterizes many of the texts this project explores. The slippage between the mother-as-metaphor and the weighty materiality of her physical body carries a domino effect whereby the distance between Little Toniot and the landscape also contracts. If the moon-woman no longer functions as a mystical art object but only as a mother, Little Toniot loses figurative mastery over the interpretation and must confront the fact that his concept of a gender binary along the lines of natural/artificial is subjective opinion, not

²⁶ « Ah ! pourquoi n'entraît-elle pas durant qu'il claquait des dents, épeuré au coin de son coffre ? C'est si bon, la lumière ! Et voilà qu'elle ouvrit miraculeusement la porte, la porte fermée au loquet en dedans. Oui, c'était bien la lune, en personne naturelle, une belle femme très blanche à cause de la noirceur de la nuit, une femme toute nue, un peu grasse, les hanches rebondies et pleines ainsi qu'il sied à un astre vivant... »

²⁷ « ...et il vit, dans une inexprimable épouvante, ce geste se répercuter sur le front de la lune, comme il aurait pu le voir se réfléchir en un miroir. »

²⁸ « ce grand reflet blanc de lui-même »

objective truth. If one were to treat this scene as if Little Tonia were watching a film, one could say that his spectatorial mastery, the distance he maintains between himself and the woman on (moon)screen, is violated by her imitation of him. This simple gesture recalls the boy to his own body and the movements it makes, firmly grounding him in the material.

Rachilde troubles reflective reciprocity between male observer and female object as that which must be transformed into artistic surface by making the complicity between man and earth the foundation of this substitution. Woman is not *literally* the moon here, despite Little Tonia's insistence that we believe otherwise, for if she were, the earth would not betray her by alerting Little Tonia to her presence outside the home. Here Rachilde reveals that the true source of horror in the text is not the figure of the mother as a sexually powerful and potentially deadly seductress whose strength is drawn from an equally deviant landscape but rather the male child who relies on these false constructions as a means of insuring his own sense of dominance. Little Tonia's face-off with the mother-moon as his reflection rather than a monster opens up the possibility that he is the source of horror in the story. For if the mother as celestial seductress were truly evil, why is she vanquished so easily by Big Tonia? Why does the earth not rise up and protect her or the heavens crash down and conceal her? The reason for her downfall is that complicity with nature is an entirely masculine affair. The woman's body, unknowable in its interiority and materiality, is covered over superficially by something that is knowable to both father and son: the woods, whose wide expanse saves the two

Toniots from having to listen to the mother's incessant gossip and complaints. However, Big and Little Toniot's plan to gain control over the mother by making her come to represent that which they have mastery over is doomed from the start, since Little Toniot cannot help but see himself reflected in the various surfaces he makes his mother occupy, and, what is worse, this reflection reveals his enmeshment in these structures, forcing him to recognize them and himself as constructs rather than naturally given.

When Little Toniot decides to creep out of the house in response to the warning call of the earth, he is exposed to the sight of this mother having sex with a peddler—a spectacle that he can understand only by transforming his mother's body into mythic landscape:

The moon is hidden on the side of the pond where the frogs sing. Yes, the moon is over there on the first branches of the wood. It's a pretty white form, round everywhere, and it rolls on the cropped grass...and she rolls and she glides and all light escapes from her and the reflections of the red hair and the milky breast...he looks, he looks, and he laughs silently despite the way his heart fearfully tightens. He'll never forget what he sees, because it's too funny! He sees a great white frog... (94)²⁹

Despite Toniot's attempts to cover over his mother's body with the projection of an otherworldly moon, the more terrestrial image of the great white frog manages to creep in and cut him to the quick: "He looks, he looks, he has a sickness in his eyes

²⁹ « La lune est cachée du côté de la mare où chantant les grenouilles. Oui, la lune est là-bas sur les premières branches du bois. C'est une jolie forme blanche, ronde de partout, qui roule au ras de l'herbe...Et elle roule, et elle glisse, et toutes les lumières s'échappent de là, des reflets de cheveux roux, de gorge laiteuse...Il regarde, il regarde, et il rit silencieusement, malgré que son cœur se serre d'une manière affreuse. Ce qu'il voit, il ne l'oubliera plus, parce que c'est trop drôle ! Il voit une grande grenouille blanche... »

that pierces him! He will look at this all his life, inside of him, at the dead center of his heart, it will be reflected there like a poisoned spring whose reflections are simultaneously cruel and sweet” (95).³⁰ Here Little Toniot occupies the position of the typical masochistic (male) spectator of horror, and the movie he is watching, in which a woman is attacked and brutally murdered by a man for engaging in sexual conduct, would certainly be right at home as a horror plot. Just like the viewer of the horror film, Little Toniot “take[s] it in the eye” (Clover 202-3).

The image of his mother as the great white frog that he carries within him forever reveals that visual “horror can come to be deposited within us...our eyes are ‘soft’” (Clover 209). In a predictable move for the genre, Toniot’s mother represents death, the threat of material decay, and subjective erasure. However, the typical motions of the Decadent plot are thrown off course since these characteristics have much to do with Little Toniot and little to do with the mother. This idea of masculine mirroring is certainly not foreign to the authors and artists of French Decadence who took the “occupation of the woman’s body” both as their “profession” and “the means by which [they] appropriat[ed] alterity” (Spackman ix). However, Little Toniot does not want consciously to occupy the woman’s body at all. In fact, he fears it. For him, the creation of an artistic surface is a means to enact distance between his own subjectivity and his connection to the earth that the mother’s body threatens to reveal as artful construction rather than Biblical law. Little Toniot’s “aesthetic

³⁰ « Il regarde, il regarde, il en a mal à ses yeux qui lui piquent ! Il regardera cela toute sa vie, en dedans de lui, au plein milieu de son cœur, il s’y mirera comme en une source empoisonnée dont les reflets sont à la fois cruels et doux. »

objectification” of the mother is thus a reclamation of nature rather than an escape from it (Bernheimer 78). The reflection of the mother as the moon and as the great white frog reveals, rather than conceals, Toniot’s own attachment to the material landscape as an artistic surface that rests within him. This “poisoned spring” at “the dead center of his heart” subsequently becomes part of the physical landscape he traverses on his frog hunting excursions. Because the forest is now a source of horror with the power to alter his self-perception, Little Toniot attempts to resuscitate the landscape he has lost (one which he had symbolic mastery over) by returning to the moment he witnessed the spectacle of his mother’s sexually charged body and reenacting the murder of that body again and again (Spackman 49). Horror thus becomes the necessary mechanism for Little Toniot to respond to this crack in his subjectivity. In and of itself, this is not a particularly revolutionary or subversive use of the genre; however, when one considers Rachilde’s body of work as a whole, in which horror situations typically play a significant role,³¹ the possibility emerges that horror enables Rachilde to do or say something that other genres do not.

Little Toniot’s obsessive repetition of the mother’s murder takes the form of hunting, skinning, and selling frogs—frightful, ever-singing creatures whose “pernicious ponds,” much like the wellspring of horror that now dwells within his heart, are mirrors that “reflect all mysteries, attract him, fascinate him, ensorcell him” (102).³² Mirrors are a recurring theme in Rachilde’s work; however, while her

³¹ Examples across Rachilde’s oeuvre include but are certainly not limited to carnivorous roses that overtake Florence, a necrophilic lighthouse keeper, and a ghost that haunts a newly purchased country home.

³² « Les mares pernicieuses, miroirs ayant réfléchi tous les mystères, l’attirent, le fascinent,

attention to reflections is typically Decadent,³³ she also actively strays from this tradition, as Hawthorne notes:

Where modern psychoanalysts such as Lacan see the mirror as that which consolidates an image of identity...Rachilde makes the mirror the instrument that undoes identity, that reveals, rather than disguises, fragmentation. Mirrors show monsters characterized by multiplicity and proliferation (spiders, crabs, octopuses with their many legs); mirrors frighten because they show that what should be 'simple' (easy and singular) in the psyche is really complex (complicated and plural). (168-9)

In Little Toniot's case, what the reflective surfaces of the mother, the moon, and the pond reveal to be not quite so simple is the tension between figure and background, surface and depth, material and figurative—concepts that the Decadent genre tends to place in binaries across gender lines. The effect these feminized surfaces have on Little Toniot's ability to "correctly" perceive his own reflection is what prompts him to take on the role of serial killer. The other main motivation for Little Toniot to slowly but surely eliminate frogs from the countryside is the frightful noise they make; although he "no longer thinks" the frogs are able "to call out human words" and issue "sharp interjections like children who amuse themselves to excess, and shout in puerile anger" (102, 103).³⁴ Despite Little Toniot's familiarity with nature and his "pact" with the earth against their common "enemy," after the death of the mother the woods and its inhabitants no longer afford him the same comforts.

l'ensorcellent. »

³³ "The [use of the mirror as a device in Decadent and Symbolist work] illustrates the narcissism of the hero and can also be used as a device to create a double, an evil twin through whom the darker, irrational side of the self that Freud was just beginning to expose could be explored" (Hawthorne 166).

³⁴ « Mais Toniot ne pense déjà plus. » ; Du milieu de leur sabbat elles lancent des mots humains, elles ont des interjections aiguës ainsi qu'en ont les enfants qui s'amuse à l'excès, ou s'égosillent dans une colère puérile. »

Previously a place where Father and son went to escape domestic annoyances, the woods now become overwhelmingly Decadent, overwhelmingly feminine, a landscape of horror for the little boy who makes it his mission to reconquer what he believes he has lost. The last third of the story is also the place where the text revels in opportunities for narrative stasis—laboring under unnecessary and effusive description rather than plot development—and luxurious descriptions of the violence done to the frog-women, beings who have now overtaken Little Toniot’s connection to nature and claim it as their own. Even as she is being hunted down for murder, the mother manages to gain more power after her death and reincarnation into an army of incessantly singing frogs than she ever managed to hold while alive and participating in petty domestic squabbles. As a revenant, she ghosts the landscape in a haunting that is beyond Little Toniot’s means of figurative control. No longer able to master the representation of his mother as some sort of mythic muse, Little Toniot must now navigate an effusively Decadent landscape that has entirely escaped him. The frogs, who speak in a never-ending stream of feminine babble that is “half prayer, half curse, the litanies of hysterics” are now the ones in control of the narrative, not the other way around (101).³⁵ And although the story ends with Little Toniot’s literal murder and metaphoric rape of a sack of frogs, this violent conclusion does not negate the moments where the text dwells on the horror of landscape as a potential site of pleasure and freedom for feminine subjects.

³⁵ « moitié prières, moitié jurons, litanies d’hystériques »

This unusual power dynamic complicates more straightforward readings of the text, such as the one by Holmes. She dismisses the tension Rachilde creates between a feminized landscape and a masculine Symbolic by arguing that “the child is male and thus can assume the father’s power”; nevertheless, Little Toniot’s transformation from boy to man is repeatedly undercut throughout the narrative (*French* 74). We never witness Little Toniot achieve Symbolic mastery; in fact, he is under the influence of an aggressive and powerful nature that “speaks” far more effectively than he does. The woods, a setting that produces horror and is itself horrific, thus also become a site of feminine (frog) agency as the narrative succumbs to typically “feminine” qualities associated with Decadence: excessive description, nature as morbid seductress, stagnation of plot development, etc. Although Decadence is often assumed to be a literary genre ruled by misogyny that makes use of feminine props to promote patriarchal ends, in “The Frog Killer” Rachilde permits the “what if” of feminine pleasure in the horrors of Decadence. This luxury comes to an abrupt halt, however, by the introduction of the material reality of violence against feminine bodies. Beginning with Big Toniot’s reassurance to his son that “I’ve brought you the meat!” after the mother’s murder and continuing on with Little Toniot’s serial-killer-like massacre of the frog women that finishes off the text, “The Frog Killer” argues that the realities of material violence and the circulation and exchange of feminine bodies, are the true enemies (96).³⁶

³⁶ « j’tè rapporte de la viande ! »

In order to perpetuate the illusion that he can separate himself from and enact dominion over woman and the natural landscape, Little Toniot repeats the moment when he is made simultaneously vulnerable (exposure to the mother's body) and powerful (on equal footing with the father as those who bring home meat but are not meat themselves). The frogs he hunts are "poor little monsters" who have been drawn in by a piece of red thread that recalls the dead mother's tongue (104).³⁷ Once hooked, they "agitate their little rear paws like the legs of a girl who is violated" (104).³⁸ After their capture, the fallen prey are placed in a "long sack of toile that Toniot had cut from his mother's last chemise" and are promptly disrobed (105).³⁹ In filling out his mother's clothes, the frogs literally take on what the reader can likely only accept as figurative: they become the mother's body and tread the fine line between materiality (they are quite literally frogs) and metaphor (they symbolically cover over that which can never and should never be reached). Their death is both erotic and horrific, a violent confirmation of their role as victims: "On his knees before the pile of little cadavers, he undresses them, removes the double loop of their golden eyes, raises their pretty dresses of green satin, their sweet petticoats of white velvet. Everything glides off pell-mell like the clothes of a doll, and he does not rest until the naked thighs, very pale, shake with nervous shudders" (105).⁴⁰ Little Toniot's assault of the

³⁷ « les pauvres petits monstres »

³⁸ « Elle agite ses petites pattes de derrière comme des jambes de fille qu'on viole... »

³⁹ « Un long sac de toile qu'il a taillé dans la dernière chemise de sa mère. »

⁴⁰ « A genoux devant le tas de petits cadavres, il les déshabille, leur ôte la double boucle de leurs yeux d'or, leur enlève leur jolie robe de satin vert, leurs mignonnes culottes de velours blanc. Tout cela glisse pêle-mêle comme des vêtements de poupée, et il ne reste plus que les cuissettes nues, très pales, agitées de frissons nerveux... »

frog-women is a brutal attempt to reinscribe them in an interpretive framework in which he occupies the role of killer, and the frogs are natural-born victims. This is one version of “The Frog Killer” as a Decadent horror film. Another reading reveals a different kind of horror, one which is present in the text prior to Little Toniot’s slaughter of the frogs. In this version, the frogs enjoy their status as creatures associated with the monstrous feminine and luxuriate in a mystical landscape where they are quite at home:

When night falls, one can hear them chattering, croaking, in the depths of all the ponds of the forest...the beautiful ponds, cups of murky crystal brimming with foam, full of a mysterious liqueur that is an equal mixture of the poison of rotten autumn leaves and the purest honey from spring flowers, from the iris, the waterlily, the arrowhead, and the periwinkle, the gloomy periwinkle who plaits itself in braids to embrace the legs of hunters. (100)⁴¹

Because the narrative is so explicit about the frogs’ pleasure in their role as little monsters, male violence (here in the form of Little Toniot’s assault) becomes a generic potential rather than a requirement. Horror itself is no longer at issue—the erasure of feminine pleasure in horror becomes the true enemy in the text.

Unfortunately, the mother-as-frog in “The Frog Killer” never manages to retreat back to her pond, since it has been appropriated by Little Toniot as a mirror. His attempts to redefine the landscape as the “natural” repository of feminine materiality, one which he is able to hold dominion over in his role as hunter, obscures

⁴¹ « Dès la tombée de la nuit, on les entend jacasser, coasser, du fond de toutes les mares de la forêt, les mares entourant sa maison, les belles mares, coupes de cristal glauque débordant des mousses, pleines d’une liqueur mystérieuse où se mélange à dose égale le poison des feuilles pourries de l’automne et les plus pur miel des fleurs du printemps, des iris, des nymphéas, des sagittaires et des pervenches, des sombres pervenches qui se tressent en nattes pour enlancer les jambes des traqueurs de bêtes. »

its use as a stage for the playful performances of the frogs who haunt Little Toniot with their “sinister cries of rage” from the comfort of “cloudy ponds” (100).⁴² In focusing on the frogs as a collective femme fatale figure who revels in her role as horrifying seductress, Rachilde reframes the Decadent text as a site of feminine horror. In this case, the binary of material versus figurative, natural versus artificial, and representation versus original are no longer binaries but endless substitutions. The “natural” is just as artificial as the representation. The narrator calls out this the generic tendency to foreclose the possibility of subversive feminine occupation in the last lines of the narrative. For even though Little Toniot reads his role as frog-killer as proof of his re-instatement as master of representations, the narrator proves him wrong: “And the fixed eyes of the man had a strange flame, a glimmer of greed or of hate, while in the distance the dogs howled at the moon, dreaming of biting death in the ass” (105).⁴³ The crude phrasing here is all the more startling given the narrative’s prior tendency toward excessive, lyric description. It draws explicit attention to the narrator’s contempt for Little Toniot’s attempt to make nature and mother metonymically fill in for each other by staging the repeated performance of his mother’s infidelity and subsequent slaughter, actions that do not actually give him any sort of mastery over the intelligibility of her body. The male response to feminine horror is so inept that it is transformed into comedy. Rachilde’s lengthy and elaborate descriptions of the frogs, are, to this reader at least, more fascinating by far than the

⁴² « leurs sinistres vociférations » ; « mares troubles »

⁴³ « ...Et les prunelles fixes de l’homme ont une flamme étranger, lueur de convoitise ou de haine, durant qu’au loin les chiens hurlent à la lune, rêvant de mordre la Mort au cul. »

maniacal Little Tonia, whose obsessive masculine aggression in response to uncontrollable erotic feminine agency will become endemic to the slasher horror film seventy years later. Rather than a fascination with the serial killer (an allure that holds fans in thrall to film franchises like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween* and is evident in the recent popularity of true crime media) Rachilde clearly sides wholeheartedly with the frogs, whose alluring songs and glowing eyes suggest a pleasure in performance that does not involve Little Tonia at all—that their motives lie in bewitching him is nothing more than a personal delusion. Their private language and languid amusements take place whether or not Tonia is present. In turn, Rachilde “make[s] ‘visible,’ by an act of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (Irigaray, *This Sex* 76). Rachilde’s oeuvre is steeped in the power of feminine language and resounds with the theories of French feminists Irigaray and Cixous despite its production over seventy years prior to the second-wave feminist movement in France. What is particularly striking about this particular aspect of Rachilde’s work, apart from its status as a kind of avant la lettre *écriture féminine*, is that feminine language is not only accessed through the body (which is how Cixous theorizes it) but through a particular kind of performance of horror. It is through horror that Rachilde bypasses Decadence’s seemingly unalterable masculine bias and enters a literary space where the price of entry is the assumed loss of feminine agency. And it is through the conventions of horror, not in spite of them, that her

women characters are able to experience a pleasure that is quickly transformed to pain by the material violence of patriarchal actors who fail to properly perceive it.

Sadistic Mirroring in “Pleasure” [« Volupté »]

Rachilde’s Decadent mimesis is also on display in her brief, one act play “Pleasure” [“Volupté”] in which the author’s favorite natural feature, the pond, takes center stage. Around this “enormous moon of water,”⁴⁴ the two principal characters play a game in which the girl, known only as “She,” names all the things that give her pain and the boy, similarly named “He,” names all the things that give him pleasure. It soon becomes obvious, however, that for this pair the two sensations are inextricably linked. The girl initiates this perverse discourse and reveals to the boy such varied pains as playing a high note on the piano over and over again, caressing satin sheets, and smelling hyacinths. This game immediately establishes the couple’s relationship as sadomasochistic as they both divulge particular moments in which pain and controlled fear enable them to access immense pleasure. The boy even goes so far as to perform a metaphoric castration on himself in which he holds a razor just above his index finger only to pull it away at the last possible moment. Despite his escape from this self-inflicted danger, he still fantasizes that he sees his blood “streaming to the earth, and that [his] finger has fallen and wriggles like a piece of a red serpent” (181).⁴⁵ In this scenario, fear of castration is something that starts and ends with the boy’s personal fantasy and from which the woman as potential violator

⁴⁴ « comme une énorme lune d’eau »

⁴⁵ « Je crois que je vois ruisseler mon sang par terre, et que mon doigt est tombé en gigotant comme un morceau de serpent rouge. »

is totally absent. In contrast, the girl presents herself (in a move that aligns with typical Western philosophy on the feminine) as an infinitely penetrable body totally open to sensation. In one example, she describes playing a single note on the piano for hours until the repetition of the sharp sound in her ear results in auditory orgasm: “I repeat it for hours, only hitting a single chord, this single sharp note, always, always, my wrist heats me up. The sound becomes the noise of crystal perpetually breaking, it’s ending, ending, and it tells me extraordinary things. It enters in my ear like a curled feather, a quill of diamond, a paintbrush of velvet. The other night, if mother had not come into the room, I would have fallen down still and broken myself in two pieces” (184).⁴⁶ This ecstatic fervor, which positions the girl early on as someone who controls language—the quill of diamond which penetrates her ear—and manipulates it in order to produce performances of erotic abandon.

Once the girl’s sadistic pleasures become too much for the boy to comprehend, he hastily redefines her as a flat image, a mirror that confirms his status as a man. Before he accomplishes this feat, however, the girl’s tales of pain allow her to reveal how these secret pleasures are themselves enmeshed in the political discourse of language, power, and knowledge. For example, the girl points out that there are things they’ll never know because they won’t ask their parents, but quickly follows up this statement with the caveat that the boy, since he is a man, “should

⁴⁶ « ...je le répète, durant des heures, j’arrive à ne frapper qu’un seul accord, que cette seule note aiguë, toujours, toujours, le poignet m’en cuit. Ça dévient comme un bruit de cristal qu’on brise perpétuellement, c’est fin, fin, et cela me dit des choses extraordinaires. Ça entre dans mon oreille comme une plume frisée, une aigrette de diamant, un pinceau de velours. L’autre soir, si maman n’était pas venue au salon, j’allais tomber raide et je me serais cassée en deux morceaux... »

know” (180). In response to her overt reference to his privilege as a man, the boy feigns ignorance and points to his youth and inexperience. His lack of knowledge is the result of his lack of masculinity (for now) and his status as “only...a boy” works to separate him from the implicit accusation she makes against him as a member of the more powerful sex (180). This linguistic sleight of hand on his part functions as an attempted erasure of the gendered power imbalance between the two and justifies his “horrified” reaction to the girl’s speech (180).⁴⁷

Undeterred, the girl quickly reminds him that “Everything that happens to us is not natural,” before continuing her litany of pleasurable pains (180).⁴⁸ By prefacing her descriptions of desire with the observation that perhaps both sexual difference and language are unnatural constructs, the girl calls into question everything that follows in the text, the first half of which consists of the couple’s game of dueling narratives of desire. This battle of sensory experience reaches its climax with the girl’s anecdote about smelling hyacinths: “I throw my dress above my head and I clasp the flower in my arms so that the perfume fills my nose entirely, and I breathe...I breathe...it seems to me that I’m eating honey when the bees brush against my eyelashes with their wings of sugar! (she swoons). You can never understand! But it’s so delicious that I forget you!” (185).⁴⁹ The girl’s description of becoming completely enraptured by the hyacinth illustrates the ease with which she is able to meld herself with a

⁴⁷ « Et moi, j’ai horreur de ta manière de parler ! »

⁴⁸ « Non ! Ce n’est pas naturel tout ce qui nous arrive. »

⁴⁹ « Je jette ma robe par-dessus ma tête et j’entoure la fleur de mes bras pour que le parfum me monte tout entier dans le nez, et je respire...je respire...Il me semble que je mange du miel pendant que les abeilles en s’envolant me frôlent les paupières de leurs ailles de sucre ! (Elle se pâme.) Tu ne peux rien y comprendre ! Mais c’est si délicieux que je t’en oublie ! »

sensory image. She takes this collapse even further than she had with the piano note when she erases all difference between herself and the plant:

She. –Do you know the scent of the hyacinth?
HE (ironically). —The scent of a hyacinth, probably.
SHE. –No, the scent of my heart!
HE. –So you have already smelled your own heart!
SHE. –Yes! I am sure that it’s a sachet full of bellflowers.
HE (laughing). –It’s not possible! Show me?
SHE (sighing). –Oh! no, you can never see it. (185)⁵⁰

In this sequence, the girl’s experience of a sensorial synesthesia that confuses sight, smell, touch, and taste effectively erases any difference between her body and the natural landscape and anticipates the collapse of the feminine spectator onto her two-dimensional screen double in twentieth-century feminist film theory. However, the girl’s purposeful positioning of herself as sensory image, a heart literally comprised of hyacinths, initiates a mode of perception that requires a level of engagement of which her male companion is entirely incapable. In taking herself literally as landscape, the girl acknowledges the primacy of her materiality while also participating in a playful performance of linguistic excess. If “the representation of space is...a correlate of one’s ability to locate oneself as the point of origin or reference of space, [and] the space represented is a complement of the kind of subject who occupies it,” the girl’s representation of herself in/as space is the recreation of a world that she is pleased to occupy (Grosz, *Space* 90). Contrary to the ubiquitous ideological coupling of the visual with the masculine and sensation with the feminine,

⁵⁰ « Elle. –Sais-tu ce que ça sent, la jacinthe ? / Lui (ironique). –Ça sent la jacinthe, probablement. / Elle. –Non, ça sent mon cœur ! / Lui (agacé). –Tu as donc respire déjà ton cœur ! / Elle. –Oui ! Je suis sûre que c’est un sachet rempli de fleurs en clochettes. / Lui (riant). –Ce n’est pas possible ! Montre voir ? / Elle (soupirant). –Oh ! non, tu ne le verras jamais. »

here sight is only valid if it is accompanied by radical physical sensation and transformation—an activity in which men are implicitly unable to participate.

The distance between body and landscape, spectator and image is carefully maintained by the boy, who calls the girl's notions of botanic transcendence "ridiculous" (185). In contrast, the girl's "*assimilation to space*" (Caillois, original emphasis, 30) aligns with phenomenological understandings of awareness as "a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 291). As such, her behavior is akin to Caillois' description of the mimetic behavior of Jupiter moth caterpillars who "simulate shoots of shrubbery so well that gardeners cut them with their pruning shears" and "suggest hysterical contraction" (25, 31). These "hysterical" creatures have incorporated themselves so well into the background that they are mistaken as that which they imitate. The girl, who also positions herself as inaccessible through sight alone (the boy must smell her heart in order to perceive it), will suffer a similarly violent fate. Frustrated at his inability to access his lover's heart—an organ constructed according to the girl's own terms—the boy will reinterpret her body as a more easily digestible two-dimensional image, even though the price is her death.

The danger of mimicry for the Decadent woman (a danger that will also come to be synonymous with the 20th century feminine film spectator) is that she will quite literally become that which she subversively imitates. This proves true in "Pleasure"

when a fly lands on the girl, and her companion cries out in delight, “Look! They take you for a plant. It has smelled your heart no doubt” (186).⁵¹ Here the boy seemingly acquiesces to the girl’s perspective and recognizes her active participation in an ontology that effectively removes her from systems of male exchange. This submission is short lived, however, and soon the boy suggests an alternative game which, while appearing to align with the girl’s perspective, is only a clever means to gain sexual access to her body. Since he is unable to smell the girl’s heart, she allows him to stroke her braids instead, an offer that sends him into obsessive transports of joy: “Do they smell of hyacinth as well? Give them to me! Give me your hands, your little shell-hands! Give me your face, give me your waist...Eh! Give me everything, because I will never have your heart” (187).⁵²

Because he is unable (despite his reduction of the girl’s body to a series of dismembered parts, another trait that links him to both the ubiquitous horror film slasher-killer and to the horror genre in general) to access the girl’s body in the same way that she seemingly can, he symbolically transforms the pond near which they are reclining from material landscape to artificial mirror: “Listen! I have a way to take hold of you despite yourself. You will look in the pool and gaze at your reflection, then you will give to me to drink the water that you took from the place where you had looked. Then I will drink your portrait and you will be inside me forever!”

⁵¹ « Tiens ! Celle-ci qui te prend pour une plante. Elle a senti ton cœur sans doute. »

⁵² « Est-ce qu’ils sentent la jacinthe aussi ? Donne-les-moi ! Donne-moi tes mains, tes petites coquilles de mains ! Donne-moi ta figure, donne-moi ta taille...Eh ! Donne-moi tout, puisque je n’aurai jamais ton cœur. »

(187).⁵³ Here the boy unconsciously reveals the ways sexual politics are deeply enmeshed in the conventions of gendered gazing and in the ways bodies create, interpret, and move through space. To read the pond as a mirror is to reinstate the boy's relationship to the girl within the confines of an economy of the self-same, in which the "surface of the mirror is feminized, woman is the flat surface at which the subject gazes, sees himself, gazes that distance" (Rose 70). The girl's joyful identification with the hyacinths, a sensory image in which she openly revels and which complicates binary distinctions between the literal/material and artificial/figurative, is replaced by a reading of her body-image that closely aligns with classic narrative cinema's treatment of women as two-dimensional images that must be thoroughly domesticated in order to divest them of any castratory threat. Although the girl's radical identification with the hyacinths and her willingness to be an open vessel that can receive the thrilling aural pleasure of a single piano note are actions that place her in a typically feminine position of formless, receiving matter, Rachilde reframes this association by presenting the girl's powerful communion with smell, sound, taste, and touch as a uniquely feminine way of perceiving the world and of acting within it. The collapse between woman and image that has plagued feminist readings of classic narrative cinema is here defined by Rachilde as an affirmative feminine ontology.

⁵³ « Écoute ! J'ai un moyen de te prendre malgré toi tout entière. Tu vas te pencher sur la Fontaine et te mirer, puis tu me redonneras à boire de l'eau que tu prendras à la place où tu te seras vue. Ainsi je boirai ton portrait et tu seras en moi pour l'éternité ! »

To the boy, it transforms his lover into a monster. In order to combat the girl's control over her representation, he introduces the pond as a kind of proto-cinema screen that will enable him to cast her in a role he is able to comprehend. This sleight of hand transforms the girl's body from something she narrates as nature to a portrait that glimmers in a pool of water and literalizes the ways in which Decadent texts so often cover over the assumed unformed materiality of the feminine with symbolic artifice. The girl's playful mimicry of nature as that which literally stands in for her heart is a substitution the boy cannot unravel. He must settle for trapping her image instead.

Despite her willingness to comply with the boy's request, the girl has a difficult time recognizing her own reflection in the pond: "I can't see myself well! Oh! This water is deep! I'll wager this pool goes through the entire earth it's so black! Ah! I see myself...I see myself..." (188).⁵⁴ This forced encounter with a mirror produces an image for the boy rather than the girl and redefines the ways her body can and should be perceived. The immediate rush of sensation and close identification with objects and sounds disappear. They are replaced by a watery screen that seems almost to give rise to Irigaray's theory of sexual morphology and the absence of difference nearly seventy-five years later: "the other must...serve to mirror the all, reduplicating what man is assumed to know already as the place of (his) production. 'She' must be only the path, the method, the theory, the *mirror*, which leads back, by

⁵⁴ « Je ne vois pas bien ! Oh ! comme cette eau est profonde ! Je parie que cette Fontaine traverse toute la terre, tant elle est noire ! Ah ! Je me vois...je me vois... »

a process of repetition to the recognition of (his) origin for the ‘subject’” (*Speculum* 239). But beyond the Irigarayan implications of this dialogue, which reveals the girl to be a reflective surface that covers over a deadly terrestrial depth, to look in the pond is also to initiate a struggle between the girl’s way of seeing herself and the world and the boy’s need for the girl to participate in an economy of visibility that he can understand. Contrary to Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage and feminist film theory that reads feminine spectatorship as an action that most often leads to a collapse onto the image, the girl struggles to recognize herself in her lover’s makeshift mirror. This misrecognition also troubles the girl’s earlier performance as a stereotypically Decadent woman—an easily malleable creature ruled by sensation—since she immediately rejects her image as muse in her lover’s mirror. The girl’s monstrous excess, her perverse sensorial pleasures that “horrify” the boy, are what prompt his attempt to duplicate and control her image—they are not products of her translation into the boy’s spectatorial practice. The horror of the Decadent woman is in this case rooted in feminine agency and performance, not in misogynist fearmongering about the nebulous but certainly dangerous threat of the feminine. The appeal of performing horror is one explanation for why feminist authors might be drawn to genres from which they are often excluded and which characterize women in general as monstrous. It is easier, and, I would argue, more subversively effective, to perform the woman in/as horror in literary and filmic spaces which have historically required women to be horrific. In doing so, the woman in/as horror not

only reclaims genres in which her active participation is often prohibited, she also affirms her own pleasure in the powers of horror.

Once he fulfills his desire to “possess” the girl’s image by ingesting her reflection, the conversation between the lovers takes a drastic turn. The girl suddenly begins to bubble over with descriptions of what their life will look like once they are married and the genre of her desire shifts from sadistic pornography to conventional melodrama. Visions of roast chicken, grey riding habits, and fresh bread dominate a discourse that only a few pages before had been far removed from typical bourgeois romance. An equally abrupt transformation of the pond echoes the transformation of the girl’s desires. The placid waters that had so lately been a source of pleasure throughout the girl’s sadistic storytelling metamorphose into a tomb in a conversion so jarring that it distracts the girl from an enthusiastic description of how she will in the future have her dresses changed over every week to keep up with the fashions: “Well! What’s that down there? It’s dark, dark! It’s gaining toward the surface and making bubbles...” (189).⁵⁵ The pond’s negative reaction to the supposed happiness of married life and positive reaction to the girl’s violent sexual desires troubles the Decadent correspondence between nature and horrifying, “natural” femininity. Here, the supposed horrors of nature are actually a trap to keep women in their place and are produced by cultural fears of female sexuality. Once the girl leans over the pond to investigate further, she loses all sense of how her body is positioned in space: “My

⁵⁵ « Enfin ! Qu’est-ce que je vois là-dedans ? C’est sombre, sombre ! Ça monte à la surface en faisant des bulles... »

God, how clear this water is! It's so blue that in this moment one could believe themselves to be leaning over a sky fallen in the moss" (189).⁵⁶ This complete loss of spatial perception takes on a new valence when it is revealed that what is rising out of the depths of the pond is actually a female corpse. While the text never confirms the identity of this mysterious body, the girl's horrified reaction and her demand that they leave the pond immediately—a site that only moments before served as a vessel for her reflection—imply that the corpse is in fact the girl's doppelgänger. In addition, the girl's almost immediate imitation of the corpse upon its arrival also gives weight to this theory. Like the newly risen figure, the girl becomes still, her voice is lost, and the text differentiates between the two bodies by referring to them as the "dead woman" and the "other dead woman." Seduced by the bourgeois narrative of matrimonial bliss, the girl is no longer able to perform the woman in/as horror. It is in the realm of conventional melodrama where she loses control of her image, and the false violence of her painful pleasures are replaced with the material violence of hegemonic romance. She is seduced not by her reflection, but by the boy's interpretation of it, and her punishment is that she must switch places with the woman in the water. To see the water as if the sky had fallen into the moss is also to take up the position of the drowned woman who lies in the water and looks up at the sky. By allowing the boy to drink her reflection and in becoming seduced by bourgeois marriage, the girl molds herself to fit the boy's limited powers of perception,

⁵⁶ « Mon Dieu, que cette eau est limpide ! Elle est tellement bleue en ce moment qu'on croirait se pencher sur un ciel tombé dans la mousse... »

abandoning the possibility of a playful embodiment of the woman in/as horror who demands the world align with her whimsical representation of her body as metaphor, her heart as a hyacinth.

It is tempting, of course, to read the figure of the drowned doppelgänger, whose “mouth, open wide, allows a glimpse of very white teeth across clear water,”⁵⁷ as somehow analogous to the figure of the *noyé* from Rachilde’s autobiographical material (190). The coincidence becomes even more uncanny when one considers that the *noyé*’s appearance is temporally linked to the efforts of Rachilde’s mother and grandmother to groom her for marriage and to Rachilde’s own efforts to “enamor herself of some hero, hearing it said that love consoles all afflictions” (*Death* 11-2).⁵⁸ That the appearance of the young woman’s drowned double occurs directly as a result of her entrapment in marriage does not seem to be a coincidence here, and the meaning, that marriage is tantamount to the death of female subjectivity, seems particularly clear. This is also true to an extent in Rachilde’s retelling of the event from her own life; however, her response to the appearance of the *noyé* is entirely different. Rather than flee the drowned figure, Rachilde embraces “A madness freely developed, in the open air of the fields. A madness that had splendid nature as its home” (*Death* 13).⁵⁹ It is in writing that Rachilde both becomes and banishes the *noyé*; by embracing her “hysterical” nature, which she intimately links to her

⁵⁷ « ...dont la bouche, ouverte toute grande, laisse voir les dents très blanches à travers l’eau pure. »

⁵⁸ « Elle avait même essayé, la jeune fille bien élevée, de s’enamourer d’un héros quelconque, entendant dire que l’amour est le consolateur des affligés... »

⁵⁹ « Une folie librement développée, au grand air des champs...Une folie ayant pour cabanon la splendide nature ! »

connection with the land surrounding her childhood home, Rachilde rewrites the pond as a site of rebirth rather than death. The young woman in “Pleasure,” however, is trapped between the two great male myths: “the Medusa and the abyss” (Cixous 885). Each houses the other in a terrifying series of substitutions and limitless interiority. Although the reader leaves the girl (“like a dead woman with her arms lifelessly hanging”) in a position that would suggest her indistinguishability from the *noyé* (an “immense cadaver” with “his arms hanging before him”), her failed struggle to produce a feminist politics of perception is vital since it augurs both the development of the importance of the mirror stage as an integral aspect of cinematic spectatorship and the affinity in second-wave feminist writing between women and the powers of horror (190; *Death* 10).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ « comme une morte dont les bras pendent inertes » ; « d’immense cadavre blême les bras tendus en avant »

Chapter Two

Persistent Vision: Erotic Violence and Performance in Angela Carter's 1970s Novels

Academic research on Angela Carter spans a wide variety of fields, including literary studies, cultural studies, and film studies; however, regardless of discipline, the topic of her complicity (or lack thereof) with genres and narratives traditionally understood to be misogynistic remains a contentious topic of Carter scholarship.

While critiques that condemn Carter as a dangerous exploiter of women, such as those by Andrea Dworkin and Robert Clark, are no longer the norm, it is difficult even now to find an essay on Carter that does not allude to her precarious stance as a “feminist” author. Maggie Tonkin, for instance, in her analysis of Carter and *Decadence*, considers whether “the stylistic and thematic affinities between [Carter and *Decadence*] constitute unmediated repetition or whether Carter’s citation of this misogynistic cultural mode opens up a space in which it can be critiqued” (5). In her seminal biographic study of Carter, Sarah Gamble remarks that

one of the most controversial areas of her work as far as feminists are concerned is both her apparent support for pornography, and her graphic depictions of violence against women in her writing, which have led some critics to conclude that, in spite of the feminist opinions she began expressing from the late 1960s onwards, she actually only furthers reactionary portrayals of women as nothing more than the objects of male desire. (4)

In a similar fashion, Gary Farnell asks whether “Angela Carter [is] a writer who *contests* or *colludes* with the forms of reality presented in and by her fiction” (original emphasis, 271). In addition, Sarah M. Henstra, who explores Carter’s use of irony as a deconstructive tactic, predicts that “the indissolubility of repetition and refutation

guarantees that [Carter's] ironic reading will encounter accusations of complicity with the text it tackles" (102). These are but a few examples from Carter scholarship that qualify claims for Carter's status as a 'real' feminist with repeated recitations of past perceptions of the author as a patriarchal accomplice. These prior allegations still hold weight in the Carter community and bring to light the potential concern that an attempt to engage with Carter's work will, like its source, be complicit in structures of oppression and misogyny. For the purposes of this chapter, the repeated need to qualify Carter and her work as positively and productively feminist proves that the primary topics of her purported collusion—sex, pornography, erotic violence, and feminine complicity—are still relevant in our current cultural moment.¹

Although Carter is, for the most part, no longer accused of misogyny or of being anti-feminist, her engagement with erotic horror, a genre particularly rife with misogynistic associations, remains largely ignored in scholarly treatments of the author. To read Carter's work in conversation with traditional narrative cinema, as Laura Mulvey does, or with de Sade's pornography, as others have, are both necessary approaches. But to take Carter's critical work to its logical conclusion—to read her novels in conjunction with specific examples of low-budget, low-brow erotic horror—is to push it to its fullest extent in an analysis of the possibilities for liberating sexual pleasure for women and the feminist politics of performance.

¹ There are a number of scholars who contest this reading of Carter as complicit in patriarchal misogyny. They include, but are not limited to, Gamble, Henstra, Jordan, Mulvey ("Cinema Magic"), Tonkin, Tucker ("Introduction"), and Wisker.

