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FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS FOR HORROR FILMS

The horizon for feminists studying horror films appears bleak. Since *Psycho*'s infamous shower scene, the big screen has treated us to Freddie's long razor-nails emerging between Nancy's legs in the bathtub (*A Nightmare on Elm Street I*), De Palma's exhibitionist heroine being power-drilled into the floor (*Body Double*), and Leatherface hanging women from meat hooks (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*). Even in a film with a strong heroine like *Alien,* any feminist point is qualified by the monstrousness of the alien mother, the objectification of Sigourney Weaver in her underwear, and her character Ripley's forced assumption of a maternal role.

Despite all this, there has been some feminist work on horror, and I believe there is room for more. In the first part of this paper I shall survey and criticize currently dominant psychodynamic feminist approaches to horror. In the second part, I propose an alternative framework for constructing feminist interpretations of horror films by critically interrogating their gender ideologies. My proposal focuses less on the psychology of viewers than on the nature of films as artifacts with particular structures and functions. In the third part I illustrate my recommended framework by sketching readings of *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993), *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986), and *Repulsion* (Polanski 1965).

PART I: PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINIST APPROACHES TO HORROR

Most current feminist studies of horror films are psychodynamic. That is, though they may consider films as artifacts, recognizing such aspects as plot, narrative, or point of view, their chief emphasis is on viewers' motives and interests in watching horror films, and on the psychological effects such films have. Typically this sort of feminist film theory relies upon a psychoanalytic framework in which women are

described as castrated or as representing threats evoking male castration anxiety. These theories also standardly presume some connection between gazing, violent aggression, and masculinity, and they suggest that there are particularly "male" motivations for making, watching, and enjoying horror films.

Feminist psychodynamic approaches to film in general were launched by Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).[1] Mulvey's model presupposes a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective and draws upon key Lacanian conceptions of castration anxiety and visual fetishism, and the association of the "Law of the Father" or patriarchy with such traditional film features as narrative order. Mulvey argued that narrative forms characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema differentially use women and serve men. There is a dual analogy between the woman and the screen (the object of the look), and between the man and the viewer (the possessor of the look). A tension arises in the viewer between libido and ego needs, and this tension is resolved by a process of identification, whereby the [male] viewer identifies with the [male] protagonist in the film. Thus possessing the film character of the woman by proxy, the viewer can proceed to focus energy on achieving a satisfactory narrative resolution.

Mulvey's view has come in for a number of persuasive criticisms by other feminist film theorists, and she has even revised it herself.[2] Nevertheless, it will be instructive to begin by extrapolating from her basic model so as to generate a simple feminist, psychoanalytic account of horror, as follows: The tension between the viewer's desire to look and the ongoing narrative of a film is especially acute in the horror film. Typically in horror, the woman or visual object is also the chief victim sacrificed to the narrative desire to know about the monster. Horror flirts directly with the threat of castration underlying the fetish or visual appearance of the woman, and this means that looking (visual pleasure) is even more immediately at odds with narrative in horror films than in other mainstream Hollywood movies. The woman's flesh, the reality behind the surface appearance, *is* made visible, and horror shows the "wound" that we are revolted to look upon. To make up for this horror, this account continues, the viewer must turn attention to the narrative thrust of the investigator, typically a male, who will complete the story for us.

[1]Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," originally published in *Screen* 16 (1975); reprinted in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); my page references are to the repinted version in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 28–40.

[2]Feminist critics have argued against Mulvey on various grounds, particularly that she ignores the social and historical conditions of gendered subjects and oversimplifies the role of the viewer/director/camera (so that, for example, a subtler view may be necessary to account for the ambivalence of certain film directors like Hitchcock). See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade, Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* pp. 41–57; Jane Gaines, "Women and Representation: Can We Enjoy Alternative Pleasure?" also in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* pp. 75–92; Marian Keane, "A Closer Look at Scophilia: Mulvey, Hitchcock, and Vertigo," in *The Hitchcock Reader,* ed. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986), pp. 231–248; and Naomi Scheman, "Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988): 62–89. Mulvey's revisions of her view may be found in "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures.* But for limitations that seem to persist in this volume, see my critical review of *Visual and Other Pleasures* in the *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 89, 2 (Winter 1990):52–55.

For example, in *Psycho,* we, like Janet Leigh, see the vague blurred and threatening shape of the attacker behind the shower curtain. But after this central murder scene, the audience and camera look into the blind eye of the victim. Since the woman herself can no longer see, and her beautiful body no longer be looked upon, we viewers are forced to proceed beyond her vision. And once our identification with the woman/victim has been disrupted, it shifts to the male investigators who will solve the crime and identify the murderer, and ultimately to the male psychiatrist who, in the film's words, "has all the answers."