Carter characterized her interrogation and imitation of “a prominent, largely male-authored strand of European literary history, which runs from the mid-nineteenth century through Baudelaire, Poe, Sade, much of French Symbolism, the Decadent writing of the fin-de-siècle and Surrealism” (Britzolakis 766) as an active engagement with a past that possesses “important decorative functions...a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which the new lies have been based” (Carter, “Notes” 41). This kind of creative reimagining, in which Carter “put[s] new wine in old bottles” in the hopes that “the pressure of the new wine [will] mak[e] the old bottles explode” is interpreted by the author herself as a kind of active reading practice, and the primary objects under scrutiny, logically enough, are those that she feels have most aggressively promoted cultural mythologies surrounding sex, gender, and desire—i.e. erotic horror and pornography (Carter, “Notes” 37). Carter is not simply controversial because her work teeters on the pornographic; she is controversial (or at least has been perceived as such in the past) because she purposefully entangles eroticism and violence in much of her early work while self-identifying in both interviews and in non-fiction pieces as a committed feminist. Carter’s interest in these topics means that much of her fiction is intertextual with contemporary erotic horror film and points to the intersection of pornography, horror, and visual culture as the ideal meeting place for a feminist evaluation of gendered desire.²

² Farnell argues that opposition to Carter results from her propensity to mix genres: “It is not just Carter’s views, whether they are for or against this or that question, that is important. Rather, it is the general conceptualization of a range of issues that is affected by this key practice of ‘writing across’—this traversing of discourses—which makes Carter’s work distinctive” (272).

Carter's supposed betrayal of her own sex appears in her fiction both at the level of style and at the level of content. Carter herself characterized her distinctive, imagistic prose as "the only way I can write. I'm not sure what beautiful writing is. There's a certain kind of flat, pedestrian writing which I know I don't like, but I am cursed a bit by fluency, I think. I do like plain, transparent prose. I wish I could do it" (Carter, *Novelists* 91). Carter's "imaginative and linguistic excess," her "excessively descriptive passages" (Gamble 29, 32) that are "outrageously surreal" (Dimovitz 84) and "saturated with sensuous detail, with coruscating surface and ornate facades" (Britzolakis 421), is often cited as an example of her alleged tendency to get carried away by the mythologies surrounding sex and gender that she claims her work demystifies. It is this extravagant prose style, this self-conscious luxuriating in the intricate and overdrawn grammar of Decadent language, that has been read by some as proof positive of Carter's entrapment in a patriarchal Symbolic. That lavish language and flashy, overly long descriptive clauses are in and of themselves not indicative of misogyny often remains unconsidered. Carter's prose is simply too close, stylistically speaking, to a particular kind of writing practice that some believe should be eradicated altogether—men have written this way in the past, so women certainly must not write this way in the future.

In terms of content, Carter's tendency to dwell on sex and violence and her complex depictions of female characters who enjoy—or at least appear to be complicit in—their subjugation at the hands of men is exhibited as proof of her contribution to women's disempowerment. There is a disconnect here between the

reception of Carter's work in the 1960s and 70s, culminating in the release of her 1979 collection of reimagined fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, and the more lighthearted, carnivalesque novels that came later in her career, such as *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991). These later novels, with their irreverent, tongue-in-cheek humor, pull back on much of the content that made Carter's earlier output so controversial, and critical acceptance and approbation have come to them much more easily (see Henstra 99-100).³ In contrast, texts like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972), with their drawn-out descriptions and episodic plots that rely heavily on erotic violence and explicit depictions of sex, are far less "acceptable" to scholars and to casual readers. To further complicate an already intricate series of associations, Carter's tendency to dwell on images of bodies, landscapes, and erotic fantasy has resulted in a repeated critique of her ability effectively to challenge the gendered genres in which she seems so easily to participate. Cornel Bonca notes that "*Desire Machines* rages against the cruelty of sexuality but can no more offer an image of sane sexuality than it can render an interesting Minister of Determination" (60). In a similar vein, Scott Dimovitz argues that *Desire Machines* "ends with no alternative conclusion. Desiderio solves the problem of the unconscious, but this merely unwinds the logic of contemporary culture. What the world would look like without this logic—a gynoculture, a socialist

³ Clare Hanson asserts that this "celebratory tendency in Carter criticism...tends to obscure the depth and complexity of her later work" and points out "the ways in which *Nights at the Circus* (1984), especially, has been read in terms of constructionism" (59).

regime, et cetera—the novel never addresses, as if the critique were an end in itself’ (99).

This kind of reading, which interprets Carter’s novels as exercises in narrative stasis—overly wrought prose dominates a sequence of seemingly disparate scenes in which ever-more fantastic scenarios are played out—once again marks her as an accomplice with prior male authors rather than as an investigative critic. That these particular narrative features appear in writing that is read as stereotypically feminine and in writing that is often read as overtly misogynistic is particularly noteworthy. That is, while women are criticized for producing writing that is overly emotional and heavily descriptive, these same attributes are the source of praise in late nineteenth-century Decadence (which was male dominated). Carter’s extravagant prose and sadomasochistic scenarios implicitly ask, therefore, whether Decadent-style prose is a clever co-optation of feminine experience. Her frank attitude toward the political nature of sexual relations and gendered language acknowledges the trappings of misogynistic story structures while also demonstrating the very real possibility that Decadence and, by proxy, horror, are particularly suited to describing and to re-imagining feminine ontologies.

While Carter’s novels and short stories are often read with an attention to her dual interests in pornography and cinema, it is not often that she is read in the context of both simultaneously. For instance, Charlotte Crofts, Henstra, Gregory Rubinson, Helen Stoddart, and Caleb Sivyer all connect Carter’s 70s novels with contemporary feminist film theory—in particular the screen theory popularized by Mulvey and

subsequently continued in the work of Teresa de Lauretis, Kaja Silverman, and Mary Ann Doane. Ironically, despite the general consensus that Carter's work grapples with the same kinds of problems as the critical work of second-wave feminist film theorists, women's studies scholars often treated her with suspicion and outright hostility (Gamble 98). This is likely due to both Carter's tendency to linger over lush, descriptive imagery depicting feminine violation and her rejection of the myth of the mother, a figure whose presence loomed large in the work of popular psychoanalytic feminist scholars Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Critics viewed Carter's overblown and satirical depiction of Mother in *New Eve* as a direct shot at "sacralized fantasies of a protective, conciliatory, 'all affirming' mother" (Rubinson 725), and her claims in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) that "all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses" only added to the critical divide (5).⁴

While the most prominent example of pornography that likely comes to readers' minds when they think of Carter is the work of the Marquis de Sade, which she explored at length in her critical non-fiction work *Sadeian Woman*, Carter's engagement with the erotic and the pornographic was also an integral part of her interest in Hollywood cinema. Carter's distrust of and fascination with film and filmmaking is present throughout her work, but most especially in her 1970s novels *New Eve* and *Desire Machines*. However, while much has been written on Carter's

⁴ For a similar opinion, see Sally Keenan. Merja Makinen offers a dissenting argument and claims that Carter's characterization of Mother in *New Eve* is "so powerful that its vitality undermines the writer's overt concern to mock radical feminist idealizations of the Earth Mother" (161).

love/hate relationship with cinema and her delight in its illusory performances, much less has been written on how Carter's treatment of sex, violence, and pornographic spectacle places her firmly in conversation with exploitation and erotic horror cinema. Like the lazy, seductive tableaux of the fin-de-siècle Decadents, of which Carter's work has been read as a direct facsimile,⁵ the erotic horror film privileges spectacle over narrative, impact over meaning, and style over substance. It also deploys the image of the sexualized woman as its ultimate marker of spectacular suffering (Baudelaire would have been a handy director). The woman in/as horror is the genre's most prized exhibition, the figure upon whose shoulders the weight of genre expectation and fulfillment rests most heavily. Ultimately, modes of spectatorial pleasure remain relatively static from Baudelaire's "A Martyr" [« Une Martyre »], in which the narrator lovingly contemplates the beauty of a woman's severed head at rest upon a nightstand, to Carter's *Desire Machines*, in which peepshow machines present a lucky spectator with violent and pornographic images of feminine mutilation, to something like the 1990 horror film *Click: The Calendar Girl Killer* (Hagen & Stewart), in which images of women performing elaborate, staged scenarios for a calendar shoot are intercut with depictions of their violent murders. The erotics of exploitation horror film are most often read as reactionary rather than subversive and are dependent upon the body of the performing woman as the primary marker of the literal and the material. Carter's commitment to the material and political realities of gendered violence and desire draws out the erotic horror film's

⁵ For readings on Carter's association with Decadence, see Munford and Tonkin.

intense focus on the materiality of feminine bodies that also function as spectacular images. After all, a successful exploitation film must have a woman who not only looks good in general, but who also looks good dying.⁶ What is so troubling about Carter is that she does not repudiate either image and considers both what a woman gains and what she loses by playing into her instantiation as a site of horror.

This chapter considers Carter's 1970s novels as critical manuals for a feminist approach to erotic horror that credit this much-maligned genre as an opportunity for the expression of feminine desire and erotic agency. Here, I follow in the footsteps of Henstra, who defines Carter's engagement with Sade as "performative reading," an act she considers to be "an actively supplemental or contributive treatment of a text" that "zeros in on passages that raise the curtain on the limits of the stage such that the apparatus necessary to sustaining the illusion becomes apparent" (102). Henstra echoes Gamble, who also admits that while Carter obviously revels in the excessive performativity of her texts, she "nevertheless also know[s] where all the ropes and pulleys are" (9). Like Henstra, my reading of Carter comes from a place of generosity—we share a mutual hope that feminine desire and agency can be affirmatively located in a body that knowingly puts on a show. After all, as Carter notes, "there's a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which

⁶ Masculine delight in watching a particularly attractive woman suffer has long been a commonly acknowledged facet of the thriller and horror film. Alfred Hitchcock's demand to "Torture the women!" is particularly apt here. Dario Argento, a director who toes the line between art cinema and Euro-trash, has also been famously quoted on the subject: "I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man. I certainly don't have to justify myself to anyone about this. I don't care what anyone thinks or reads into it. I have often had journalists walk out of interviews when I say what I feel about this subject" (Jones 20).

should be taken quite seriously” (*Novelists* 85). As performative readings, my interpretations of *Desire Machines* and *New Eve* follows Henstra in

insist[ing] on the relative volatility of the text, its susceptibility to redeployment of meaning and its constant renegotiation of power in the field of cultural significance. It therefore refuses to invest the subject text with the authority of a misogynistic illocutionary act, and its own elan is proof against the notion that the text relegates the female reader to a permanently objectified or silenced position. Finally, such a reading will construct its response along generic lines which themselves scrutinize the text’s structural claims. (Henstra 102)

Such a reading does not dismiss a text on the basis of genre, but rather looks to generic markers as pressure points that reveal the assumptions necessary to sustain a particular ideology.

Under these circumstances, genre, rather than functioning as an inhibitor, becomes an agent for change. Sivyler writes along similar lines when critiques readings that situate Carter’s engagement with cinema as anti-illusionistic in a bid to justify her violent narratives: “In addition to illuminating the influence of the French New Wave upon Carter’s writing, this line of interpretation attempts to make sense of her controversial representation of violence against women” (224). The anti-illusionism of French New Wave, its focus on the real conditions of everyday life, is here deployed as an intertext that exonerates, or at the very least diffuses, Carter’s life-long focus on erotic violence. Like Sivyler and Henstra, this chapter puts more stock in Carter’s obvious enjoyment of the very illusions and myths that take so well to the cinematic screen. This pleasure, which hints at a complicity in feminine subjugation and at the promising possibilities of the power of false appearances, is the root of feminist scholars’ wariness around Carter. Representation in and of itself is

not the problem. It is only by “tak[ing] cinematic illusions seriously, and show[ing] that it is by pushing such illusions to their logical extreme that [Carter’s] texts arrive at a more robust critique—a critique not just of cinema but of desire” (Sivyer 225). This play with semblance and reality, with the literal and the metaphorical, is what makes Carter’s fiction particularly cinematic. It is also what connects her work to the erotic horror film.

Carter’s first attack on popular perceptions of pornography in *Sadeian Woman* is to applaud porn that has managed to ascend to the status of “real” art. According to Carter, when the narrative functions of literature (she offers plotting and characterization as examples) are applied to pornographic media it becomes correspondingly more subversive, because “the pornographer himself is faced with the moral contradictions inherent in sexual encounters. He will find himself in a dilemma; to opt for the world or to opt for the wet dream?” (*Sadeian* 21-2). This initial reading would seem to preclude the exploitation or erotic horror film outright as a potential intertext for Carter’s fiction. After all, something like *Click* has hardly been accepted into the academic canon of art cinema. The same could be said for most low-budget erotic horror film—as a popular genre, its primary purpose is most often ascribed to mass audience entertainment and its focus on sexual violence and gratuitous nudity banish it beyond the realm of acceptable intellectual inquiry. Consequently, low-budget erotic horror would be classified, according to Carter’s logic, under the same heading as most pornography intended for the general public—a form that is overwhelmingly conservative despite its excessive censorship. If one

were to replace the term “pornography” with the term “horror” in the following quote by Carter, the import of her words remains much the same: “So pornography in general serves to defuse the explosive potential of all sexuality and that is the main reason why it is made by and addressed to the politically dominant minority in the world, as an instrument of repression, not only of women, but of men too.

Pornography keeps sex in its place. That is, under the carpet. That is, outside of everyday human intercourse” (*Sadeian* 20). This is a reading of porn/horror as reactionary. Both genres boast a mass market appeal that, coupled with their low cultural status, render them “instrument[s] of repression” that continuously screen the seemingly inevitable and endlessly repeatable scenario of women’s status as an object, by turns eroticized and murdered (often simultaneously). As tandem structures, pornography and horror defamiliarize the real world and lure their viewer in with dazzling spectacles that can be reduced to a compelling and artful simplicity concerning the role of men and the role of women and what they should do if and when they encounter one another.

If pornography and horror are both essentially conservative in nature, however, and both reinforce cultural attitudes concerning sex and gender, then why their prolonged history of censorship? Only five years after *Sadeian Woman* was published, the Video Recordings Act (1984) was passed in Britain following a campaign on the part of the National Viewers and Listener’s Association as well as conservative religious and political groups. The Video Recordings Act required the British Board of Film Classification to review and censor films before they could be

released on the video market. The so called “video nasties”—among which were violent horror and exploitation films—that precipitated this campaign had until the early 1980s been freely distributed to consumers in Britain and had not been subject to censorship laws. This move to limit access to “obscene” videos in which sexualized violence was the norm points to how the low-budget erotic horror film, despite its status as popular entertainment rather than art, is potentially disruptive to conventional ideologies concerning the intersection of sex and violence in everyday life. Conservative opposition to the free circulation of the video nasties strengthens this hypothesis. The common adage that art imitates life was reversed as concern spread that teenage boys would begin to mimic the behavior they saw depicted on their television screens and go on killing sprees, the victims of which were an imaginary throng of attractive and vulnerable young girls. Although the films it was feared that this generation of young men might imitate were not classified as “art,” they nonetheless held a high degree of cultural influence, an influence that points to the weight of “low” art forms as indicators of commonly held cultural beliefs and expectations concerning gendered behavior.

Rather than read horror as exclusively reactionary, using its violence and nail-biting scenarios as a means to reinforce prevailing conservative ideologies, I want to explore what happens if we consider extensive censorship as proof of the subversive power of horror (specifically erotic horror and exploitation horror). If porn/horror only confirm heteronormative ideologies, then why the video nasties list? Why the attempt at censorship? Here, too, Carter has a theory: “It is fair to say that, when

pornography serves—as with very rare exceptions it always does—to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas in a given society, it is tolerated; and, when it does not, it is banned” (*Sadeian* 20). The erotic horror film’s history of censorship is an implicit acknowledgement of its power to critique one that it maintains despite its status as a low art. Carter acknowledges as much when she argues that

sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and has never been the intention of the pornographer.

So, whatever the surface falsity of pornography, it is impossible for it to fail to reveal sexual reality at an unconscious level, and this reality may be very unpleasant indeed, a world away from official reality. (*Sadeian* 23)

Perhaps one reason for literary critics’ reticence to positively engage with Carter’s treatment of sex and violence is that she inhabited the “unpleasant reality” of erotic horror too well, seemed to live there a bit too comfortably. As a result, the themes and tropes she worked to dismantle through a kind of Irigarayan mimicry carry the risk of being made all the more alluring, all the more pervasive and persuasive. Does Carter’s decision to “dwell on the intensely specularised figure of woman” (Tonkin 5), her fascination with “aspects of the theatrical,” including “tableaux, peep shows, [and] filmic conventions” (Tucker, “Introduction” 2), and her “addict[ion] to performance” (Gamble 9) preclude her work being deconstructive? Or does it illustrate Carter’s canny and quite progressive understanding of the possibility that performance and illusion, pornography and sexual violence, are not intrinsically “bad” but modes of possible expression? Carter’s admission that *all* pornography, to some extent, questions the system to which it belongs illustrates the powerful

potential she saw in this much maligned medium. It also explains the reason why her own work tackles pornography in the context of the erotic horror film.

Like Carter's own oeuvre, the erotic horror film oscillates between the domain of illusion and that of reality. Because it exists in the nebulous realm between pornography's attempt at realism (unsimulated sex) and horror's gruesome obsession with special effects (the murders we see on screen do not actually occur), erotic horror belongs to both and neither of these two genres.⁷ As a result, it is situated in a unique position to demystify both. Erotic horror's propensity for troubling generic conventions emerges most clearly in Carter's tendency to lean into the literal. Carter's insistence on the materiality of the Symbolic forces pornography and Decadence, as well as psychoanalysis, to confront the monsters they have created. The intense focus on the materiality of the body as it is molded into psychoanalysis' fantastic and horrific forms—the phallic mother, the femme castratrice, the pre-historic womb—also appears in horror film, which takes these metaphors and makes them manifest.⁸ Take, for example, the grotesque external uteri that protrude like tumorous growths on the body of Nola in David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979) or the literal vagina dentata of Dawn O'Keefe in Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* (2007). Horror's obsession with the literal and the material has been used as evidence for the genre's supposed transparency—what you see is exactly what you get. This reasoning could also be

⁷ In its mixture of pornography and horror, erotic horror film is closely related to snuff, a genre that depicts both unsimulated sex and violence. Examples include *Snuff* (Michael Findlay, et al., 1976) and *Effects* (Dusty Nelson, 1978).

⁸ For readings that address Carter's literalization of psychoanalysis see and Dimovitz (88) and Stoddart.

applied to pornography which, on the surface, appears crystal clear in its presentations and intentions. Carter's careful attention to the intersections of horror and porn not only urges readers to question texts that present themselves and their underlying meanings with a transparency that seems to belie analysis, but also argues that these supposedly simple genres hold the key to a demystification of sex, gender, and scopophilic desire.

The Eye of Desire: Manifesting Reality in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972)

While many scholars connect Carter's fiction to the work of second-wave film theorists like Mulvey and Doane, who both focus primarily on melodrama and classic Hollywood narrative, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* is much more akin to the erotic horror film. By combining elements of both genres, it reveals the interdependency of pornography and horror and grapples with this imbrication as a means of working through the politics of gendered spectatorial desire. The novel follows protagonist Desiderio, a personal aide to the Minister of Determination, who is sent undercover on a secret mission to locate and assassinate the titular Doctor.⁹ Dr. Hoffman has been waging a war on reality and has chosen Desiderio's city as the epicenter of his campaign. The Doctor's battle is carried out by what he believes to be the endless possibilities of human desire, which are freed from the shackles of the unconscious and made manifest in everyday life with help from his desire machines.

⁹ Carter chooses to capitalize the historically masculine title "Doctor" when referring to Hoffman throughout the novel, allowing the designation to take the place of his given name. This practice also applies to the Minister of Determination.

According to Desiderio, these “gigantic generators,” like large satellite dishes, with their “seismic vibrations” make “great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation we had informally formulated in order to realize our city” and transform it into a “kingdom of the instantaneous” (17, 18). In order to combat this assault on orderly reality, in which “the identity of a thing lay only in the extent to which it represented itself,” Desiderio travels through a series of interconnected yet self-contained picaresque episodes that culminate in a confrontation with Dr. Hoffman and in the betrayal of Desiderio’s primary love interest, Albertina (23).

From the beginning of the novel the parallels between Dr. Hoffman’s hallucinations and the magic of the cinema screen are made obvious. For example, Bonca’s description of the narrative as “full of elaborately described tableaux which feel ‘objective,’ and static, and often cruelly distant—and a fevered-brow Gothic decadence whirling with emotional tumult” carries strong similarities to scholarly descriptions of and approaches to horror film as a medium that favors spectacle over story and (supposedly) requires emotionally distanced spectatorship. (59-60). While Sivyer admits that *Desire Machines* “is not explicitly concerned with cinema,” he goes on to argue that the Doctor “transform[s] the world into a series of vast, interactive cinematic spectacles” that “can be read as an allegory of twentieth-century visual culture” (227, 226). Finally, Crofts writes that “Hollywood’s grip on the imagination is evoked by the city bombarded by mirages in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*” (96).

The Doctor's desire machines, whose projections are able to bend characters' perceptions of reality, are perhaps most directly linked to cinema through their origin story. Prior to the Doctor's carefully planned assault on Desiderio's city, a number of preliminary inventions were tested for their efficacy. Chief among these initial experiments was the cinematic apparatus of the "iterant showman" Mendoza, who had previously worked closely with Hoffman when they were university students (27). As "one of Dr. Hoffman's first disciples or even perhaps an early missionary," Mendoza's claim to fame is that he is able to literalize the cinema's ability to manipulate temporality by transforming his theater into a time machine: "When [the participants] were suitably garbed, the lights dimmed and Mendoza projected upon a screen various old newsreels and an occasional early silent comedy. These films had, as it were, slots in them in which the members of the audience could insert themselves and so become part of the shadow show they witnessed" (27). This description of spectators neatly ensconcing themselves in the cinematic text is strikingly similar to Carter's definition of pornography in *Sadeian Woman* as that which "describe[s] a woman's mind through the fiction of her sexuality. This technique ensures the gap left in the text is of just the right size for the reader to insert his prick into, the exact dimensions, in fact, of Fanny's vagina or O's anus" (17). In this passage, Carter locates the primary relation between reader and pornographic text as the absent presence of the female body.¹⁰ Although Carter does not speak directly

¹⁰ Although *Sadeian Woman* is primarily concerned with the representation of women in pornography, Carter also acknowledges that "This gap in the text may also be just the size of the anus or mouth of a young man, subsuming him, too, to this class that is most present in its absence, the invisible recipients of the pornographic tribute, the mental masturbatory objects" (18).

to gendered looking or performance in this particular scene from *Desire Machines*, the explicit connection between the pornographic gap and the cinematic slot establishes a gendered materiality as the basis for the cinema's land of illusion, more specifically, a feminine non-materiality given weight by the active participation of the (masculine) spectator.

Despite easy access to any number of these cinematic slots, which manifest themselves in everyday life through the marvels of Hoffman's illusions in the city as well as the various fantastic landscapes and marvelous characters who populate his episodic journey, Desiderio consistently resists an affective investment in the extraordinary shadow show that plays before him. On the very first page of the novel, set as a frame tale where Desiderio's memoirs comprise the embedded narrative, he writes "I survived because I could not surrender to the flux of mirages. I could not merge and blend with them; I could not abnegate my reality and lose myself for ever as others did, blasted to non-being by the furious artillery of unreason. I was too sardonic. I was too disaffected" (11-12). Desiderio's self-construction is akin to the paracinematic spectator of horror film, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four—a viewer who, at a cool distance from the violent and erotic images on the cinema screen, never actively engages with what he watches because he assumes its fantastic and excessive surfaces mean absolutely nothing.

As an all-knowing spectator, Desiderio is able to position himself in such a way that there is no need to interpret what he sees and experiences on his journey. The events that befall him are nothing more than the predictable manifestations of a

cinema hopelessly devoted to erotic violence. This cinematic certainty in turn enables Desiderio to position himself securely as the inattentive spectator-hero of a movie he has already seen: “I felt as if I was watching a film in which the Minister was the hero and the unseen Doctor certainly the villain; but it was an endless film and I found it boring because none of the characters engaged my sympathy, even if I admired them, and all the situations appeared the false engineering of an inefficient phantasiist” (25). Desiderio’s claims are seemingly in direct opposition to scholarly interpretations that read his desire as the novel’s main drive and argue that, even if this is a film Desiderio has seen before, the entirety of the plot contorts itself to play out in his favor—he pulls all the strings (see Tonkin Ch. 4, Robinson).

Desiderio as a “blasé and detached...experienced film spectator” and Desiderio as the secret director of the entire plot—it is his desires and fantasies that push the narrative forward—are two characterizations constantly at war throughout the novel and in its scholarly responses (Sivyer 21). The result of this perpetual tension is that Desiderio is always at the center of the novel—both as the orchestrator of this particularly filmic tale and as its primary actor. Comparing his position as both director and protagonist of his own private picture show with second-wave feminist film criticism of classic Hollywood cinema results in a jarring consonance. In this tradition, cinema is a construct by and for men, who are able to keep themselves at a necessary distance from that with which they easily identify (i.e., the male hero) and thus enjoy a spectatorship that is not only pleasurable but also reinforces their sense of identity in an overwhelmingly hetero-patriarchal society. In addition to neatly

complying with second wave feminist film theory, reading Desiderio in this way by necessity decenters Albertina, the novel's female lead, and relegates her to the role of fantastic image and passive imitator rather than innovator. By bringing Albertina to the forefront and considering her inherent knowledge of the cinematic structures her world is built upon, my reading seeks to discover how her powers of vision might upset more conventional analyses of the novel that focus only on Desiderio's desire.

In moments when Desiderio's detachment wavers, when the picture show he thought he came to see falters and fails (and, with it, his narrative control), Carter's critique of fetishistic scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism come through most effectively.¹¹ According to Sivyer, Carter accomplishes this by "effectively giving the (heterosexual) male spectator too much of what he wants in order to force a confrontation with desire" (239). The excess of images that Desiderio encounters along his journey, much like Dr. Hoffman's cinematic illusions, have the effect of transforming his detached fantasy into a three-dimensional realm of persistent reality. Among these phantasmatic illusions, the image that most consistently troubles Desiderio's identification as a detached spectator and that refuses to acknowledge the tension between form and content, reality and appearance is that of Dr. Hoffman's daughter and Desiderio's love interest: Albertina. In much of the critical literature on *Desire Machines*, Albertina's alliance with Dr. Hoffman and her willingness to be a glorified sex toy (so that her father may use the erotic energy produced by herself and

¹¹ "Carter dramatizes Hollywood's fantasied solution to the problem of (male heterosexual) desire and exposes its ideological position by pushing its structure to the logical extreme. Hoffman's mirages are effectively more Hollywood than Hollywood because they increase the sense of proximity between spectator and image" (Sivyer 228).

Desiderio's lucrative sexual intercourse to untether reality from the shackles of time and space) marks her as a character who hinders rather than helps feminist intervention. This characterization, which is founded primarily on Albertina's actions in the final section of the novel, has consequently come to dominate interpretations of her character at the expense of everything that comes prior to this crucial moment. Sivyer calls her "a masculine-scripted image of femininity" (227). For Dimovitz, she is "from beginning to end, merely the avatar of Surrealist—idealist and psychoanalytic—discourse" (100). Finally, Robinson primarily interprets Albertina as a pawn wielded by her father. As such, she is a leading lady whose presence does little more than perpetuate patriarchal systems of power (166).

While some scholars, such as Tonkin and Mandy Koolen, read Albertina as an agential character who "strategically positions herself as the object of the male gaze" (Koolen 410), interpretations of her as a passive image or merely a byproduct of Desiderio's erotic desire are far more common (see Tonkin Ch. 4). Albertina's relatively static positioning in scholarly readings is in direct contrast to the tension surrounding Desiderio as both omnipotent director and impassive spectator. In turn, the lack of debate concerning Albertina results in readings of the novel as a *reflection* of Western popular culture and ideology rather than an *intervention*. By looking closely at Albertina as a possible disruptor, more generative readings of the novel become manifest. In a fictional world that has already set itself up along the conventions of cinematic spectatorship and desire, why should the introduction of the heroine be taken any differently? Albertina's status as a "shimmering," "persistent

hallucination” links her body to the material apparatus of the film projector itself and displaces Desiderio, if only momentarily, as the character with sole control over this particular picture show (25).

Albertina first appears, as if by magic, in answer to Desiderio’s complaints regarding the film in which he has inadvertently become the protagonist. In her grand entrance, she is a “persistent hallucination...in a negligee made of a fabric the colour and texture of the petals of poppies which clung about her but did not conceal her quite transparent flesh...where her heart should have been there flickered a knot of flames like ribbons and she shimmered a little, like the air on a very hot summer’s day. She did not speak; she did not smile” (25). In this primary moment of scopophilic desire, Desiderio interprets Albertina as a spectacular, erotic surface who is both totally transparent and completely impenetrable (she is composed of an “unimaginable substance”) (25). This first encounter with Albertina is the reader’s introduction to her affinity with the cinematic. Although Albertina is transparent in her function as erotic object, her self-presentation as a stereotypical feminine enigma (her alluring appearance coupled with her provocative silence) are an invitation for Desiderio’s inquiring gaze to read her as he would a filmic illusion. While Desiderio likens her “shimmering” presence to the “air on a hot summer’s day,” a more apt comparison might be the wavering light of the film projector as it moves from one stationary image to the next to create the illusion of movement.

Again and again, Albertina troubles Desiderio’s position as an omnipotent and detached spectator, a role that depends on an understanding of reality (here linked

closely with cinematic projection) as seamless and effortless. Albertina's most pointed attack against perceptual mastery is her repeated recourse to the phenomena of persistence of vision. The persistence of vision is an optical illusion that occurs when motion is perceived as continuous despite the fact that there are 'gaps' in the images presented to the eye, as in the scene when Albertina appears to "shimmer" on the air while Desiderio rapturously watches from his bed. Knowledge of this phenomenon is congruent with the emergence of cinema itself, since "early experiments, working to create conversation pieces for Victorian parlours or new sensations for the touring magic lantern shows" discovered that "if drawings of the stages of an action were shown in fast succession, the human eye would perceive them as a continuous movement" (Kehr). These gaps "between the stages of an action," disruptions in the illusion of perpetual motion that preserve the fantasy of the cinema as smooth and inviolable, are the primary target of Albertina's concentration. For if the "undifferentiated mass desire" that the Doctor synthesizes in his lab and shoots out upon the world by means of his amazing desire machines has the power to populate the earth with "synthetically authentic phenomenon," then why can't her own persistent eye also carry the power to enact change (186)?

If Albertina's body is a substitute for the projection screen, its "shimmering" calls attention to the spaces between the imaginary frames that structure everyday vision: she flickers because the picture show is, by necessity, discontinuous. It is this discontinuity, this revelation of a misplaced belief in a seamless, automatic vision, that Albertina wishes to exploit in order to disrupt gendered patterns of spectatorship.

By doing so, she works to ensure that her own performance exists in a space with the elasticity to accommodate it. If the film reel is fixed in a never-ending continuous loop, there is no possibility for change. By embodying the material reality of the film strip, Albertina hopes to alter Desiderio's perception of the mutability of reality. Albertina brings herself even closer to the cinematic apparatus when she composes intertitles to provide Desiderio with an interpretive framework for approaching her body as film. While Desiderio sleeps, Albertina industriously scribbles "imperative[s] written in lipstick" on his "dusty windowpane" (26). These adjurations, for example "DON'T THINK, LOOK" and "BE AMOROUS" have the feel of silent film intertitles which the mysterious Albertina, since she does not speak, uses to get her message across (26).¹²

Although Albertina actively upholds the typical formulation of woman as static image, an "erotic toy" whose transformations throughout the novel both excite Desiderio's desire and ensure the narrative trajectory (he is questing towards her just as much as he is seeking Dr. Hoffman's lair), to argue that she only functions as a product of Desiderio's desire not only negates her impact on the novel's systems of desire and spectatorship, but it also robs her of the opportunity to question these structures of signification. Even if Albertina surely threatens a closeness or collapse onto the mirror of the cinema screen, she also seeks to participate in spectatorship herself. Rather than completely demolish the systems of looking and desiring in

¹² The punctuation of these demands, in addition to their ambiguous yet fervent tone, aligns them with the titles that grace the exhibits in Dr. Hoffman's peep show machines. Examples include "A KISS CAN WAKE HER" and "I COME" (59).

which both she and Desiderio are enmeshed and which dictate the ways she can and cannot move and be perceived, Albertina works within these structures in order to alter them from the inside.

Because Albertina is so associated with the shape-shifting magic of the cinema and Desiderio with the objective, disaffected spectator, critics often assume she is a figment of Desiderio's desire, much like the rest of the novel's surplus of subplots and characters. Albertina herself confirms the validity of this reading when she admits to Desiderio that "You have never made love to me because, all the time you have known me, I've been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire" (204). This late admission is at odds with Albertina's earlier self-positioning, which she discusses at length while disguised as a male ambassador for the Doctor at a diplomacy dinner with Desiderio and the Minister of Determination. The Minister is quick to point out the similarities between the Doctor's mirages and the cinema, arguing that he has "induced a radical suspension of disbelief. As in the early days of the cinema, all the citizens are jumping through the screen to lay their hands on the naked lady in the bathtub!" (36). When Albertina as the Ambassador insists that the citizens' outstretched fingers "touch flesh" despite the unreality of the images that plague the city, the Minister rejects her interpretation outright, preferring instead to call these forms "substantial shadow" (36). Albertina responds by redefining the Minister's description of the mirages (among which she includes herself): "And what a beautiful definition of flesh! You know I am only substantial shadow, Minister, but if you cut me, I bleed. Touch me; I palpitate!" (36).

Here Albertina proposes a radical redefinition of the term “flesh” in which her existence as “substantial shadow” does not preclude her ability to exist in the material world. The disparity between Albertina as an image made flesh whose body produces involuntary physical responses and Albertina as an ultimately inaccessible figment of masculine desire is a central conundrum in critical responses to the novel. However, rather than come to a definitive conclusion as to whether Albertina is “real” or not—for it seems that her status as a “real” character is a defining feature of her usefulness as a tool for feminist analysis—a more productive line of inquiry is perhaps to explore the ways her character enables conversations about the interrelation of cinematic images and feminine bodies. For if she is nothing else, Albertina is a performer, and both her body and its likeness inhabit the pages of the novel in numerous two- and three-dimensional disguises. It is not until the final section of the narrative that she peels her fantastic appearances away, and this gradual unveiling corresponds to Desiderio’s loss of interest in her. Desiderio is only able to fully rekindle his passion once he has murdered Albertina and fixed her image forever in the likeness of the glass phantom with a heart of flame.

Desiderio’s first encounter with a cinema-like apparatus, barring the physical presence of Albertina herself, occurs when he initially tracks down Dr. Hoffman’s old professor, an aged peep show proprietor who travels the country with Hoffman’s experimental samples, comprised of “models, slides and pictures which went inside the machines and were there magnified by lenses almost to life-size. A universality of figures of men, women, beasts, drawing rooms, auto-da-fés and scenes of every

conceivable type was contained in these boxes” (95). These “wax models, often with clockwork mechanisms,” “glass slides,” and “sets of still photographs which achieved the effect of movement by means of the technique of the flicker books of our childhood” (107) collectively compose “symbolic constituents of representations of the basic constituents of the universe. If they are properly arranged, all the possible situations in the world and every possible mutation of these situations can be represented” (95-6). However, despite these promising descriptions of the samples’ power to reimagine spectatorship and desire, they appear only to offer static, universal myths.

The first machine Desiderio approaches depicts a multimedia art piece titled “I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE.” It is composed of the waxwork

legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover...A bristling pubic growth rose to form a kind of coat of arms above the circular proscenium it contained at either side but, although the hairs had been inserted one by one in order to achieve the maximal degree of verisimilitude, the overall effect was one of stunning artifice. The dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina acted as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior. (44)

Here the woman’s exactly detailed vulva is quite literally the shutter which opens on the aperture of a vagina into which the spectator can neatly insert himself. This precisely framed window welcomes Desiderio’s roving eye to an “irresistible vista of semi-tropical forest” (44). However, despite the initial appearance of Eden, the viewer’s gaze ultimately finds, deep in the recesses of the landscape, “the misty battlements of a castle” which seems to house “as many torture chambers as the Château of Silling” (44, 45). This ode to Sade nestled in the heart of a pornographic

presentation of “stunning artifice” caters to myths of the earthy essence of womanhood and also reveals that these supposedly natural phenomena are invariably presided over by the watchful eye of the male pornographer. His presence completely erases the material body and fleshly interior of the woman over which the spectator’s gaze has traversed in order to reach this final destination. She is a conduit that enables two men to gaze at each other.¹³

As the exhibits continue, their connections with the generic tropes and expectations of erotic horror film grow more and more pronounced. For example, Exhibit Four, “EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT THE NIGHT IS FOR,” contains a “wax figure of the headless body of a mutilated woman...in a pool of painted blood” (45). Despite the violence of the scene, Desiderio lingers over the lush landscape of the woman’s body, which is clothed “only in the remains of a pair of black stockings and a ripped suspender belt of shiny black rubber” (45). Rather than focus on the woman’s pain and suffering, we are instead asked to dwell on the “loving care with which the craftsmen who manufactured her had simulated the growth of underarm

¹³ Hoffman’s peep-show machine is heavily inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s last major artwork *Étant données: 1° la chute d’eau / 2° le gaz d’éclairage* [Given 1. *The Waterfall*, 2. *The Illuminating Gas*] which was first exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969. The installation is an elaborately constructed diorama which can only be viewed by looking through two peepholes inserted in a wooden door. Once the viewer has placed their eyes to these openings, they are met with the first layer of the diorama—a brick wall with a large hole in the center. Through this aperture one can see the prone body of a woman lying in some grass. Her feet are positioned towards the viewer, and her spread legs invite the audience to gaze at her openly displayed genitalia. Her face is obscured by the brick wall, and in her outstretched hand she holds a gas lamp, presumably meant to draw the viewer’s eye towards the lush landscape to which her body serves as the gateway. The similarity to “I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE” is unmistakable. Carter’s re-imagining of *Étant données* condenses the associations between gendered spectatorship, the female sex, and paradisaic landscape by removing the brick wall as framing device altogether and replacing it with the opening of the woman’s vagina as the true window into this imaginary Eden.

hair,” her “belly” which is “covered with some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet,” and the “handle of an enormous knife” that emerges from the torso and is “kept always a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring” (45-6). Desiderio’s parenthetical “probably” is an aside that marks this private picture show as something that hovers between the realm of representation and that of reality. Desiderio’s intense focus on the body as a detailed prop, brought to life or death as the case may be, prefigures the trend in horror film periodicals to showcase stills of (often female) characters after their bodies have been mutilated in order both to remove them from the diegesis and to highlight the masculine artistry of the special effects (Kendrick 315). Completely divorced from its original context, the body of the mutilated woman sheds associations of guilt and also her status as a reminder of the threat of castration. Instead, she becomes a kind of static art piece, an image whose relation to the real world is covered over by the “loving care” of the “craftsmen” who have reduced her to a singular function.

The exhibition’s finale is also the place where Albertina appears on the scene. In “PERPETUAL MOTION,” we move from erotic horror to hardcore pornography, although, since the images in the machines collectively constitute a set, generic boundaries are tenuous at best and horror and porn often exist simultaneously. The couple in this diorama is uncannily lifelike and “exquisitely executed in wax” (46). Their performance of the sexual act represents Carter’s understanding of the mythic aspect of heterosex—a coupling that exists in a temporal and spatial void. It is the very immutability of these figures, their existence in a clockwork prison of

intercourse, that renders their movement horrific. Despite his initial self-presentation as disengaged, disinterested spectator (we are not meant to imagine that any of these lurid displays might actually excite Desiderio or otherwise produce some other kind of involuntary bodily response), our hero ultimately finds himself totally taken in by this simulation. At first, the man and the woman depicted in the sample are nothing more than an anonymous pair of dolls who are so closely entwined that they “might have been modelled in one piece.” As Desiderio looks more closely, he notes that their

coupling had a fated, inevitable quality. One could not picture a cataclysm sufficiently violent to rend the twined forms asunder and neither could one conceive of a past beginning for they were so firmly joined together it seemed they must have been formed in this way at the beginning of time and, locked parallel, would go on thus for ever to infinity. They were not so much erotic as pathetic, poor palmers of desire who never budged as much as an inch on their endless pilgrimage. (46)

Desiderio’s preliminary disinterest gives way, however, once he catches a glimpse of the female automaton’s face: “I recognized this face instantly, although it was fixed in the tormented snarl of orgasm. I remained staring at it for some time. It was the beautiful face of Dr. Hoffman’s ambassador” (47).

The revelation of Albertina’s face forces Desiderio to abandon his spectatorial distance and become enthralled by the simulation that is happening before him. It also, ironically, offers him the perfect occasion to insert himself into the text. However, rather than the “exact dimensions” of Fanny’s vagina or O’s anus, the gap left in this particular image is actually a life-sized cardboard copy of Desiderio himself. The anonymous male automaton whose “face was moulded into the woman’s

neck and so could not be seen” comprises this pornographic display’s empty slot, not Albertina (46). This opportunity for insertion is transferred from the realm of cinema to that of reality at the novel’s climax, since this preliminary cinematic coupling of perpetual motion prefigures an opportunity Desiderio ultimately rejects: to submit himself to endless copulation with Albertina in order to produce enough eroto-energy to change the world. Thus, the faceless man in “PERPETUAL MOTION” is, quite literally, Desiderio himself, and the gap he leaves in this tableau reverses the quotidian contract of pornography since he, rather than Albertina, is the site of lack. This moment of almost mistaken identity as well as the sight of the quivering knife that “(probably)” moves “by the action of a spring” in Exhibit Four are examples of the failure of prevailing gendered spectatorial dynamics. In both cases, the carefully drawn line between reality and its exacting imitation wavers and Desiderio runs the risk of coming too close to the fantastic world of false appearances that might be unleashed by the set of samples. In this world, which bears a strong resemblance to both feminist screen theory and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, “everything it is possible to imagine can also exist,” and it is this untethering of the imagination that enables Albertina, the generic shape shifter par excellence, to take control of spectatorship as a constant negotiation with the shape of the world around her (*Desire Machines* 97).

The peep show machines’ ability to trouble ideologies of gendered spectatorship means they work in tandem with, rather than undermine, Albertina, who, through her various disguises (which include the Ambassador, a valet to the

Sadeian Count, and the proprietor of a brothel), demonstrates to Desiderio that even when his eye is not pressed against the peephole he is still living in an entirely simulated world. While Desiderio's encounters with the machines are by and large the product of erotic horror and exploitation film conventions, scholars have consistently connected Albertina to feminist screen theory on classic cinema, in which the image of the woman onscreen both threatens narrative continuity through her implicit reminder of male castration and serves as a two-dimensional repository for male anxiety. That Albertina and the machines ultimately serve the same purpose—to question the deployment of women's bodies as metonymic safeguards for cinema itself—reveals the ways classic narrative cinema and erotic horror/exploitation film rely on one another despite their generic differences. Scholars like Robinson and Sivyler, who directly compare Albertina to “Hollywood film... a mirror, reflecting back the spectator's own desire,” define Albertina as a physical manifestation of cinematic magic (Sivyler 228).¹⁴ As such, she is both a source of satisfaction and a threat. The danger of loss of self that Albertina implicitly embodies (according to the logic of feminist film theory) becomes an immediate reality at the end of the novel when she thrusts away the romantic illusions upon which she had previously depended to entice Desiderio. Rather than an alluring and mysterious shapeshifter who always lets Desiderio in on the deceit of her various disguises (he is

¹⁴ “That Albertina Hoffman is as malleable as an ideational femaleness makes of her a fetish object. The blurring of ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ in this text, in fact, works by a fetishistic logic that makes of woman a tool of man's pleasure and self-representation... Carter's novel actively engages with the fetishistic economy that Mulvey identifies in order to show how the ‘bleeding wound’ of female castration sets off the trajectories of male desire for domination” (Robinson 166).

not observant enough to untangle them himself), Albertina gives up on the pretense of her performance as shimmering illusion, preferring instead to “put away all her romanticism” so that her face becomes “hard and brown and impersonal” once she reaches the dream factory of her father’s castle (193).

Desiderio’s immediate response to Albertina’s disenchantment is to abandon her: “I felt an inexplicable indifference towards her. Perhaps because she was now yet another she and this she was the absolute antithesis of my black swan and my bouquet of burning bone; she was a crisp, antiseptic soldier to whom other ranks deferred. I began to feel perfidious, for I had no respect for rank” (193). This appearance of “reality,” cool, clean, and seemingly objective, does not make for a very interesting movie, and Desiderio, ever the spectator, begins to lose interest. This brief interlude of mundane normalcy ends at the novel’s climax when Albertina presents herself as the ultimate offering to Desiderio and propositions him to abandon himself to a never-ending pantomime that perfectly resembles the mechanical figures he encountered in “PERPETUAL MOTION.” Heavily cloaked in the stuff of cultural myth, “She wiped the silver from her eyes and the purple dress dropped away from the goddess of the cornfields, more savagely and triumphantly beautiful than any imagining, my Platonic Other, my necessary extinction, my dream made flesh” (215). Albertina exhibits herself as the woman in/as horror, a figure fraught with the power to arouse and frighten. As such, this final, spectacular presentation relies on the bedrock of the myth of the “Platonic Other” and man’s “necessary extinction” even as it uncovers the falsity of these fantasies. Because she is equally comfortable in the

two-dimensional realm of the cinema of the unconscious and in the three-dimensional realm of the Doctor's facility, Albertina closes the distance between herself as image and Desiderio as spectator. As Sivyer argues, this climatic moment with Albertina forces Desiderio "to com[e] to recognize that his desire not only maintains the spectacle but is dependent on it and that this also involves relinquishing of autonomy" (228). For Desiderio to enter the land of cinematic illusion in this moment would be to lose himself to his own materiality, to be defined by the function of his sex as one among the one hundred couples who tirelessly devote themselves to the production of the eroto-energy that fuels Dr. Hoffman's desire machines. In Desiderio's mind, there is no position of mediation. One is either a spectacle or a spectator. As such, his violent response to this newfound threat to his position is promptly to commit murder.

At this crucial moment, Desiderio reasserts the necessary distance between himself and the woman-as-image in order to retain a sense of himself as a subject with visual mastery. It is Mulvey's sadistic voyeurism literalized: having investigated the dangerous woman and discovered the threat she embodies, the hero must excise her from the narrative trajectory as soon as possible. Desiderio's choice also bears a strong similarity to Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty's influence here is unsurprising considering the novel's intense focus on the mutability of space and its dependence on individual perception. For example, consider Merleau-Ponty's discussion of necessary distance in the formation of the subject: "What brings about both hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space already experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the

object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers” (*Phenomenology* 291). This necessary distance is not based on an individual’s “critical powers” but on “the structure of his space” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 291). Both the screen and the woman’s body—in many ways they are one and the same—are crucial objects that the male subject relies on as material references in order to construct a psychic understanding of himself.

When Albertina comes too close, she is both a material manifestation and an erotic fantasy. Her presence shatters the safety of the equidistant relationship between the spectator and the mirror—the Lacanian encounter with the ideal-I—and promises a contiguous encounter within the space of the image. Albertina describes the relationship between herself and Desiderio as one of interconnected images and quotes an imaginary scholar’s commentary on Chinese philosopher Hui Shih’s “paradox” to clarify her stance: “‘There is the mirror and the image but there is also the image of the image; two mirrors reflect each other and images may be multiplied without end.’ Ours is a supreme encounter, Desiderio. We are two such disseminating mirrors” (202). Albertina’s promise of a double collapse, of a recourse to the endless duplicability of the image, positions both herself and Desiderio as originary mirrors and requires Desiderio to take up the position normally allocated to women in classic cinema theory. However, although Albertina advocates for dismantling the binary of image and spectator, Desiderio is too committed to a structure of spectatorship built

on his personal pleasure. As he ruefully admits, “the habit of sardonic contemplation is the hardest habit of all to break” (207).

The power to shape reality based on the strength of one’s own desires is attributed to various male characters throughout the novel—the Minster of Determination, the Sadeian Count,¹⁵ and of course the Doctor himself all mold reality to suit their purposes. In contrast, Albertina is the only female character who is able purposefully to alter her circumstances. Nearly halfway through the novel, Desiderio discovers a note hidden in the pocket of a suit given to him by the peep show proprietor and immediately asserts: “I knew it was meant for me and that it came from Albertina” (97). The text, a quotation which Desiderio attributes to Sade, reads: “My passions, concentrated on a single point, resemble the rays of the sun assembled by a magnifying glass; they immediately set fire to whatever object they find in their way” (97). Although this declaration concentrates Albertina’s entire philosophy of spectatorship and desire into a single sentence, Desiderio “find[s] no personal significance in these words” and ultimately “decide[s] they must refer to the machinery of the peep show itself” (97). Subject to Desiderio’s (lack of) interpretation, Albertina and her gaze are rendered synonymous with the cinematic apparatus of the peep show, and words meant to describe the impact of her own persistent vision are immediately cast aside as props that fail to enhance Desiderio’s own voyeuristic gaze.

¹⁵ Desiderio takes up with the Count after the travelling circus with which he had been touring alongside the peep show proprietor is buried in a landslide. An homage to the Marquis de Sade, the Count is a self-described “connoisseur of catastrophe” who holds “a passionate conviction that he [is] the only significant personage” and “live[s] only to negate the world” (122, 123).

Persistence of vision, the recognition that continuous perception is an illusion that relies on the spectator to fill the space between the images the eye records with their own biased perception of reality, is the central premise of Hoffman's machinery and the guiding principle for Albertina's personal perception of the world. While she and Desiderio are trapped in the land of Nebulous Time (a place where the unconscious is given free reign) and the two lovers are about to be killed by a group of centaurs, Albertina makes a rescue helicopter appear seemingly out of thin air:

Yet, as she trembled, I saw it was not with fear but with hope—or, perhaps, a kind of effortful strain; she gripped my hand more tightly, until her nails dug into my palm. I remembered the scrap of paper in the pocket of the peep-show proprietor's nephew. 'My desires, concentrated to a single point...' I am sure what happened next was a coincidence. I am positive of that. I would stake my life on it. (191)

What happens next is not only the appearance of one of Hoffman's aerial patrols, come to whisk Albertina and Desiderio to safety, but also the immediate conflagration of the centaurs and the sacred tree around which they had all been gathered. At the moment "the buzzing horse tree went up in flames" Desiderio finally completes the quote he had earlier left unfinished: "...ignite all in their way" (192). Albertina's persistent vision not only bends reality to her will, but her writing also brackets this scene in Desiderio's narrative and marks it as her own. This remarkable act of spectatorial power on Albertina's part is somewhat dampened by Desiderio's continued resistance to her perception and his claim that what occurred was nothing more than a "coincidence." Desiderio's inability to analyze critically, or even emotionally invest himself in the world of cinematic illusion which he inhabits, betrays an implicit belief that he does not need to think about this world because it is

always already structured around and caters to his personal sense of self. This aloof self-assuredness is promptly torn down by Albertina once they arrive at her father's castle and Desiderio must realize that nothing simply happens.

Albertina spends the majority of the narrative fighting for a world where she is not trapped in the position of woman-as-image. In her reimagined system of perception and experience, the hierarchy between material reality and insubstantial illusion breaks down so that neither holds supremacy. In this new cosmology, she can be both a physical body (“cut me, I bleed. Touch me; I palpitate!”) and a seemingly insubstantial illusion (someone who can vanish by “gradually erasing the pattern she made upon the air”) (36, 138). In both cases, she retains agency over her own presentation. That this world is ultimately unattainable, the actions necessary for its birth akin to an unthinkable prison, does not negate the ways Albertina's behavior forces Desiderio to confront what he unconsciously relies on to supply him with the illusion of a stable reality. Both thematic and formal structures of exploitation and horror cinema are deployed as necessary devices to break down Desiderio's reliance on the distancing structures of classic narrative cinema. Albertina goes through just as much trauma as any erotic horror heroine: she is put on a stage in a pornographic spectacle, she is raped by the Count while disguised as a boy, she owns and operates a brothel where she offers herself to Desiderio for free, and she is brutally gang raped by a coven of centaurs in a scene that intentionally caters to prurient curiosity concerning bestiality. In addition to these more plot-focused allusions, formal

elements such as style, pacing, and especially the collapse of metaphor all aid in pointing to the generic influence of the horror film.

The narrative's association with horror is complicated by the fact that *Desire Machines* is written primarily as an embedded memoir by Desiderio. His decision to structure the story as a series of loosely connected subplots, his tendency to linger on spectacles of erotic titillation, and his penchant for lengthy, overly descriptive passages that stall the movement of the plot all point to his unconscious use of the trappings of horror to tell this story. That Desiderio must unknowingly rely on the conventions of horror in order to parse his encounters with the fantastic world of the Doctor and his affair with Albertina points to the genre as a useful device for shifting commonly held cultural perceptions about how to move through the world. It is not until the novel's finale, when Desiderio is asked knowingly to confront the formal and thematic structures that have been the essential framework for his story all along, that he seemingly awakens from his role as inactive spectator. Rather than reducing himself to the function of his sex and joining Albertina as pornographic spectacle, he resorts to murder. Albertina's death enables Desiderio to reject his role as image, her murder a necessary action in order for him to reestablish his spectatorial distance. Albertina, on the other hand, must be pinned down as a permanent image; pressed into the pages of Desiderio's narrative, she is the eternal star of his own private picture show. As Desiderio finishes his memoirs, which he has dedicated to his lost love, he ends by writing that "unbidden, she comes" (221). This is not the fleshy Albertina whom the reader has come to know. In Desiderio's regretful cinema, she is

“a woman as only memory and imagination could devise...I see her as a series of marvelous shapes formed at random in the kaleidoscope of desire” (13). In the end, Albertina is reduced to an image, a picture seemingly “formed at random” but one that, in reality, is the careful product of mythmaking. Her persistent vision, equally dedicated to erotic dream and material reality—and the materiality of erotics—is in the end too horrific for Desiderio to fully acknowledge.

Chapter Three

The Living Image: Woman as Cinema in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve*
and Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*

Fearful Perceptions: Decadence, Horror, and the Proto-Cinematic in *The Future Eve*
[*L'Eve future*] (1886)

Desiderio's incessant longing for a cinematic illusion that never quite existed is echoed in the starry-eyed admiration of Evelyn for glamorous Hollywood starlet Tristessa in Carter's 1977 novel, *The Passion of New Eve*. Despite the narrative's focus on gender switching and queered desire, Carter ends *New Eve* in much the same way as *Desire Machines*: with its protagonist longing for a now-dead illusion of womanhood in the ghostly form of the beloved. Whereas Desiderio anxiously awaits the nightly visitations of Albertina, an "unimaginable substance" dressed in white with "a knot of flames like ribbons" in place of her heart (25), we leave Evelyn, now violently transformed into the womanly Eve by a group of radical underground feminists, dreamily conjuring the absent embrace of Tristessa, the cross-dressing Hollywood actress who is also the father of her unborn child: "He himself often comes to me in the night, serene in his marvelous plumage of white hair, with the fatal red hole in his breast; after many, many embraces, he vanishes when I open my eyes" (187).¹ Albertina and Tristessa, both physical manifestations of cinema's

¹ In the novel, Tristessa's pronouns shift in accordance with Evelyn's perception of them. When he still believes Tristessa to be a woman, he refers to them as "she." The moment that Tristessa's biological sex is revealed, however, they are consistently referred to with he/him pronouns. I have chosen to use the non-binary they/them since the character remains fluid in their gender identification throughout the narrative.

fantasized, spectatorial desires, are twinned in these two Carter novels as absent objects whose presence cannot be sustained in a world bent on maintaining a coherent, navigable, and seemingly objective reality.

New Eve's title directly references Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 Decadent speculative fiction novel *The Future Eve* [*L'Eve future*], a text in which women are inherently cinematic and, by consequence, fundamentally horrific. Although Carter was openly invested in Villiers' novel as a predecessor to *New Eve*,² not much connects the two texts beyond shared character names and the production of an artificial woman as a major plot point. Despite the substantial differences between these two works, however, both are deeply interested in performance, femininity, and cinema. That *New Eve* is heavily invested in the feminist possibilities of cinema, and of erotic cinema in particular, is unsurprising. Laura Mulvey's landmark 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" appeared in *Screen* just two years prior, and the feminist crusade against visual pornography was gaining traction—Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* would be released two years later in 1979, the same year that Carter published *The Sadeian Woman*. Even though *Future Eve* predates the first instances of projected moving images by roughly a decade, the novel is deeply influenced by Villiers' speculative vision of cinema, which includes a fictionalized Thomas Edison, who would come to be known as the father of cinema, as the main character as well as an extraordinary sequence in which the moving image of a woman singing and dancing is projected on a wall for male

² Both Munford and Tonkin cite Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's text as an inspiration for *New Eve*.

entertainment. Through a speculative technology called photosculpture, Edison transmits a living woman's image via a series of lenses in order to render it permanently printed onto the fleshly exterior of a robot; in this way, he transforms the android Hadaly into a doppelganger for the living woman Alicia Clary. The android Hadaly thus becomes, quite literally, the film image made flesh, a concept treated at length in Carter's novel, primarily through the character of the aging film star Tristessa. *Future Eve* not only serves as a threshold text between fin-de-siècle Decadence and Carter's second-wave feminist work, but it also demonstrates that the very same themes and tropes that feminist film scholars were grappling with in the latter half of the twentieth century were already being played out in the literature of the late eighteenth hundreds. The Decadents' obsession with feminine artifice, their horror at feminine sexuality, and their desire to reproduce these disturbing figures as text-images all play a part in second-wave feminist debates on the representation of women in cinema and would come to bear on nascent feminist work on horror film.

Future Eve follows a wealthy aristocrat, Lord Celian Ewald, who has come to say a last goodbye to his friend Thomas Edison before he commits suicide. Ewald's lover, the actress Alicia Clary, is the primary motivation for his death wish. Her fatal flaw is that her physical beauty, which Ewald likens to the statue Venus Victorious (aka the Venus de Milo), is in "absolute disparity" with her soul, which he describes as that of a "bourgeois Goddess" (558, 552). This inherent discrepancy between content and form leads Ewald to conclude that Alicia has no concept of how to correctly present herself to the world:

The traits of her divine beauty seemed to be foreign to her *self*; her words seemed constrained and out of place in her mouth. Her intimate being was in flat contradiction with the form it inhabited. You would have thought not only that her personality was deprived of what I think philosophers call plastic mediation, but that she had been shut up, by a kind of magical punishment, in the perpetual contradiction of her beautiful body (original emphasis, 552).³

Unable to survive the loss of the promise seemingly granted by Alicia's physical beauty but irreparably damaged by her money-hungry personality, Ewald has decided that the only way to truly rid his mind of his desire for this "sphinx without an enigma" is to commit suicide (560).

Edison, who in Villiers' text takes on the role of an electrician-magician with a prodigious talent for mesmerism, offers Ewald a risky solution: transform the as yet incomplete female android he has been constructing in a subterranean garden into the perfect imitation of Alicia. Through the magic of modern reproductive technology, content and form will unite in a single harmonious being:

I shall reincarnate her entire external appearance, which to you is so deliciously mortal, in an Apparition whose HUMAN likeness and charm alone will surpass your wildest hopes, your most intimate dreams! And then, *in place of this soul which repels you in the living woman, I shall infuse another sort of soul*, less aware of itself perhaps...a soul capable of impressions a thousand times lovelier, loftier, nobler—that is, they will be robed in that character of eternity without which our mortal life can be no more than a shabby comedy. I will reproduce this woman exactly... (585-6)

Ewald ultimately accepts Edison's proposal, and the remainder of the novel is largely taken up by lengthy explanations of the android Hadaly's inner workings and a description of the events that prompted her initial genesis. *Future Eve* reaches its

³ All quotes in this section that contain italics and capitalization for emphasis use original punctuation.

climax when the android, posing as Alicia, is able to trick Ewald into thinking he is with the living woman. After some initial doubts, he is won over by the robot, whose speech and movements achieve a complexity beyond what he could have expected thanks to Edison's programming alone. The narrative is ultimately unable to sustain the promise of this subversively sentient being, however, and Hadaly is destroyed in a shipwreck on her way to Ewald's home estate in Scotland.

In *Future Eve*, women are intimately associated with images. This is not at all unusual for Decadent literature and seems entirely appropriate and jarringly prescient considering the novel's focus on proto-cinematic technology. Villiers' interest in cinema has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Allison de Fren notes that "*Tomorrow's Eve* anticipates how the anatomical gaze will inform the cinematic gaze, encouraging a way of seeing that, while focused on the specificities of material reality, gives way to experiences that defy rational explanation" (241). Annette Michelson similarly contends that in the novel the "female body comes into focus as the very site of cinema's invention" (20).⁴ However, the fundamental association between women and cinema in Villiers' novel, one that, according to Edison, should produce women who are mirrors of masculine desire, is not as neat as it might first appear. Ewald's initial description of Alicia is strikingly similar to classic readings of the woman-on-screen, a figure who is equal parts alluring and distressing, since she simultaneously affirms masculine identity and threatens castration. For example, Alicia's outward

⁴ For additional readings that address the role of cinema in *Future Eve* see Bellour, Forrest, and Hedges.

appearance, a screen that refuses to mirror Ewald's lofty artist's eye, instead functions as "one of those clear springs that in sunny countries rise in the shadows of ancient forests, exquisite in their murmurings. If some summer's day, you are carried away by the beauty of their deadly ripples and drop into them a leaf, still green and young and vital, it will be turned to stone when you take it out" (570). Here Alicia is cast as a mirrored surface with the power to petrify men who dare to try to see themselves in her. However, while she certainly inhabits the role of the image or mirror, she never behaves in such a way that she reflects Ewald's desire back at him. Alicia thus fulfills the traditional role of the woman-on-screen, but embodies only the supposedly "threatening" parts with none of the comfort of scopophilic mastery or the promise of sexual fulfillment. Ewald's immediate response to this danger is preemptive violence, a move that instantly links feminine performance with the production of mainstream horror film: "What I really would like would be to see Miss Alicia dead, if death didn't result in the effacing of all human features. In a word, the presence of her form, even as an illusion, would satisfy my stunned indifference, since nothing can render this woman worthy of love" (569-70). In this instance, Alicia is a figure who evokes the woman in/as horror and produces a conception of the woman-on-screen that closely aligns with by now well-established gender codes in cinema (i.e., foundational feminist interpretations of melodrama). This is an important distinction because it places the woman in/as horror not as a byproduct of a predominantly misogynist cinematic landscape, but as a preexisting figure who is independently produced by women.

Although Alicia is first and foremost a performer, she is an actress who does not believe in the roles to which she is assigned. Instead, she considers her performances to be commodities. Rather than treat her body as a sacred vessel which transmits the genius of male artists, she takes note that her body “represent[s]” well, and she puts herself to work producing “hollow” performances that she refers to as “*airy nothings*” (555). Alicia’s complete lack of faith in the work she casually reproduces with her body and her voice is what truly horrifies Ewald. The situation could only be rectified, he concludes, if she were to totally refrain from perception altogether, “if she kept her mouth shut and closed her eyes” (563). Alicia’s refusal to engage with masculine art is at no point more troubling to Ewald than when he takes her to view the statue which he believes to be her original:

We passed through the corridors, and I put her without further preparation in the presence of the eternal statue. This time Miss Alicia raised her veil. She looked at the statue with a certain surprise; then, amazed, she cried aloud childishly:

—‘Look, it’s ME!’

The next moment, she added:

—‘Yes, but I have arms, and besides I’m more distinguished looking.’

She shivered; her hand, which had dropped my arm to seek support from a railing, returned, and she said to me in an undertone:

—‘These stones...these walls...It’s cold here; let’s go away.’
(568-9)

Not only does Alicia ultimately fail to acknowledge her image in the Venus, but she also affirms her own completeness when presented with a mirror image meant to indicate lack.⁵ Alicia’s refusal to identify with the statue is one source of her

⁵ Mikkonen offers a similar reading of this scene: “It is woman (Alicia Clary) who appears incomplete, a being that must be mended, supplemented and whose symbolic power as a being outside ‘castration

destructive power. Rather than acquiesce to the staged confrontation with a mirror (Ewald describes the art in the Louvre as “so many mirrors I was setting before her”), she has the nerve to find her arms “again in the dark night of time” and use them to trade her body for money (568, 563). Alicia’s remodeling of the Venus coupled with her refusal to completely give herself over to her status as image situates her as an agential performer who allows the political reality of everyday life to creep into her theatrical displays and calls attention to the ways that gender and class affect her ability to live. In a small way, she thus moves to answer Carter’s call, over forty years later, for a moral pornography. It is precisely this kind of performance, which features a woman actively embodying her role as a source of horror while also dismantling patterns of misogynistic spectatorship and desire, that will fully come to fruition in the erotic horror film.

Women’s ability to actively and intentionally perform as artificial images, alongside male characters’ inability to see through these alluring facades, is the prime source of horror within the novel. Edison’s defense against this assault on his powers of perception is to capture the woman on film or to transform her into a walking, talking synecdoche for cinema itself, a response not at all unlike Baudelaire’s⁶ reimagining of a rotting female corpse into malleable art object in “Carrion.” Cinema

fear’ must be reversed. Equally, the female model behind Alicia’s, the deformed statue *Venus de Milo*, is portrayed through its lack and incompleteness, marked by its lost arms. While seeing this ‘model’ of herself in the Louvre, Alicia emphasizes her physical completeness and her ability to create a dignified appearance or the illusion of such a state. Besides, finding herself more refined than the statue of Venus, Alicia also remarks that she at least, unlike the Greek statue, has arms” (33).

⁶ Michelson identifies Villiers de l’Isle-Adam as “the student of Baudelaire” (4) and de Fren argues that he is the person to whom “Villiers’s oeuvre owes its greatest debt” (250).

as male art thus becomes the antidote to the novel's most subversive aspect: women are always already "cinematic" all on their own. However, these women's performances leave no room for interpretation—only acquiescence to their particular worldview. To use Carter's language, there is no "hole" into which the male spectator can insert himself in this carefully crafted illusion; rather, they must play the part they are given. This ability to embody the artificial and render imagistic fantasy as material reality is the site of feminine monstrosity. Significantly, women's status as image is not in and of itself dangerous to Ewald and Edison; in fact, they are full of praise for women who produce a blank canvas or screen upon which they may project desires that are then reflected back at them as confirmation of their sense of self. However, none of the women in the novel, from the populist prodigy Alicia Clary, to the marvelous android Hadaly, to the duplicitous dancer Evelyn Habal, to the mesmerizing sculptress Sowana attempts to fulfill this function.

Particular moments in *Future Eve* that scholars have noted as especially "cinematic," such as Hadaly's dissection and the short film of the dancer Evelyn Habal, are all attempts to reframe women in a particular mode of cinematic representation rather than a definitive shift from the material realities of nature to the artificial splendor of the image. In a treatment that breaks from a typically Decadent understanding of women as one with nature, Villiers' female characters are from the moment of their birth intrinsically artificial and utilize their status as images in order, according to Edison, to trap men in their own private picture shows. Edison's response (by way of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam), in contrast to characters in the work of

Baudelaire or Huysmans, is not to elevate women from the material to the artificial, but to take control of perception so that women and the world in general are in accordance with masculine desire. From the outset, then, Edison's technology is first and foremost a response to women's performative self-presentation rather than the source of this "dangerous" behavior. For example, Edison's narration of the suicide of his friend Edward Anderson following an illicit affair with the bewitching and capricious Evelyn Habal, the event that prompts the genesis of Hadaly as ballast against the duplicitous charms of real-life artificial women, is precipitated by a warning against the everyday woman's powers of illusion: "It simply *had to be* that they [men] were all dupes of an illusion, pushed to extraordinary lengths, no doubt, but a simple illusion after all...the serious and upright man they [artificial women] insidiously accustom, by a series of gradual and imperceptible blurrings of the vision, to a kind of sweetish half-light that gradually depraves his moral and physical retina" (633). Carol Clover's observation that horror film forces spectators to "take it in the eye" (202) seems an apt description of the effect Edison's imagined artificial woman, whom he also characterizes as a "viper" and a "vampire," manages to induce in any man who dares to look at her without being imbued with the necessary powers of interpretation (636).

Edison warns Ewald that Evelyn, along with virtual swarms of others like her, are poised to bring "tens of thousands" of men to their deaths if left unchecked (630). The primary sin of these women, beyond the unforgivable fact that their content (soul) does not match their form (physical beauty) is that they possess the power to

bend masculine perception to their will: “And in the end they are slowly, insensibly, able to convert their reality (often frightful) into the original version (often charming) they first presented. Custom prevails, lowering curtains over the sight; haze and darkness settle in; the illusion deepens—and bewitchment can no longer be prevented” (633). In *Future Eve*, the invention of the moving picture and the production of Hadaly as cinema made flesh are both direct responses to a proto-cinematic ontology founded in feminine desire and performance. Rather than fall prey to the dangerous spectacle presented by Evelyn Habal and her ilk, Edison and Ewald promote a spectatorial practice closely aligned with Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze, wherein women are transformed into mirrors whose “thoughts might soon be changed by love” so that they become the perfect “reflection” of their male lovers’ own (552): “In short, it’s this objectified projection of your own soul that you call on, you perceive, that you CREATE in your living woman, and *which is nothing but your own soul reduplicated in her*” (590).

When women actively participate in proto-cinematic performances that predate and challenge soon to be conventional ways of looking at women on film, they are monsters and belong to the realm of horror, but when they stand as blank canvases for inscription they belong to the realm of classic cinema and are romantic heroines. After all, Alicia, a woman whose excessive beauty is marred by an unimaginative and money-minded soul, is reduced to a “phantom” (560), a “dead shape” (561) whose kiss “rouses [Ewald] to nothing but thoughts of suicide” (567). In contrast to Alicia, of whom Ewald can “see nothing but her form” (572), Hadaly is an

“enchanted mirage” composed of “radiant matter” that shifts according to his will (586).

Danse Macabre: Women and the Origins of Horror Film

Perhaps the text’s most striking example of cinematic spectatorship is the scene in which Edison projects a moving image, with sound, of the performer Evelyn Habal in order to demonstrate Ewald’s potentially fatal lack of proper perception. This scene is not only remarkable for its fairly accurate predictions concerning what cinema would come to be, it also lays the groundwork for a particular kind of viewing practice centered on feminine performance and masculine spectatorship. Michelson argues that Villiers’ novel, much like the early films of Georges Méliès and Thomas Edison, which often featured women who were magically transformed through cinematic wizardry, offers the female body “not as the mere object of a cinematic iconography of repression and desire...but rather as the fantasmatic ground of cinema itself” (19). Lucy Fischer takes this claim one step further in “The Lady Vanishes,” which explores how early magic trick films set the foundation for the future of female representation in cinema. Fischer contends that these films, such as Edison’s *Mystic Swing* (1900), Méliès’ *Ten Ladies in an Umbrella* (1903), and Segundo de Chomón and Ferdinand Zecca’s *The Red Spectre* (1907), illustrate “a rampant hostility toward the female subject” generated by a “basic fear of imagined female powers” (34). It is this fear that produces women in trick films who disappear, reappear, and transform according to the will of the male magician. But what is particularly striking about these early trick films both within the context of *Future Eve* and in this project as a

whole is that they can quite easily be classified under the genre of horror. Fischer describes their sets as a “chamber of horrors” and goes on to name some of the specific demonstrations (34):

Thus we have such tricks as “Rod Through Body” in which a sword is placed through a woman’s torso, “Dagger Chest” in which a series of knives are placed into a box around a woman’s head, “Shooting a Woman Out of a Canon,” “Sawing a Woman in Half,” “Shooting Through a Woman,” and finally “The Electric Chair.” Such tricks cannot simply be viewed as jovial and naïve demonstrations of imagined male powers, as a harmless flexing of the masculine ego. Rather they must be regarded as symbolic acts of considerable violence. (34-5)

Fischer’s “symbolic acts of considerable violence” are apparent both in the short film depicting Evelyn Habal and in Edison’s lurid display of the dancer’s makeup and costumes (objects meant to stand in as metaphoric substitutes for Evelyn’s corpse). In addition to functioning as Edison’s retribution against Evelyn for deceiving his friend, these demonstrations are also teaching tools for Ewald so that he can learn how to safely and correctly perceive women. As punishment for using her physical body as an “effective screen” with which she may “imperceptibly blin[d]” her prey, Edison captures Evelyn on film, effectively entombing her image and manipulating it in order to reveal her true nature (642). In a chapter titled “Danse Macabre,” Edison first screens “the life-size figure of a very pretty and quite youthful redhead”: “The transparent vision, miraculously caught in color photochrome, wore a spangled costume as she danced a popular Mexican dance. Her movements were as lively as those of Life itself, thanks to the procedures of successive photography, which can record on its microscopic glasses ten minutes of action to be projected on the screen

by a powerful lampscope, using no more than a few feet of film” (640). Here, not only has Edison captured the image Evelyn presents to the world, but the development of film technology itself is also explicitly linked to feminine performance. Once Ewald has gotten a good look at this “morsel fit for a king,” Edison replaces the film strip in order to display Evelyn’s “true” form:

He turned to the tapestry and adjusted a collar on the cord controlling the lamp. The first filmstrip leaped from its track; the image disappeared from the screen. A second heliochromic band quickly replaced the first and began running as quick as light before the reflector. On the screen appeared a little bloodless creature, vaguely female of gender, with dwarfish limbs, hollow cheeks, toothless jaws with practically no lips, an almost bald skull, with dim and squinting eyes, flabby lids, and wrinkled features, all dark and skinny. (641)

This sleight of hand augers the popular trick films referenced by Michelson and Fischer and verifies both Edison’s mastery over the image of woman and the innately corrupt nature of women who are able independently to alter their images and thus deceive the unpracticed male eye that has not yet learned how to master the cinematic. However, despite Edison’s claim that the second film strip shows the “true” Evelyn, the woman “hiding beneath the appearance of the other,” there is no evidence that this person is in fact Evelyn at all, since one can hardly imagine the dancer allowing herself to be filmed in this manner (642). This specter is consequently nothing more than a magician’s trick that labors to establish a fixed, “correct” image of Evelyn, one that accords with Edison’s interpretation of her and teaches Ewald that he must work to overcome his initial false impression of the “pretty young creature,” as he calls her, if he does not wish to succumb to the same fate as Anderson (641). The violence of this transformation, in which a woman is

exposed as a monster, marks horror film as the battleground in a war over primacy of perception. Put another way, early cinema—even in this fantastically speculative moment prior to its actual invention—quickly establishes a connection between images of women and masculine horror, a move that leads to the conventions of horror film as the primary response to feminine erotic performance. From this historic moment onwards, horror film thus serves as both a material record of women's oppression and a powerful tool for parsing how women's ontological experience is laid out along a series of binaries: artificial vs. natural; representation vs. reality; pre-Symbolic vs. Symbolic, etc. The spectacle of erotic horror—Evelyn's by turns suggestive and ghastly dance—toes the line between representation and reality, objective truth and subjective interpretation. Evelyn's relegation to horror cinema not only points to the importance of the genre as a response to feminine performance, but it also sets the precedent that horror is largely produced and consumed by men.

The second notable example of cinematic spectatorship in the novel, frequently discussed in the critical literature, is the dissection of Hadaly, whose body is opened up before Ewald's eyes such that Edison can lay out its inner workings in great detail. While the associations with horror as a genre that perpetually opens the body and violates the boundary between inside and outside are self-evident, the scene's connections to horror film have gone largely unnoticed. For example, Raymond Bellour writes that “by dismembering and by naming the parts, [Villiers] makes of the female body an experimental field, an object exposed to generalized sadism” (115). Bellour links this sequence to Baudelaire specifically and to the

literary tradition of the *blason*, in which specific female body parts are separated from the whole in order to be expounded upon as unique art objects in their own right.⁷

However, the literal opening up of a woman's body in order to divine its secrets, an action Bellour specifically points to as "generalized sadism," precipitates the horror film's fascination with the dismembered female body repeatedly laid open for (presumably masculine) spectatorial pleasure.

Hadaly's connections to horror as a generic form proliferate from this point on in the novel, and she embodies many of its commonly acknowledged characteristics. For example, her actions and speech are limited to "sixty basic hours," which have been predetermined by Edison, and they foreshadow horror's penchant for endless repetition (735). She is able to "die" for show only to be brought back to life by her assigned keeper, a feature that anticipates not only horror's endless string of dead female bodies, but also the ways in which the genre itself is repeatedly brought back from the grave by way of excess sequels, spin-offs, and remakes. In addition, she physically embodies the tension in erotic horror between representation and reality and thus serves as a bridge between the special effects of horror and the authenticity of pornography—the mad scientist can literally open her up and sew her back together again as many times as he likes without actually killing her. Finally, Hadaly's flesh, which is produced through the process of photosculpture, transforms her into a walking, talking filmstrip and creates a compelling link between her

⁷ Both Bellour and de Fren credit the tradition of the *blason* as the inspiration for the chapters in *Future Eve* that detail Hadaly's construction and boast titles such as "Rosy Mouth, Pearly Teeth," "Corporal Fragrances," "Flesh," and "Physical Eyes."

incarnation and the development of early cinema as a means of working through how to display and perceive feminine bodies, a screening process that immediately lands on horror as the most effective generic medium for combatting women's control (itself horrific) over themselves as images.

Edison and Ewald's solution to the threat of feminine artificiality is to transform women into moving pictures, a strategy that seals them in a symbolic zoetrope in which every move has been predetermined and exists as part of a continuous loop. Hadaly's scripted performance of a series of preordained scenes, as John Anzalone asserts in "Golden Cylinders," is an attempt to fill the gap or lack between sign and signifier:

Edison recognizes a fundamental and indelible flaw in his recording devices. They can transcribe words and images, but they cannot control the way the recordings will be received. The novel's first ten chapters show the inventor's deep mistrust of language that cannot in some way be neutralized, that is, of language whose meaning is arbitrarily and spontaneously generated in interlocution, and not arrested in some transcendent sense. (42)

Hadaly will be a film that Ewald not only knows by heart but can manipulate at will, thereby divesting the android of her ability to threaten castration, the primary problem, according to feminist screen theory, associated with the image of the woman-on-film: "At the very least, you will never experience here that fear of being misunderstood, which haunts you with the living woman; you will simply have to pay attention to the intervals engraved between the words she speaks" (655). These "intervals," potential points of rupture in Ewald's highly tailored performance, recall the space between perception and image that is so important to Albertina in *Desire*

Machines and point to the possibility of fracture in even the most carefully controlled scripts.

The filmstrip of Evelyn Habal, the golden cylinders that hold Hadaly's predetermined speech and actions, and even the photograph of Alicia that Ewald presents to Edison as proof of the actress' inappropriate likeness to the Venus Victorious⁸ all confirm the supposed validity of masculine perception over feminine performance. Because her behavior is so predictable, Hadaly creates a safe space for masculine spectatorship and fulfills the requirements set by Mulvey for membership in the "cult of the female star," since she is a figure whose "over-valuation" effectively dissipates anxiety concerning her presence as an unknown or potentially violent force ("Visual Pleasure" 718). However, Hadaly is not solely the product of Edison, she is also the brainchild of the mysterious somnambulist Sowana, and it is her involvement in the android's birth as well as her habitation of Hadaly's electric armature that troubles any reading of the machine-woman as simply a doll who performs the role of faithful mirror in order to confirm Ewald's ability to correctly interpret the world around him.

Disruptive Direction: The Possibilities of Film Made Flesh

Before she was the "many-sided and mysterious" phenomenon Sowana, the woman who speaks telepathically with Edison (through means of electricity), influences his actions, and inhabits the as yet unconscious shell of Hadaly, she was

⁸ "Here she is, in her native purity of marble! Look at it, and see if in my words I've exaggerated beyond the reality.' Edison took the photo and glanced at it. 'Prodigious!' he cried. 'It's nothing less than the famous VENUS of the unknown sculptor! It's more than prodigious, it's absolutely stunning! I concede the point'" (577).