A modified version of the simple Mulveyan schema I have just sketched is offered by Linda Williams, who scrutinizes one of the more vulnerable aspects of Mulvey's theory, her straitjacketed association between males and the pleasures of looking or spectatorship.[3] Williams points out that often in horror, contrary to mainstream cinema, women do possess "the gaze." That is, they are typically the first to get to see, inquire about, and know the monster. Similarly, although monsters may threaten the bodies of women in horror, even so, the fates of women and monsters are often linked. Both may somehow seem to stand outside the patriarchal order. (Think of vampire stories, for example, where a fascinating foreign Dracula seduces women away from their husbands and fathers, undermining the patriarchal institutions of law, marriage, motherhood, medicine, and religion.) Despite these observations about the shortcomings of a Mulveyan account, Williams's account remains consistent in its outlines with the sort of Mulveyan view I have just sketched. Williams argues that women who possess the gaze in horror, and who become aligned with monsters, are typically shown themselves to represent threats to patriarchy and hence to require punishment. In the end Williams seems to accept the basic idea that horror films reinforce conceptions of the active (sadistic) male viewer and the passive (suffering) female object. Women are punished for their appropriation of "the gaze," and a sort of masculine narrative order (what Lacan would call the Law of the Father) is restored.

More recently, feminist film theorists have turned to the work of one of Lacan's successors, the French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*[4] focuses on literature and not film, but her views have been adapted to the study of visual horror by Barbara Creed, in a 1986 *Screen* article about *Alien,* and in her more recent book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis.*[5] Kristeva locates the sources and origins of horror not in castration anxiety, but in the preoedipal stage of the infant's ambivalence toward the mother as it struggles to create boundaries and forge its own ego identity. The mother is "horrific" in the sense of being all-engulfing, primitive, and impure or defiled by bodily fluids—particularly breast milk and flowing menstrual blood. Kristeva uses the term "abjection" to designate the psychic condition inspired by this image of the horrific mother. For Kristeva, horror is fundamentally about boundaries—about the threat of transgressing them, and about the need to do so. Hence she emphasizes the duality of our attraction/repulsion to the horrific.

[3]Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism,* ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 83–99, and "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991): 2–13.

[4]Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* tran. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[5]Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, 1 (1986): 45–70, and *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

In applying this theory to *Alien,* Creed stresses the film's repeated birth scenarios and numerous versions of the engulfing, threatening, voracious, horrific Alien mother, "a toothed vagina, the monstrous-feminine as the cannibalistic mother." Creed also offers an explanation of why, in the final scenes of *Alien* (notoriously), Sigourney Weaver undresses before the camera, strolls around in her thin undershirt, and eventually returns to her sleeping pod with the small orange cat she has rescued: "Ripley's body is pleasurable and reassuring to look at. She signifies the 'acceptable' form and shape of woman."

Creed departs in certain important respects from the simplistic Mulveyan model I sketched. She emphasizes, contra the Mulveyan-Lacanian position, that horror importantly concerns not just women as victims—women who are attacked because they present a horrific vision of a castrated body—but also monstrous women who threaten to castrate men. "Virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper body."[6] More specifically, Creed thinks that horror texts all serve to illustrate "the work of abjection."[7] They do so in three basic ways. First, horror depicts images of abjection, such as corpses and bodily wastes; second, horror is concerned with borders, with things that threaten the stability of the symbolic order; and third, horror constructs the maternal figure as abject.

Let me pause now for some assessment. As I have noted, both the Mulvey-Lacanian and Creed-Kristevan frameworks for feminist film theory build upon a psychoanalytic foundation. Despite all the details of their different pictures, each view construes the familiar tensions of horror in terms of an opposition between "female" and "male" aspects, where these are understood or defined within the terms of depth psychology. There is, in other words, a tension between spectacle or the horrific feminine (associated with the castrated woman, preoedipal mother, or castrating woman), and plot or narrative resolution (associated with the patriarchal order that the child achieves after resolving the Oedipal complex). In broader ways that go beyond psychoanalysis, in all these theories (Mulvey's, Creed's, and Williams's) the focus is also psychodynamic—that is, there is some presumed general or universal psychological theory that grounds their analysis. To back up speculations of this sort Creed, for example, begins her book by appealing to both universal cultural practices and classical mythology. Psychodynamic feminist theorists speculate about why "we" are interested in horror and more basically about why certain things are horrifying. These kinds of question are seen to require an answer within a psychological theory, which remains the chief concern even when the theorist speaks about how to "interpret" such films or about what various aspects of these films "represent." The "deep" explanations offered are (putative) psychological explanations. For instance, here is Creed on *The Exorcist:*

> Regan's carnivalesque display of her body reminds us quite clearly of the immense appeal of the abject. Horror emerges from the fact that woman has broken with her proper

[6]Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine,* p. 13.