Annie Anderson, the widowed wife of Edward Anderson betrayed by her husband's affair with Evelyn Habal and left destitute following his suicide (740). After the loss of her husband, Mrs. Anderson suffers from "one of those complete neurotic collapses known to be incurable" and is taken in by Edison as a personal patient (737). From this moment on, she exists in a comatose state that gives Edison the chance to perform research on the powers of magnetism, through which he claims he is able to "exert enough nervous energy to dominate another person almost completely" (738-9). Aided by the help of two metal rings imbued with "a certain quantum of magnetic fluid" and the mouthpiece of a telephone, Edison and Mrs. Anderson are able to silently communicate across great distance (739). Once this telepathic communication commences, however, the power dynamics of the relationship dramatically shift. Mrs. Anderson informs Edison that she has left her previous existence behind and demands to be called by a new name: "My friend, I remember Annie Anderson, who lies sleeping down there where you are; but *here* I remember another *me* whose name for a long time has been Sowana" (739). From this point on, Mrs. Anderson/Sowana challenges Edison's authority and asserts her influence over the entire process of Hadaly's construction. Mrs. Anderson is also enlisted by Edison to sculpt the model of Alicia that will serve as the blueprint for Hadaly's physical form, the logistics of which are never fully explained in the novel since by all accounts Mrs. Anderson is catatonic and physically bedridden for the entirety of the narrative. Nevertheless, she is visible to Alicia, who describes her as "very pale, middle-aged, very taciturn, always in mourning, appearing to have been

once very beautiful” (737). What’s more, Alicia is able physically to feel Sowana’s “icy hands,” which the actress describes as a “long streak of fire,” as they massage her body prior to sculpting its likeness (737). This interaction between Alicia and Sowana calls attention to the mysterious and perhaps superior powers of feminine perception in *Future Eve*, since neither Ewald nor Edison ever describe Sowana as a material presence. For Edison, the dormant body of Mrs. Anderson, which lies in his laboratory, and the immaterial apparition Sowana, who speaks telepathically with him and inhabits Hadaly, are two separate entities. That Sowana might perhaps be accessible to Alicia in a way that she is not to Edison points once again to the novel’s fixation on just what it is that makes bodies truly visible.

In the critical literature on *Future Eve*, Mrs. Anderson/Sowana is often read primarily as a kind of puppet who serves as an example of a textbook hysteric and gives Edison a chance to demonstrate his powers of comprehension and compulsion. Asti Hustvedt characterizes her as “a model patient, a perfect example of the amazing transfiguring possibilities of hysteria...She exemplifies the transformed hysteric, who under the influence of Edison’s hypnotic powers, is reprogrammed” (38). This quote, perhaps unwittingly, reveals the novel’s implicit belief in the latent artificiality of all women, not just androids, and points to women’s machine-like dispositions as a feature men attempt to manipulate and to control, not one that they have inherently created. In much the same vein, Kai Mikkonen argues that Edison “‘cures’ Any⁹ Anderson by moving her into a state of ceaseless sleep” (38) and that “the ‘maternal’

⁹ Throughout *Future Eve* Mrs. Anderson is referred to interchangeably as Annie and as Any.

figure of Sowana only exists in hypnosis” (42). Breaking from these readings, Marie-Hélène Huet asserts that Sowana’s personal agency is an integral component of the novel: “In a dramatic reversal of the tradition that credited the mother with the material shape of progeny and the father with the living principle, in *L’Eve future*, Edison provides no more than an intricate metal frame and a superficial likeness to a living being. Hadaly’s soul is Sowana’s work. The maternal principle is vindicated at the very moment when Edison’s creation escapes his control” (230). Despite Edison’s claim that he has “project[ed his] will” into Mrs. Anderson’s body, Sowana’s ability to independently possess Hadaly, her insistence that she no longer be addressed by her married name but by the mononym Sowana, and Hadaly’s implication, after she has been transformed into the physical likeness of Alicia, that Ewald need not rely on her programming because she is already propelled by an unknown feminine force all point to Sowana’s influence over the android and open up the possibility for a reading of Hadaly not as unconscious machine but as Sowana actively performing the woman in/as horror.

Edison himself acknowledges the magnitude of Sowana’s influence when he informs Ewald that Hadaly is not entirely of his own design: “Once having seen [the android], Sowana, as if subject to some demonic spirit of exultation, forced me to explain all its most hidden secrets—until, when she had studied every last detail, she was able, *occasionally*, TO INCORPORATE HERSELF WITHIN IT, AND ANIMATE IT WITH HER ‘SUPERNATURAL’ BEING” (740). This passage not only verifies the text’s implication that Hadaly performing Alicia is in reality Sowana

performing Hadaly performing Alicia, it also intimates that Sowana is a figure whose powers are themselves horrific. Her “demonic spirit” is beyond Edison’s scientific comprehension and strays into the realm of monstrosity, the unknowable horror of femininity. This frightening void is what prompts Edison to warn Ewald that “*not everything about [Hadaly] is an illusion!*” before the latter sets sail with his artificial bride (741). For despite the fact that Edison is supposedly able to manipulate the sleeping Mrs. Anderson at will and influence her thoughts and actions, he is forced to admit that “though I know Mrs. Anderson, I swear to you on my soul THAT I DO NOT KNOW SOWANA!” (741).

In *Future Eve*’s climactic scene, Ewald, thinking he has been invited on an evening stroll with Alicia, is shocked to discover that he is actually in the company of the completed android Hadaly whose likeness is so perfect that she is now indistinguishable from her original. In her effort to ensure that Ewald accept her as his new lover, Sowana/Hadaly performs the idealized Decadent woman with a script that could have been lifted directly from Baudelaire’s “Beauty” [« La Beauté »].¹⁰ She fashions herself as “an envoy...from those limitless regions whose pale frontiers man can contemplate only in certain reveries and dreams” and claims that her “eyes have really penetrated into the realms of death” (726, 727). In a complete reversal of the populist practicality of Alicia, Sowana/Hadaly positions herself as a formless Ideal come to inspire Ewald from the non-space of the pre-Symbolic where “all periods of

¹⁰ “Conceive me as a dream of stone: / my breast, where mortals come to grief, / is made to prompt all poets’ love, / mute and noble as matter itself” (*Flowers* 24). [« Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme une rêve de pierre, / Et mon sein, où chacun s’est meurtri tour à tour, / Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour / Eternel et muet ainsi que la matière » (202).]

time flow together, space is no more; [and] the last illusions of instinct disappear” (726). Despite this pandering to the Decadent ideal of woman as formless material awaiting her sculpture by the male artist, Sowana/Hadaly is adamant concerning her birth. In her description of the event, she divests Edison of all his creative agency and gives herself sole credit instead: “I called myself into existence in the thought of him who created me, so that while he thought he was acting of his own accord, he was also deeply, darkly obedient to me” (726). Much like the dancer Evelyn Habal, whose performance forces men to “blind” themselves in deference to her artifice, Hadaly offers Ewald no room for negotiation—if he wishes to live in a world where she may exist freely, he must acknowledge her as she is (638). The truth of her existence is never in question, only Ewald’s ability to perceive and accept her: “Reinforce me with your self. And then suddenly I will come to life under your eyes, to precisely the extent that your creative Good Will has penetrated me...only through your choice can I be either living or inanimate” (726). Sowana/Hadaly actively embodies the Decadent woman (a figure whose formlessness, materiality, and connection to death all traditionally serve as the inspiration for masculine artistry) and simultaneously denies Ewald the ability to use her as a reflection for his own identity, an action that points to a particularly feminine pleasure in the performance of the woman in/as horror. In turn, the horrors of feminine artificiality become the inspiration for the more biddable Decadent woman as muse. In Edison’s words, “since all these women are more or less artificial, since it is Woman herself who suggests the notion of being replaced by the Artificial, let’s spare her the trouble, if that may be” (647). This

sentiment prompts him to bring Hadaly into being, but as Sowana/Hadaly shows, even the woman as muse can take on the role of agential performer, since she is the inspiration for herself as commodity. To this end, Sowana/Hadaly instructs Ewald to let her live independently of her programming and requests that he refrain from manipulating her rings, which would activate “the other feminine potentials” within her (727).¹¹ In doing so, she effectively separates the concept of woman as formless matter from the figure of the male artist or lover and establishes it as a role which she plays independently of either Edison or Ewald. From the moment Sowana/Hadaly “call[s herself] into existence in the thought of him who created [her],” she establishes herself as an agential performer rather than mindless and repetitive machinery.

Sowana/Hadaly is *Future Eve*'s final girl. She is the one woman who manages to evade the discerning eyes of Ewald and Edison, men who seek complete control over feminine representation through the medium of film. As a material woman who is also, literally, an image, Sowana/Hadaly troubles binaries between representation and reality and draws attention to the ways in which women on film have, from the beginning, always been associated with horror. There is little to no distinction, after all, between the “female vampire” (645) Evelyn Habal, whose illusory charms trap men within an ever-present mirage, the radiant “form” of the sculptural beauty Alicia Clary, by whom Ewald feels “possessed” (572), and the spiritual android

¹¹ “But no! These other feminine potentials that live in me should not be roused. I despise them a little. You had better not touch that deadly fruit within this garden!” (727).

Sowana/Hadaly, whose kiss enables her to “drink in the soul of her lover, as if to make it her own” (732). Although Hadaly is designed by Edison as the solution to the problem of the living artificial woman, in reality she is reproductive film technology run amok, a woman whose intimate connections to performance, horror, and cinema mark her as an important figure for feminist film theory and as a useful tool for developing more nuanced approaches to women’s engagement with horror film.

Trading Places: Melodrama and Horror in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977)

New Eve follows the trials and tribulations of Evelyn, an English academic who travels to a speculative, dystopian version of America and must learn to navigate its foreign, apocalyptic landscapes where various warring factions, including the Blacks and the Women, fight for territorial supremacy. After he accidentally impregnates a stripper named Leilah, Evelyn flees New York in favor of a cross-country road trip. He does not make it very far before he is captured by a militant band of women who transform him into New Eve and hope to impregnate him with his own sperm in an effort to “bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis” (64). Eve manages to escape before this fated conception, however, and the remainder of the novel is dedicated to a series of episodic encounters with various groups and individuals whose chief goal is to impose their own vision of the world upon our unlikely heroine. Eve’s journey reaches its climax when she finally encounters aging movie starlet Tristessa, of whom Eve has been an admirer since boyhood. Eve is shocked to discover that Tristessa is actually a man in woman’s clothing, and their sexual coupling is soon followed by Tristessa’s untimely death. The novel concludes

with Eve alone on a raft, sailing into the unknown of the Pacific and wondering what function she can possibly serve in a world that seemingly has no use for a mythic wonder such as herself.

In *New Eve*, both Eve and Tristessa, men respectively transformed into women by force and by choice, must confront their status as myths in a world that apparently has no need for them. The novel's mythological epicenter is the "celluloid brothel" of Hollywood cinema (Carter, *Sadeian* 68), "the place where the United States perpetrated itself as a universal dream and put the dream into mass production" (Carter, "Hollywood" 385). Carter's investigation of Hollywood as the wellspring of cultural myth begins on the very first page of the novel, which Mulvey characterizes thus: "It's hard to think of any more succinct summing up of the paradox of cinema and its projection of fantasy and illusion onto the female body than the opening of *Passion of the New Eve*" ("Cinema Magic" 232). This establishing scene introduces the reader to the novel's protagonist, Evelyn, as he was before his transformation into a woman by a militant cadre of extreme feminists: "The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa" (1). Tristessa, who the reader will later discover is actually a man and who becomes Evelyn's love interest after his transformation into Eve, is in Evelyn's eyes a beautiful vision in complete "complicity with the phenomenon of persistence of vision" (1). Tristessa's status as illusion makes them all the more desirable, and their faultless reinforcement of melodrama's core belief (to be a woman is to suffer and to suffer beautifully) is the primary source of their

attractiveness (“For Tristessa’s specialty had been suffering. Suffering was her vocation.”) (4). That the novel opens with an ode to the power of fetishistic scopophilia in Hollywood cinema has not been overlooked by scholars, many of whom identify classic narrative cinema as the primary site of the novel’s cultural engagement. In implicit accordance with Mulvey, Sivyer contends that *New Eve* is “arguably [Carter’s] most explicit ode to, and critique of, Hollywood” (29). Similarly, Crofts notes that the character of Tristessa “draw[s] attention to the masquerade implicit in classic Hollywood cinema” (99), and Stoddart remarks that in the novel “Woman is again the subject (object) of a particular classic cinema which holds masquerade both as its representational subject-matter (the fetishized female body as spectacle) and as the symptom of the artificial and reinscribed nature of the cinematic representation.” This heightened attention to *New Eve*’s engagement with classic Hollywood cinema, while important to an understanding of the text, also does the novel a disservice since it obscures the ways *New Eve* is equally influenced by erotic horror and exploitation film.

While scholars have often remarked on the ways *New Eve* intersects with and interrogates the conventions of porn and melodrama, little attention has been paid to the ways Carter deploys erotic horror not just as a particular set of tropes and narrative structures but also as a way to excavate and unpack the underlying assumptions that must be in place in order for both melodrama and ‘correct’ spectatorship of Hollywood cinema to take place. Throughout the novel, melodrama is repeatedly the place where men look at each other and women become mere

mediators for their desire. In contrast, erotic and exploitation horror are genres that not only admit the possibility for feminine desire but are also the cinematic mechanisms most amenable to a deconstruction of gendered spectatorship and desire. In short, erotic horror becomes a tool for crafting a solution rather than the root of the problem.

That melodrama is a medium in which men look narcissistically back at each other is apparent from the first line of the novel, which details the result of Evelyn receiving oral sex on a date at the cinema: “When she perceived how Tristessa’s crucifixion by brain fever moved me, the girl who was with me got to her knees in the dark on the dirty floor of the cinema...and sucked me off” (5). Although Evelyn is unaware that his desire is directed toward a man performing femininity, Carter still manages to demonstrate how Hollywood cinema and even the heteronormative cultural ideal of femininity (as exemplified in Tristessa) is in reality a series of oscillating looks between men. Evelyn’s potential for over-involvement with the film, the possibility that he will take up a feminized spectatorial position and come too close to a figure that will eventually become a kind of twin, is circumvented by the unremembered woman’s reassurance that he still holds mastery over spectatorship and vision. This (assumed) fear of a metaphoric castration at the hands of the woman-on-screen (who, for Carter, is also a man in disguise) is later transformed and subverted by Carter in her recourse to the literal. Evelyn’s physical castration by the *Women* is the direct byproduct of his ardent devotion to Tristessa—the metaphoric dangers of filmic spectatorship are made manifest in his time spent in their

underground feminine sanctuary. To add insult to injury, Evelyn, now simply Eve, must learn to be a woman by watching endless screenings of Tristessa films during his recovery. However, this time there is no longer a woman to serve as mediator for his desire for/identification with Tristessa. He must watch in the anonymous woman's place and bear the brunt of both his desire for the woman-on-screen and the knowledge that, in a way, he and she are the same. In this world, the consequences of cinematic spectatorship are very much a part of everyday life and primarily take the form of bodily transformation. While Evelyn can avoid a direct (metaphoric) confrontation with the woman-on-screen because he has a second woman, conveniently already on her knees, to mediate his experience, both mediator and distance are erased once his violent transformation into a woman takes place. As Eve, a figure whom Evelyn describes as "the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head" and "my own masturbatory fantasy," he is both spectator and image (71). This new spectatorial position, one which demands a dangerous proximity to the screen and the expectation that he will collapse himself onto the image of male desire, becomes an absolute requirement once he is kidnapped by and subsequently married to the polygamous poet Zero, a dictator who only knows how to treat Eve as a woman.

Zero is an extreme parody of masculinity who believes his paramount purpose as a man is to impregnate as many women as possible, an impossible task since he is impotent. Eve soon learns that Zero is of the absolute conviction that looking too closely at Tristessa's eroticized despair in *Madame Bovary* gave the starlet the power

to “magick away his reproductive capacity via the medium of the cinema screen” (101). This literalization of Mulvey’s oft-cited premise that the image of the woman onscreen carries the threat of castration and thus must be subjected to fetishistic scopophilia or sadistic voyeurism shifts *New Eve*’s focus from melodrama and classic Hollywood cinema to horror. While it is unlikely that Carter believed that all narrative cinema functions as erotic horror, her novels certainly point to this particular subgenre as the most effective tool for dismantling second-wave feminist assumptions about cinema. Erotic horror is particularly suited to this task because it takes what feminist film theory reads at the level of metaphor and moves it into the realm of the literal. By performing this generic shift, Carter situates her analysis of cinema in the materiality of the body. It is through horror, where low-brow, body-focused spectacles rely on the literal materiality of knifings and stabbings, penetrations and provocations, that Carter can begin to dismantle the cultural myths surrounding spectatorship, desire, and the inability of feminine performers to be active viewers in their own right. Although Tristessa as Madame Bovary deals the initial blow to Zero’s manhood, it is as Madeline Usher, printed on “a very large poster” and enrobed in a “bloody nightdress,” that they preside over Zero’s office and are subject to his knife throwing practice (87). The (perceived) woman in/as horror is Zero’s true enemy, and the bite of melodrama is its capacity to enable horror. Notably, there are no female characters who show quite the same devotion to the genre as Zero, Tristessa and, initially, Evelyn. Here, melodrama is a man’s genre.

The first section of *New Eve* follows Evelyn's journey from England to America and his first few months in New York, where he positions himself as a detached, untouchable spectator who reads the chaos and confusion of the city as his own private film: "I'd been hooked on a particular dream, all manner of old movies ran through my head when I'd first heard I'd got the job there—hadn't Tristessa herself conquered New York in *The Lights of Broadway*, before she died of leukemia?" (6). Evelyn maintains this position even as the true state of the city under siege becomes apparent to him: "That the city had become nothing but a gigantic metaphor for death kept me, in my innocence, all agog in my ring-side seat. The movie ran toward its last reel. What excitement!" (11). Evelyn's "cinematic consciousness" regards women and people in general as "characters in his personal film," and in this section of the novel his perspective is strongly aligned with the fantasy world reflected in classic cinema's gendered systems of spectatorship and desire (Sivyer 39). Much like Mulvey's imaginary masculine spectator, who sits safely before "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically," Evelyn looks at the city as if he is seated in a theater and held in thrall by the "illusion of looking in on a private world" that can never affect him physically ("Visual Pleasure" 714). Bodily danger and defilement are things that happen to others (as when Evelyn witnesses a horde of oversized rats attack and consume a German Shepherd in a matter of minutes) or actions he perpetrates against those whom he believes should succumb to the power of his vision (as when he pursues and enters into an affair with sex worker Leilah).

The scene in which Evelyn pursues Leilah through the dark and grimy streets of New York is one of the novel's most discussed sequences and is often read as an example of Carter's engagement with the narrative expectations of pornography. For example, Tonkin argues that the relationship between Evelyn and Leilah lays bare the material and economic conditions of the prostitute (186); Christina Britzolakis reads Leilah as an intertextual response to Baudelaire's pornographic depictions of Jeanne Duval (467); and Gamble remarks that the couple's "sexual interactions are presented with the stark exactitude of the pornographic text, which spurns the discreet veils of romanticism" (123). Finally, Rubinson interprets the scene as "a cliched pornographic pursuit" that is also Carter's "most explicit attempt to script her own 'moral pornography'" (721). While the text justifies these interpretations, and it is safe to assume that any pornographic writing by Carter at this point in her career would count as an attempt at moral pornography, there is an inescapable element of fantasy in Leilah's performance that cannot be dismissed solely as Evelyn's deluded interpretation of feminine sexuality or as a disillusioned pornography.

Leilah's primary power, and certainly the one that serves as Evelyn's chief source of mystification and horror, is her ability to manipulate the way Evelyn perceives her body. Evelyn does his best to inscribe Leilah within the unknowable and infectious landscape of the city, a landscape that has already been closely linked to the space of the cinema screen. Just as the woman-on-screen is often read as synonymous with the image within which she appears, Evelyn merges Leilah with his perception of the city, calling her "the night's gift to me, the city's gift" (21). Leilah's

revolt against this portrayal consists in her purposeful positioning of herself as both a product of the “undergrowth” of the metropolis and as totally distinct from it (14).¹² It is this ability to exploit space, coupled with Evelyn’s perception of her as the “original darkness and silence” rife with a “hot, animal perfume,” that marks Leilah as a woman who performs her status as horror rather than as a passive image that Evelyn can easily consolidate with the city as the setting for his personal picture show (16, 17).

Evelyn’s first intuition that his perception of Leilah might be flawed comes right at the start of a prolonged game of cat and mouse which takes him across New York. Rather than submit to Evelyn’s consolidation of herself and the city, Leilah manufactures about herself an inviolable space: “But such was the pentacle in which she walked that nobody seemed able to see her but I” (18). Rather than become one with the set of Evelyn’s imagined cinema, “the movie [running] towards its last reel,” Leilah clearly differentiates herself from the space of the cityscape upon which Evelyn’s gaze works to flatten her as onto the surface of a terrible mirror (11). Importantly, in addition to creating space between herself as figure and the city as background, Leilah’s magic pentacle situates Evelyn in the position of Mulvey’s

¹² Leilah’s simultaneous embrace of and resistance to her indistinguishability with the city recalls Chapter 1 of Johnson’s *The Feminist Difference*, in which she considers “the dream of psychoanalysis” to be the representation of “sexual difference as a recursive figure, a figure in which both figure and ground, male and female, are recognizable, complementary forms. This dream articulates itself through the geometry of castration in Freud, in which the penis is the figure, or positive space, and the vagina the ground, or negative space” (19). In her analysis of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Johnson argues that the protagonist moves herself “into a ground that cannot be located in real space” (i.e., the yellow wallpaper) and forces the “figure / ground distinction” to “self-destruct[t]” (25, 26). This effort, in turn, challenges the reader’s ability to locate themselves (26).

isolated theater patron—a seemingly solitary voyeur whose look is absolutely primary and absolutely unique. Upon closer inspection, however, just who is actually spectating and who is providing the unknowing performance becomes unclear. For even as Evelyn closely watches Leilah, the description of the sex worker as a figure who is totally isolated in her observation of Evelyn marks her as equally capable of occupying the position of spectator. The strange, “magic space” Leilah carves out of the background is thus a protective framing rather than an all-consuming screen, one that enables her to exert control over Evelyn’s perception of her even to the point of spatial implausibility (18). Significantly, the structures that support this frame and enable Leilah to move safely through a cinemascapes that Evelyn has designated as “classic” or “narrative” cinema are those of erotic horror. Foregrounding her body as the primary spectacle of this particular chase sequence imbues rather than removes narratorial power, and her knowing occupation of the role of woman-as-absence, as rot and decay, ironically enables her to gain control over her presence:

Once, when she was perhaps fifty yards away from me, under the lighted portico of a movie theatre that showed a revival of *Emma Bovary*, outlined against the face of Tristessa, a face as tall as she was, she halted, as if suddenly purposeful, and disappeared for a moment behind a red-painted pillar on which had been inscribed that fearful female sign. When she emerged, she let drop some black, wispy thing and, as I now ran towards her openly welcoming smile, she became, as if miraculously translated, as if all the time no more than trick photography, posed against a Coke stand fifty yards further ahead, placidly drinking a bright pink milk-shake and laughing, with a great display of yellow, brown-streaked teeth. (19)

In this scene, Leilah purposefully frames herself in specific settings and at specific moments in order to produce a particular viewing experience for Evelyn. Tristessa as

Emma Bovary, the same role Zero believes to be the cause of his impotence, is here made into a backdrop for Leilah's performance as a horrifying and captivating femme fatale. Once again, the trappings of erotic horror and pornography (Leilah is literally performing a striptease with the promise of explicit sex) become both an artful tool for foregrounding the material reality of existing in a feminine body and an agent for changing commonly held assumptions about how these bodies navigate the world around them. Much like Tristessa, Leilah is putting on a show. However, unlike the gilded screen star, she does not believe that her performance is the root of her essence as a woman. Here femininity is pure show, one that picks up and drops off unexpectedly and does not render its performer identical with the rotting stasis of the city.

Following this heightened encounter, the setting for Leilah's horrific and erotic displays—performances that she appears to take pleasure in even as they subject her to the constricting power of Evelyn's vision—shifts to the space of her bedroom mirror. To Evelyn, Leilah's mirror is a stand-in for the larger cinema screen that showcases the turmoil of New York but will never touch him personally. Before its reflective surface, he imagines himself and Leilah literally enacting what many feminist film theorists (most notably Mulvey) have argued is the primary relation between men, women, and the cinema screen: "pleasure in looking [is] split between active/male and passive/female...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 715). In Leilah's small apartment,

The cracked mirror jaggedly reciprocated her bisected reflection and that of my watching self...as she watched me watching the assemblage

of all the paraphernalia that only emphasized the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath it, so she, too, seemed to abandon her self in the mirror, to abandon her self to the mirror, and allowed herself to function only as a fiction of the erotic dream into which the mirror cast me.

So, together, we entered the same reverie, the self-created, self-perpetuating, solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror that seemed to have split apart under the strain of supporting her world. (26)

It is unclear just who controls the world of the mirror, and at certain points the surface seems to hold an agency in and of itself. If Evelyn is only a player in an “erotic dream,” a role in which he has been “cast” by the demands of the particular space created by the mirror, then he is absolved of any influence in sustaining and creating a relationship in which Leilah becomes pure image and he the invulnerable spectator; instead, these roles become, quite simply, examples of an unquestionable reality. The idea that the mirror independently creates the spatial relations that govern the flow of erotic spectatorship among the three figures in the room—Leilah, Evelyn, and Leilah’s reflection—flounders when Evelyn shifts his stance and argues that it is none other than Leilah herself who produces the “self-created, self-perpetuating, solipsistic world of the woman watching herself being watched in a mirror.” What is more, the force of this feminine narcissism has caused the mirror literally to crack “under the strain of supporting her world.”

A more conservative reading of this passage might argue that Evelyn, not Leilah, is actually the master spectator here: it is his self-created and self-perpetuating world that demands Leilah occupy the position of two-dimensional erotic image. This type of analysis subscribes to the theory that women can only exercise spectatorship

in a narcissistic framework that collapses the opposition between the subject and the object of the gaze.¹³ Like Leilah, who, according to Evelyn, cannot effect the necessary distance between herself and her image in the mirror, the gaze of the imagined feminine spectator of classic cinema “is depicted as partial, flawed, unreliable and self-entrapping” (Silverman, *Acoustic* 104). In de Lauretis’ words, “the position of woman in language and in the cinema is one of non-coherence; she finds herself only in a void of meaning, the empty space between the signs—the place of women spectators in the cinema between the look of the camera and the image on the screen, a place not represented, not symbolized, and thus preempted to subject (or self) representation” (8). Reading Leilah as a textbook example of classic Hollywood’s imaginary woman does a disservice both to the power of Leilah’s gaze and to her ability to negotiate the way her body operates in the realm of fantasy (Leilah as “Lily-in-the-mirror”) and of material reality (the strength of her image literally forcing the mirror to split) (24).

Interpreting Leilah’s mirror as a kind of cinema screen that enables a non-look of “sheer proximity and an overwhelming presence-to-itself” is only possible if one disregards Evelyn’s original description of Leilah as a purposeful orchestrator rather than an enthralled and passive spectator (Doane, *Femmes Fatales* 36). Leilah’s obsession with her own image is first and foremost a process of artistic creation:

Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and,

¹³ For foundational theory of this type, see de Lauretis, Doane, Mulvey, and Silverman.

although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection. (24)

In this primary description of Leilah before the mirror, she is much more closely aligned with someone Silverman, Mulvey, or Doane would describe as a masculine spectator—someone who effects the necessary distance between themselves and the cinema screen and safely achieves enjoyable identification. However, Leilah’s literal assumption of her mirror image troubles any effort to categorize her in a gendered binary of spectatorship. The production of herself as an art piece, the “edifice” which she has so carefully “roug[ed]” and “sprayed,” powdered, and “bedizened,” is an act that enables her to “become her own mistress” (25, 24).

The “systematica[l] carnalis[ation]” in which Leilah becomes “dressed meat” lays bare the material conditions of the marketplace where she sells herself to men (27). However, within the theater of her bedroom, she is also her own fantasy, the marquee attraction in a show that can go on with or without Evelyn and is so powerful that it has fissured her looking glass. Placing more weight on the power of Leilah’s gaze than on the triangulated look between Evelyn, Leilah, and her mirror also permits a reading of Leilah as a woman in/as horror who gains pleasure from her performance as femme fatale. After all, for Leilah there is only one look in these moments—the one she purposefully shares with herself. Leilah’s constitution before the mirror recalls the scene in *Future Eve* in which Edison projects two disparate images of the dancer Evelyn Habal in order to teach his friend Ewald proper film

spectatorship techniques. However, while Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's example completely erases the original woman whose phantom appears on screen, in Carter's reimagining of the sequence, Leilah, the modern Habal, is both original flesh and imaginary spectacle. Rather than a screen which reveals an inherent monstrosity, Leilah constructs an image of the woman in/as horror as a guise which she purposefully assumes. By embodying Evelyn's metaphoric descriptions of her as "the profane essence of the death of cities, the beautiful garbage eater," Leilah demonstrates her ability to enclose herself within the image of the mirror/cinema screen through the intervention of horror (14). In this case, Leilah is not overcome by the woman-as-image. It is the opposite. As a result, she effectively transforms horror from a genre used to depict women (but from which they are barred) to one that accurately reflects her experience in the real world. She is both the product and the consumer and as such manufactures a space in which Evelyn, despite being the culturally intended audience, feels absolutely alienated.

Despite Evelyn's claim that Leilah watches him watching her in the mirror, a look that defers to his spectatorial desire and submits to the power of his gaze to define her, he notes early on that "To decorate the other was her sole preoccupation at these times; she did not hear me if I spoke to her" (24). Leilah's mirror play imagines a cinema made possible through the horror convention of the monstrous-feminine and "constructs another frame of reference" that "produce[s] the conditions of visibility for a different social subject" (de Lauretis 8-9). It is through her embodiment of the expectations of erotic horror, her literalization of a woman becoming her own image,

that conventional modes of gendered desire and spectatorship are troubled. By allowing Evelyn to perceive her as “unnatural,” as a kind of demon whose eroticism is both alluring and repellent, Leilah situates herself in the realm of the monstrous. This is clearly presented in the text when Evelyn describes how, “still riven by her carnal curiosity, [Leilah] would clamber on top of me in the middle of the night, the darkness in the room made flesh, and thrust my limp cock inside herself... Waking just before she tore the orgasm from me, I would, in my astonishment, remember the myth of the succubus, the devils in female form who come by night to seduce the saints” (23). In this pornographic scene, Leilah’s desire transforms her into an icon from the horror film. She is a darkness “made flesh,” a monster whom Evelyn believes will sap his soul through the unsolicited use of his penis (a thought that places him closer in proximity to the crazed Zero than he perhaps realizes). Evelyn’s response to this performance, despite the fact that it is in perfect correspondence with what he initially found so alluring about Leilah, is to constrain her and, if provoked, to beat her: “Then, to punish her for scaring me so, I would tie her to the iron bed with my belt... If she had fouled the bed, I would untie her and use my belt to beat her. (23-4). This act of violence on Evelyn’s part is not so much a protest against Leilah’s performance as it is a rejection of the fact that she has drawn him into her play as an unwilling participant. For if she is the succubus then he is the victim, a figure who has lost his ability to control his own body. In this scenario, horror becomes a powerful tool for Leilah and a potential weapon against Evelyn. Masculine

violence, the patch that holds heteronormative gendered spectatorship together, is the only recourse Evelyn can think to turn to in this situation.

Evelyn's resort to violence is accompanied by a generic shift. He now turns to the self-suffering stereotypes of melodrama. Leilah's unplanned pregnancy, which occurs almost immediately after their first meeting, allows Evelyn to remove Leilah from the dangerous realm of horror, with its disconcerting spatialities and threatening network of looks, and instead to place her securely into the classic role of the piteous, unwed mother: "As soon as I knew she was carrying my child, any remaining desire for her vanished. She became only an embarrassment to me. She became a shocking inconvenience to me" (28). It is not until much later on, in the unspecified future, that Evelyn, now Eve, is able to acknowledge that the characteristics he was so intent to discover in Leilah—"the sickness of the ghetto, and the slow delirious sickness of femininity, its passivity, its narcissism"—are phantoms that exist only in his own imagination (33). After demanding that Leilah procure an abortion, an enterprise which leaves her hospitalized and sterile, Evelyn abandons both the dangers of horror and the thrall of melodrama. Fleeing the city, which he associates with the supposed depravity of his dark-skinned lover (much as Baudelaire does), he embraces the patriarchal realm of the Western, a generic site that, to his mind at least, offers clearer guidance on how he can and should function in his newly chosen landscape—the western frontier. Like a lone cowboy who has left his entire past behind him, Evelyn imagines himself wiped clean, "like a true American hero, my money stowed between my legs" (33).

While Leilah is emblematic of a woman who consciously manipulates the position of woman in/as horror and manages successfully to subvert expectations of gendered spectatorship in her mirror performances, Tristessa, the cinema starlet par excellence and Carter's encapsulation of Hollywood's "universal dream," functions as a farce who unconsciously exposes classic cinema as nothing more than men talking amongst themselves (Carter, "Hollywood" 385). As "an amalgamation of Hollywood icons of fetishized femininity" and thus "a metaphor for the way in which woman supports the cinematic apparatus," Tristessa's narrative defeat demonstrates the failure of classic cinema's production of the idea of "woman" (Crofts 99). Tristessa's unfailing belief in the essence of womanhood as "negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through" proves that they are "too much of a woman...for the good of the sex" (Carter, *New Eve* 134, 169). Tristessa is both "the clown," as in Carter's analysis of Marilyn Monroe in *Sadeian Woman*, and also the Sadeian Count of *Desire Machines*, who is "the shrine of his own desires" (Carter, *Desire Machines* 125). This dichotomy is reflected in scholarly responses to the character. While Merja Makinen, Dimovitz, and Rubinson all associate Tristessa with Sade's long-suffering Justine as "the ultimate emblem of mythical femininity" (Makinen 158), Gamble connects the actress with the Marquis' widow-libertine Madame de Saint-Ange, "a figure both tragic and ridiculous in the theatrical extremities of her assumed persona" (127).¹⁴

¹⁴ Madame de Saint-Ange appears in de Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795) and takes on the role of sexual instructress to fifteen-year-old Eugénie de Mistival.

The revelation of Tristessa's sex, in the context of the novel, is also a revelation that they have taken it upon themselves not only to perpetuate but also to benefit from a mythical femininity that they believe grants them complete control over the power of perception:

While Zero ingeniously tortured you in your gallery of glass, you must have been in absolute complicity with him. You must have thought that Zero, with his guns and knives and whips and attendant chorus of cringing slaves, was a man worth the ironic gift of that female appearance which was your symbolic autobiography. You had turned yourself into an object as lucid as the objects you made from glass; and this object was, itself, an idea. You were your own portrait, tragic and self-contradictory. Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one. (126)

In the end, Tristessa's understanding of bodily autonomy and their desire for complete control over their audience's powers of perception are not far off from a figure like the Count in *Desire Machines*, whose "insistence on the authority of his own autonomy made him at once the tyrant and the victim of matter, for he was dependent on the notion that matter was submissive to him" (168). Just as the Count demands Desiderio "instantly negat[e]" himself into "oblivion" (148), Eve is challenged by Tristessa "in the most overt and explicit manner": "With her glance like a beacon of black light, she ordered me to negate myself with her. It was the most imperious demand for submission I could ever have imagined" (122). This absolute imperative to capitulate to Tristessa's view of themselves and the world around them—their mansion of mirrors is but an extension of the stage of the cinema screen—is the source of a power that, because they believe in it wholeheartedly, aligns them with the world of patriarchal mythology where the primary gender is

male and women must excise themselves to the realm of the two-dimensional. In contrast with Leilah, whose perspective and performance actively deconstruct classic cinematic conventions even as she participates in its highly structured forms, Tristessa is beholden to a melodrama that they believe will grant them total immunity from the threat of difference.

Tristessa's confidence in their ability to bend reality to their will is the source of their power, one they gain through a pantomime of feminine suffering that serves no one and does a disservice to women since it operates under the same ideology as Zero's imagined impotence. Just as Zero positions his castration as the result of coming too close to the cinema screen, Tristessa's one-sided encounter between themselves and their mirror prompts their transformation into an illusion of womanhood: "Tristessa is a lost soul who lodges in me; she's lived in me so long I can't remember a time she was not there. She came and took possession of my mirror one day when I was looking at myself. She invaded the mirror like an army with banners; she entered me through my eyes" (147-8). Tristessa's "complete complicity" with Zero is also a complete complicity with the ideology that women and the cinema screen are one and the same, and if you are not careful both are liable to swallow you whole.

Rather than imagining an alternative cinema as the solution to this problem, as Mulvey famously did when she demanded that filmmakers "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment," Carter recognizes the inherent mutability of

Symbolic structures (“Visual Pleasure” 722). She accomplishes this by first acknowledging that the established understandings of gendered spectatorship have been predominantly sustained by looks and words among men and then launches a critique bolstered by the implicit assumption that women also possess the ability to gaze actively. In this critical landscape, horror emerges as the best tool for a job at which melodrama consistently fails, as in Leilah’s performance of the monstrous-feminine before her mirror. In contrast, melodrama is cast aside as an example of men playing house. Both Zero and Tristessa place far more stock in their ability seemingly to adhere to strictly cast gender roles than to the material realities and repercussions of these stereotypes, which come to their most visceral conclusions in the horror film.

The appearance of pain and abuse are for Tristessa more important than the political reality of suffering, and Zero’s assaults only confirm the movie star’s status as an inviolable virgin:

Zero cracked his whip over her and, though the lash did not touch her, her body convulsed in a gigantic wince, though not immediately; after she heard the crack of the whip, she turned slowly to look at Zero and his instrument and *then*, lavishly histrionic, convulsed, although by now he’d coiled his whip away. She was that much in control of her experience. She made her responses in her own good time, with great art. (original emphasis, 123)

Tristessa’s demand that reality bend to the myth of their womanhood is broken by Zero’s command that they marry Eve and the subsequent forced consummation of the marriage. This marital rape, in Eve’s eyes, awakens Tristessa from a Sleeping Beauty-like slumber and pushes them into an equally dangerous myth—that of the romantic lead. Even after their abuse at the hands of Zero, Tristessa never quite

manages to leave the realm of melodrama. Once the couple escapes Zero's clutches, Tristessa constructs an entire "symbolic schema" to reinforce their failing sense of self. Highlights include a degrading career as a prostitute and a baby eaten by rats. Eve, rather than repudiate them, allows herself to be seduced by her function as a woman in relation to her fantasy of Tristessa as melodramatic male lead (148). In a moment that recalls the Desiderio-shaped hole in "PERPETUAL MOTION," Tristessa's body becomes the absent referent of the cinema screen as "fragments of old movies pla[y] like summer lightning" across their body (145). Rather than run from this invitation, Eve neatly inserts herself into this cinematic slot that is just her size. The result is her seduction by melodrama's promise of an eternal and undying romance. By accommodating herself to the idea of eternal womanhood, Eve allows her body to be "solely defined by" Tristessa's, a decision that means she must give up performative agency in favor of myth. This shift to melodrama is also a shift to a binaristic, sex-based system of gender identification, one previously troubled by the conventions of horror. Although Eve admits that she is unable to unravel the mystery of "what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own factory fresh incision and engine-turned breasts" (146), her seduction by the experience of her body as "a man-made masterpiece" that prompts her to "reach out my hand and tou[ch] my own foot in a sudden ecstasy of narcissic gratification" indicates her allegiance to heteronormative ideologies (142). Nor is Tristessa immune to the overpowering weight of mythic expectation. Despite

living for decades as a woman and having been perceived as such by the entire world, they admit that the experience was always lacking due to the absence of a vagina:

“But I, no, I never opened on this kind of chasm, no matter how beautifully I danced nor what death-defying leaps I performed upon my trapeze. I never lodged in a cave like this and never thought such a little mouth could sing such a loud song...” (149).

The experience of heterosexual coupling here becomes the ultimate signifier of pleasure.

Eve and Tristessa’s sexual union, which occurs after their escape helicopter crashes and leaves them stranded in the desert, has been read by scholars both as “lifeless mating” (Punter 57) and as “lovemaking that defies gendering” (Tucker, “Introduction” 19). While it is possible to argue that Eve pushes past the essentialism that grounds Tristessa’s sense of being, since her perception of the star oscillates between fantasies of “the glass woman I saw beneath me” and “a man who overwhelmed me,” her subsequent claim that “The erotic clock halts all clocks” cautions against a reading of their lovemaking as an event that unravels the myth of gender (145). Completely consumed by the fantasy of erotic love, Eve is even happy to die if she can do it romantically: “And the most beautiful thing of all was that we were slowly dying. The desert was drying us up. The desert would mummify us in the ironic and devastating beauty of our embrace, I nothing but a bracelet of bright hair around his bones” (147). This imagined death is soon made material when the lovers are picked up by an extremist Christian sect of pubescent boys who make quick work of Tristessa when they change into their “female aspect” and kiss one of the young

soldiers on the mouth (152). Once Tristessa has been killed, the novel abandons melodrama entirely and leaves Eve to the structures of horror as she escapes from the ecclesiastical clutches of the boys, finds a gas station whose owner has murdered his entire family before taking his own life, and finally reunites with Leilah, who has apparently given up on playing the monstrous-feminine and now leads a resistance band in a guerrilla war against the state of California. However, despite having spent the majority of her adventure occupying a series of closed “systems which operated within a self-perpetuating reality; a series of enormous solipsisms, a tribute to the existential freedom of the land of free enterprise,” Eve’s return to “historicity” is hardly promising: “But now I felt myself on the edge of a system of reality that might be perpetrated by factors entirely external to itself, and of a kind to prompt an honest red-neck paterfamilias to butcher his entire family and leave his pets to starve” (162-3). This new system of reality attempts to sever its symbols from their material signifieds, and it is for this reason that although Eve reencounters Mother—the phallic figure who orchestrated her transition from male to female—it is not until she enters a cave where all of Mother’s symbols have gone to rest and replay themselves in an endless series of overwrought performances that she truly “returns to her mother” (176).

The separation of history and myth has also wrought its toll on Leilah, who now goes by Lilith and has abandoned the game where she “rouge[d] [her] nipples and dance[d] a dance called the End of the World, to lead the unwary into temptation” (169). Lilith believes that “historicity [has] rendered myth unnecessary,” but Eve is

not so quick to capitulate to this new way of looking at the world, emblemized by Lilith's "detached, impersonal kindness," and her face, upon which "the deadly passivity of the naked dancer had been washed off with the paint" (168). The hard line Lilith draws between myth and history seems too simple a solution to Eve, who knows Lilith "could not abdicate from her mythology as easily as that; she still had a dance to dance, even if it was a new one, even if she performed it with absolute spontaneity" (175). It is this all-or-nothing approach, the complete abandonment of the pleasures of illusion in favor of an assumed, objective reality, that spells death for Eve. Lilith abandons her, along with Mother, because Eve "did not want [her] old self back" (183). The novel concludes with Eve delivering herself to the sea, and the reader leaves her on a voyage to nowhere, floating off in a "neat little rowing boat...made out of a cheerful mauve plastic...just the kind of boat you strap to the top of a car and take to the beach on a Saturday afternoon for a few hours pleasure" (174). Whether Eve lives or dies or even whether her and Tristessa's child (if it exists) is able to come to term are questions the novel leaves unanswered and seem less important than the fact that, just as in *Desire Machines*, no compromise can be reached between the allure of the imaginary and the necessity of historicity.

In both *New Eve* and *Desire Machines*, a commitment to a presumed historical authenticity and empirical reality wins out over the appeal of myth and the luxuries of illusion. The play of performance is equated with unleashing the entire Western cultural imagination and allowing it to exact totalitarian reign over the general consciousness. However, completely closing off this fantastic realm of excess simply

means that other monsters are unleashed, ones such as the “paterfamilias” who kills his entire family. The most obvious solution to this dilemma—to acknowledge the mutability of symbols as objects of perceptual play and to destabilize myth by performing it slant—are outcomes neither *Desire Machines* nor *New Eve* can yet imagine as sustainable possibilities. Albertina, Eve, and Leilah, children of melodrama and horror, must exit the narrative.

In the opening pages of the novel, Eve argues for the value of symbols as material embodiments of our inner lives:

Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols themselves have no control over their own fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; the nature of our life alone has determined their forms. A critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives. (2)

These lines perhaps offer Carter’s best justification for why Eve matters, despite the fact that the novel deserts her in the end. Eve is but one example of the narrative excess that characterizes all of Carter’s novels, a feature that scholars often justify by claiming that Carter is in reality a detached critical mastermind or spectator—someone who allows description and ellipses to run amok but is never personally affected and always retains control. For example, Gamble argues that Carter’s “role, as an onlooker both alien and alienated, [is] to defamiliarize that which has been constructed as familiar, thus inculcating an echo of her own detachment in the reader” (95), and Henstra reads her as a kind of objective “onlooker” who is able to “think through” multiple kinds of experiences” (109). These interpretations stand in stark

contrast to the kind of arguments supported by Sivyler, who acknowledges Carter's "wholehearted engagement with illusion, fantasy and visual pleasure on their own terms rather than simply dismissing them as something to be seen through" (225), and Crofts, who makes a case for Carter's "passionate detachment" which "celebrates cinema's capacity as a medium for illusion itself" and ensures the author remains "passionately engaged" (103-4). Carter's investment in the power of illusion, her desire to accord it material weight and to treat it with engaged consideration, is one that celebrates rather than condemns the space of spectacle, most especially as it concerns the women who both occupy and enact it. The realm of the two-dimensional, of the screen that is both magic mirror and tempting trap for any who dare to invest themselves in its images, is a tool whose use is not only pleasurable but also powerful. Within this knowing yet hopeful framework, horror cinema is lifted out of the realm of untouchable and immemorial myth in order to transform its generic structures into a template ever available for constant reimagining.

Chapter Four

Hopeful Horrors: A Feminist Reconsideration of Erotic and Exploitation Horror Film

Heretofore, this project has primarily focused on a genealogy of women authors who all participate in literary movements characterized by exclusionary misogyny. In this chapter, the groundwork laid by these writers becomes the foundation for a reading of the woman in/as horror as she appears on film. From Rachilde's "Frog Killer" and "Pleasure" to Carter's *Desire Machines* and *New Eve*, each demonstrates a strong investment in (even a pleasure for) perpetuating the idea of woman as a subject whose active embodiment of the horrific leads to a renegotiation of bodily perception. In each of these case studies, the site of horror is elaborated in and through feminine spectacle; it is a non-place where flat, two-dimensional planes carry the weight of emotional or bodily responses but are continually denied higher-order symbolic meaning. In short, Rachilde's and Carter's work demonstrates the ways that the perpetual stereotype of the feminine body as object of horror is the direct result of a particular construction of spatiality. While this recognition is not intrinsically revolutionary, the enduring desire on the part of these authors to lean into rather than away from this construction points to a sustained feminine, perhaps even feminist, complicity in these seemingly misogynistic characterizations of women as two-dimensional, superficial, and spectacular. In turn, this genealogy makes space for the possibility that the surface of the feminine body, rather than passively supply itself as the primary spectacle of horror, can also be deployed as a tool for articulating Symbolic and material oppression.

As a loosely defined genre, horror has historically been associated with misogyny, exploitation, and voyeurism. To operate within the genre as a woman is to be associated with the very things that make it untenable for feminist approbation. While the previous chapters have focused exclusively on horror in literature—moving from the stylized artificialities of fin-de-siècle Decadence to the postmodern excesses of speculative feminist fiction—this chapter marks a decisive shift from the abstraction of the written word to the concrete images of the screen. This transition from word to image makes the horror genre’s tendencies toward violence and voyeurism even more explicit, its reliance on the surface of women’s bodies as metonym for spectacle even more apparent. The shocking immediacy of the horror film’s on-screen violence, its “crudity and compulsive repetitiveness,” places the bleeding, weeping, leaking (most often feminine) body at the center of the screen, thus bringing the visceral reality of corporeality to the forefront of the narrative (Clover 22-3). The horror genre’s intense focus on the body, the ways it can be violently altered, made to open and close, and move in seemingly impossible ways not only generates venues for rethinking how bodies come to be perceived in relation to the kinds of generic spaces they occupy, but also how the horror genre itself is a particularly apt tool for a reconsideration of how the body as material subject (the broken and bruised body of the woman under attack in particular) is expected to exist not just onscreen but in everyday life. It is for this very reason that Rachilde and Carter rally around horror both as a site of unthinkable violence towards feminine subjectivity and as a potential place of radical performance, a stage where bodies can

be and do things otherwise. To negotiate with genre in this way is “to perform the terms of the production of woman as text, as image, is to resist identification with that image. It is to have stepped through the looking glass” (de Lauretis 36). The conscious performance of woman in/as horror is just this kind of resistant identification, which revels in generic tropes while simultaneously revealing the ways these tropes influence the ways that bodies both occupy and construct space.

Superficial Obstructions: A Brief History of Horror Film Scholarship

Despite a long lineage of woman-authored texts that celebrate feminine complicity in horror through the bodily performance of woman’s status as landscape, art, and cinema screen, feminist approaches to horror film have been predominantly critical of the genre as inherently damaging to women. Despite this common critique of the genre, some of the most frequently cited criticism on horror has been written by women. Carol Clover’s foundational *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine*, and Linda Williams’ “When the Woman Looks,” are all important scholarship in the field. However, in the roughly twenty-five years that separate our present moment from the publication of Creed and Clover’s book-length studies in 1993—coincident with the growing popularity of gender and sexuality studies in horror film analysis—no text has emerged that carries the same scholarly weight as these initial publications (Humphrey 38; Hunter 498). In the intervening quarter century, what has changed? Are these readings, both anchored in psychoanalytic approaches to horror and reliant on 70s neo-horror as their objects of

analysis, still relevant to feminist research on the horror film?¹ To judge by the frequency of their citations in contemporary criticism, the answer is a resounding yes. To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Creed's landmark text, *Re-reading the Monstrous-Feminine* was released in 2020 with contributions by prestigious feminist film scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Annette Kuhn, Elizabeth Cowie, Anne Kaplan, and new content by Creed herself. In her introduction to the 2019 anthology *Gender in the Contemporary Horror Film*, editor Samantha Holland notes that over half of the included essays cite Clover's scholarship. The primary result of this critical plateau, wherein the canon of feminist horror criticism has remained relatively unchanged over the past twenty-five years, is that feminist approaches to horror film have consistently catalyzed around a specific kind of reading and a specific kind of film—psychoanalytic analyses of both audience and film, in particular 1970s auteur films or more mainstream contemporary films, have remained the standard.

For the most part, academic (including feminist academic) horror criticism relies on a well-established canon of 1960s and 70s neo-horror films directed by a now recognizable and respected group of male auteurs. The types of films in this category are those that fulfill Robin Wood's 1979 criteria for "apocalyptic horror," movies whose "negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes (on the contrary) the recognition of that ideology's disintegration, its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart" (23). Wood's

¹ Both Creed and Clover follow psychoanalytic approaches in their examination of horror film, and, broadly speaking, this has been the standard for feminist horror critique ever since. Please refer to Freeland for an in-depth discussion of psychoanalytic critique as a prevailing trend in feminist film criticism.

characterization of apocalyptic horror as “currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism” applies to such films as Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and Brian De Palma’s *Sisters* (1972). The tipping point for this new, academically elevated horror film is often credited to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). As the year that brings “modern cinematic horror...into being,” 1960—and *Psycho* in particular—serves as a “threshold” that “marks a separation between areas” (Schneider 144; Prince 4). Horror was no longer about the threat from the alien outside (often a thinly disguised communist enemy) that could be soundly defeated by the power of white men in lab coats, as it had been in horror films from the forties and fifties such as *Them!* (1954) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). All of a sudden, the threat came from within, putting the whole social system of the nuclear family at stake.

The transition into the “golden age” of American horror inspired a developing body of criticism that still exerts significant influence on contemporary academic horror studies. For example, on the cultural relevancy and acceptability of 70s horror, Peter Hutchings remarks that “the importance of the 1970s is so widely accepted that it does not require much by way of justification or elaboration” (“International” 291). Referring specifically to its academic reception, Joe Tompkins agrees that 1970s neo-horror generates specific kinds of readings that “mirror broader canonical values of the film academy—particularly as regards issues of aesthetic realism and cultural

relevance” (37). Finally, Steffen Hantke writes that “within academic film criticism, 1970s neo-horror has already been safely integrated into post-war American cultural history”: the “transgressiveness coupled with the mystique of rebellion and political subversiveness have ensured these films’ canonization and enabled academics to ease potential feelings of distress and illegitimacy in their object of study” (“Introduction” 19). While pioneer horror scholars at times felt the need to legitimize the genre and its presence in their work, by the 1970s horror film had become sufficiently canonized for easy entry into academia.²

The primary reason for this early interpretive reticence is horror’s status as a “low” genre—one that not only focuses on the onscreen body but demands reciprocation in the body of the spectator. Horror film’s ability to produce embodied reactions in its audience—often credited to the genre’s close attention to the physicality of the bodies onscreen, generally in the form of sex and violence—has resulted in a historical suspicion on the part of “serious, career-minded academics” that their object of study “was ultimately too frivolous, garish and sensationalistic to warrant serious critical attention” (Hantke, “Academic” 194). Now, however, these expressions of “regret” and the need to “offer reparations” can be avoided if one only turns to the safe realm of 70s horror (Crane 153), which has “become, if not the

² In the opening chapter of *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* Clover notes a lack of horror scholarship in academia in particular but is quick to add that even those outlets dedicated to “trash” or the horror genre in general rarely perform analytic work. For example, she remarks that even “film magazine articles on the genre rarely get past technique, special effects, and profits” (21).

cornerstone for discursively securing thematic depth and cultural legitimacy, then an exercise for scholars to indulge in horror's radical potential" (Tompkins 38).

Auteur-based criticism of 1970s horror is thus the firm foundation and academic standard for approaching horror in a "respectable" way. Consequently, the 1980s and 90s, with their "sequels, remakes, television spin-offs, and highly mannerist exercises in gore," are set up as the era when the mainstream horror film "began to overshadow the subcultural and countercultural aspects of the cult of horror" (Mathijs & Sexton 198). The "radical potential" (Jancovich, "Introduction" 5) of the 1970s becomes buried under a mountain of slashers that culminate, for many critics, in the "self-indulgent, postmodern play" of *Scream* (1996) (Hantke, "Introduction" 8). Audiences "could no longer take [horror] seriously" (Jancovich, "Introduction" 6), as they were pummeled by an unprecedented volume of mainstream releases that all seemed to be more concerned with "reactionary depictions of the association between sex and violence" than subversive political critique (Sharrett 70). This crisis in horror led to a return to the "safe" space of the politically minded 70s films that, like their predecessors from the 30s and 40s, had managed to gain a certain degree of generic stability and academic credibility. This rhetoric of critical crisis—in which the 70s films are heralded as "good" and "legitimate" objects of study and the films of the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, in their unseemly excess, "are simply dismissible from any aesthetic, technical, or political perspective, and are straight-to-video write-offs"—coalesces around the issue of surface and spectacle, more specifically, the tendency on the part of post-70s horror

films to focus on violence and gore that is seemingly untethered from narrative purpose (Sharrett 64).³

One strand of criticism that veers from the nostalgic longing for 70s horror but still holds fast to canonical critical approaches can be found in scholarship that reads the post-1960 horror film in conversation with postmodernism. In this way, scholars such as Isabel Pinedo have transformed what some might criticize about the horror genre into the very characteristics that validate it. That is, as a postmodern form, the horror film becomes a text that challenges the distinctions between high art and low culture by creating an “unstable” world “in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates” (Pinedo, *Recreational* 4, 11). In a similar vein, Tania Modleski argues for the validity of horror as postmodern text by claiming that it is “as apoplectic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure and the specious good as many types of high art” (“Terror” 624). This strategy, in which horror undergoes a “postmodern recuperation” (Watson 67) through its association with the avant-garde, operates under the assumption that horror’s subversiveness lies in its ability to dissolve the boundary between (presumably male) spectators and the screen while simultaneously participating in “an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish” (Modleski,

³ The influx of so-called torture porn films in the early to mid-2000s is the apex of this particular trend in horror. Films like *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), and *The Human Centipede* (2009) were met with box office success and critical incredulity as the means and methods for portraying human torture on screen became more and more elaborate.

“Terror” 620). Despite this innovative and progressive approach to horror, both Pinedo and Modleski admit that the woman on screen remains the genre’s scapegoat and, as such, bears the symbolic weight of everything that postmodern horror seeks to subvert. As the repository of the “specious good” (for example, the bourgeois family), the woman in postmodern horror is the personification of a feminized “mass culture,” a convenient screen on which the subcultural-identifying male spectator can cast off his “experience of submission and defenselessness” (Modleski, “Terror” 625). Even Pinedo, who reads the final girl as a positive emblem of feminine power who gains authority through her ability to defeat the killer, recognizes that by the end of the movie she is “caught within the confines of the frame and reinstated as spectacle” (*Recreational* 86). As a result, despite the attempt at recuperation through a postmodernity that supposedly celebrates horror’s self-reflexivity, its disregard for linear narrative, and its excessive special effects, the woman in/as horror is still constructed as a screen onto which the spectator can offload his own cultural anxieties. Furthermore, the primary concern still lies with the spectator’s reactions to any particular film rather than the content of the film itself.

The tendency to focus on the creation of a particular kind of spectatorial practice as an integral part of horror film analysis carries over even in cult studies work on exploitation cinema. Similar to the postmodern approach and to the work of feminist scholars like Creed and Clover, “the vanguardist scholar-critic of lowbrow popular cinema” applies a specialized discourse of spectatorship as a primary means of access to all the “bad” movies that have been left behind by academia (Tompkins

34). The term paracinema was first coined by Jeffrey Sconce and is an “elastic textual category” that includes

entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as “badfilm,” “splatter punk,” “mondo” films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to softcore pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic “trash,” whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. (372)

For the scholar of paracinema, watching “trash” or “badfilm” is in and of itself a subversive action that rebuffs the “politico-ideological approach in favor of an experimental engagement...that is attuned to notions of transgression rather than political progressiveness” (Hutchings, “International” 300). Situating himself at an ironized distance from the gory spectacles in which he delights, the viewer of paracinematic horror not only rejects the need to actively interpret what occurs within the space of the screen but also relies on the classification of paracinema as “unacceptable” trash in order to present himself in “a superior position of camp distantiation, approaching the films *as* exploitation and enjoying the imagined discomfort of other ‘ordinary’ audiences at the film’s politically incorrect offensiveness” (Hunter, original emphasis, 495). The paracinematic spectator thus never delves beyond the surface of the screen but rather positions himself as a connoisseur of a simultaneously treasured and disparaged literal. In turn, the idea that the excessive incompetency of paracinema means it means nothing at all permits

paracinematic viewers to exclusively rely on the literal—the authenticity of the text as filmic construction with no interior meaning—as an inherent component of their self-construction as academic bad boys.

Feminist critics such as Joanne Hollows, Jacinda Read, and Modleski have called out paracinematic scholars for relying on a feminist politics of resistance and oppression to justify their pleasure in texts that would otherwise be condemned as violently misogynistic. For example, Read argues that “Paracinema gives white academic males a place from which to speak which does not, like mainstream film criticism, problematize male hetero pleasure in the text” (60). Because paracinema viewers claim their true motive is “a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the ‘refined’ sensibility of the parent taste culture”—that is, “a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites”—they are able to effectively absolve themselves of associating with the problematic content of the films they take such pleasure in viewing (Sconce 376). In order to sustain this position of disaffected distance, paracinema viewers actively refrain from any sort of filmic analysis and instead choose to direct their focus beyond the screen to the extratextual—production and distribution information, anecdotes about the director, funding, etc. In turn, this extraneous information amalgamates into subcultural capital that stands in place of the film’s content. The result? A critical approach that is far more interested *how* the material is viewed and created than with *what* material is actually onscreen.

One of the more popular categories of “badfilm” for paracinema scholars is European horror. Barring auteur *giallo*⁴ directors such as Dario Argento or Mario Bava, Euro horror has for the most part escaped the scrutiny of American academic analysis beyond brief mentions of condemnation and disapproval. In his book-length study of Euro horror, Ian Olney explains its absence from film studies, which adheres

to old aesthetic and ideological criteria used to determine whether a film is suitable for academic study. Popular movies that demonstrate obvious artistic merit or boast politically progressive credentials are deemed worthy of consideration; conversely, tasteless or politically incorrect forms of popular cinema—like Euro horror, which has a reputation for being not only aesthetically challenged but also misogynistic, homophobic, and racist—remains largely beyond the pale. (*Euro Horror* 21)

Euro horror emerged as a subgenre in the 1980s with the advent of the VHS tape and the ability for consumers to access bootleg copies of previously unavailable films through distribution of black-market catalogs. Although the content of these catalogs varied widely, covering such diverse ground as art films, exploitation cinema, musicals, documentaries, and softcore porn, Euro horror “acquired a special status”: “In effect, viewing uncut versions of [Euro horror] became the mark of how committed a horror fan you actually were. Not only did you in this way acquire a particular kind of subcultural or countercultural capital, you also got to thumb your nose at the repressive Thatcherite state...” (Hutchings, “Resident” 16-7).⁵ As Joan Hawkins observes, “because uncut, uncensored European horror, exploitation, and

⁴ *Giallo* is a subgenre of Italian horror film known for complicated plots (often with twist endings), overly stylized lighting and set design, and an extreme dedication to heightened visual effects. The genre had a large impact on the development of the American slasher film in the late 1970s and 80s.

⁵ See Hawkins, Chapter 1, “Sleaze Mania, Euro-Trash, and High Art.”

softcore porn tapes are available only through bootleg companies, European titles tend to be constructed (and consumed) as more sophisticated and daring, certainly more exotic, than domestic products” (45-6). The censorship laws and the scandals surrounding the video nasties in Britain pushed Euro horror films into the black market where they were “celebrated by fans for whom their illicit status made them desirable” (Jancovich, “Introduction” 6). In turn, cult subcultures took far more readily to Euro horror as a kind of detritus in demand than academics ever did or have since. In the ensuing years, Euro horror has become a video category that, though existing under a seemingly simple generic classification (horror made in Europe), has never quite managed to form a “cohesive totality” (Hutchings, “Resident” 22). It covers “a variety of different practices, with no geographical center and no core identity, and...is fractured, fragmented and dispersed unevenly across Europe” (Hutchings, “Resident” 22). Despite its unstable definition, however, Euro horror continues to be associated with certain structural and content markers that separate it from its Anglocentric counterparts. Chief among these are its reputation for outrageous, stylistic excess, unsustained or simply nonexistent narratives, low production quality (compounded by mis-matched, re-edited, grainy prints), “post-synchronese” sound, and a gratuitous focus on the violent sexual exploitation of women (Olney, *Euro Horror* 29). In short, Euro horror has become the placeholder for all the things academics originally accused domestic horror of being before its canonization.

As a mode that “transgress[es] the very boundaries of acceptable interpretation,” Euro horror, in particular sexploitation and erotic horror, occupies the position of American horror’s evil twin (Tompkins 33). The “self-indulgent postmodern play” of which *Scream* is accused in 1994 is already out in full force in the Euro horror produced forty years earlier that “eschew[ed] artistic unity” in favor of “perceptual play” (Olney, *Euro Horror* 33). Excessive in its individual qualities as well as in the sheer number of films that were produced, many of which recycled plots, actors, and even entire film crews (it was not unusual to simultaneously shoot an unsanctioned secondary film utilizing production monies left over from the first), Euro horror markets itself on its status as a stylistic surface that “emphasizes spectacle instead of story, engaging viewers viscerally instead of involving them narratively” (Olney, *Euro Horror* 31) and showcases plots strung together by a “series of spectacular set pieces that combine displays of extreme terror and violence with some truly virtuoso stylistics” (Hutchings, “Resident” 14). Here the Euro horror film is presented as that which, like mainstream horror, relies on audience expectations and recycles the same series of images again and again, which, through their very ubiquity, cease to produce individual meaning.

This self-reflexivity has become a hallmark of the horror genre and is the primary justification for the tendency in horror scholarship to ignore the genre at the level of content. For if everything is already at the surface, displaying itself openly and obviously, then there is no need to look further. Clover, for example, claims that because the horror film does not “detain us with niceties of plot, character,

motivation, cinematography, pacing, acting, and the like” (21), it displays meaning “obviously and spectacularly” (236) and serves as a “transparent source for (sub)cultural attitudes towards sex and gender in particular” (22). Because exploitation and slasher films are assumed to function without recognizable directorial intention, the only text it has to refer back to is itself. As a result, horror is constructed as a great tautological mirror, something that can only be understood through reference to an unending line of substitutes. As a genre characterized by a proliferation of remakes and sequels, a trait compounded by individual films’ focus on excessive spectacle, academic interest in horror hardly ever goes beyond the literal and metaphorical surface of the movie screen. This interpretation of horror’s “excessive narrative and specular redundancy” renders analysis unnecessary and promotes the assumption that there is in fact nothing below the surface (Pinedo, *Recreational* 61). In short, the excess of horror renders critical inquiry at the level of content redundant without asking “what form and structure and function operate within the representations deemed excessive” (Williams, “Film Bodies” 602).

To refuse to take horror for granted is to begin to recognize that there is much at work beneath the genre’s blood-stained surfaces. The first step forward is to look closely at who exactly stands in for the spectacle of surface in the horror film. Doing this not only provides insight into the prejudices inherent in horror film’s academic reception but also reveals the continuing dependence of contemporary horror scholarship on supposedly binaristic and outmoded film theory rooted in psychoanalytic criticism.

Splatter Matters: Reimagining Feminist Engagement with Horror Film

According to Hantke, the popularity of a particular kind of 1970s horror film, defined by “transgressiveness, coupled with the mystique of rebellion and political subversiveness,” has meant that “contemporary horror films, with their mainstream credentials, fall short” (“Introduction” 16). Like Hantke, I am of the mind that this retreat into the canon “forecloses other, potentially more productive venues of critical inquiry” (“Academic” 200). The most effective point of departure for an inquiry into a feminist revision of horror is to look to the most common denominator that ensures not only lack of canonization but also lack of positive critical engagement (particularly feminist engagement) across the genre: sex and splatter. While excessive splatter and gore divorced from logical plot or narrative development typically serve as overdetermined characteristics of horror, when coupled with explicit or semi-explicit sexual content, the line between the artificial and the real, between the staged and the pornographic, and between special effects and snuff becomes increasingly blurred. As Stephen Prince contends, “to the extent that much contemporary horror film has equated horror with gore, the genre has arguably been trivialized” (9). Critical inquiry of non-canonical horror film thus becomes a kind of academic slumming, a characterization that only further strengthens the association between the genre and feminine bodies. To “go low (as in splatter low)” not only glorifies and romanticizes the search for an academic text that, through its very emphasis on the physical, breaches the “boundaries of acceptable interpretation,”⁶ but it also validates

⁶ For more on exploitation and Euro horror as a kind of theoretical “limit case,” see Crane (156) and

and normalizes uncritical approaches to supposedly problematic texts (Tompkins 33). The academic, “deluge[d] with computer graphics and bloodshed entirely removed from narrative purpose,” is thus granted a fail-safe from ideological interpretation of both non-canonical horror and the excessive bodies that inhabit it (Sharrett 69). The primary body that occupies and stands in for the surface of the horror film is the same one that has traditionally foreclosed narrative meaning and progression in mainstream film and whose excess must remain within the safe parameters of the screen while fans and scholars look beyond the diegesis to locate meaning. It is the body of the woman in/as horror.

That horror bestows a disproportionate focus on the ruined female body is no surprise to those familiar with the genre, and it is the most common evidence provided by feminist critics who claim horror film has nothing of worth to offer women. For example, in reference to exploitation cinema specifically, Modleski has gone so far as to claim that, “as a rule, [exploitation cinema] was far more misogynist and totally violent in its treatment of women than even the standard hardcore pornographic films” (“Women’s Cinema” 49). Likewise, Mark Jancovich observes that “the [horror] narrative is organized around fear of and hostility to women either as monsters or victims” (“Introduction” 15). Finally, Clover’s poster child for the slasher film, the final girl, confirms horror’s reliance on the appearance of a feminine surface through which its narrative can be told: “Applied to the slasher film, this logic reads the femaleness of the Final Girl (at least up to the point of her transformation)

Olney’s *Euro Horror*.

and indeed of the woman victims in general as only apparent, the artifact of heterosexual deflection. It may be through the female body that the body of the audience is sensationalized, but the sensation is an entirely male affair” (52). It is at the juncture of the woman’s body and the superficial surface of the screen that horror’s ultimate affront to meaning comes together and cements the genre’s illegibility—in this two-dimensional non-place the spectacle of the feminine body becomes synonymous with splatter. The woman in/as horror serves as a metonym for splatter/gore, and both of these symbols are in turn substitutable with the idea of the screen/surface.

The tendency for exploitation film supporters to fall back on the surface of the screen as horror’s limit—the extravagant picture shows that, because they display their meaning openly, mean nothing at all—proves the continued relevancy of Mulvey, despite the forty-five years that have passed since the publication of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” One only has to compare a quote from Mulvey on the purpose of women in narrative cinema with a trash film scholar’s enthusiastic celebration of Herschell Gordon Lewis’ ultra-violent film *Blood Feast* (1963) to note the similarity in theoretical approach. In Mulvey’s famous critique of narrative cinema, the woman on screen bears meaning for the male spectator but also serves as a potential threat of castration through her ability to block narrative. When reduced to the status of icon, however, “the beauty of the woman as object and screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct

recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 719). This presentation of the woman as icon is eerily similar to descriptions of splatter and gore in horror film in which the primary body that is mutilated is female. As I.Q. Hunter admits in his review of *Blood Feast*, "the horror film's single-minded focus on dismembering beautiful young women makes it an arguably unembarrassed and unedited version of what horror is really about—the disgusting and pornographic spectacle of female death. This, naturally, must be disavowed in cult responses to it" (496). The "stylized" and "fragmented" close ups of female mutilation in *Blood Feast* ensure that its female characters become synonymous with a filmic content totally preoccupied with the superficial. Thus, in the horror film, the woman's body, indistinguishable from splatter and gore, is the indispensable element of spectacle whose "presence tends to work against development of storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 715).

In a genre "obsessed with showing," it is ironic that so many viewers either refuse to engage with what is so spectacularly on display or, alternatively, treat it as the very thing which prevents ideological analysis (Pinedo, *Recreational* 18). The effects of this reticence on the part of fans and scholars to actively engage at the level of content can be seen in the proliferation of special effects magazines that started to appear en masse in the 1980s.⁷ Rather than consider the function of female mutilation as narrative content, these magazines perform the labor of ensuring the woman's body is reduced to pure form, and the excessive artifice of filmic special effects is

⁷ See Kendrick (315).

stripped from bodies whose supposed authentic materiality is subsequently laid bare. This “desire to reveal the secrets of the flesh, to expose the hidden, and to penetrate the surface of the body is exemplified in the gore film” (Pinedo, *Recreational* 57) and in special effects magazines where moving images from film are re-presented as frozen stills and accompanied by “cheeky, ironic, or sarcastic captions” (Kendrick 315). The image of the wounded woman becomes pure art in this case, but it is important to recognize that it is only once her image is divorced from the body of the film that it can operate as such. Within the movie, her body as spectacular, superficial splatter is a “shattered grammar” that forecloses interpretive intervention (Crane 163). As that which “trivialize[s]” (Prince 9) horror and prevents it from reaching the echelons of arthouse cinema, the “gruesome spectacle that has long since become the singular hallmark of the genre” (Crane 153) is removed from the context of the horror film proper and sent to the realm of the periodical where it becomes a “toxic pleasure” (Tompkins 44) that the male scholar need no longer “willfully deny” (Crane 153). As a static image, one whose entire purpose is to glorify the work of a (likely male) special effects artist, the woman in/as horror becomes nonthreatening in her status as art object. In this context, she becomes “readable”—a figure who is all bark and no bite. In order to sustain this (non)reading practice, the horror critic must always remember that

whatever appears to ready eyes, whatever carnage splatters across the screen, is mere illusion. In this act of intentional blindness, looking past what carries a brutal charge, horror imagery is treated as a particularly bloody variation of insubstantial and inconsequential maya. For the horror cognoscenti, blood and broken flesh screen and

obscure truths. Only the unlettered amateur is moved by what appears on the surface. (Crane 153)

The tortured body onscreen becomes that which must be penetrated in order to discover a film's true meaning; beneath the "bloody, but permeable, scrim" of screen and skin, content gives way to the analyst's probing eye (Crane 154). It is only when she is held fast as static image, in a magazine spread, for instance, that the woman in/as horror becomes safe to read, her body no longer the threat of "mere illusion."

Paracinema critics' refusal to engage ideologically or analytically with film, bolstered by the claim that there is nothing there to read, has the curious effect of validating the critical claims and practices of feminist scholars who utilize screen theory to talk about popular cinema. To show investment in the paracinematic film would be to acknowledge an interested, affective gaze—one that encourages the critic to interact with what is widely regarded as a low or body genre that, according to Williams, induces an involuntary, mimetic response in the body of the viewer: "...what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female" ("Film Bodies" 605). By denying any sort of affective investment in paracinematic content and by refusing to acknowledge any sort of ideological potentiality, paracinema viewers are able to establish a masculinized viewing practice founded on a dialectics of distance. Ironically, this is the very same masculine viewing position theorized by foundational feminist film critics such as Mulvey, Doane, de Lauretis, and Silverman. To create distance between oneself and the

screen, to master the image and enjoy a privileged voyeurism, according to these theorists, is a primarily masculine affair. To look at the screen as a woman is to be too close, to be affected uncontrollably by and collapsed onto the space of the screen—precisely the kind of viewing position low genres such as paracinema demand. The supposed ill repute of the low genre film, which for Williams also includes porn and melodrama in addition to horror, stems from its demand that the viewer occupy a traditionally feminine viewing position. Rather than sit at a safe distance from the screen, confidently identifying with the correct (read: male) character and remaining effectively disembodied for the majority of the viewing experience, body genres demand that the spectator come close, that they inhabit a messy corporeality that is fused with the flat surface of the screen, just like the (feminine) bodies on film. As Clover has pointed out in her analysis of masculine, masochistic horror viewing practices, to watch a “low” film is to potentially occupy a feminine body.⁸ Scholars and critics who understand paracinematic viewing practices as sealing the (male) viewer off from the troubling content of these films, cocooning him in a shelter of extradiegetic information, and ensuring his counter-cultural status as an “academic bad boy” only confirm the very mainstream feminist psychoanalytic film theory that paracinema supposedly resists (Read 64). This not only problematizes paracinema theory’s critical status as a relatively new and rebellious sector of horror and cult film studies, it also unconsciously acknowledges the continued relevance of second wave

⁸ See Clover, especially Chapter 1, “Her Body, Himself.”

feminist film theory that relies on Lacanian psychoanalysis and screen theory and might otherwise be considered reductive, binaristic, or just plain out of date.

Both the paracinematic and feminist approaches to horror, whether they explicitly intend to or not, confirm Mulvey in their assumption that “it is the female body that structures the male drama, and to which he assimilates, in his imagination, his own corporeal existence” (Clover 218). This reliance on psychoanalytic screen theory as the underlying structure which horror scholarship perhaps unconsciously always refers to and measures itself against proves the continued relevancy of this theory up to our current moment—it still structures fans’ and scholars’ perceptions of horror film and the level of credibility that they are willing to bequeath upon it. The main difference in the feminist and paracinematic approaches is largely one of material—paracinema scholarship is more likely to engage with Euro horror, trash, and low budget exploitation. These are the kinds of films that most fully embody what is “wrong” with horror. Consequently, they also offer the best opportunity for re-engagement with the genre. As this project has already shown, women authors have historically been invested in not only perpetuating the horror genre, but also inactively inhabiting its structures. With this in mind, what happens if these kinds of “unreadable” films—films entirely focused on the material surface of the body, the feminine body in particular—were understood as site of potential play for women rather than prisons where their every move is already hardcoded into the generic tropes that structure horror narrative? Rather than look outward at how the masculine spectator “must use the feminine as a screen on which to tell his story,” what happens

if one looks inward to the diegesis of the film itself (Clover 100)? What kinds of spaces does it produce? Who can gain power in those spaces and why? Is the two-dimensional realm of spectacle actually a position of disadvantage? Or does horror perhaps provide a generic site where the lure of the superficial is both a chance for critique and for the pleasure of a knowing performance?

In the readings that follow, I look to those films that have fallen through the cracks of the 70s horror canon and approach them with an eye for their content rather than their production and distribution patterns or their history of reception. In doing so, I actively rely on feminist film scholarship in general (screen theory from Mulvey, for example) and horror scholarship in particular (Clover and Williams, among others). The enduring power of feminist psychoanalytic film theory has not only shaped academia's understanding of horror, it has also shaped the evolution of the film genre itself.⁹ This chapter's engagement with screen theory will differ from prior approaches, however, especially insofar as it divests the screen of its all-consuming power to absorb the woman who appears on it, flattening her, prostrate, onto the two-dimensional scrim of the movie theater vinyl or the thick, curved glass of the home

⁹ The trope of the final girl has become so ingrained in popular culture as to become ubiquitous. For example, in 2015 two different horror films were released that focused on this very figure, creatively titled *Final Girl* (Tyler Shields) and *The Final Girls* (Todd Strauss-Schulson). *Tragedy Girls* (Tyler MacIntyre), released two years later in 2017, offers a more creative take on the approach since its two female protagonists, hoping to make a name for themselves as investigative journalists, hold the true killer hostage and then take up his duties. As a result, they are always guaranteed to have the scoop. Over ten years prior, in 2006, *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine) troubled audience assumptions about the final girl by making her interchangeable with the killer. Most recently, *Freaky* (Christopher Landon), which was released in late 2020, follows a final girl who, through the intervention of a magical dagger, switches bodies with the male serial killer. Just as Clover declares, in this film her (referring to the final girl) body is, quite literally, himself.

television. Instead, the woman onscreen, in particular the woman in/as horror, embraces the two-dimensional plane of the superficial as a way to draw attention to a performance that, misogynistic though its roots may be, enables a phenomenological becoming that gives nod to both its material roots and its Symbolic figurations. To affirmatively occupy horror is to embrace what many critics take at face value: the status of the woman on screen as a surface of projection, a two-dimensional mirror image that simultaneously reaffirms masculine subjectivity and absorbs male loss.

By shifting perspective from reception to content and form, my goal is to reconsider the ways female characters in horror film simultaneously occupy and represent space, a position from which they supposedly act as convenient placeholders for spectatorial anxiety and unconsciously thwart, through bodily displays, the progress of linear narrative. To do this, I consider historical criticism surrounding women's bodies and the ways they do or do not take up space, and, in many cases, are equated with it. In a Symbolic system where place and self vie for a mutually recognizable legibility and where women's failure to "remain in (their) place" has corporeal consequences, horror is the setting for a battle over bodily intelligibility (Weiss 81). Narrative space, which the horror film links to the illegible, the superficial, and the two-dimensional, becomes the great unknown. Scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz have related this idea of space to philosophical histories structured around the idea of *chora*, that which is essential for form to come into being but which in and of itself is meaningless. That this conversation exists in almost perfect symmetry with critical discussions surrounding

horror, a genre that both produces and relies on the body of the mutilated woman as a marker of generic classification, is no coincidence.