[7]Ibid., p. 10.

feminine role—she has "made a spectacle of herself"—put her unsocialized body on display. And to make matters worse, she has done all of this before the shocked eyes of two male clerics.[8]

The theoretical approaches of feminist film analysts like Creed, Mulvey, and Williams are significantly constrained by their psychodynamic framing, and more particularly (and significantly) by the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis. I here present six objections to such approaches.

First, psychoanalysis is itself a very problematic enterprise that is far from achieving anything like general acceptance as a psychological theory. Feminists adapting the views of Lacan or Kristeva do so either in ignorance of or indifference to forceful philosophical critiques of psychoanalysis offered by Crews, Grünbaum, Deleuze and Guattari, and others.[9] Attempts to defend psychoanalysis by reconceiving it as hermeneutic explanation are also problematic, because they loosen the theory from its crucial underpinnings in causal hypothesizing, leaving key theses, about, say, abject preoedipal mothers, castration anxiety, and so on, as, at best, hermeneutical aids to reading film "texts." Such hermeneutical aids should be taken seriously only insofar as they produce valid readings. But typically in film studies, psychoanalytic interpretations are advanced a priori, rather than in an open-minded spirit of testing how well they actually work. Though a Kristevan reading may seem illuminating for *Alien,* with its many birth scenarios and theme of monstrous mothering, why should we believe in advance that it will work equally for all kinds of examples of horror? The notion of abjection expands in Creed's theory so as to be almost vacuous, because we are to understand in advance that all the varieties of horrific monstrousness we can think of really just are "illustrations" of the "work" of abjection. This includes an astonishing variety, ranging from *Alien*'s monstrous mother to the disintegrating cannibalistic zombies in *Night of the Living Dead,* or from Seth Brundle's hideously gooey and amoral fly to the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s cannibalistic family. In what sense is a psychological theory of abjection "explanatory" when it becomes so broad? And in any case, why can't it be the case that there are unique, distinctive, sui generis human fears of a variety of things? Keep in mind that abjection in a Kristevan framework always refers at bottom to the necessity of separation from the primal mother. Why must all other fears somehow equal or be reduced to fear of the primal mother?

Second, even supposing one were to grant that psychoanalysis is a worthy psychological theory, this is not an argument for the particular psychoanalytic views of Lacan or Kristeva. There are many alternatives; so why settle on these? Lacan makes problematic and philosophically disputable metaphysical assertions about the self, the nature of desire, and so on.[10] Kristeva makes equally problematic quasi-empirical claims about, say, the infant's acquisition of language. Her views are quite controversial even within feminism; she has been criticized for, variously, essentialist theorizing, promoting anarchy, idealizing maternity, or adopting views that are fascistic, apolitical, or ahistorical.[11] Luce Irigaray offers both scathing critiques of Lacan and intriguing alternatives to some of Kristeva's most basic claims.[12]

Clearly, within psychoanalysis, we can identify many alternatives to Lacanian or Kristevan frameworks that might also be fruitful for film studies. Stanley Cavell, for example, borrows from traditional Freudian psychoanalysis to offer quite subtle and complex accounts of viewers' desires and interests in relation to both male and female actors' embodiments of film characters' roles.[13] He seems to provide a promising framework for the analysis of certain types of films, such as melodrama or the genre he calls the "comedy of remarriage." Alternatively, for all we know, Jungian or Reichian psychoanalytic theories might be intriguing psychological theories to put to the test in film studies. Jungians, with their theory of universal unconscious archetypal structures, might pay more attention to cross-cultural considerations in films, or to films' links with various kinds of fairy tales and myths. Reichians have the virtue of emphasizing concrete external sociomaterial factors in identity formation and repression. Perhaps Horney's notion of womb envy or Klein's of the bad mother would enable us to offer better interpretations of certain films, like *Frankenstein* or *The Brood.*