From the standpoint of contemporary academic criticism, we are still fixated on the same dilemma that plagued film scholarship in the 1970s, and this preoccupation acutely affects audience's perceptions of how, when, and where women should be portrayed in media. Take, for example, an Instagram post from December 2020 that appeared on the Turner Classic Movie channel account. The post consists of two images side by side. On the right is a head shot of Audrey Hepburn, photographed by acclaimed celebrity photographer Cecil Beaton. In the image, Hepburn is looking straight into the camera and is wearing a bonnet constructed entirely of white, pink, and purple flowers. The whole affair is fastened with a large, periwinkle blue bow under her chin. The photograph on the left features contemporary rap artist Cardi B. Cardi B is also shot from the shoulders up, she is also facing the camera, and she is also wearing a headdress of pastel flowers—although hers are obviously fashioned from sequins and ribbons whereas Hepburn's are seemingly genuine. Although the caption that accompanies this image makes no claim to judge either woman as performers, the vast majority of comments on the post express horror that TCM, a corporation representative of classic cinema and good taste, would dare to place these two women side by side. Comments include affront at this “disgraceful comparison,” simply the notation “class vs. trash,” and the opinion that this is “an obscene comparison. Audrey was an angel...this is a common thug.” Another disgruntled follower argues that Cardi B, rather than any of the discontented

commenters, is the true misogynist, since she blatantly objectifies herself in her music videos and songs. Overwhelmingly, the primary sentiment in the over nine hundred replies to the post is that one simply “can’t compare CLASS with TRASH.” Although Cardi B’s music and accompanying video productions cannot be classified as horror proper, they do certainly fall under the umbrella of “exploitation” (at least by the white middle class standards represented by TCM followers and mainstream critics), and the overwhelmingly negative response to her comparison to Hepburn reveals an inherent divide that persists to this day in “high art” and “classic film” circles. Because Cardi B actively puts her body on display, monetizes her genitalia (her hit single is literally titled “WAP” aka “Wet Ass Pussy”),¹⁰ and very clearly enjoys herself doing it, she is “trash.” Her image, when placed alongside Hepburn’s is “obscene.” This knee jerk reaction to censor explicit performance art by women is one of the many reasons feminist film analyses of horror almost always immediately shuts the genre down. Whether the woman in question has creative direction (as is the case with Cardi B) or is pressured by a director (as could perhaps be the case in erotic horror film) is irrelevant—explicit displays of feminine sexuality that are not “tasteful” enough to be “art” are automatically anti-woman porn. With this in mind,

¹⁰ Cardi B’s perpetuation of and active pleasure in a pseudo-blaxploitation medium in the “WAP” music video places her alongside the women performers in horror film that this chapter will explore as case studies. It is worth noting that in the music video for “WAP,” which Cardi B collaborated on with rapper Megan thee Stallion, the perception of space becomes a matter of utmost importance. The entirety of the video takes place in a fantastic mansion, the grandeur of which has been obviously enhanced by CGI, through which Cardi B and Megan thee Stallion explore various rooms where women appear as if by magic. As the two women open various doors, the architecture of the rooms they encounter often defies spatial logic as the house becomes a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* maze where the only grounding element is the performance of the two principal singers. Just as in trash and exploitation film, visual excess abounds, and the women’s status as spectacle becomes part and parcel of the narrative they want to tell.

even while it is difficult to make any overarching argument about the erotic horror or exploitation film as inherently pro-woman, it is also difficult to dismiss outright a genre built on the back of feminine performance.

In order to shift this narrative, it is also necessary to shift perceptions of space—what it means, how it comes into being, and its reliance on the mutual construction of specific types of bodies. For the woman who performs horror, phenomenological becoming is intimately linked to the recognition that her body “is the potentiality of a certain world” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 106). From this perspective, the two-dimensional no longer exists solely as the non-space of the monstrous feminine. Rather, the woman in/as horror occupies the superficial as a conscious habitation of the place where she has historically been made to bear meaning but, through her calculated appearances, is able to negotiate a new way between herself and her surroundings. This is not accomplished by a rejection of cinema in general and the horror genre in particular but rather through the wholehearted embrace of these very media and genres. Horror, in particular erotic horror, continues to exert a powerful influence on public perception of women performers. The recuperation and reclamation of the genre not only reveal the ways the woman in/as horror has shaped societal expectations and opinions on the feminine, but also the possibility that she can turn the tables in her favor. To work through the erotic horror film with the woman in/as horror as the primary focus, rather than an imagined male spectator who uses her body as an object shield for his own subjectivity, is a repositioning that opens up the subgenre rather than closing it

down. To open up the possibility for affirmative play in feminine performance is to also open up the horror genre for a more egalitarian pleasure for those both on and off the screen.

A Bite Out of Time: Jess Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971)

Jesús “Jess” Franco is perhaps *the* posterchild for the paracinematic “bad boy” director. Credited with producing the first Spanish horror film, *The Awful Dr. Orloff* (1962), he went on to direct some one hundred and eighty films over the course of his lifetime. And while Franco is perhaps best known for his horror output, his work runs the gamut from spy spoof to thriller, science-fiction to exploitation, and horror to hardcore pornography. Franco’s filmography ticks all the typical boxes for films characterized as postmodern Euro horror. As a director who “wants us to never lose sight of our consciousness of cinema” (Lucas 31), Franco’s work delights in its status as a fantastic construction and in a “postmodern sensibility” that is “purposefully avant-garde and disorienting” (Thrower 15, 28). The spectacle of the image reigns supreme at the cost of plot progression and “privilege[s] moments of affect and excess” that often burst out from “long, plodding stretches of plot development” that are treated with “a decided lack of interest and care” (Olney, “Sleaze” 72). Despite the low subject matter of his films, their “textual playfulness, reflexivity and—above all—referentiality” ensure they remain in the realm of the avant-garde (Olney, “Sleaze” 70-1). While fans of his work are quick to point to *Orloff* and his credit as second unit director on Orson Welles’ *Chimes at Midnight* (1965) as proof of Franco’s technical know-how (i.e., he made “bad” movies because he wanted to, not

because he didn't know any better), for the majority of his life Franco was "reviled, dismissed, mocked and berated" and his "work was deemed sloppy, full of glaring technical shortcomings and corner cutting laziness" (Thrower 14). In fact, it was not until his filmography was included in Phil Hardy's *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* in 1986 that Franco really began to appear in Anglophone film discourse.¹¹

Despite the current widespread availability of Franco's films on DVD and Blu-ray, he remains sorely unrepresented in academic study, and critical discourse surrounding his work is generally the product of fan scholarship that often, following the general trends of paracinema studies, focuses more on an overarching view of Franco's cinema, production history, and biography rather than taking a close look at individual films. For example, despite devoting time and energy to Franco's various allusions to cinema and literature, his focus on landscape and temporality, and the way that his films "create a dizzying sense of time and space overlaid" where "faces, places, costumes, props, storylines appear and reappear," Stephen Thrower admits that Franco's films possess "precious little 'depth'" and that he would be hard pressed to offer an explanation on what the films are "about" or what they "have to say" (31, 33, 44). In their survey of European exploitation film Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs go so far as to warn against any attempt at analyzing Franco's work and claim that to do so robs the viewer from taking pleasure in the film: "Inside the Franco tale contradictions are everything. It's better to keep them undigested, they add life to the narrative" (87). Consequently, although Franco has a devoted subcultural fanbase that

¹¹ See Hawkins (200), Lucas (17), and Thrower (14).

clearly appreciates his work, published criticism of his filmography tends to lean into expected paracinematic viewing practices that often carry a tinge of boys' club exclusivity. Many of the men who write on Franco make appreciative comments about his tendency to display beautiful women onscreen but very rarely examine the formal or thematic aspects of these character's portrayals with any seriousness. One of the few exceptions to this approach is Hawkins, who argues that Franco's work "challenges many of the assumptions traditionally made about the position of women in low genres and self-consciously and self-reflexively explores the connections between the worlds of high art and low culture" (202). In the analysis that follows, I follow the path set by Hawkins in my reading of Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971) as a film that explores the intimate connections between spectacle, feminine desire, and temporality.

Jess Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos* is perhaps one of the director's best-known films. A slick, 1970s avant-garde aesthetic dominates a conventionally Franco-esque narrative that follows the experiences of a property lawyer named Linda, who travels to the island estate of the vampire Countess Nadine Carrody only to become enmeshed in a lesbian romance characterized by murder, psychosis, and obsession. As is typical in Franco's work, women are "the hub on which the action spins," and their world, one of eroticism, intrigue, and sensuality, is one which various male characters spend much of their time trying (unsuccessfully) to infiltrate and to comprehend (Tohill & Tombs 91). *Vampyros* is a film obsessed with the tension between surface and depth, illusion and reality. While there is an identifiable plot, the

film is for the most part held together by atmospheric images whose effects work together to tell a story.

Within the first minute of the movie, we are introduced to Nadine through an overhead medium shot. The vampire lies flat on her back, looking up at the camera, arms extended. Her signature red scarf, which she keeps on even when everything else comes off, flutters upwards across the frame, periodically obscuring her face. There is no dialogue, only an extradiegetic score that alternates between Middle Eastern-inspired sitar (the film is set in Istanbul) and what sounds like jumbled radio transmissions. We cut from this disorienting introduction to a sparse stage on which we once again see Nadine, but this time she is upright and garbed in filmy black mesh that seems fitting attire for a groovy 70s vamp on the prowl. The black bra and panties and accompanying negligee are further set off by appropriate props: a baroque candelabra, a large, gilt framed mirror, and a naked woman posing as a mannequin.¹² After panning over this set-up, a reverse shot of the diegetic audience reveals that what we are looking at is actually a scene that serves as a microcosm of the spectacle of the film at large. On this stage, Nadine pretends to be what she actually is: a femme fatale lesbian vampire. As the act progresses, Nadine makes love to her image in the mirror before moving on to her mannequin-like stage partner with whom she exchanges clothes before pretending to bite her on the neck. The connections between Nadine's performance onstage and the seemingly unconnected shots of her lying on her back that immediately precede it are not initially clear. Nadine laying down, arms

¹² In the promotional images for the film, this actress is replaced with a literal mannequin.

outstretched as if she intends to embrace the camera and Nadine dancing before a mirror and a pseudo-mannequin for a large audience of people are images whose connections are only slowly revealed over the course of the film, and their suture is totally dependent on Linda's and Nadine's desires.

Nadine's initial stage performance serves as an artificial reconstruction of the romantic relationship that will ultimately develop between herself and Linda; however, in the end, it is Linda who will puncture Nadine's neck and leave her to die. Despite the presentation of Nadine's strip act as a kind of kinky dinner show, the scene is primarily focalized through Linda's gaze. As the camera moves from Nadine's striptease to Linda's fixated stare, our attention is repeatedly drawn to the worried looks of her boyfriend Omar who is seated next to her: Linda is looking *too* closely. Continued shot reverse shots between Nadine as performer and Linda as spectator work to ensure that this film's dominant gaze—the one that structures the narrative on a formal level in addition to supplying thematic content—is feminine. The effects of this feminine gaze come to bear not only in the extensive use of repeated shots of textures, landscapes, and symbolic images, but the way the plot unfolds in non-linear bits and pieces that can only be partially rearranged to fit once the final frame has run. For example, certain elements in the initial strip act simply do not make temporal sense. In the moments we cut from Nadine on stage to Linda in the audience and back again, articles of clothing magically disappear from Nadine's body only to reappear on her dance partner. These missing pieces of narrative performance are filled in much later in the film when Omar, attempting to find a

missing Linda, stumbles back into the club in time to catch Nadine perform. The missing pieces of the act are now filled in for us as we, along with Omar, watch Nadine remove her clothing and place it on the mannequin-woman.

In this moment, the linear narrative of the film collapses as Nadine's first and second performances lock into place to constitute a single act. As a result, these two performances, in which moments apparently missing from the first magically appear in the second, become the primary marker for how to tell time within the world of the film. Rather than tell a story that steadily moves forward in time, *Vampyros* is a narrative beholden to a time that moves in relation to these two interconnected performances. Because Nadine's second performance utilizes moments that are cut from or fill in the gaps from the first, her stage show is the original referent to which the intervening actions must ultimately refer. These missing frames are a breach in the flow of the film's linear time, and their insertion much later on in the narrative implies that the first performance never truly ended—as long as these moments are left open, as long as frames are dropped, there is no limit to what can be inserted to fill in the gaps. If this is the case, then Nadine's and Linda's romantic relationship become part and parcel of an elaborate show in which Nadine's vampirism oscillates between embodied reality and assumed stage persona. Throughout the middle portion of the film, their romance nestles in the space Nadine so cleverly left open and waiting in the blank portions of her stage performance.

In formally constructing the women's relationship as part of this extended production, *Vampyros* places feminine desire and performance, up until Omar

witnesses the second performance at least, as the primary structuring force of the narrative. It is only when Omar's look supplants Linda's gaze, which structured the camera's focus in the first act, that time must bend back to a linear, forward moving marker of temporality. These shifts in the film's temporal structure require Nadine's nightclub performances to come to a definitive close, and the murder of her stage partner—a move that owns up to the fact that she is truly a vampire—is an act of sexual aggression that Omar, who stands in for the typical masculine spectator, anticipates as the only logical conclusion to queer feminine longing. As the prototypical masculine spectator, Omar is unable to read Nadine and Linda in/as horror. Nadine's extended performance, her demand that time come to a kind of stand-still, produces a temporal tension that enables her to explore her desires in a realm meant to prevent her from doing so—the two-dimensional world of spectacle.

The use of feminine performance to structure narrative is something that Franco famously focused on throughout his career. As others have noted, female performers litter Franco's filmic landscape, and it is rare to come across a film of his without at least one striptease going on in the background.¹³ Perhaps the most well-known among these are the S&M club performances of Lorna Green in *Succubus* (1967) which, like *Vampyros*, allows the film spectator to watch the stage performance as if it were part of the film's reality before a delayed pan to the audience for the big reveal. For these performers, many of whom come to violent ends or are themselves perpetrators of violence, stage performance is a way to speak

¹³ Thrower defines the strip club as “the Franco location par excellence” (39).

up, to use their bodies as a medium for both occupying and negotiating space. In *Vampyros*, performance reconfigures the very structure of the film itself as moments are repeated, extracted, replaced. These moments that lag, that blur the line between what the viewer can accept as the film's truth and what dismantles typical structures of narrative continuity, particularly as they relate to the fulfillment of a voyeuristic gaze, wrest control from male characters and normative understandings of time and space, especially in relation to women's bodies. Here I am referring to the cinematic construction of temporality and spatiality as it is explored by Mulvey, de Lauretis, and other feminist film theorists. For if the primary goal of cinema is to produce a three-dimensional landscape which the male spectator can imagine himself comfortably moving through, then horror, and in particular Euro horror and erotic horror, time and again trouble such easy identification. It is in the Euro horror film's incomprehensible spaces and confusingly edited temporal structures that the woman in/as horror flourishes. Horror's focus on the body, on the two-dimensional quality of its images—we know what we are watching is not real, nor does it pretend to be—and on the fluidity of time and space inspire an investigation of these very topics. The ill-defined edges of the erotic horror film thus offer an opportunity for rewriting and for improvisational perceptual play that would perhaps be much harder to come by in a cinema dedicated to "obviousness and truth" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 721). If "space and time remain conceivable only insofar as corporeality provides the basis for our perception and representation of them," then Nadine's bodily performance is endowed with the power to shift normative perceptions of both diegetic time (what

the audience in the film experiences) and film time (what the film spectator experiences) (Grosz, *Space* 84). The look between Linda and Nadine restructures the kind of voyeuristic wish fulfillment that Franco's work is assumed to implement as a matter of fact. Rather than work to disassociate from their status as spectacle, literal objects whose function is to exude "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," original emphasis, 721), Linda and Nadine complicate the relationship between their bodies and their surroundings—a contract between women and horror assumed to be written in stone—by making it clear that their bodies are "the means whereby the positions of things becomes possible" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 242). Nadine is quite aware, in short, that this narrative needs her in order to function, and she tactfully manipulates others' perceptions of her to make the time and space of the film bend to her desire.

In spite of Franco's focus on feminine subjectivity and its connection with erotic spectacle, it is all too easy to read Nadine as emblematic of both the gaping hole of the monstrous feminine and a comforting screen to reflect male desire. This is, after all, a horror film, and it obeys the conventions of the genre. Nadine performs for a primarily male audience, just as the film as a whole caters to (or has been read as catering to) a predominantly masculine spectatorship. In this light, the narrative becomes pure exploitation—the gratuitous nudity and lesbian sex are opportunities to gratify a masculine audience who is less concerned with the film's discontinuity than with the number of naked women who manage to appear on screen, preferably together. Despite the ways it undeniably panders to a voyeuristic gaze, *Vampyros'*

adherence to generic horror conventions, namely its disruptive temporal structure and its focus on spectacular images rather than narrative, is also the key to its subversiveness. Moments of unnecessary nudity and erotic violence are tempered by the fact that the film repeatedly obstructs the plans of male characters who want to take interpretive control over Linda and Nadine.

In the first of several examples of the follies of masculine gazing, we move directly from Nadine's initial performance at the club to an as yet unidentified setting—a large house that appears to be on an island—where the camera progresses through a series of images that are repeatedly invoked throughout the film. They include a white moth beating its wings against a fishing net, a scorpion scuttling across the wide expanse of a pool deck, and blood beading down a large, glass window. Initially, this set of images seems to be an allegory for the power dynamic between Nadine and Linda in which the female vampire is the aggressor (an entrapping net, a stinging scorpion) and Linda the innocent prey (the defenseless white moth). However, if these brief sequences are read as examples of the interplay between surface and depth in the context of women's cinematic (il)legibility, then their possible meanings drastically shift. In this alternate interpretation, Nadine is simultaneously the scorpion¹⁴, the moth and the lonely drip of blood. Rather than an aggressive killer she is a trapped performer, someone who, like Irigaray's woman-as-nature, is always splayed along the surface that separates male place from female

¹⁴ The film highlights Nadine's connection to the scorpion when images of the vampire dying during the narrative's climax are intercut with footage of the scorpion drowning in the pool and eventually sinking to the bottom. The scorpion's death recalls an earlier scene in which Linda finds Nadine floating face-up in the pool and assumes the vampire has died.

space, a figuration that easily translates to screen theory in which woman is consistently equated with two-dimensional surface. That these images come to be intimately associated with the desire between Linda and Nadine points to the women's relationship as one founded on a mutual struggle to overcome Symbolic illegibility rather than as an example of predatory sexuality. The surface of the cinema screen has repeatedly been read by feminist film scholars as both a looking glass through which the masculine spectator is able to participate in a narcissistic recognition and also a portal to a three-dimensional landscape in which he is easily able to insert himself into the action of the narrative. In contrast, the surface of the cinema screen takes on an entirely different valence when it comes to feminine spectators and filmic characters. For them, the screen stops at the level of mirror—they are unable to go through the looking glass, as it were, to step into the fantastic realm of the cinematic. Instead, they must remain in and rely on the two-dimensional. The spectacle of the two-dimensional is both the realm of the feminine and the generic marker for horror, and here it transcends its status as a narrative inhibitor and becomes a narrative enabler. In effect, these repeated scenes, which in and of themselves are seemingly incoherent spectacle, are presented as keys with which to read the woman in/as horror, a figure who is almost always perceived to be two-dimensional spectacle herself. Rather than read these sequences as narrative filler, or images that simply add a stylish look to a film that does not set out to “say” anything, I propose a reading that treats these moments as an extension of feminine performance, as images that hold narrative weight and provide crucial information not

only about how women are treated in the film (visually pleasing but meaningless) but also in the genre as a whole (trapped, stuck to the surface of the screen).

When we are first transported to Nadine's island estate following the finale of her introductory striptease, it is a place that is more impression than definite location. Our main point of access is through the aforementioned sequences—set pieces in miniature, the fragments of a performance that is never fully assembled. This series of images culminates in yet another contraction of narrative time. The image of Nadine lying on her back, arms upraised with the camera looking down on her, is repeated here almost exactly as it was presented at the film's opening. The only difference is that this time the vampire is naked save her signature red scarf. Because Nadine's arms are raised and her hands are initially out of frame, in both cases there is the implicit connotation that Nadine is the one holding the camera. In this brief moment, Nadine is not simply a flat, fixed image deployed for the voyeuristic amusement of an assumed male audience; she is someone who actively constructs herself as spectacle and draws attention to herself as a woman in/as horror. Her status as image is no longer a sentence that relegates her to the realm of myth but a tool actively wielded in order to trouble her relationship to the myth of feminine monstrosity. By presenting Nadine in this moment as having directorial control over her own body, Franco encourages the idea that Nadine has actually carried this authority all along. Since we have already seen this moment at the start of the film, the narrative legitimacy of all that has happened in the interim is thrown into question as linear time and three-dimensional space collapse across a moment that potentially spans from the opening

of the narrative to this specific point in the film. Have we gone back in time to the beginning? Or has the circularity of the horror genre demanded a simple repetition of earlier events? Either way, it is hard to pinpoint when, exactly, in the film's timeline this doubled moment takes place and, consequently, everything that has occurred in the interim becomes equally temporally nebulous. There is no way to tell how time passes in *Vampyros* except in reference to these markers of feminine performance, among which are Nadine's night club act and the repeated shot of the vampire as potential camerawoman. From this overhead shot of Nadine, the camera pans down her body to rest in between her wide-open legs. Before the viewer has any chance to get a clear view, however, Linda's huge, out-of-focus head falls forward into the shot, seemingly out of nowhere, and distorts all sense of depth perception as her image overwhelms the screen.

From here, the shot cuts to a close up of Linda reclining on a psychiatrist's couch, and we learn that the entire previous scene was a dream that she had been narrating to her doctor: "And everything always repeats itself. But I have never seen the woman before or the places where all this happens. They are always the same places. I see them as clearly as if I'd been there often before. And every time...every time I get frightened. But it's strange. At the same time this dream stimulates me." The psychiatrist's office is visually similar to the nightclub stage—Linda is set against the backdrop of a black wall that, when coupled with the uplighting on her face, adds a performative air to the entire appointment. As the camera moves to an overhead shot of Doctor Steiner, we see that rather than taking notes on his patient's

testimony he is doodling instead. The page is filled with multiple stick figures, both human and animal, as well as a film camera on a tripod with a six-armed man standing nearby ready to take action. Thrower has hypothesized that Paul Muller, the actor who plays Steiner, has actually given us a caricature of Franco, a director whose attention span was brief and who was always captivated by multiple things at once.¹⁵ While there is no way to prove this speculation, if Linda's dream produces pictures of film production rather than medical notes, then it raises the speculation early on in the film that the performance of woman as horror (in this particular film at least) is that which produces filmic narrative. It also makes clear that Dr. Steiner, like the oft theorized male spectator, can only imitate horror (if we read Linda's dream as a kind of horror film in situ); he cannot interpret it. Despite Dr. Steiner's failure to tell Linda what her dream means (he offers no explanation other than Linda's sexual frustration), her fantasy is absolutely necessary for the progression of the filmic narrative and will eventually enable Linda to take the role of active interpreter of her own symbols.

Dr. Steiner's careless doodle and his lazy diagnosis are both unsuccessful attempts to assert narrative control. This kind of scenario, in which a male character fails to correctly interpret female experience and overlays a more understandable masculine plot over her indecipherable feminine one, is a device that appears again

¹⁵ "Bearing in mind how busy Franco must have been, as both actor and director on this film, it's interesting to see the doodles that Paul Müller, playing a psychiatrist, draws on his notepad as Linda describes her dreams. Amid numerous stick figures there is one holding a movie camera, while another stands behind him gesticulating. Unlike the other stick figures, the gesticulating man is drawn with six arms! Surely this is Müller's pen-portrait of Franco directing cameraman Manuel Merino, with the six arms demonstrating his tendency to do almost everything himself!" (243).

and again in Franco's cinema. He often goes out of his way to divest power from male authority figures who, though they still manage to perpetuate patriarchal power structures by forcing women to do their bidding, are more often than not depicted as totally impotent. For example, in 1972's *Daughter of Dracula*, the titular Dracula compels a female descendant to take up the role of vampire and to bring victims for him to feast upon. However, the vampire never speaks, never leaves the comfort of his coffin (in a musty cellar adjacent to the family estate), and when he is approached merely sits up, waggles his eyebrows, and breathes heavily. In *The Other Side of the Mirror* (1973), a father commits suicide in protest of his daughter's impending marriage and spends the remainder of the film haunting her and urging her to kill all potential lovers. He does this from the confines of a gilt mirror in which his spectral apparition appears. From here, he materializes as he was in his moment of suicide: hanging from the ceiling, eyes bulging and vacant, tongue sticking out. In both cases, the father figure is the primary enemy of the heroine, demanding her participation in performative violence to herself and to others; however, he is also a figure of ridicule, a faulty patriarch whose physical frailty reveals the weakness of the systems of power from which he benefits.

Returning to *Vampyros*, the stereotype of the ineffective male authority figure comes up again in the character of Doctor Seward, who runs a sanitarium and houses Linda when she mysteriously washes up on a beach after her initial rendezvous with Nadine. Dr. Seward relies on constructions of the monstrous feminine as his point of access to the ecstasy of "the beyond": "The more I study the phenomena of vampires

the more attracted I am by this mysterious world which summons its mysterious powers out of unknown depths. Powers which remain inaccessible for most of us. I can barely resist the temptation to pass the threshold which will open to the dark regions of the supernatural for me.” Dr. Seward hopes to lure Nadine into his sanitarium by keeping a past lover there as bait. However, despite Dr. Seward’s copious research on Nadine, his knowledge stops at the level of philosophic hypotheticals and never spills over into physical sensation, something in which both Linda and Agra—the former lover Seward keeps under lock and key—are well versed. Rather than recognize the vital importance of knowledge gained through embodied experience, Seward takes a Lacanian approach (even though they experience it, they do not know anything about it): “Linda, my darling, I find you delightful and charming but, excuse me for saying so, of occult issues you have not the faintest idea. You have no authority about supernatural processes.” After issuing this paternalistic rebuff, Seward instructs Linda on how to protect herself from the vampiric forces he so desperately wants to access himself: she must take a stake and drive it through Nadine’s brain in order to ensure that the vampire is defeated both spiritually and physically.

Although Nadine eventually tracks down Seward and kills him as punishment for attempting to separate her from Linda, an act which means he can “never obtain [her] friendship,” Linda nevertheless ultimately follows Seward’s guidance and murders Nadine rather than become a vampire herself. A stake through the eye rather than the heart is the method of choice. The fact that the specific method of killing

Nadine obliterates the feminine gaze, which had heretofore influenced both the content and the structure of the film, feels like a particularly cruel blow. However, the negation of the feminine gaze that serves as the film's climax is repaired to some extent in the final moments of the narrative as Linda returns to Istanbul by boat alongside her boyfriend Omar. When Omar reassures his shellshocked girlfriend that everything had been a dream—an explanation prompted by the mysterious disappearance of Nadine's murdered body upon his arrival at the scene—Linda firmly refuses this interpretation: "No, it was not a dream. Even though it may seem unbelievable. Even though there might not be an explanation for it. The horror of these days will fade, but the memories will always stay vivid as long as I live." Linda's ultimate refusal to accept Omar's counternarrative ensures that the film ends with feminine interpretation at the forefront. Linda's rejection of Omar's insistence that her experience carries no weight ensures that despite Nadine's being blinded and murdered, an unfortunate capitulation to masculine narrative demands, *Vampyros* leaves the story in the eyes and the mouth of the woman who actually lived it.

Chapter Five

Horror as Feminine Experience in the Films of Roberta Findlay and Anna Biller

In comparison to contemporary cult auteurs Doris Wishman and Stephanie Rothman, Roberta Findlay, who produced a robust filmography of pornographic and horror films between 1971 and 1989, has been largely ignored in the critical academic scholarship. Film scholar Alexandra Heller-Nicholas theorizes the reasons for this are two-fold: disparities concerning the provenance of Findlay's films and the director's relationship to "feminism." In the first case, Findlay's wide range of work occurs within a historical timeline and among film genres where provenance is tenuous at best and totally uncertain at worst. A prime example of this confusion is the set of low-budget exploitation films on which Findlay collaborated with her husband, Michael, in the late 1960s and early 70s. Commonly held fan-scholar knowledge often credits Findlay with having a hand in her husband's infamous *Her Flesh* trilogy (1967-8) and other early works, such as the underground film *Satan's Bed* (1965) featuring Yoko Ono, although Findlay denies any such involvement:

My husband was making those films, and I guess I knew about them. I'm not in them. I was in school. I wasn't quite married to him yet, but I left home at sixteen and moved in with Michael, and he was making these pictures. I don't even know if I was on the set. Maybe I did voiceovers. I would say if I had done anything more. I don't mind talking about this. It's just that people expect me to be something I'm not. (Taylor)

Despite Findlay's attitude here, which seems to suggest a certain level of transparency regarding her career in the late 1960s and 70s, the director was an active contributor to the swirl of confusion surrounding the correct attribution of her work.

In addition to utilizing pseudonyms (most often Anna Riva), Findlay knowingly removed her name from projects. In the case of her film *Fantasex* (1976), despite directing most of the picture herself, Findlay chose to attribute directorial credit to her friend Cecil Howard, who worked primarily on the pornographic scenes. Whether by accident or intent, the ambiguity surrounding Findlay's filmography makes parsing it something of a detective hunt. Whether Findlay simply didn't care about the fame she might have garnered had she correctly billed herself or whether the pseudonyms were an effort at dodging potential legal or monetary concerns are unknown. Regardless of her reasoning, Findlay's decisions and fans' speculations have made it difficult to pin down an accredited filmography. Consequently, it has been historically challenging to establish Findlay as a credible auteur, despite her robust body of work, thus limiting the extent to which academic scholars have addressed her archive (Heller-Nicholas 405).

The second reason for Findlay's absence from scholarly work on female cult directors, according to Heller-Nicholas, is her cagey relationship with feminism:

Staking a claim as a Findlay 'fan' implies a complex ideological positioning: on one hand a seemingly progressive alignment through the championing of a woman filmmaker, yet this lies at odds with the inescapable fact that this same filmmaker is the driving force of some of the nastiest and inescapably regressive exploitation and pornographic films of the late-twentieth-century American cinema. (Heller-Nicholas 402)

Findlay, despite focusing almost exclusively on female characters in her horror films and in much of her pornography, openly disparaged women in everyday life, distanced herself from feminism, and stated point blank that she had never "helped

another woman in [her] life” (“Roberta Findlay Masterclass”): “I’m not a feminist. I don’t feel responsible for any other woman in the world. I’ve gotten where I am all by myself, and if *anyone* helped me, it was my husband—and he’s no woman” (Abel, original emphasis, 33).¹ Findlay's efforts to distance herself from feminism are an endeavor to erase sexual difference from the space of her film productions. Rather than acknowledge the systemic misogyny that dominated the film industry in the 1970s and 80s, a culture that was especially virulent in her chosen genres of pornography and horror, Findlay turns to what she interprets as the cold hard facts of capitalism, which to her thinking is blind to difference. Any pretensions toward a politics of any kind, in fact, she chalks up to her desire to make a profit. “Feminism” becomes a marketing tactic, although it is obviously one which makes Findlay, a woman whose eye was always on her profit margin, noticeably uncomfortable: “I did that once [presented herself as a feminist]. It was so embarrassing. I went out around ’88 or ’90 with some X-rated film. C.W. Post College, it was, under the pretense—their pretense—that I was some kind of artist-feminist. Nonsense. I don’t know why I did it. It was very silly, but if that’s what I’m supposed to be, fine, as long as I get paid” (Taylor). Findlay’s explicit rejection of feminism—and women in general—coupled with the fact that her “horror yarns are no less sexist than the works of a Brian de Palma” makes her a difficult subject for feminist scholars hoping to

¹ In a 2012 phone interview with *Third Eye Cinema*, her opinions remain much the same: “I had no particular axe to grind. I’m not a feminist of any sort. I never thought to support my sisters or support womanhood in general, it never occurred to me. I myself never had a problem in the world with sexism. I just went in and did my job.”

champion a woman filmmaker with all the supposedly progressive or subversive politics that distinction implies (Timpone 50).

Findlay's filmography spans twenty years, with her work from the seventies through the mid-eighties lying almost exclusively in the realm of pornography. This period was followed by a five-year stint in straight horror film from 1984 to 1989. Although Blu-ray re-releases of her films through cult distributors like Media Blasters and Vinegar Syndrome and Findlay's active participation in director commentary tracks and public interviews generated new interest in her work beginning in the mid-2000s, critical response to Findlay's films remains fairly limited.² Even considering Findlay's "distasteful" subject matter, this is something of a surprise, especially when one considers the efforts of feminist film scholars in the 1980s and 90s to scour the archives in search of lost or forgotten female artists. Findlay's prolific body of work marks her as an important figure in genre filmmaking. Films such as *Snuff* (1976) and *A Woman's Torment* (1977) are especially significant since they exist at the boundary between pornography and horror and illustrate how these two genres, in combination, are particularly suited to depicting feminine ontologies. Reading the arc of Findlay's filmography, it is clear that pornography is for her a natural foundation or steppingstone to horror. Although the two genres are often conflated in theory and popular discourse for their explicit focus on the body, Findlay's work animates horror's power to disrupt the tedious, regimented content of pornography. By

² Scholarly work that mentions Findlay tends to focus almost exclusively on *Snuff*. Examples include Brottman, Eithne and Schaefer, Herron, LaBelle, Stine, and Williams (*Hardcore*). Readings that focus on Findlay's other films include Heller-Nicholas and Moorman.

combining the erotic allure of porn with the thrill of horror, Findlay (perhaps unconsciously) complicates both genres and draws out their inherent and imbricated gender politics.

Because of their formulaic structures and generally low budgets, both porn and horror have been historical entry points for women who want to work in the film industry.³ The comparative ease with which women were able to break into low-genre filmmaking is demonstrated in Linda Gross' 1978 *Los Angeles Times* article "A Woman's Place Is in...Exploitation Films?" As exploitation director Marci Siler reports to Gross, for example, she saw the industry as an opportunity rather than a barrier: "In 1969 it was very difficult for women to get into filmmaking. We got into the production of low-budget exploitation because it was, in essence, an opportunity to go to film school. Because it was a lucrative market there was no demand for quality as long as you had a set formula and a requisite number of nude scenes. Beyond that you could experiment any way you wanted" (34). Although the exploitation genre was perhaps not particularly appealing to the directors that Gross interviewed, it was nevertheless a space for relatively uncensored creative freedom and thus points to exploitation film as an important piece of women's film history. Like Siler, Findlay claims to have stumbled into genre filmmaking by chance rather than choice. However, despite her vocal distaste for horror and pornography, genres within which she apparently felt herself doomed to work,⁴ Findlay's overall success

³ See Gross, Moorman.

⁴ Findlay consistently vocalizes her love for classic Hollywood film and her general dislike for horror and other low genres. However, her appreciation for any film ultimately is measured by its overall production value: "People think that I'm a great horror fan. But no, the only horror films I like are

in body genres doesn't seem merely to be the result of accidental associations and a relatively open market. One possible explanation is that these genres came so easily to Findlay because their content, at its core, was familiar to her. By this I do not mean that Findlay was sexually adventurous (she was by her own account a bit of a prude⁵) or experienced abject terror at the hand of a murderer. What I want to imply is that the quotidian experience of existing as a woman translated most easily to the sensationalized space of the body genre film. It is for this reason that Findlay was able to not only participate but to actively thrive in low genres with no prior experience. In her own words, "I just did things. I don't know how I knew" (*Torment* Audio Commentary). While this natural aptitude applies to any and all female filmmakers, Findlay is unique in her approach, which pushed genre boundaries to an extent that was not always met by other woman directors, and also in her seemingly natural progression from porn to horror film. The end result was a body of work that stretched the erotic horror film to its limits at the level of both form and content.

For the casual viewer of Findlay's films, discovering the director's aversion towards pornography and horror would likely come as quite a shock, because all of her work (even if it was made on laughably low budgets) betrays Findlay's commitment to her material. Findlay was intensely dedicated to her profession, produced scripts that were up to one hundred pages in length, and obsessed over

Hollywood productions [she later cites *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby*]. I don't like cheap horror films. I find them very boring" (*Prime Evil* Audio Commentary).

⁵ "We were so square and so provincial and bourgeoisie we didn't fit any pattern at all. I didn't know anything about drugs...we had no concept of any of this weird, wild stuff that was going on" (*Third Eye*).

technical details like lighting. Referring to perhaps her most popular horror production, *Tenement: A Game of Survival* (1985), Findlay recalls:

The only one I had to talk to was myself. I was the cameraman and the director, so I talked to myself and everything was explained to myself in tremendous detail. There was nothing I had to draw. I had each shot broken down. Sometimes I did it the night before, but most of the script was done weeks before we started. Every close-up was described to myself by me so that I could remember what I was supposed to do, and I wrote it in words. (*Tenement* Audio Commentary)

Here, Findlay not only reveals a deep commitment to her work, but she also implies that everything in her films exists by design. While certain aspects of Findlay's work are undoubtably the result of meager budgets—the prevalent use of a handheld camera for example—quotes such as the one above demonstrate that Findlay was a highly intentional director, scriptwriter, and cinematographer. This intentionality, coupled with the relative creative freedom she enjoyed working in porn and horror, mean that her films are especially significant for feminist scholarship.⁶ Not only are her films examples of a woman director working in genres from which common knowledge often (incorrectly) excludes them, but they also explicitly combine horror and hardcore pornography in ways that draw out the implicit ties between the two genres.

⁶ It should be noted that Findlay felt her ability to produce quality films was limited by budget rather than genre: “We can’t spend very much money, nobody can. You can’t have a large budget on the thing [referring specifically to pornography] because the market is so limited. If you have a small budget, that brings in all kinds of horrible things. It brings in bad scripts, it brings in technically bad equipment. I just can’t make a good film for twenty or thirty thousand dollars. The money’s gone even before I turn around” (Peary 32).

In this context, Findlay's focus on realism is of particular importance. While porn is commonly interpreted as "real" in the sense that it depicts unsimulated sexual acts and horror is understood as fabricated because it shows simulated violence, it is obvious that both participate in a heavily stylized and undeniably curated space of fantasy. The kind of "realism" that Findlay aspires to in her horror and pornographic films is the reality of gender politics that invariably affects every aspect of her characters' lives and acknowledges that "the erotic relationship...is, in fact, the most self-conscious of all human relationships" (Carter, *Sadeian* 9). Findlay's pornographic slasher *A Woman's Torment* (1977) thus anticipates Carter's call for a moral pornographer two years later in *Sadeian Woman*:

The pornographer who consciously utilizes the propaganda, the 'grabbing' effect of pornography to express a view of the world that transcends this kind of innocence [the myth of pornography]...will begin to find himself describing the real conditions of the world in terms of sexual encounters, or even find that the real nature of these encounters illuminates the world itself; the world turns into a gigantic brothel, the area of our lives where we believed we possessed the most freedom is seen as the most ritually circumscribed. (24)

In a promotional interview for her breakthrough porn film *Angel Number Nine* (1974), which was advertised as "the first big deal porno film directed by a woman, the first to reflect a sexually liberated, female point of view" (Abel 33), Findlay notes that feminists took particular offense at a blow job scene: "Women's groups protested this one scene because it looks real. It actually does. He's just abusing her. Slaps her around, hits her with his belt. Not hard—he just does it. And she's blowing him, and

she is happy to do it because she is so madly in love with him” (Peary 32).⁷ Although this scene fulfills the generic conventions of pornography—it contains an explicit sexual act—Findlay’s seemingly objective camerawork lays bare the power dynamics of a situation that might otherwise be overlaid by erotic illusion. What disturbs these feminist viewers is Findlay’s presentation of the man’s behavior as part and parcel of the mythology of sexual fantasy (which porn is meant to fulfill). The banality of the blow job scene, in which a woman unconsciously accepts masculine abasement as a natural aspect of the sexual act, demystifies the gendered dynamics of pornography in a moment when they should be fully concealed. Both Findlay and her detractors recognize this moment as an accurate reflection of reality. Its presentation in the context of pornography—a genre that, though supposedly “real,” depicts acts heavily coded in the mythology of erotic fantasy—is the true thorn in the feminists’ sides. The pathos of a melodrama allows this kind of behavior (the domestic abuse, not the unsimulated sex) since the male aggressor is ultimately redeemed or punished. It is shocking in pornography.⁸ It is not a coincidence that the conflation of sex and violence in horror has produced a similar reaction. We know that the killer’s knife is ultimately nothing but a prop in the horror film. But when pornography and horror mix, as they do in much of Findlay’s work, the legitimacy of pornographic actions

⁷ In a tweet from August 8, 2019, feminist filmmaker Anna Biller addressed Findlay’s rejection by feminists and the director’s corresponding renunciation of the movement: “I just saw a fabulous lecture by the Something Weird gal where she said that exploitation director Roberta Findlay denies being a feminist. Made sense when you realize that feminists would have been picketing her films in Times Square and trying to shut them down!” (@missannabiller).

⁸ Here I am referring specifically to mainstream 1970s porn that was commercially successful and widely distributed, such as *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976) and *Deep Throat* (1972), not underground or BDSM pornography.

colors the viewer's reception of the false violence of horror—in her oeuvre both genres are equally believable and equally mundane.