Third, moving away from the particular restrictions of psychoanalysis, I find that psychodynamic theories often tend to be weak as film readings because they are too reductive. They tend to utilize a one-dimensional system of symbolic interpretation. For example, even when a Kristevan interpretation seems illuminating for certain aspects of a film, as for example it does when Creed uses it to comment on horrific aspects of the climactic birth scene in *The Brood,* her focus on this aspect of the film alone seems to lead her to neglect many other important features of the film.[14] In my view this film offers a critique of several concrete contemporary social problems: the evils of charismatic psychotherapists, and the ways in which child abuse gets perpetuated from one generation to the next. It is limiting to translate a social critique into a depth-psychological thesis about how we all (allegedly) have deep ambivalences about our abjected mothers. Even more of a problem is the fact that Creed's framework locates the film's chief source of horror in the freakish mother (Samantha Eggar), setting aside the film's apparent depiction of the megalomaniac psychiatrist, Dr. Hal Raglan (Oliver Reed), as its central villain. Creed's account thereby becomes insensitive to historical allusions the film makes (and that Cronenberg quite typically makes) to the tradition of mad scientist horror films. She also misrepresents the structure of the film's plot, which depicts an appropriate punishment that Dr. Raglan suffers for his hubris—as he is destroyed by the monstrous children he has so freakishly "fathered."

[8] Ibid., p. 42.

[9] See Frederick Crews, "The Unknown Freud," *The New York Review of Books* 11, 19 (November 18, 1993): 55–66; Adolf Grünbaum, *The Philosophical Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (New York: Viking, 1977).

[10] See my "Woman, Revealed or Reveiled? An Approach to Lacan via the *Blithedale Romance* of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Hypatia, a Journal for Feminist Philosophy* (Fall 1986): 49–70.

[11] See Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), introduction, "Oscillation Strategies," and chapter 1, "The Prodigal Child."

[12] See ibid., chapter 7, for discussion of Irigaray's differences with Kristeva.

[13] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); for feminist departures that build upon Cavell's work, see Naomi Scheman, "Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988): 62–89.

[14] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine,* pp. 43–58.

Fourth, psychodynamic film theories that depend upon very basic distinctions between males and females—whether as viewers, objects of the gaze, or pursuers of distinct sorts of pleasures—rely upon certain notions of gender that are themselves problematic and under question by feminists. Many feminist and other critics have pointed out that assertions about fears of castration, or about the masculinity of logic and language, may be radically culture- and era-bound. To make very broad generalizations about "male" or "female" viewers blocks the recognition of significant individual differences among viewers that surely affect how they experience films. These include significant differences of social class, sexual orientation, age, race, and so on. For example, given that racial identity seems an important factor in some horror movies, such as *Night of the Living Dead* and its sequel *Dawn of the Dead,* it seems unreasonable to presume that white and black female viewers will experience the film, its "gazes" and its "visual objects" in just the same ways. These films seem explicitly to pair white females and black males as sharing a certain "victim" status.[15]

Even the most basic assumption of psychodynamic feminist film theorists, that it is conceptually useful and appropriate to distinguish between male and female viewers, and even between heterosexual and homosexual men or women, have been placed under attack in recent theoretical work in queer and performance theory by writers like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. A focused awareness of issues in queer theory could lead, for example, to intriguing re-visions of a movie like. *The Silence of the Lambs.* I have in mind not the obvious problems with the film's homophobic depiction of the "Buffalo Bill" character, but critical textures that may be added to readings of the film when we focus on its strange pairing of Jodie Foster, who was at the time of the film's release controversially "outed" by ActUp, with the villainous yet charming "Hannibal Lecter" character whose fussy mannerisms allow him to be read as "an old queen."[16]

Fifth, another difficulty with a psychodynamic, especially a psychoanalytic, framework for feminist film studies is that this view has mysteriously acquired a predominance within feminist film theory that is completely disproportionate to its status within contemporary feminist theorizing in general. British, American, and French feminists differ from one another and among themselves, not to mention from Third World anticolonialist feminists, and major books in both popular and academic feminism in the United States have adopted widely divergent theoretical bases—but these are typically not psychoanalytic. Instead, they range from a rather vague and standard liberalism grounded in the tradition of John Stuart Mill, to more radical forms of Marxist socialism; and from Foucauldian emphases on disciplinary techniques of knowledge and bodily control to new, visionary feminist work on ecosystems and the possibly liberating role of technology. Surely these diverse and flourishing forms of feminist theory also have something to offer to film studies. Many of them focus, for example, on subjectivity and desire, on visual objectification and

[15]For a particularly acute critique of feminist film theory's neglect of race issues, see Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," in ed. *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* pp. 197–214.

[16]This observation was made by Douglas Crimp in a lecture he delivered at the University of Houston in the fall of 1991.

equality, or on technologies of representation in ways that would seem readily adaptable to film studies.