For Findlay, the boredom of porn stems from its reliance on a mechanics of heteronormative fantasy. More than once in commentary and interviews she attributes her unique editing and narrative choices to a desire to make pornographic films more “interesting” and admits that she only truly concentrated on the “non-sex parts” of her films (*Torment* Audio Commentary). By presenting herself as someone who worked in something of a void—when pressed about the possible influence of Herschell Gordon Lewis, she claimed “The only Lewis I know is C.S. Lewis”—Findlay freed herself from the limitations of generic expectation and instead produced films that she felt reflected women's life experiences, even if the need to include hardcore sex necessitated some outlandish plot decisions (Findlay, *Third Eye*). In every case, audience expectations, which are often formed by a commonly held understanding of genre conventions, are thwarted. Erotic titillation in the form of sex and murder is counterbalanced by off-putting plot details and unconventional narrative structures. For example, Findlay's hardcore film *Mystique* (1979) follows a woman who moves to her beach house to rest after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis. *Blood Sisters*, Findlay's ultra-low-budget sorority house slasher, keeps all of the sisters alive and well until almost an hour into the eighty-six-minute film. Both *The Oracle* (1985) and *Lurkers* (1987), two of Findlay's straight horror films, revolve around women who spend the majority of their screen time being gaslit by men and screaming hysterically. In both cases, the women's “crazy” ideas are shown to be grounded in

truth even though neither character is particularly likeable, and the audience is not given much motivation to root for them. Ultimately, both heroines are validated by plots that refuse to follow Clover's final girl trope, which requires the female protagonist to shift from girl to boy and back to girl once she has defeated the killer at the film's conclusion. By the end of both Findlay films, the lead female character embodies the very danger that pursued her for the duration of the plot. *The Oracle's* Jennifer, who is hounded by spirits desperate for her to avenge the death of a wrongfully murdered man, takes up the role of a powerful psychic medium who works alongside the very phantoms that had so lately tormented her. Throughout the film, her mental stability is called into question by friends, her husband, and even a psychiatrist, almost all of whom end up dead. In *Lurkers*, Cathy is besieged by revenants who haunt her childhood apartment building, a place she later learns is a portal to hell that eventually claims the lives of all who once lived there. At the climax of the film, she is killed by her boyfriend (a disguised member of Satan's horde) as well as other "lurkers" who are drawn to the fated apartment building. She later reappears as a spirit and endeavors to warn others who are in danger of being tricked into going back to their prior home.⁹ In both cases, the women "defeat" the killer (Jennifer helps the dead man get revenge and harnesses the power of the spirit world and Cathy haunts her ex-boyfriend in order to thwart his evil schemes), but neither of them makes the kind of ascension to phallic victory followed by feminine

⁹ Cathy acts as the successor to a mysterious, unnamed blonde woman who appears throughout the film and tries to keep her safe from the lurkers.

retreat that Clover identifies in the figure of the final girl. Findlay's female leads disrupt typical horror film patterns since they are totally separated from their now-canonical function as identificatory figures for male spectators, as in Clover's analysis. As a result, these films seriously consider what it means for women to participate *as women* in the structures of horror film.

If pornography and horror are genres of fantasy—one of sexual fulfillment and one of castration—Findlay upsets their dreams by choosing to focus on realism while still maintaining the contextual markers of both genres. The divergent content of her films is unsettling when coupled with their mostly traditional forms. That it was so easy for Findlay and other woman directors to “play” within the confines of what at first appear to be relatively rigid genres points to the productivity of erotic horror as a filmic space that not only *can* be productive for feminism but that *has* been productive for feminism in the past. Findlay's refusal to censor her work based on its content is the result of her commitment to portraying the world as she sees it. Her films' combination of horror and pornography is both a testament to the ways these genres rely on each other for visual legibility and a declaration on Findlay's part that the images we see on screen are not an isolated representation—they are produced by everyday life. As Findlay herself notes, “Sexist films, feminist films, films that degrade women are all *stories*. Even if they weren't, all of that exists, so why shouldn't we shoot it?” (Timpone, original emphasis, 50).

Genre Wars: Negotiating Spectatorial Pleasure and Participation in *The Slaughter* (1971) / *Snuff* (1976)

When Findlay is asked about the notorious 1976 exploitation film *Snuff*, she replies, “Oh, *Snuff*. Did I do that?” (Nolte). Although *Snuff* was not released to the general public until early 1976, it was originally filmed in 1971 under the title *The Slaughter* with Findlay serving as cameraman and Horacio Fredriksson and Michael Findlay acting as co-directors. The story follows the escapades of a Charles Manson-esque cult consisting entirely of bloodthirsty, drug-addled young women led by a man who calls himself Satán. The plot is primarily concerned with Satán’s plan to ruthlessly murder a German arms dealer, his son Horst, and the son’s pregnant girlfriend Terry, an American actress who is in Argentina to shoot a co-production sex picture. Findlay claims that the film “made no sense” and brushes it off as the product of “a crazy bunch of men who wanted to make a horror film” (Timpone 53). Despite Findlay’s lack of interest in *Snuff* (she claims never to have seen the film in its final form) and her refusal to engage with feminist outrage over the picture (“The only thing I object to, philosophically speaking, was that nobody was paid.”), the film’s confusion of pornography and horror is a portent of Findlay’s career (Taylor). After the film was completed in 1971, it sat without a distributor until 1975 when it was purchased by Allan Shackleton. Shackleton, in a brilliant bit of marketing, changed the title from *The Slaughter* to *Snuff*,¹⁰ added a documentary-style scene to the end of the movie in which the film crew murders a woman on set, gave the picture

¹⁰ Michael Findlay sold the rights to the original title to American International Pictures, who planned to release the Jim Brown led blaxploitation film *Slaughter* in 1972.

a self-imposed X-rating, and released an advertising campaign that claimed the film contained an actual murder.

Although Shackleton's modifications to *Slaughter* are limited to a title change and an added final scene, these alterations were significant enough to effectively transform a grindhouse horror film into a hardcore pornographic picture. Thus, despite the fact that there is technically no explicit sex in *Snuff*, the film marks the moment when the lines between horror and pornography become completely and irrevocably intertwined in the American consciousness. While *Slaughter* was not particularly explicit in its content—there is a mild amount of blood and nudity is limited to a few topless scenes—the addition of the final scene, in which the film's crew, driven to a frenzy by the illusion of mutilation that they have only just finished filming, commits a murder that is presented as the logical conclusion to an attempted seduction, has led feminist scholar Beverly LaBelle to mark *Snuff* as “the turning point in our consciousness about the meaning behind the countless movies and magazines devoted to the naked female body” (190). In short, “the graphic bloodletting in *Snuff* finally made the misogyny of pornography a major feminist concern” (191). This strong take on the cultural impact of the film is corroborated by Eithne Johnson and Eric Schaefer in “Softcore/Hardgore,” in which they argue that “*Snuff* stands as a pivotal moment in a discursive shift in debates about pornography and sexual representation... After *Snuff*... pornography was resoundingly (re)stigmatized as a dangerous form of low culture that legitimized the exploitation of women and children for a sadistic, presumably male audience” (41). Despite the

fervor that surrounded the release of *Snuff*—the letters from decency groups, the theater boycotts, the protests by women’s organizations—just what is explicitly pornographic about the film remains unclear. It contains no hardcore sex, and it is relatively mild in terms of nudity and violence prior to the final added scene. The documentary-style ending, which features a woman who thinks she is about to have an illicit encounter on a deserted film set with a fellow crew member, is by far the film’s most graphic sequence. The audience watches as the unnamed woman is held down on a bed, has her fingers snipped off, loses a hand, and is sliced open all while being filmed against her will by the crew that has just wrapped on *Snuff*. As the grand finale, the woman’s attacker reaches into her abdominal cavity and pulls out her heart and her intestines. These organs are held aloft as the killer lets out a frenzied scream. Suddenly, the screen goes black, and we hear the cameraman curse because they’ve run out of film.

This final, shocking scene has come to define *Snuff / Slaughter* in its entirety, to the point where it is substitutable for the film as a whole. It is also the driving force that pushed anti-porn feminists such as Susanne Kappeler and Andrea Dworkin to label the film as pornographic. *Snuff*, in effect, had become a case study that ostensibly proved their point that images of violence against women—as shown in the *Slaughter* portion of the film—lead viewers not only to sexually assault women but to perpetrate acts of violence against them as well. According to Linda Williams, the film’s final scene

Convince[d] critics that if what they had seen before was fake violence belonging to the genre of horror, what they were seeing now was real

(hard-core) violence belonging to the genre of pornography. The particular obscenity of this last sequence thus resided in a perverse displacement of pornographic hard-core sexual activities, which typically end in penetration, onto the penetration and violation of the body's very flesh. (*Hardcore* 192)

The confusion between the gore of horror and the meat shot of pornography is one which plagues all erotic horror film and makes the genre's relationship to women—both as spectators and characters—especially fraught. Because feminine experience is the common focus of both genres, an attack against horror or pornography is by nature an argument concerning how feminine experience should be represented on screen. The fervor against *Snuff* amounted to an ethical debate concerning which parts of women's lives were acceptable to portray on film. Ironically, this debate focused on *Snuff*'s message to men, despite the fact that the most offensive scenes depicted women's bodies—protesters were concerned that by watching these behaviors men would feel compelled to imitate the violence they witnessed onscreen. Following this line of analysis, the film's final moments, in which sex and violence are so closely intertwined, would provide imagined male spectators with an easy opportunity to connect erotic titillation with physical abuse as mutually dependent phenomena. That women spectators were perhaps already experiencing this kind of behavior from men in everyday life and that the film was a reflection of this fact is not addressed. Consequently, this section will take a slightly different route than the fevered media response of the 1970s and more contemporary readings that primarily look at the film in the context of its reception and its historical impact on film censorship (although both these latter topics will be addressed). In the textual analysis that follows, I

primarily read *Snuff* as a critique of contemporary gender politics that ultimately posits women as empowered spectators of both horror and porn and draw out important connections to Euro horror and to the feminist literature I explored in previous chapters. Focusing solely on what *Snuff* has to say to imagined male spectators about women, even though the film, by dint of its genre affiliations, spends the majority of its runtime depicting feminine experience, amounts to an erasure of women as subjects both within and outside the space of the film. Looking back on *Snuff* forty-five years later, it is of course important to recognize the movie as a piece of misogynistic 1970s exploitation cinema, but it is equally imperative to closely examine possible moments of subversion in regard to how women are positioned in the original and extended versions of the film. Doing so is the most effective means of interpreting how *Snuff / Slaughter*'s relation to genre influences its narrative arc and stylistic presentation. Finally, it is also worth exploring how this relatively tame picture, which reads more like Euro horror than a slasher or a sex picture, came to produce a final five minutes intimately associated with the supposed horrors of hardcore pornography.

In a section of *Hardcore* devoted specifically to the impact of *Snuff*, Williams interprets the film as a variant of the American slasher film, but notes that its “South American setting, post-synchronized dialogue, and focus on adult rather than teenaged victims make it atypical” (191). Although Williams submits a strong case for the link between horror and pornography in general, arguing that “significant parallels hold between these two illegitimate, low-budget genres” and that “many of

the most sensational accusations made about pornography apply better to exploitation horror films than to pornography,” she is ultimately unable to make *Snuff* fit the mold of the slasher (*Hardcore* 193-4). This is primarily because *Snuff* is much more closely aligned with Euro horror than with the American slasher film. All of the characteristics that Williams identifies in *Snuff* that make it hard to categorize as a slasher—the post-synchronous sound, the South American locale, and the focus on adult characters—connect *Snuff* with Euro horror. This association is further strengthened by the film’s lack of coherent narrative, its discordant editing style, and its focus on spectacle rather than story. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated Euro horror’s potential for feminist reimagining in part due to the genre’s obsessive focus on women performers. *Slaughter*, as shot by Findlay, is closely aligned with this tradition. Filmed the same year as *Vampyros Lesbos*, *Slaughter* not only adheres to Euro horror conventions, but it also serves as an important example of at least one woman’s interest in a shooting style that has retroactively been condemned for its incurable misogyny. Although it is unlikely that Findlay herself was exposed to Euro horror film at the time, her camerawork clearly shares notable similarities with films of this type. Shackleton’s response to this affinity for a genre founded in feminine desire is to quickly and violently silence it through recourse to the realm of hardcore. It is this attempt at erasure that generated such a loud public response to the film and leads to the question of whether *Slaughter* would have been received the same way had it been presented in its original form. With this in mind, I consider what might happen if *Slaughter*, as shot by Findlay, is read primarily as a pseudo-Euro horror

film that, like many of its counterparts, is ultimately propelled by feminine desire, and *Snuff* is read as Shackleton's response to this disarming production.

Despite the fact that much was made of *Snuff*'s copycat Manson gang headed by the vengeful Satán, the film actually spends far more time with—and gives much more power to—the female members of the cult. That their influence over the plot is largely erased in the film's reception speaks to the general audience's expectations regarding typical gender dynamics in horror: men act, women are acted upon. Satán's lack of narrative importance is highlighted nowhere more strongly than at the end of the film. He is entirely absent from the finale in which the women go through with his plan to break into the house of a German arms dealer and kill all whom they encounter. The first major spectacle of this siege is the murder of the arms dealer's son, Horst. He is quickly located, tied to a tree, and subjugated to the gaze of the gang members as they watch Angelica, the character we grow closest to in the film, castrate him. The women perform this violence seemingly of their own volition—there is no voice-over indicating they are following Satán's orders, and the man himself is absent from this last and final siege on capitalism and the nuclear family (the ultimate goal of the operation is to murder Horst's girlfriend, Terry, along with the couple's unborn child). The camera moves through a series of close-up shots of each woman's face as she avidly watches Angelica cut into Horst. Their facial expressions indicate that they are aroused by Angelica's actions, and not one of them looks away from that which the audience is never made privy: the sight of Horst's genitals being separated from his body. As a result, the scene emphasizes the

women's status as desiring agents who are also avid spectators of performative violence.

While a reading of this scene that equates feminine desire with violence and male death is certainly viable and falls in line with common horror tropes, Findlay's choice to focus on the faces of the women as they watch Horst's slaughter—a character with whom the audience is not predisposed to sympathize since he has been shown to be a philandering playboy—draws audience attention away from masculine pain and toward feminine desire and participation in horror. This scene is also significant since it represents a moment in the film with pornographic potential. It would not have been difficult for Shackleton to insert some hardcore footage of the women servicing the bound Horst before slicing off his genitals. At the very least, he could have implied that the women performed oral or manual sex on Horst before an explicit shot of the castration. Of course, Shackleton did not do this, and perhaps he did not even think of it. To do so would defeat the purpose of porn in *Snuff*, which uses the context of the genre as a marker for verity without actually going so far as to actually depict unsimulated sex. The public reception of *Snuff* as pornography was the means by which its final scene was considered “real.” This prior moment in the film, in contrast, relegates the women's actions to the realm of fantasy. Even the violence of horror is forbidden in this particular instance: we do not see Angelica actually cutting Horst or even her holding a bloody organ (a potential visual parallel with the man clutching the female crew member's internal organs at the film's climax). The women's collective castration of Horst is thus an example of Findlay's depiction of

the woman in/as horror as a figure who collapses, or at the very least questions, genre boundaries. The special effects of horror versus the “reality” of porn are held in tension in this moment that references both but does not quite belong to either. Shackleton does not touch it because to do so would only further highlight the women’s agency as proper film subjects (as bloodthirsty villains, but subjects nonetheless). To emphasize the veracity of the scene by recourse to the trappings of pornography also begs the question of the film’s intended audience. Shackleton’s final scene was read as a resounding call to male sexual predators—that he was unable or unwilling to alter the original film points to its unmarketability to such an audience. Without the context of the “true crime” ending, scenes such as this one reveal erotic horror film’s capacity for reimagining feminine spectatorial pleasure, a quality that will be forcibly denied in *Snuff*’s structural shift to hardcore pornography.

The castration scene, in which the cult members gather around to watch a violent performance, recalls an earlier sequence in the film depicting Angelica’s cult initiation. Forced to kneel on her hands and knees and submit “like an animal to its mate,” Angelica is fucked from behind by Satán while her fellow initiates stand around and observe. However, while the purpose of this scene is presumably to demonstrate the women’s total devotion to Satán and their willingness to humiliate themselves before him, the leader is almost entirely absent from the frame once the initiation begins. Instead, Findlay chooses tightly framed close-ups of Angelica as she moans with pleasure and brief shots of the other women as they look on. Satán is practically nonexistent during the ordeal—he is nothing more than an absent presence

who (not very effectively) keeps the sex heterosexual. The effect is that this supposedly demeaning rite of passage appears instead to be women watching each other get off—an activity, much like the theatrical castration of Horst, they can accomplish all on their own. Again, the scene’s pornographic potential remains unrealized by both Findlay and Shackleton. Unlike the castration scene, in which acute physical violence is perpetuated against an unwilling body, the only “horror” to be found in the initiation sequence is the supposed depravity of Angelica and the other gang members who allow themselves to be used by Satán. Were Shackleton to summon the powers of pornography here it would only emphasize the women’s status as active spectators. Just as the castration sequence identifies the gang members as women who enjoy watching horror, Angelica’s initiation characterizes them as avid porn spectators. For Shackleton’s vision of *Snuff*, this is an undesirable outcome that divests pornography of the power to block feminine spectatorship. After all, it is the unnamed crew member’s arousal at the sight of Angelica murdering Horst’s girlfriend that serves as the motivation for *Snuff*’s climactic sexual encounter. The unnamed crew member’s pornographic murder is thus the means by which her ontological status shifts from spectator to image. Women are meant to be looked at—they do not look themselves.

Satán’s absence from the frame in Angelica’s initiation and the gang’s final siege on Horst’s home begs the question of why he needs to be in the film at all. The answer would seem to be social convention (one can’t make the argument for horror or exploitation convention, since films like Russ Meyer’s *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*

(1965) had already introduced the possibility of all female gangs). After Angelica's initiation, Satán asks her whether she regrets her decision. Angelica tells him no, since she has "always been in bondage," and goes on to narrate the story of her childhood rape and subsequent sexual servitude in a way that frankly highlights her oppression under patriarchal systems of authority: "Since then I never once have had real independence. I've always been dependent on men, and now on you. All my life I've been in bondage of one kind or another. I'm not saying I like it. I have to have it." We experience Angelica's childhood rape in a flashback sequence that includes her seduction by Luis (the owner of the farm where her father works), her father's discovery of the affair and his subsequent murder at the hands of Luis, and the death of Angelica's brother when he attempts to avenge their father. One moment in particular during this flashback sequence is especially noteworthy: the first time Luis approaches Angelica to demand sex. Throughout their exchange, the camera is positioned from Angelica's point of view as she is berated by Luis. When Luis grabs hold of her and draws her to him, the camera lurches along with Angelica's body as the frame moves to an extreme close-up of Luis' chest, swings forward, and physically collides with him. The screen goes black, and we are left only with audio of Angelica begging for mercy. Findlay's decision to break the film's diegesis and reveal the material reality of the camera as the image goes out of focus and then black against Luis' torso not only pulls the viewer out of the enclosed fantasy of the horror film, where all violence is staged, but it also pushes the film's genre back and forth between the engineered brutality of horror and the authentic penetrations of

pornography. That this clash of genre boundaries centers on a young girl's pain pushes the spectator to question what counts as horror and what counts as porn. How does one lead to the other and vice versa? Another result of this jarring dissonance is that it effectively aligns the frame with Angelica's body, a result that would not be possible without the presence of genre confusion. She is in this moment, quite literally, the camera itself. Her perspective and her materiality are what propel the narrative forward, not Luis' desire or, as we later see in her cult initiation, Satán's orders.

Despite the literal and figurative impact of this moment, it is unable structurally to shift generic and societal expectations regarding the role women must play within the film's diegesis. As Angelica informs Satán, though she is happy, she is not yet in a position to function without simultaneously being in bondage.

Throughout *Snuff*, the film's narrative and its cinematography waver between recognition of the women's enslavement (as noted in various dialogue) and their actions as desiring and free agents (as seen in the castration scene, for example). This oscillation is never resolved within the main body of the film. It is not until the final five minutes, when *Slaughter* is transformed into *Snuff*, that the text is overwhelmed by the graphic images of masculine aggression and feminine mutilation that critics allege are typical of mainstream pornography and which are almost totally absent in the main body of the film.

Johnson and Schaefer, like Williams, take note of the way *Snuff / Slaughter* confuses body genres and ultimately conclude that the film "shift[ed] the definition of

pornography from sexual representation to a literal inscription of male dominance over women” (56). According to their analysis, *Snuff*, despite containing no hardcore sex, is definitively pornographic because of its fusion of pornography and horror:

Whereas conventional porn assiduously avoids castration, the horror genre revels in gory body wounds. *Snuff* is the bizarre exception in that it features a soft-core seduction story with two bloody endings: in *The Slaughter* portion, Angelica’s displaced rage over having once been sexually abused finds its object in the castration of her ex-boyfriend¹¹ and the murder of his pregnant lover; in the form of an epilogue, the voyeuristic director’s unmotivated attack on a sexually available woman appears as a kind of textual revenge against female aggression in the film. Thus two generic ‘temporal structures’ compete in *Snuff*, adding to its status as an overdetermined case of sensationalistic low culture. (55)

Although I would hesitate to call the first portion of the film a “soft-core seduction story,”¹² it is particularly striking that Johnson and Schaefer distinguish between porn and horror by referring to the former as a “sexual representation” and the latter (their new definition of porn / porn transformed into horror) as a “literal inscription,” since horror is often understood as representation and pornography as literal. Their interpretation likely stems from the fact that the final five minutes of *Snuff* depict graphic violence (representation) within the generic confines of pornography (literal inscription)—we see footage of the actual crew as they film the scene in real time, and the murder is precipitated by an invitation for casual sex. As a result, discourse surrounding the film has substituted the apparently real murder of the female crew

¹¹ The use of the term “ex-boyfriend” is a bit generous in this case, since Angelica only initiates a romantic relationship with Horst to ensure easy access to his home when the time comes to go through with Satán’s master plan. Her commitment to the relationship is in truth a display of her loyalty to Satán.

¹² Who is being seduced and by whom? Who is even the main character?

member for unsimulated sex with her. The sexual act becomes phantasmatic while gendered violence is brought forward as palpable reality. *Snuff* introduces the possibility, but ultimately falls short, of bringing porn and horror together as body genres that both deal in material reality. By erasing pornography entirely and replacing it with horror, *Snuff* makes horror the scapegoat for pornography's perceived sins (egregious violence against women) and neither genre is effectively transformed. Since *Snuff* aligns itself with the structures of pornography but only depicts horror, its reception by anti-pornography feminists set the stage for a deeply rooted cultural association between pornography and horror in critical literature. According to Johnson and Schaefer, "As discursively deployed by feminists, pornography appeared to have all the key elements Clover identifies in the slasher film: a voyeuristic male 'propelled by psychosexual fury'; a 'terrible place' in which women were in constant danger; 'weapons' (including the penis itself) for intimate torture; and female 'victims'" (56). Unable to sustain itself on a narrative that recognizes gendered power imbalances and the possibility of feminine pleasure in horror spectatorship, *Slaughter*'s promise is covered over by the vision of its new director/distributor, whose power extends beyond the realm of the camera and (seemingly) into everyday life. Rather than the material weight of Angelica's body-as-camera as it is pushed into the frame of her rapist, we are presented with the body of the woman as endlessly manipulable image—not by herself but by others. The counterfeit gore of the horror film masquerading as the genuine penetration of porn becomes the answer to the problem of feminine agency in exploitation film.

“Oh, I was watching you”: Reframing Pornography as Horror in *A Woman’s Torment* (1977)

Before Findlay moved into strictly horror filmmaking in the mid-eighties, she dabbled in the genre with her proto-slasher film *A Woman’s Torment* (1977). Findlay has referred to *Torment* as “the story of my life,” a sentiment that is surely partly jest but nonetheless still difficult to ignore, especially when one considers the fact that Findlay served as a double for lead actress Tara Chung on the film (*Torment* Audio Commentary). *Torment* follows the lives of two married couples—Estelle and her psychiatrist husband, Otis, and Frances and her architect husband, Don—and Karen, the mentally-ill stepsister of Frances. Karen has recently come to live with Frances and Don and is a point of strain in the couple’s relationship. Don wants to convince Frances that Karen should be placed in a mental institution and nominates Otis, with whom Frances is having an affair, to perform a psychological evaluation. Frances reluctantly agrees but is adamant that Karen is just “tired” and “needs her rest.” To this end, Karen has planned a visit to the family’s beach house, and it is here that we first see her as she builds a sandcastle soon to be consumed by ocean waves. Throughout the film, the viewer is transported between Karen at the beach house on Fire Island, living in a constant state of paranoia and committing a series of sexualized murders, and the bourgeois boredom of New York where Estelle, Frances, Don, and Otis bicker, do plenty of day-drinking, and exist in a near constant state of dissatisfaction. Because it is a pornographic film whose lead character murders anyone who happens to pass by her house, *Torment* is generally agreed to be less than

titillating. When asked at a retrospective event on the “anti-eroticism” of the film and whether it was intentional, Findlay replies, “I don’t know. But we [she and longtime partner Walter Sear] had a habit of making asexual, nonsexual sex-pictures” (“Roberta Findlay Masterclass”). Similarly, in the director commentary on the *Vinegar Syndrome* Blu-ray release of the film, Findlay wryly observes that Karen murdering potential and actual sex partners is “not good for an X-rated film.” *Torment*, though technically a pornographic film, is a prime example of Findlay testing the limits of the genre. Despite Findlay’s lifelong resistance to critical inquiry concerning her process and her films, *Torment* nonetheless prompts a number of significant theoretical questions: What is the function of a failed pornography? What does it mean to be a woman in a pornographic world? What does it mean to be a woman in a world run by the conventions of horror film? Finally, are the two one and the same?

Throughout *Torment*, despite Karen’s framing as “crazy” by both the film (she’s the only character who commits murder) and by the other characters, the line distinguishing her from the other ostensibly “normal” women in the film is tenuous at best. In the opening scene, for instance, we see Estelle and Otis having sex in their home. Otis quickly finishes, and it is immediately clear that Estelle is not satisfied with the experience. When she chastises Otis for “masturbat[ing] inside me” instead of making love to her, his response is to treat her like a child. Tissue in hand, he instructs her to “wipe eyes” and to “blow nose” rather than validate her concerns. By quickly embodying the character of a compassionate and concerned father, Otis

effectively robs Estelle of any power she might have gained by speaking up and places her in the role of a child rather than a sexually mature adult. The ease with which Otis effectively infantilizes his wife and asserts himself as the sole voice of reason demonstrates his power to judge what does and does not constitute “reality.” In contrast, Estelle’s interpretation of the events is made out to be nothing more than a bewildered delusion. When Estelle accuses Otis of having an affair, he questions her mental stability: “You’re irrational. You sound like a patient, and it is not attractive.” This opening scene establishes early on the ease with which any man can diagnose a woman as mentally ill as an alternative to acknowledging and addressing her point of view. Frequent, abrupt cuts between Karen at the beach house and Frances, Don, Otis, and Estelle back in the city also work to blur the line between acceptable domesticity and uncontrollable feminine sexuality. While Findlay has attributed the deficiency of her sex scenes to her own prudish nature, and *Torment*’s uninhibited sex and grisly murders are certainly far from Findlay’s reality, the constant struggle in the film to exist as a woman without simultaneously being accused of insanity—in *Torment* the two identities practically collapse onto each other—is perhaps a better indication of what Findlay means when she calls the film a reflection of her own life.

From the outset, Karen is steeped in the conventions of the slasher film serial killer. The viewer’s first proper introduction to the character is from behind as she swings jerkily back and forth in a wooden rocking chair. Although the context of the scene leads the viewer to believe we are in Karen’s bedroom, the relationship of the

space to the rest of Frances and Don's house is never disclosed, and the high key lighting coupled with the rocking chair generate associations with the ubiquitous horror film attic. The space certainly fulfills the requirements for Clover's "terrible place" in horror films, a space that she intimately associates with monstrous, feminine sexuality: "Decidedly 'intrauterine' in quality is the Terrible Place, dark and often damp, in which the killer lives or lurks and whence he stages his most terrifying attacks" (48). Rather than Karen's face, we are instead treated to a medium close-up of a pair of scissors that flash as she slaps them against her thigh and sings wordlessly to herself. Bits and pieces of information we've gleaned from Don and Frances over the previous ten minutes or so of the film accompany these visuals to indicate that something is not quite right about this woman. As the camera alternates between Karen packing for her beach house vacation and a conversation between Don and Frances on the best way to deal with Karen disrupting their marriage, Don repeatedly questions her sanity. The use of parallel editing in this scene not only works to assure us that Karen is in the same house as the couple (we never see them in the same room together) but also indicates that Karen can hear everything that's being discussed. Karen's presentation as an unstable killer, swaying in a rocking chair and brandishing a pair of scissors in a mysterious part of the house, will likely call to mind the character of Mother from *Psycho*, an association the distributors exploited in their marketing for the film—the original theatrical poster declares *Torment* "a hardcore *Psycho*." However, Karen's character also pays homage to what some horror critics argue is the "original" slasher film, the 1974 Canadian production *Black Christmas*.

Torment's portrayal of Karen invokes not only the *Black Christmas* killer, who spends much of the film hiding out in the attic of a sorority house, but also the film's first victim, Claire, who is never discovered by her sisters or the police and finishes out the movie up in the attic with the killer, sitting in a rocking chair with a plastic bag tied over her head. The film's final shot reveals the true irony of her situation. As the camera zooms out to show the exterior of the sorority house, we see that Claire has been fully visible in the attic window all along—no one bothered to look up. In *Torment*, Karen is never definitively categorized as a killer or a victim, a woman or a mental patient. Since the film never manages to come to a conclusion regarding these binaries, it opens up the possibility that she occupies all of these positions at once.

Karen's shifting personality from mentally unstable victim to seductive murderess makes classifying *Torment* extraordinarily difficult. Is a film so patently unsexy as this able to call itself pornography? Where does the horror of the film actually come from? Karen's kills are almost unilaterally more satisfying, to this particular viewer at least, than any of the explicit sexual acts depicted on screen. Each kill, for Karen, is a revolt against a society that has rejected and dehumanized her—from the electrician Larry who, after a round of consensual sex, perpetrates a rape, to Otis, who brushes Karen aside after having sex with her. The effect of this genre confusion, where the horror of Karen's kills immediately follows and ultimately usurps hardcore sexual content, is exactly what feminists protested in *Snuff*. However, rather than a documentary-style murder in which a man mutilates a woman as a replacement for sleeping with her, *Torment* complicates the formula by seriously

considering not only where Karen gets her pleasure (is it the killing or the fucking) but also what the real-life consequences are for her participation in both acts. While the concept of the femme fatale, who seduces men only to cause their downfall, is certainly a stereotypical trope in Hollywood film, the tension that traditionally surrounds this type of character as someone who makes the male protagonist painfully aware of the horrors of castration is totally absent in *Torment*.¹³ While both Larry and Otis attempt to interrogate the initially silent Karen, any threat she might have posed is quickly forgotten as a result of her performance as a sexually complacent woman, one which is self-directed rather than the product of the men's investigations. She is so convincing, in fact, that Karen is confidently "diagnosed" as a woman by both of the men with whom she sleeps and consequently kills. They do not physically harm her because they think she's insane but because she is too much a woman—too sexual, too needy, etc. This excess of femininity is the excuse Otis and Larry fall back on as justification for their abuse; they treat Karen in a way they feel is appropriate given the gender dynamic she seems to have established (i.e., they use her as a sex toy).

In the first of these encounters, Karen is surprised by electrician Larry, who has entered the house unannounced in order to check the electricity following a

¹³ According to Mulvey, the male film protagonist has two choices when it comes to confronting the perceived threat of castration invoked by women: "...preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)" ("Visual Pleasure" 718).

winter storm. Karen's immediate response is to brandish a kitchen knife at him and to cower in fear. After some unwarranted snooping, he discovers that Karen is all alone in the house with no food. He offers to build a fire and manages to extract Karen's name from her. Once the fire is going, Karen effects a complete switch from her previous role. She goes from a shy, paranoid woman to a sexually confident seductress in a manner of seconds, a transformation that takes Larry completely by surprise. His response to her come-ons is to tell her "I think you're nuts." Karen is quick with a convincing rebuttal: "What if I am? I'm still a woman." This reply definitively marks Karen as a character who not only performs horror but also femininity. In doing so, she also reveals that, in this film at least, the two are one and the same. With this new performance for context, the earlier scene in Karen's room back at Frances' house reads as camp, a kind of joke about the stereotype of the mad woman in the attic rocking back and forth with nothing to occupy her dangerous mind.¹⁴ Despite his reservations, Larry soon abandons his protests and obliges Karen with a hand job. However, once she orgasms he is ready for his "turn" and initiates penetrative sex despite her protests. Luckily, Karen still has her kitchen knife handy, and she stabs Larry in the back at the same moment he pulls out to cum. The murder combines the realism of porn (the explicit sex between Karen and Larry) with the special effects and false violence of the horror film (Larry's murder). Although Findlay claims never to have seen the theatrical release of *Snuff*, there are undeniable

¹⁴ Karen fulfills the stereotype theorized by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

parallels between that film's final scene and Larry's untimely death. While *Torment* does not pretend to depict an actual homicide, Findlay's decision to include hardcore sex alongside a simulated murder committed by a woman against her rapist has the effect, intentional or not, of calling attention to the ways in which women's bodies are traditionally put on display in both porn and horror and to the real-life power imbalances that naturalize the logics underlying both genres. In a sequence that flouts genre convention, the body on display is not Karen's but Larry's. We see the knife slide into his back, the blood gushing from his mouth, and the semen smeared across his penis. Findlay herself was well aware of the overlap between horror and porn that is so openly on display in this sequence.¹⁵ The presence of both blood and semen function as proof of the material weight of the bodies onscreen. However, when one piece of evidence is presented as "real" while the other is simultaneously offered as the product of special effects, the line that separates porn as artless response and horror as calculated fantasy becomes unstable.

In contrast, Karen is the conscious performer, not the involuntary reactor. By shifting from porn to horror she takes control of the scene and renegotiates her position as a character in a low-genre landscape. In "'The Hardest of Hardcore': Locating Feminist Possibilities in Women's Extreme Pornography," Jennifer Moorman comments on this scene in particular as a pornographic anomaly and also an opportunity for subverting generic tropes: "What starts out as a potentially

¹⁵ Findlay remarks on the universal function of bodily fluids in low-genre film during an interview for the DVD release of *Blood Sisters*: "You know the money shots in porn films? Well, this was a different substance. It was red."

consensual sexual encounter (to the extent that a woman in her condition is capable of consent) quickly progresses toward rape. In this particular case, the transition from consent to the revoking thereof (rather than the reverse) seems designed to provoke discomfort rather than straightforward arousal” (709). Here, Findlay’s tendency toward “asexual” or anti-erotic pornography appears in full force. It is also a moment that points to Findlay’s desire to make realistic sex scenes—not in the sense that the sex is unsimulated, but in that the very real power discrepancies between men and women in everyday life have bled into the fantasy of porn. Karen’s revocation of consent halfway through the scene not only acknowledges the complexity of real-world sexual encounters, but it also disrupts the film’s dream-world of uninhibited sexuality which is in turn held up by the conventions of porn. Significantly, Findlay is only able to do this by invoking horror.

The entire scene between Larry and Karen is re-played soon afterward in a masturbatory shower sequence in which Karen re-narrates the encounter through her perspective. Presumably, this narration is meant to serve as Karen’s own pornographic fantasy, one in which the spectator is invited to join through visual access to Karen’s body—while Karen might be getting off on imagining her encounter with Larry, the audience is meant to get off by watching Karen. However, this relatively straightforward dynamic is soon disrupted by rapid cuts to Larry and Karen having sex, to Karen murdering Larry, and to Karen clutching Larry’s bleeding body in the aftermath. Karen’s voice narrates the experience over these visuals, which in her interpretation primarily revolve around spectatorship: “Oh, I was watching you,

do you remember? You were watching me.” Images of Karen in the shower are replaced by close-ups of Larry with blood pouring out of his mouth or of his distorted face as it looms over Karen during sex. Karen’s narration continues: “And you see me, don’t you? I know you want me.” This entire sequence, which certainly required more work from Findlay in the editing room than it would have had she left it as a stand-alone masturbation scene, further confuses the film’s already tumultuous relationship with genre (the sex scenes point to porn, the murder to horror) and also shifts the film’s perspective to more closely align with Karen and her desire. In this moment, Karen participates in a pornographic pleasure made possible by a personally edited and re-configured performance of the woman in/as horror.

According to Williams, one of the central problems with porn is that it has no way of genuinely confirming feminine pleasure since it cannot always offer material evidence of female orgasm.¹⁶ In this sequence, attention is diverted away from Karen’s body and onto images of her encounter with Larry as demonstrable proof of her pleasure. Karen’s fixation on the dynamics of spectatorship does not directly acknowledge the fact that Larry exclusively views her through the lens of pornography. Instead, she consistently reads him as a character in a horror film (he enters and leaves her life as an unwanted intruder, first in her home and then in her

¹⁶ “Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession. The woman’s ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake (at least according to certain standards of evidence) seems to be at the root of all the genre’s attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core ‘frenzy of the visible.’ The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured” (Williams, *Hardcore* 50).

body). The tumultuous relationship between these two genres is implicitly drawn out by Karen's recontextualized flashbacks. These images, which Karen reframes through their use as masturbatory fodder, and her narration reveal the very material consequences that women confront in everyday life for expressing their sexuality. The porn, in contrast, functions as placatory afterthought. For Karen at least, horror is by far the more fulfilling genre. The repeated infantilization of women in the film, the expectation that they function solely as sex objects and/or potential mothers, and the tenuous line between woman and psychiatric patient all point to the ways sexual politics worms its way into the bedroom. As a woman who performs horror, Karen is aware of this power imbalance and takes advantage of it to facilitate her own pleasure.

Because Karen has her hands full murdering folks who enter her house unannounced (Larry is followed by the nosy neighbor, Fannie Grudkow, and a young couple looking for a place to have sex), she stubbornly ignores her stepsister Frances' repeated attempts to reach her by telephone. Eventually, Frances becomes concerned enough to send her psychiatrist friend Otis to go check on Karen. He discovers Karen in a stupor, rocking back and forth on the shoreline. No sooner has he gotten her back into the house and on an impromptu psychiatrist's couch, however, than Karen spontaneously begins to play the role of a patient whose cure is all too easy to facilitate: "Help me, Otis. I need you. I need someone. I'm not crazy, really, I'm not. I loved a man, and he left me. And I was depressed. Tired. So, so tired. I need to feel a man's arms around me. I need to feel like a woman. That's what's wrong with me.

Hold me. Hold me, Otis.” Karen’s confession seems neatly to solve the problem Otis encounters with his wife Estelle at the start of the film and is a perfect example of Karen’s purposeful performance as a sexually desirable woman. Throughout the duration of the film, she only speaks when she is trying to seduce or lie to a man. Otherwise, she is completely mute—a trait that particularly disturbs her brother-in-law, Don. In stark contrast to Otis’ wife, Estelle, who is chastised for only thinking of her own pleasure and crosses the line from wife to patient, Karen is initially coded as mentally ill but is easily able to sway Otis’ opinion of her by making him the indisputable judge of her femininity. It is not long before his professional assessment reveals her to be the perfect woman: “You know I could never be doing this [having sex] if you were my patient. I could never think of myself as a psychiatrist again. But this is different. I mean, you’re not mentally ill. To me, you’re just Karen. A lovely, desirable woman.” As in her seduction of Larry, Karen plays the part of the sexually available, slightly unstable young woman who only needs a man to help set her straight. Karen’s distress and inability to communicate when she first encounters Otis on the beach are quickly forgotten after he makes the decision to have sex with her. To him, Karen is “perfectly normal...In fact, better than normal.” This diagnosis comes at the expense of shifting the accusation of hysteria onto Frances who, according to the doctor, has “create[d] problems where they don’t exist because of [her] own inadequacies.” No woman is safe from masculine assessment in *Torment*, a trope that repeatedly points out the inherent gendered power imbalances of everyday life and once again recalls the fine line between “crazy” and “normal” for women in

the logic of the film. Karen's reclamation of her own worldview, one that confuses porn and horror, or rather transforms porn in a way that enables her to reveal the horrors of everyday life, is what brands her as a monster. When Otis tries to leave the beach house as soon as they've had sex, she shocks him with a ripped out electrical cord while he's in the middle of yelling for a towel from the shower. This murder, like the demise of Larry, seems the result of mistreatment rather than a mindless wish to do harm, as in the case of a male slasher such as Michael Myers.¹⁷

This purposeful violence extends even to Karen's most stereotypical slasher murder in which two young people wander into what they think is an empty summer house for some pre-marital sex. Findlay shoots the scene according to genre conventions, utilizing jump cuts as Karen slashes with her knife and including rapid-fire medium close-ups of the bloody corpses that render their lifeless bodies as nothing more than a mishmash of disposable parts. However, despite the stereotypical set-up of this murder at the level of both form and content, it is important to note that the couple's dialogue is atypical—the two discuss their upcoming nuptials, what kind of house they will buy, and how many babies they will produce: “When we get married, we'll have a bedroom just like this to make love in. We'll make babies every year.” Findlay's decision to include this dialogue not only solidifies a reading of the film as a response to middle-class married life, but it also points to a potential

¹⁷ “Unlike their male counterparts in the sexploitation films made by the Findlays, the heroines in Roberta Findlay's hardcore films do not murder out of gendered hatred or sheer joy in violence but rather as a form of retribution or revenge for their own ill-treatment—a torturing of the men in response to the cultural dictate to ‘torture the women’” (Moorman 708-9).

motivation for Karen's murder of the couple, which is unprovoked except for their decision to trespass on her family's property. The serial killer as a force that disrupts nuclear family structures is a common trope in 1970s and 80s horror film, but Findlay complicates this conceit by clearly demonstrating the disadvantages women face in regard to marriage and sexual desire. When the line between a hysteric and a homemaker is so thin, any one of the female characters in the film can easily become like Karen. Here, horror is a tool that Karen wields not only to assert her own desire within a filmic landscape ruled by the conventions of pornography but also to demonstrate the material effects of genre on a body conventionally defined solely through its visual representation.

This performance, however, is ultimately unsustainable. After Otis fails to return to the city, Karen's stepsister Frances comes to the beach house to check up on him and to collect Karen. Lamenting that she cannot leave her "friends," Karen inadvertently leads Frances to the bodies of Larry and Mrs. Grudkow, who are stashed in the sand under the deck. Frances, horrified, runs back inside and soon discovers the bodies of Otis as well as the couple left naked and bloody in bed. She immediately calls the police and Karen, who had chosen to remain outside, seems to understand that her performance as seductive serial killer cannot go on any longer. The final moments of the film are taken up by prolonged stationary shots of Karen walking out to the edge of the shore and continuing straight into the waves. Unlike the more stereotypical slasher killer, there is no final girl to send her off. Karen must take care of her necessary death all on her own. Contrary to Clover's theorization of

the slasher, in which the character of the final girl serves as a safe object of masochistic identification for masculine spectators who, through her defeat of the bisexual killer, safely reclaims the phallus and reassures the viewer of his own successful psychosexual development, *Torment* offers no boy in disguise with whom potential spectators can identify. Karen, rather than a “female ‘cover,’” who actually tells the “story of a man in crisis,” clings to her femininity until the end (Clover 65). It is both what allows her to kill and what necessitates her violence in response to cruel treatment at the hands of men. Her demise, rather than a reassuring return to phallic superiority, denies the “identificatory buffer” of “gender displacement” in the character of the final girl (Clover 51). Without this “emotional remove that permits the majority audience to explore taboo subjects in the relative safety of vicariousness,” *Torment* is in a unique situation as a proto-slasher horror film: masochistic identification is unresolved, and the feminine gaze retains primacy. Karen eliminates every man we see her come in contact with—none are available for sustained identification. All that’s left is Karen herself—a killer without a final girl who must put herself out of a picture whose boundaries are too restrictive to allow for her pleasure. There is no return to the phallus in *Torment*, only the sea.¹⁸

Despite Findlay’s repeated admonitions to those looking for depth in her filmography—she claims to not even have a subconscious—she does admit to paying an antithetical amount of attention to the technical: “I was consumed with two things

¹⁸ Karen’s decision to entrust herself to the ocean rather than live in a world that seemingly has no place for her mirrors Eve’s resolution to “commit [herself]...to the sea” in Carter’s *New Eve* (186).

while shooting all these films. Two things...I was consumed with making a good frame. That is to say the shot. And lighting...I was trying to make something that looked good to my eye” (*Third Eye*). What is in the frame, despite Findlay’s reticence regarding “ulterior motive[s],” is thus of vital importance (*Third Eye*). By looking to what she chose to include and what she chose to omit in *Torment*, we come to know what “looked good” to her particular eye. Findlay’s decision to include extended cutaways to Karen’s doll as it is washed out to sea early on in the film parallels the final frames in which Karen commits herself to the Atlantic. This decision, which offers a nice bit of visual symmetry (a good frame), also produces the effect, purely at the level of the visual, that Karen is ultimately as powerless as her doll, no matter the fact that we have spent the past hour watching her murder people. The frame of Findlay’s eye thus manages to speak for itself at the level of form—although, as this chapter has argued, her content is equally significant. Findlay’s intense focus on how things look not only to herself as the director and cinematographer but also through the eyes of her main character means she manages to develop a visual language for women within the turbulent landscape of the erotic/pornographic horror film, one that shows just how important the consequences of pornography are for horror and vice versa.

Material Girls: The Allure of 1970s Erotic Horror in Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch* (2016)

Almost forty years following the conclusion of Findlay’s groundbreaking filmography, another woman filmmaker will also consider what it means to

manipulate horror conventions by casting the genre through acts of feminine performance with an outcome that is equally frustrating. Described by *Film International*'s Matthew Sorrento as a “naughty pleasure” and *Diabolique*'s Peg Aloi as “a stunning homage to 70s Technicolor thrillers,” Anna Biller’s sophomore feature film, *The Love Witch* (2016), received predominantly positive reviews upon its release. The film’s perceived imitation of 1960s and 70s *giallo*, sexploitation, and low-budget thrillers is the primary catalyst for its general popularity—fans like it, in short, because they assume it is “bad” on purpose. In response, Biller has spent the last several years attempting to distance herself from these (according to her) flawed associations.

In the face of continued feedback from viewers and reviewers on *The Love Witch*'s striking resemblance to Italian *giallo* and American exploitation film—the work of Russ Meyer, specifically, comes up quite often—Biller has steadfastly separated herself from a genre that she feels is the antithesis of what she is trying to achieve. For her, exploitation—and horror film in general—is solely produced by and for male consumers’ sadistic pleasure. In a striking echo of I.Q. Hunter’s admission that horror is the pornographic spectacle of female death (something cult fans refuse to admit), Biller identifies the “central fantasy” of the slasher film as “killing women” (“Misogyny”). This chapter takes an alternate stance and argues that *The Love Witch*'s proximity to horror and cult cinema facilitates important conversations regarding feminism’s relationship to these generic spaces. Cult’s tendency to frustrate “masculine, goal-oriented ways of seeing” by focusing on space rather than character

or narrative, according to Moya Luckett, means that “femininity emerges as arguably *the* structuring force in cult films” (155; original emphasis, 142). With this in mind, *The Love Witch*’s intense focus on space and spectacle and on overwhelmingly detailed sets that blur the line between feminine subject and background not only raises important questions in regard to the status of women-on-film as two-dimensional screens that serve as the backdrop for masculine character development and as elaborate props that enable fetishistic scopophilia, it also characterizes the film as both inherently “cult” and inherently feminine. Biller’s loyalty to verisimilitude and the dissatisfactory (to her) response it has elicited from critics and fans who read her work as an imitation of films from the past draws to the surface the possibility that behind the refusal to engage with trash film is a refusal to engage with a medium entirely rooted in what has traditionally been associated with the feminine, namely two-dimensional superficiality, a distracted, wandering gaze, and a focus on bodies rather than language to tell a story (what little of one there might be).¹⁹

Despite Biller’s fixation on sexploitation and horror films’ tendency to glorify the spectacle of female violence and their focus on the sexual objectification of female characters, her primary qualm with the inevitable comparisons between her film and the work of directors such as Russ Meyer, Jess Franco, Dario Argento, and Mario Bava, rather than her preferred company of Alfred Hitchcock, Douglas Sirk, Luis Buñuel, and Jacques Demy is one of reading and reception. Namely, it is an

¹⁹ This is a problem that is systemic within the horror genre and one that, I believe, Biller ran across unexpectedly when she produced her film (originally the genre choice was tied to budget restrictions—horror is cheaper to make).

issue with low-budget erotic horror's supposed illegibility, a prejudice that also underlies much feminist reception of the genre. What Biller is most upset by when viewers and critics compare her work to 60s and 70s sleaze rather than pre-code film or melodrama is that they often take it as a chance to disengage from her film's content; moreover, she fears that her focus on masquerade and exorbitantly aestheticized locales only further exacerbates the common tendency in horror studies to focus on stylization and special effects rather than content or symbolic meaning. Consequently, common takeaways are that Biller is not doing "serious work" ("Radical Pleasures") or that "They think it's a joke about other types of movies from the past" ("Spellbound" 43). And yet, Biller's dedication to historical aesthetics in her cinema consistently results in films that slide, superficially at least, backwards in time, so that they appear totally indistinguishable from films actually produced in the 1960s and 70s. In reference to her first film *Viva* (2007), an homage to 60s and 70s sex culture that takes its name from a woman's erotic magazine that ran from 1973 to 1979, Biller notes that she is particularly careful when it comes to costumes and sets because she is "going for the 'uncanny,' which happens when you get things so right that they seem impossible" ("Unlikely Genres" 141). In the same interview, Biller goes on to reveal her desire to "get so good" that "there are no discernable differences between my movies and the real ones. The differences will be underneath."

Although Biller initially claimed, specifically in reference to *Viva*, that her feminine cinema of subversive mimesis was "less interested in how sexploitation movies or any of the other genres [she uses] fail" and more interested in "how

[she]can use them to tell [her] own stories,” this tactic falls sharply to the wayside in her approach to and defense of *The Love Witch* nearly a decade later (“Unlikely Genres” 143). By producing films that appear to perfectly imitate the aesthetic of 1960s and 70s exploitation pictures, but which are in actuality entirely different in their ideological content, Biller must work very hard to shed preconceived notions so that her work may accomplish something different. Unfortunately, this kind of ideological cleansing effectively implies that the films to which her work refers but does not (according to Biller) ultimately agree with are not worth watching. However, if one were to take exploitation film “seriously” rather than ironically or as about something in addition to the perpetuation of women as spectacularized sex objects, would the affiliation be so anathema? Tellingly, many of Biller’s complaints center on viewers’ tendencies to associate the feminine with the “ridiculous” (“Spellbound” 44). As a result, dismissing the film based on its association with exploitation reveals an inherent bias against the portrayal of feminine experience. According to this line of analysis, the consequence for actively engaging with *The Love Witch* as a serious film is the same as that faced by the men in the movie who succumb to its protagonist’s extravagant performances: you are left “drowning in estrogen.”

Biller’s film follows a young female protagonist named Elaine Parks, a self-proclaimed witch who leaves the spotlight of San Francisco following the mysterious death of her husband and continued questioning by the police. She winds up in Eureka, California, and moves into a fellow witch’s unoccupied apartment. Upon settling in, Elaine befriends interior decorator Trish, begins selling homemade

magical concoctions at the local wiccan shop, and goes through a series of failed relationships that all end in the death of her various lovers. What is perhaps most immediately striking about *The Love Witch* is the way it looks. Meticulously crafted, elaborate sets are presented on digitally printed 35mm film and shot with classic, hard key lighting techniques that further enhance the super-saturated color palette. A true representation of DIY filmmaking, *The Love Witch* features props and set pieces personally sourced and, in many cases, manually constructed by Biller. She is also responsible for sewing many of the film's costumes and composing portions of the score. Biller's deep personal investment in the film's production design and commitment to an authentic 60s and 70s aesthetic are the marked results of her desire to create a "cinema for women" that is also a "noteworthy addition[n] to the horror genre" (*Diabolique*).

Despite Biller's reservations, her focus on the material history of horror and her dedication to the look of the genre and its subject matter suggest that, for her, horror is the most useful medium for working through entrenched cultural assumptions concerning femininity, performance, and cinema. Biller's interviews make it quite clear that even now feminine spectacle is read as synonymous with the horror film and serves as the primary marker for the genre's supposed unintelligibility. With this in mind, one avenue of approach to *The Love Witch* is to consider why it so carefully performs the sexploitation genre and features a character who explicitly and self-consciously presents herself as male fantasy. What if, rather than read the film as a perfect mirror of something like Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of*

the Dolls (1970), we instead looked to the ways that generic performativity provides insight into how these older films, which many perceive as unimportant and outdated, are still highly relevant to women's experiences today? What if, rather than use sexploitation films as a lens to read Biller's work, *The Love Witch* became a lens through which we might reconsider, and ultimately reclaim, the sexploitation genre from a feminine point of view?

By placing feminine spectacle and performance at the forefront of her film, Biller admits the possibility of an interested feminine gaze in the horror genre—one that does not condemn a love of performance nor the pleasures associated with embodying the horrific feminine. Despite Biller's general distaste for the content of 1960s and 70s exploitation and horror film, *The Love Witch* is filled to bursting with props and sets that repeatedly recall this oft maligned genre: extreme periodization creates a world totally disjointed from our 21st century reality as Elaine swishes through Victorian tea rooms bursting with pink lace and harp music; Wiccan ceremonies that, despite being modelled on books and first-hand accounts, thoroughly recall the black mass sequences in Sergio Martino's *giallo* film *All the Colors of the Dark* (1972); and an apartment plush with period furniture, psychedelic, Tarot-inspired artwork, and a bubbling laboratory that seems to be a cross between a mad scientist's lair and a home economics classroom. The ultimate complement to these carefully crafted sets is Elaine herself. Her impeccable wardrobe, made up of a mix of 1970s chic and Victorian revival, is set off by precisely applied makeup that highlights her striking resemblance to *giallo* superstar Edwige Fenech. Elaine's

perfect symmetry with her environment (and the film as a whole) marks *The Love Witch* as a film that is not merely an homage to *giallo* or exploitation but is actually about the specific allure, for women, of these films as generic spaces.

A brief comparison between *The Love Witch* and *All the Colors of the Dark*, for example, reveals the ways that Biller's film assimilates itself to both the form and the content of 70s erotic horror cinema. Not only is there an uncanny resemblance between Samantha Robinson and *All the Colors*' Edwige Fenech, but Martino's film also deals with a female protagonist's entanglement in a wiccan cult as a way to overcome a dissatisfactory personal life. The modish set design, dream-like, hallucinatory sequences, and the desperation of the heroine to make sense of the world around her are echoed in *The Love Witch*. The distinctive style and exploitative plot of *All the Colors* is supposedly the stuff of an outdated and misogynistic film genre, so why re-vivify it? More importantly, why try to duplicate it in a film that openly markets itself as feminist? Elaine's assimilation to the environment of 70s erotic thriller is a demonstration of the temptations the genre represents for her as a contemporary woman. As a result, Elaine's character resists conventional film analyses that would collapse her onto the genre as its primary marker of signification and instead actively appropriates horror's artificialities to tell her story even as its structural demands doom her to heartbreak.

The primary motivation for Elaine is to ensnare men with sex magic so that she can make them fall in love with her. In order to do this, she molds herself into an imagined feminine ideal: sexy, well-groomed, slightly air-headed, and with the

lightest dusting of the maternal (“poor baby” is perhaps her most repeated phrase to men). When a bewildered lover (who also happens to be her friend Trish’s husband) asks her who she is, Elaine simply replies, “I’m the love witch, I’m your ultimate fantasy!” Trish repeatedly questions Elaine’s choice to outwardly cater to men and admonishes Elaine by accusing her of being “brainwashed by the patriarchy.” Despite Trish’s concerns over Elaine’s supposed gullibility, Elaine’s performance of female drag is presented in the film as, quite literally, an act. Twice the audience observes the same routine as Elaine arranges to be alone with a man, cooks him a “nice dinner,” and performs a striptease before initiating sex. That this whole scenario is one that has been carefully scripted becomes apparent during Elaine’s rendezvous with her first victim in the film, Wayne. After a chance meeting in town, Elaine manages to elicit an invitation to Wayne’s country cabin over the weekend. It soon becomes clear, however, that Elaine has roped an unwitting Wayne into a premeditated piece of theater, one which she has staged often before. When Wayne attempts to have sex with Elaine in the car outside his house she staunchly refuses, insisting that they must have dinner first. It is only after they have dined and Elaine has performed her strip act that she capitulates: “You can make love to me now.” Wayne is all too eager to do so. The same scenario repeats later on with Elaine’s next conquest, Richard, and in neither case do the men know how to read Elaine beyond this moment of granted permission. For although Elaine performs the normative cultural stereotype of desirable womanhood, the primary reaction she receives from men is uncomfortable laughter and bewildered stupefaction. In moments such as these, Elaine’s femininity

is entirely masquerade. What is more, she unintentionally reveals it as such to her male audience. By taking her embrace of the stereotypically feminine to the extreme, she uncovers its artifice. This literalization of the “perfect” woman renders her incomprehensible (men do not know how to read or react to her) and marks her as a monster (men’s inability to play off her performance results in their murders). Elaine’s over-the-top femininity manages, in short, to break through the barrier between herself and her male lovers, characters who unanimously occupy the position of paracinema’s and classic narrative cinema’s disaffected spectator—someone who can enjoy the show but who does not participate in it himself nor allow it to affect him emotionally. Elaine’s love magic forces engagement on her own terms. Not only that, it forces engagement with a woman who is emblematic of the woman-on-screen as erotic spectacle. This mandate for active engagement on the part of Elaine’s lovers, the dictum that they invest their minds as well as their bodies in the interest of preserving her performance as the ultimate fantasy, is the main source of male horror in the film.

Although Elaine fashions herself into, quite literally, eye candy, and plays by all the “rules” of patriarchal culture—she informs Trish that all men want is “a pretty woman to love and to take care of them and to make them feel like a man and to give them total freedom in whatever they want to do or be”—her male partners are unable to live up to the promise seemingly fulfilled by her performance. When confronted with the flesh and blood reality of Elaine, coupled with her performance of feminine spectacle, they “get really weird.” The only man who refuses to succumb to Elaine’s

performance is her final partner in the film, Griff. In a climactic scene that blatantly exposes *The Love Witch* as a film obsessed with perception, Griff admonishes Elaine, telling her that she knows absolutely nothing about love and that he has no plans to fall prey to her traps. This confrontation is accompanied by a condemning gaze that causes Elaine to cower, hands held up as if shielding herself from physical assault. Griff's refusal to abandon his position as distanced, disaffected spectator, one which grants him mastery over the interpretation of Elaine as spectacle and ensures his safety from Elaine's love magic, aligns him with the typically theorized male spectator of classic Hollywood cinema. By wresting narrative control from Elaine, he reasserts his dominance over how her actions should be interpreted within the context of the film. This hostile takeover is short lived, however, since Elaine's almost-immediate response is to drive a knife through Griff's heart, playing out an image she had previously painted on her apartment wall and carrying out a sentence most often reserved for male artists against their female muses. Elaine's response to Griff's failure to correctly perceive her is to manipulate the way his body can function, to transform it into the mirror image of a two-dimensional spectacle she had been inhabiting all along (she is in the mural as well), thus revealing the potential dangers of the trap of the two-dimensional. As in Carter's *Desire Machines*, where Albertina constructs herself and Desiderio as twin reflective mirrors, Elaine makes sure that Griff is hereby subject to the realm of reflection. While this move on Elaine's part carries the risk of simply reversing the power dynamic—by transforming Griff into splatter, she forces him to occupy, unproblematically, the position of the feminine

while she takes on a masculine role—she never manages (or wants) to abandon her position as feminized spectacle, even in these last moments of the narrative. She is just as much a product of her art as Griff is, and his refusal to recognize or read her means Elaine is right where she was at the start of the film: a performer without a satisfactory audience.

Elaine's repeated efforts to draw attention to the weight of expectation placed on her not just by male characters but also by the conventions of the erotic horror genre are ultimately revealed to be a simple plea for love. Over the course of the film, Elaine consistently embodies hegemonic male fantasies of femininity, so it is inconceivable to her that men either up and die or outright reject her in response. Elaine's literalization of the woman-on-screen also has the effect of literalizing the theoretical fallout of her presence. If the threat that the woman onscreen represents is castration, as Mulvey argues, the de-masculinization and subsequent death of two of Elaine's love interests not only turns this threat into a reality but also foregrounds the repercussions of performance for Elaine. When Griff refuses to open himself up to the threat of castration, he instead becomes a perpetrator of sadistic voyeurism by uncovering Elaine's past and seeking her out for interrogation and humiliation. While this literalization of and adherence to feminist screen theory does, to some extent, prove Mulvey right, it also gives Biller a chance to focus on what, precisely, the consequences would be for a woman if she did manage to perfectly satisfy the requirements of classic narrative cinema, a cinema that, perhaps unsurprisingly, does

not serve her. Erotic horror, rather, becomes the volatile element that enables a critique of traditional positions allocated to women in classic narrative film.

Similar to the ways critics read *The Love Witch* as a superficial mirror of exploitation cinema, the men in the movie attempt to read Elaine as artificial image. However, as a character who “embodies the stereotypes, contradictions, and problems of female consciousness and male projection,” Elaine fulfills the fantasy of narrative cinema *too* well and becomes a prime example of the woman in/as horror (*Diabolique*). As Biller notes, she is frightening because she takes male fantasy “literally”—she truly transforms herself into “that thing that men want you to be” (“Radical Pleasures”). The slippage between taking Elaine “seriously” as a product of “female consciousness” that is engaging with art cinema and treating her as a kind of easy sex doll that exists only as a mindless (at worst) or ironic (at best) parody of sleazy exploitation from the 70s stages the crux of the crisis in feminist film interpretation and reception that for the most part does not acknowledge the possibility of genuine feminine pleasure in genres so long characterized by their misogyny. As such, if Elaine’s performances are read as an example of feminist participation in horror, the male characters’ inability to understand them is an indication that even if feminist engagements with erotic horror were happening in films during the 60s and 70s (as this project argues they were) they were likely to be ignored or, as in Biller’s case, labeled as internalized misogyny rather than as expressions of real-life feminine experience. If nothing else, *The Love Witch* reveals the political implications for frame of reference and how generic perceptions and

expectations influence male characters' (in)ability to engage with feminine spectacle as feminine experience.²⁰ Strikingly, Biller's answer to Mulvey's call for a cinema that foregrounds feminine spectatorship is to embrace fully the spectacular.

Because Biller's set design is so uncannily out of place and time and her attention to detail in her *mise-en-scène* is so meticulous, it comes as something of an anachronistic shock when elements of the everyday creep in: a cellphone casually answered, a contemporary car parked on the street, random folks strolling through the background who very clearly do not belong in the film's technicolor dreamworld. All of this points to *The Love Witch* as an artful construction. In these moments, when Biller purposefully allows the film's attention to periodization to falter, the spectacle is fractured, and the film is suddenly *not* an ironic, modern-day relic of a genre that we have never taken seriously but a contemporary representation of what it means to be a woman in the United States in 2016. These moments, "places where the film diverges from genre and takes an unexpected point of view," are discrete examples of an Irigarayan mimesis that takes obvious pleasure in a genre that tends to be read as working against feminine desire ("Q&A"). Elaine's performance of female drag—the heavy eye makeup, the bouffant hair, the flashy, vintage-style clothing—is both her way of "giv[ing] a man his fantasy" and something in which she takes personal pleasure. As a displaced character from 1970s *sexploitation*, Elaine's literalization of

²⁰ Referring to the treatment of feminine experience in trash versus art cinema, Biller cites the positive critical reception of Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967), which follows a housewife who decides to become a daytime prostitute: "Why would nobody call that movie 'sexploitation'? Obviously, because it's cinema. It's a real movie, it has a real story, it's about a real character. So is *The Love Witch*" ("I'm in conversation").

her role as magical sex doll not only reveals the double standard placed on women—to fulfill expectations *too* well, to be *too* womanly, is to be a monster—but also points to horror in general and the erotic or exploitation horror film in particular as the most effective tool for launching a critique of these conventions. Elaine's dedication to the generic modalities of erotic horror not only allows her fully to inhabit the realm of spectacle, but it also proves, in her relationship with men in particular, that her function in the erotic horror film is not so far off from her function in classic Hollywood cinema. The difference is that in *The Love Witch* Elaine, despite her commitment to her status as image, also occupies the position of the film's primary gaze. Consequently, the spectacles of horror are not so much a problem as an opportunity for active performance, one that Elaine obviously enjoys. The true point of conflict in *The Love Witch* is not Elaine's status as illusion, it is the failure of male characters to read and react to Elaine's performance as purposeful and pleasurable.

In an important scene in the film, Elaine's friend Trish is shown entering Elaine's apartment with a spare key so that she can drop off a lost ring. Finding herself alone, Trish takes the opportunity as a chance to play dress up. Seating herself at Elaine's vanity, she delightedly applies lipstick, eyeshadow, a wig, and even puts on lingerie. Up to this point, Trish has acted as a consistent foil to Elaine as the practical feminist who does not define her worth by her ability to please men. However, in dressing up as Elaine, performing as the love witch, Trish is able actively to enjoy her image in the vanity mirror as spectacle. Because Biller is so invested in Mulveyan theory and in producing films that serve as a direct response to

Mulvey's call for "a cinema of visual pleasure for women," it is important to read this moment as a direct response to Mulvey's critique of the presentation of the woman-on-screen, in fragmented close-ups and glamorized excess especially, as that which causes narrative flow to stutter and stop, transfixes meaning, and holds the (male) spectator enthralled in either desire or fear ("Unlikely Genres" 139). Trish's transformation operates otherwise within the context of the film. Her performance as Elaine is a moment of character development, and her obvious enjoyment of her own image—one that comes with presumed patriarchal strings attached—works to add depth and nuance to the film's overall critique of the preconception that the image of the woman-on-screen can only mean one thing: her status as sex object. In this moment, the spectacle of feminine horror not only becomes necessary to tell this particular story, it is also divested of its inherent associations with sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. Trish's display in the vanity mirror is rather a valuable tool of self-presentation that carries intrinsic meaning and is not meant to be a parody or a joke. In short, Trish's transformation is legible content that banks on the pleasurable play of feminine spectacle.

Despite the ways Trish's performance before the mirror works to create a feminist exploitation cinema, Biller's decision to distance herself from the genre remains a sticking point. It is difficult to argue that "there's an almost ahistorical idea that anything including any type of woman is made for the male gaze" ("Female Fantasy") and to simultaneously claim that sexploitation exists solely "to get men off" ("Spellbound" 42). Regardless of Biller's opinion, however, *The Love Witch* ensures

that the spectacle of the horror film and the spectacle of feminine performance are intimately linked to a suppressed feminine point of view: “And so, when people take it for fluff and I read reviews that say it’s ‘light’ or things like that—‘don’t take this seriously’—there’s a political dimension to that, I think. ‘Don’t look at women’s lives. Don’t look at what women go through. If you think this is a serious plot, it’s not. It’s a joke about some other movies 50 years ago. Don’t pay attention’” (“Radical Pleasures”).

The same could be said about the very movies Biller works so hard to deny as mere titillation. *The Love Witch*’s reception reveals the inherent tendency in certain scholarly approaches to flatten the representation of women in specific types of genre film to mere moving images with no underlying intent. *The Love Witch* thus becomes an important text to read as a response to and a replay of the very movies to which it claims to bear no relation. One such title, ironically, is Franco’s *Vampyros Lesbos*. In an *AV Club* interview, Biller notes that a viewer reached out to her to let her know how much they enjoyed her film and that they thought it would make a “great” double bill with *Vampyros*. Apparently, it is a comparison that “happens all the time.” Both Biller and the interviewer reject this suggestion outright, even though Biller admits she has never seen the film. When Biller remarks that she has seen Franco’s *Venus in Furs* (1969), so she “know[s] what [*Vampyros*] probably is,” the interviewer confirms her assumption by reassuring Biller that “All Jesús Franco movies are the same movie, basically.” Biller consequently rejects the comparison to Franco in the same breath that she dismisses his work: “I write a script about a woman’s life being

destroyed, which is a very personal story, and that's all they get out of it? There's an insensitivity to that comparison that becomes harrowing after a while" ("Radical Pleasures"). This disregard for Franco confirms and upholds reading strategies that are pervasive within horror criticism and affirms Biller's complicity with canonical, scholarly approaches to horror film that work in opposition to what *The Love Witch* appears to be. However, despite Biller's refusal to acknowledge her engagement with the kinds of films *The Love Witch* so closely resembles, the film is undeniably dependent on the very genres its director seeks to deny. I would agree with Biller that the reasoning behind these prejudices is ultimately the point of view that women's bodies and desires are illegible, cannot be taken seriously, and are thus meaningless spectacle. However, once this perspective shifts and one reads Elaine as possessing intentionality equal to Nadine or Linda in *Vampyros* and vice versa, then the genre's possibilities for engagement widen. For if Biller's film shows us nothing else, it demonstrates that second-wave feminism and the exploitation films that grew up around it still impact our perception of what feminine bodies can do and mean today. In the interstices between curated sets, Ennio Morricone sound bites, and stilted dialogue that recalls the bad dubs of Euro-trash imports, the twenty-first century creeps in to remind the viewer that Elaine is not only invested in the look of her apartment, with its oversaturated colors and theatrical set pieces, but that she is also invested in how she looks against that backdrop. We should read her accordingly.

Epilogue

The Power of Perception

In his highly influential essay on the mirror stage, Jacques Lacan declares the specular image to be “the threshold of the visible world” (77). That the cinema has in turn been read in the same context, as a screen that facilitates a replay of the moment when the subject experiences their first alienating identification, is especially significant to this dissertation, since it is a relation that seems to occur successfully only in the case of imagined male spectators. What happens when imagined female spectators attempt to engage with themselves in the mirror of the cinema screen has, in turn, been treated at length in feminist scholarship. Broadly speaking, classic feminist readings define the woman’s look as a collapse or over-identification with the projected image, an assimilation that erases difference and reveals the difficulty (psychoanalytically speaking) for women to establish themselves as independent subjects. In short, it is a relation that is doomed from the start.

“Spectacular Flesh” has taken a different approach in its analysis of various women-led texts and films. Rather than focus on the reactions and receptions of an imagined male or female audience, I have looked to diegetic characters as spectators who consciously participate in the generic conventions of horror and watch themselves as they do so. One of the most prevalent and significant examples of this behavior can be found in the numerous mirror-play scenes that are a staple throughout this body of work. These moments, in which women play to themselves, are relevant to discussions on the significance of the mirror stage for women and also to the status

of the cinema as a metaphoric mirror. The image of the ideal-I that the subject perceives in the mirror is an escape from the horrors of the material body, a troublesome heap of “fragmented” flesh ever ready to “appear in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented” and supersede its idealized, specular double (Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 78). For the woman in/as horror, this overthrow of the unsatisfactory, material body in favor of the more desirable mirror ideal never occurs—how can it when she must exist as a symbol of abjection whose bodily mutilation is repeatedly featured in extended graphic displays? She cannot escape her own “gratuitous excess” (Williams, “Film Bodies” 603).¹ With this in mind, it seems particularly pertinent to ask the question: What does this woman see when she looks in the mirror?

Despite the common perception that horror is inherently biased against women, “Spectacular Flesh” has argued that the genre is not only particularly apt for female directors who want to portray the harsh reality of feminine experience, but that it is also populated (even in places one might not expect, like Franco’s *Vampyros Lesbos*) by a particular kind of character who embraces her status as a signifier for horror in order to disrupt generic expectations and to foreground her own desire. Her gaze dominates these pages and structures my readings of both texts and films. When she looks in the mirror it is not an attempt to cloak her status as horrific, but rather a concentrated effort to more fully inhabit a world she is working to create. In the

¹ Although Williams goes on to argue that the depiction of women in body genre films is “in no way gratuitous...it is instead a cultural form of problem solving,” popular opinion of these films (especially horror films from the 1970s and 80s) continues to label them as excessively misogynist and demeaning to women (“Film Bodies” 612).

various mirror scenes across my archive, from Anne and Lore in *Don't Deliver Us from Evil*, to Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve*, to Trish in *The Love Witch*, the mirror's fantasy of a false totality and an equally false mastery over perception is replaced by the active formation of a subject who foregrounds her status as excessive, fragmented, abject, horrific. For her, the ideal-I is an image that espouses the very qualities the mirror is typically understood to mask and emphasizes fragmentation and disconnection rather than an ultimately unachievable sense of mastery. That the woman in/as horror embraces the very materiality the mirror, psychoanalytically speaking, seeks to transcend, pushes the viewer to reconsider the ways in which her body has been understood to function within the context of the horror genre and admits the possibility that horror might be the gateway to reimagining new ways for women to express their subjectivity and desire.

In the film examples I consider in "Spectacular Flesh," the woman in/as horror negotiates the status of her body as a narrative function that gives rise to a particular kind of film associated with a particular kind of spectatorial practice. She does this by concurrently carrying on a conversation between herself and the mirror (she is making her own kind of horror film) and between herself and horror conventions at large (her character has become a standardized trope). In doing so, she brings to light "an organic inadequacy in [her] natural reality" (Lacan, "Mirror Stage" 77). In *Don't Deliver Us from Evil*, this "inadequacy" is the social expectation that Anne and Lore assimilate to a heteronormative, Catholic, bourgeois identity. The conventions of Decadent horror are for them the key to a more livable world. It is this

world that Anne attempts to access when she performs for herself in her bedroom mirror, a display that re-purposes the misogynistic trappings of the femme fatale or Decadent muse. Anne's reflection in this scene, which might be read as alienating or, in Irigarayan language, as a "blind mirror...reduce[d to male] images and mirages," is in this instance an affirmative enactment of a world where feminine play is made possible through routes traditionally read as exclusionary (the mirror stage itself, the horror film in general) (*Marine Lover* 31).

Anne and Lore's zeal for performance is shared by femme fatale Leilah in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Although Leilah's mirror-play is translated entirely through the masculine gaze of protagonist Evelyn, she is nevertheless a strong example of a woman performing her own kind of horror film. Unlike Anne and Lore, who repeatedly rely on other people (most often men) for spectatorial validation of their role as Decadent muses, for Leilah the most important observer is always herself. In her "ritual incarnation" before the mirror, Leilah becomes "dressed meat" (27) (the horror connotations are particularly explicit here and resonate with Baudelaire's mistress-as-carcass) and enables the fruition of "her world" (26), a place over which she is "her own mistress" (24). It is only by accessing the mirror and performing a mimesis of her status as horrific that she is able to create a space in which she holds the power to shape her own subjectivity. Rather than alienation, the mirror offers Leilah affirmation. Rather than an escape from an insufficient, fractured body, the mirror confirms the worth of that body as horror specifically for Leilah. Leilah as "Lily-in-the-mirror" might not have the power to change a world dominated

by masculine perception—Evelyn’s forced misrecognition of Leilah proves that much²—but she is still able to take control of a personal ontological shift (24). Rather than a non-place from which she continuously reflects male completeness à la Irigaray, Leilah’s performance re-imagines the mirror as a screen that produces an autonomy facilitated by the foundational structures of horror.³

Mirror-play continues to hold significance in Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch*. Strikingly, the most important mirror scene in the film does not feature protagonist Elaine but rather her uptight, traditionally feminist friend Trish. Finding herself alone in Elaine’s apartment, Trish sits herself down at her friend’s vanity and proceeds to observe herself as she delightedly applies the trappings of Elaine’s high-femme wardrobe, including a long black wig and makeup. Watching this scene in a virtual screening of the film, I was surprised by other viewers’ reactions. Many were horrified that Trish would attempt to make herself over in Elaine’s image and expressed secondhand embarrassment. Others were more concerned about the breakdown in personal hygiene when Trish reaches for Elaine’s panties or expressed disbelief that the two women would wear the same bra size. Barring these latter responses, I’d like to focus more on these spectators’ emotional response to Trish attempting to become Elaine. What is it about Trish-as-Elaine that is so off-putting? After all, these same viewers praised Elaine’s overall look and indulged her self-

² “And, although all I told her was true, far more true than I wished to believe, because to acknowledge she was indeed just as beautiful and brilliant as I told her she was would have wounded my own vanity too severely, still, even then, I could pretend that I did not see her contempt in the face that now shut up all its dark petals against me” (29).

³ “She wills nothing except that you should keep everything and that she should mimic that completeness. Perfect as a mirror” (*Marine Lover* 54).

absorbed behavior throughout the film, so why should Trish be subject to different treatment?

Biller has argued that Trish is an integral component of the film and contends that her presence shifts *The Love Witch*'s narrative away from the realm of male fantasy.⁴ In this scene, this is certainly true. Trish's transformation into Elaine, a figure whose entire personality is based on a self-aware performance of the woman in/as horror, is grounded in the relationship between two women and a mirror. Trish's pleasure in both her own image and in its similarities to Elaine's—itsself founded on 1960s and 70s thrillers—places her experience in the realm of female to female drag, a performance that Biller notes makes feminists “almost uniformly uncomfortable, as if it's somehow a sign that a woman is trapped in her own image” (“Strippers”). This fear of being ensnared by one's image brings us back to the mirror stage and to the assumption that when women are presented with a pre-determined image of themselves—before the conventional mirror or the mirror of the silver screen—they must always passively acquiesce to it. In this scene, Elaine is conjured as an ideal-I to whom Trish is magnetically drawn. Superficially, this set-up aligns perfectly with prevailing discourse from theorists like Doane who read the typical relationship between woman and the mirror as one of excessive resemblance. However, Elaine's self-directed performance of male fantasy and Trish's imitation of it before the mirror

⁴ “This would be the difference between *The Love Witch* and any exploitation film. In an exploitation film you'd have a character like Elaine—and she wouldn't be as dimensional, but let's say a beautiful character that's sexy that destroys men. And she'd be the only female character in the movie because it's all about having a fantasy about this woman. But putting Trish in there, you know it's not a male fantasy about this type of woman” (Biller, “Female Fantasy”).

trouble a reading of this moment as a passive collapse onto a cinematic, misogynistic ideal of womanhood.

Although Elaine pretends to be the perfect woman, she is far from it. Her flawed performance, one which horrifies the men in the film, is the ideal to which Trish aspires when she looks in the mirror. Consequently, although Trish's assumption of Elaine's exaggerated femininity seems to mark her transformation as absolute compliance with the voyeuristic male gaze, it is actually an affirmation of the aesthetics of exploitation horror as a site of shared feminine pleasure. By fashioning Elaine as an ideal-I, Trish abandons the concept of the mirror as gateway to an untouchable, whole, and complete being and replaces this goal with an inherently flawed stereotype of femininity that becomes a political tool for negotiating gendered power imbalances. Biller would characterize this scene as one of "female fantasy," something that emerges in spite of or in addition to the film's status as a horror movie.⁵ I argue instead that female fantasy is possible in *The Love Witch* because it is a horror film.

In each of these examples, engaging with one's mirror image allows women the chance to re-imagine their positions in relation to themselves and to the horror genre. Rather than act as spectacles for the enjoyment of an imagined male spectator or a diegetic male killer, these women-performing-horror makeover the surface of the mirror as a screen that produces a different kind of horror film, a different kind of world. If, according to Merleau-Ponty, perception is "a re-creation or re-constitution

⁵ "This is not just a horror movie, this is about female fantasy" (*Diabolique*).

of the world at every moment” (*Phenomenology* 207) and, according to Lacan, the mirror stage is the means by which the subject works through “his discordance with his own reality” (“Mirror Stage” 76) in order to achieve a “world of his own making” (“Mirror Stage” 77), performing horror before the mirror becomes, for these women, the key that unlocks a more egalitarian theory of gendered gazing. Before the mirror, the woman in/as horror has the power to imagine a new world, one that re-deploys and reassigns previously held associations in order to foreground her personal experience. That the world is subject to such plasticity is, to my thinking, an inherently hopeful idea, one that can surely continue to carry us through this new era in the horror film as more and more women continue to adapt and enjoy a genre that held space for them all along.

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