Sixth and last, I doubt that whatever insights are produced by psychodynamic readings of horror films require a grounding in some particular psychogenetic theory that allegedly explains viewers' interests and responses in general filmic narratives and representations. As I have noted, psychoanalytic feminists construct genderized accounts of the tensions in horror between key features of spectacle and plot. But it is entirely possible to construct a theory of horror that emphasizes these same tensions without genderizing them. As far back as the ancient world, Aristotle's account of tragedy in the *Poetics* recognized a tension between the aesthetic effects evoked by tragedy and its narrative structures.[17] Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* follows Aristotle and similarly pays central attention to the dichotomy horror typically depends upon between the cognitive pleasures of following out the narrative and the emotional pain of art-horror associated with monsters and spectacles.[18] If an account like Carroll's grasps these same tensions and offers reasonable explanations of them without alluding to either gender or depth psychology, it is hard to see why as feminists thinking about horror we need to resort to such theorizing. To my own mind, if there is any particular merit in the sort of comment that Creed makes about *The Exorcist* in the passage I quoted above, we can make this judgment by looking at the movie, without any special devotion to or even knowledge of the intricate theoretical grounding (and jargon) of Kristevan psychoanalysis.

Some of the general problems I have just enumerated will likely arise for other psychodynamic feminist approaches to horror, even ones that do not begin from a strictly psychoanalytic framework, such as Carol Clover's "gender rezoning" proposal in her recent book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.*[19] Clover's approach does have much to recommend it: she discusses subgenres of horror rather than trying to create a wholly uniform theory; she attempts to locate horror films within their sociocultural context; and she recognizes and indeed focuses on some of the elusiveness of gender categories. Her theory is much less subject, then, to my fourth objection listed above.[20]

Yet even so, Clover's account is problematic because, in the place of psychoanalysis, she assumes the validity of an alternative theory of gender and of our psycholog-

[17]Of course, certain of Aristotle's sexist assumptions may have had an impact on his evaluational schema for tragedies; for more on this, see my "Plot Imitates Action: Aesthetic Evaluation and Moral Realism in Aristotle's *Poetics,*" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics,* ed. Amelie Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 126–28.

[18]Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[19]Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also my review in *Afterimage* (March 1993).

[20]Despite her attention to "rezoning" of gender distinctions and to social factors in horror film plots, Clover still seems at times to fall prey to reductive generalizations or rather simplistic dichotomies and associations between viewer characteristics and stereotyped gender notions. By her own admission, she is mainly interested in why the predominantly male viewers of horror subject themselves to being "hurt" (= "feminized") by the genre. Her fourth chapter, "The Eye of Horror," examines the role of eyes, watching, and gazing in horror films like *Peeping Tom* (1960). On the one hand, Clover argues that this film depicts what she calls the "assaultive gaze" of the camera, which is "figured as masculine" ("A hard look and a hard penis mean the same thing"); but on the other hand, it also critiques that gaze and showcases the "reactive gaze," "figured as feminine, of the spectator" (p. 181).

ical conceptualizations of it—Thomas Laqueur's "one sex" model. According to Laqueur, sex is primitively conceived as involving one norm, masculinity, of which femininity is a defective version. Clover thinks this model is somehow operative both in the construction and in the experience of works in the horror genre. There are several distinct questions to raise here. First, one might ask on what basis we should be persuaded to adopt this particular theory of gender. Laqueur is a historian of science whose views are by no means universally accepted, and so relying on his theory is a rather strange and arbitrary choice. It seems doubtful to me that any book of film theory can argue convincingly for the truth of a particular psychological theory of gender. Next, we might ask Clover to argue for the applicability of this theory of gender to the horror genre. She does make a stab at this, but only vaguely, by asserting that horror originated in the time of the rather primitive science that Laqueur is analyzing. This claim itself needs more detailed defense. Does it even hold of the early works *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* for instance? I doubt it. Finally, even granted that her historical claim about the psychological theories prevalent during the creation of early works of horror were correct, Clover ought to recognize that such a theory is hardly predominant any longer. Accordingly, it would seem reasonable for us to expect more recent forms of horror to reflect the current state of public knowledge and scientific theorizing about sex. My doubts about all the gaps in Clover's exposition lead me to question her particular observations about individual films. Again, where I find such observations insightful, I am inclined to think that their value stems more from how acutely they "read" film texts than from how accurately they reflect the real human psychology of actual viewers.

PART 2: A PROPOSED FEMINIST FRAMEWORK FOR READING HORROR FILMS

In Part 1 I described various approaches to horror within contemporary feminist film studies and identified problems in these approaches, some involving specific psychoanalytic tenets, others, more general problems about psychodynamic approaches. But the feminist theorists I have examined are limited by more than their problematic universalizing views about human psychosexual development. They also lack a deep and well-grounded historical awareness of horror's roots and varieties. Clover's book does focus on a range of horror plots and on their social and cultural contexts, but only on horror films of the past two decades. Horror has a much longer, more complex history. It originated from the gothic novel, a fact in itself important for feminists to note because of the unusual prevalence of women as both writers and readers in this genre.[21] Much good feminist work has been done in recent years concerning gothic romance and the origins of horror in works like those of Mary Shelley.[22] Ideally, feminist readings of horror films would benefit from awareness of this research and of related work

[21]Eugenia de la Motte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

[22]See Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988); and Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), especially chapter 7, pp. 213–47.

in cultural studies that examines the history of horror in relation to specific sociocultural contexts.[23]

Further, feminist psychodynamic accounts do not seem sensitive to the dazzling diversity of horror's subgenres: gothic, mad scientist, alien invader, slasher-psycho, rape revenge, B-movie, cult film, science fiction, monster, possession film, zombie, comedy, Japanese horror (Godzilla), and so on—even music video horror (Michael Jackson's *Thriller*)! In light of all this genre diversity, I doubt there can be any one "feminist theory of horror." Reflecting on the astounding variety of styles, nuances, and tones within this genre would also lead me to doubt any particular theory that associates gender with the kind of looking, or monstrousness, or victimization that is typical of horror, or with some "work" of abjection that horror films necessarily "illustrate." Films within a single subgenre like the vampire film may present male monsters as distinctive as the emaciated Kinski Nosferatu, the campy Bela Lugosi, the languid Frank Langella, the sinister Christopher Lee, and the macabre ball-goers of Polanski. A quite horrific and gory movie can also be wildly funny (*Texas Chain Saw Massacre II, An American Werewolf in London*). Horror films can be very eerie and subtly creepy (*The Dead Zone*), or they can revel in over-the-top, hair-raising, outrageous effects (*Evil Dead II*). They can be depth-psychological "family romances" (*Repulsion*) or virtual cartoons (*Predator 2*). They can be historical costume dramas (Herzog's *Nosferatu*, Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*) or technophilic futuristic visions (*Alien*). They can be vividly realistic (*Jurassic Park*) or ridiculously fake (*Godzilla*). They can be incredibly original (*Scanners, Brain Dead*), mindlessly imitative (*Silent Madness, Orca*), or a little of both (*Body Double*).

I assume, then, that a promising feminist approach to cinematic horror should be historically aware and also broad and open enough to work for all of these varieties of horror. In light of these observations, as well as the list of six criticisms I made in Part 1, the task of building a "feminist theory of horror" may seem monumental. And in fact, this is not exactly what I aim at here. My proposal is perhaps best understood not as a "theory" of horror, but as an attempt to begin making good on some of the deficiencies and positive requirements I have outlined. I suggest a strategy or framework for constructing feminist readings of horror films. My strategy would emphasize the structure of horror films and place special weight on their gender ideologies, in a sense I shall explain further below.

First, it is useful to distinguish various roles that feminism can play in film studies. For convenience I shall label these roles, somewhat pretentiously, the "extra-filmic" and "intra-filmic." By the "extra-filmic" role, I mean to refer to feminist investigations, in a sociological, anthropological, or historical vein, into actual concrete issues concerning the historical context, production, and reception of horror films. In this role, feminist critics would ask questions, for example, about women's motives and experiences in producing, writing, directing, editing, and acting in horror films. Alternatively, they might explore reception theory, looking at actual examples of how various kinds of periodicals and audiences, such as feminist and lesbian audiences,

[23]See James Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

review and read horror films—perhaps in unusually creative and nonstandard ways.[24] Another type of extra-filmic exploration would be that of the cultural historian who aims to locate specific periods or varieties of horror movies within the sort of historical and social context that I find absent in most current feminist theorizing. In this role, feminist critics could examine the links between horror films and related works of literature.

Though I consider all the types of extra-filmic exploration that I have just mentioned very important, my own focus, stemming in part from my own perspective in philosophy—a notoriously nonempirical discipline—will instead be on what I call the intra-filmic questions about horror. My proposal for producing feminist readings or interpretations of horror films is that we should focus on their representational contents and on the nature of their representational practices, so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between the sexes. I suggest that feminist readings of a horror film proceed by looking at various crucial sorts of film elements. Some of these elements concern the representation of women and monsters within films. Others explore how the film is structured and how it works. Within my recommended framework, we must shift attention away from the psychodynamics of viewing movies, and onto the nature of films as artifacts that may be studied by examining both their construction and their role in culture. To study their construction we look at such standard features as plot, characters, and point of view. To study their role in culture—that is, to inquire about this as feminists—we examine their gender ideology. This is my chief goal in producing feminist readings of horror films.

Let me offer some clarifying comments here about my proposal. The label "ideology" I borrow from Marxist theory, supposing that an ideology is a distorted representation of existing relations of power and domination. In the particular project I am interested in, obviously, these would be relations of patriarchy or male domination (together with any relevant associated relations of class or race dominance). Feminist ideology critique is a deep interpretive reading that criticizes or analyzes a film's presentation of certain naturalized messages about gender—messages that the film takes for granted and expects its audience to agree with and accept. These will typically be messages that perpetuate the subordination and exploitation of women; they present gender hierarchy or genderized roles and relations that are somehow portrayed as normal in the discourse of the film.[25] Or, occasionally and more interestingly, an analysis of the film's ideology might show that the film itself is raising questions about "normal" relations of gender dominance.

[24]As a parallel, see "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," by Elizabeth Ellsworth, in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, pp. 183–96.

[25]For another example of an ideological examination of horror films that takes a different approach from mine, see Tania Modleski's "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Tania Modleski, ed. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), pp. 155–66. Modleski advances a complicated set of reasons for rejecting the ways in which certain postmodern theorists have championed some horror films for allegedly deconstructing the self, revealing the primacy of spectacle, and so on. She sees these films as attacking the feminine through their attacks on representatives of the family or consumer culture; examples she discusses are *Halloween* and *Dawn of the Dead*). [See this edition, pp. 764–73.]

It might be thought that the strategy I favor resembles a somewhat old-fashioned feminist approach to film studies, the "images of women" approach.[26] On this approach, one would analyze a genre of horror like the slasher film, say, by observing how images of women are presented in these films. Thus, typically, young women are shown either as tomboys or as teenaged sex fiends who somehow deserve their dismemberment at the hands of a Jason or Michael Myers. I do recommend that to explore a film's gender ideology, we ask various questions that would also be asked on this approach, such as, How does the film depict/represent women—as agents, patients, knowers, sufferers? or, What role do women play vis-a-vis men in the film? However, I take feminist ideology critique to go beyond this rather simple set of questions in two main ways.

First, I want to emphasize films as complex functioning artifacts composed of a wide variety of elements, including more than simply the representation of characters. Obviously, films also include technical and formal filmic features such as editing, visual point of view, lighting, sound, and costuming, as well as features shared with literary works such as plots, dialogue, audience point of view, and narrative structure. Feminist ideology critique will explore any or all of these features that seem relevant to understanding a film's presentation of gender ideology. This may include focusing on what Noël Carroll has called rhetorical strategies, such as the elicitation of audience presumptions in completing gaps in the story.[27] So on my approach we would ask questions like these: How do the film's structures of narrative, point of view, and plot construction operate in effecting a depiction of gender roles and relations? Does the film offer a "heroic modernist" narrative of mastery, centered upon a male character, offering up either a clear resolution or a noble tragedy? Or, is there a nonstandard narrative centered upon female characters, offering, perhaps, a more open-ended and ambiguous conclusion? Does the film reference historical or genre precedents—say, a particular earlier vampire film, or the mad scientist genre in general—and if so, how does it comment upon, replicate, parody, or revise the gender thematics of its predecessors? What are the film's implicit rhetorical presuppositions about natural gender roles and relations? Does the film present possibilities of questioning or challenging these presumptions?

Second, I do mean something by calling feminist ideological critique of horror a "deep" interpretive reading. An interesting and creative feminist reading of a film may look "below" its surface representations of male or female characters to consider gaps, presumptions, and even what is "repressed," by which I mean simply blocked, omitted, or avoided, in these representations. My strategy accords with advice laid out by the French feminist Luce Irigaray in her discussions of how to construct disruptive feminist readings of the discourse of the male western philosophical tradition:

[26]For discussion of this approach, see Noël Carroll, "The Image of Women in Film. A Defense of a Paradigm," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, 4 (Fall 1990): 349–60.

[27]Noël Carroll has discussed a somewhat different notion of the ideological effects of cinema. The particular conception Carroll criticizes, the "Althusserian Model," rather narrowly alleges that films' contents and formal structures function to present a certain distorted picture of the viewing subject. Carroll offers persuasive objections to this approach and considers an alternative rhetorical analysis that draws upon Aristotle's, to show how "rhetorical strategies may be implemented in narrative film" (p. 223). Noël Carroll, "Film, Rhetoric, and Ideology," in *Explanation and Value in the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 215–37.

"The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal."[28] Referencing Irigaray may seem inconsistent on my part, given that she operates within the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition. However, Irigaray has in fact written some of the strongest feminist critiques I have read of the most basic assumptions of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Further, I do not believe that a use of her recommended strategies of reading—for philosophy, literature, or film—must rely on any specific psychosexual assumptions. That is, as strategies of *reading* they work much like deconstructive textual strategies that are logically separable from those psychological assumptions. A brief example may help show this.

Irigaray has written critically about Plato's and Aristotle's treatment of form and matter in their metaphysics. She shows how they regard form as more valuable because they associate it with masculinity and order. Now, it could well be said that Irigaray proceeds by offering some sort of depth psychological reading of how these philosophers treat matter: Plato, as the "womb," Cave, or receptacle; Aristotle as the "envelope" or penis sheath. This sort of reading could be regarded as an analysis of their motives or of the ongoing appeal of Greek philosophical frameworks to subsequent, mostly male philosophers. However, it strikes me that Irigaray's critique functions equally as a deconstructive reading that enables one to question some of the most basic assumptions of the discourse she is examining, in this case, ancient metaphysics. One can find actual passages in which these philosophers associated form with masculinity. So, Irigaray's "deep" reading conforms with my conception of ideology critique, in that she questions the most basic ways in which an apparently neutral and objective field, metaphysics, conceals and contains hierarchized gender notions. One need not accept any psychoanalytic tenets to use this style of reading so as to query the particular discourse at issue, asking in this case, not only why form was associated with masculinity and considered by the ancient Greeks as more valuable than matter, but also what an alternative metaphysical schema would look like.[29]

Similarly, to try to transfer the point of this last paragraph to film studies, Carol Clover, in her examination of the depiction of the feminine in slasher films, has provided something like an Irigarayan "deep reading" that criticizes an existing form of discourse. She points out first, the obvious, that these films typically show young women as somehow bad—too sexy and alluring—before they are attacked by a male. Beyond this, she offers a "deeper" reading by arguing that slashers also reinforce cultural messages about the virtues of masculinity by presenting a villain who is defectively masculine—often someone pudgy, awkward, shy, or seemingly impotent—and a heroine (the "Final Girl") who is more masculine than feminine. I would call this a "deep" reading because it shows that the apparently male villains are actually bad because they are culturally coded as feminine. Where I part ways with Clover is that I reject her assumptions about the need for grounding this sort of reading in the truth of a given psychosexual model (Laqueur's), or about the processes through which slasher audience's psychological investment (and hence pleasure) in these movies alleged reflects certain standard, universal, gender-associated psychological interests.

[28]Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse," in Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* tran. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 78.

[29]For more thoughts about the usefulness of Irigaray's approach for a nonpsychoanalytic feminist analytic philosophical reading of historical texts, see my "Nourishing Speculation: A Feminist Reading of Aristotelian Science," in *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Essays on Plato and Aristotle,* ed. Bat-Ami Bar On (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 145–87, and "Reading Irigaray Reading Aristotle," in *Re-Reading the Canon: Feminist Essays on Aristotle,* ed. Cynthia Freeland (Pennsylvania University Press: forthcoming), pp. 126–42. Kelly Oliver offers a somewhat similar approach, which she also calls ideology critique in drawing upon both Irigaray and Kristeva's theories, in her article "The Politics of Interpretation: The Case of Bergman's *Persona,*" in *Philosophy and Film,* ed. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 233–48. However, I believe that Oliver shows much more sympathy to psychoanalytic accounts of, say, "the maternal" than I do.

My recommended approach is continuous with previous approaches to artworks in the Western aesthetic tradition, ranging from Aristotle's account of tragedy in the *Poetics* and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to more contemporary works like Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe.* Philosophers have typically supposed that it is appropriate in aesthetic theory to discuss aspects of the psychology of our response to artworks, but they have done so without presuming any particularly detailed theory of the psyche. They emphasize that paintings, tragedies, or even landscape gardens are a particular kind of phenomenon, intentionally created and structured to produce a certain kind of effect—catharsis, aesthetic distance, the free play of the imagination, and so on. It is enough for purposes of philosophical aesthetics to employ commonsense, everyday notions of human psychology, to assume that we are capable of being frightened, excited, horrified, and so on, by artistic representations, and then proceed to try to analyze how this occurs.

Adopting my proposed framework means simply that a feminist critic will construct a reading that focuses on gender representation within a film, beginning with a list of specific questions that can vary as appropriate—according to the film's own period, style, and tone. Distinct feminist readings of the same horror film could easily be constructed. It is indeed always possible that a film may not have much to say that is particularly exciting or illuminating on the subject of gender. Also, and importantly, a feminist reading need not be a "complete" reading of the movie that purports to attend to all its many elements.

I believe that my proposal to use a basic set of questions about gender ideology as a broad strategy for feminist film readings helps overcome some of the defects of current feminist film theorizing I enumerated in Part 1, and I want to explain more here how I see it as an improvement. Recall that my first two objections concerned the problematic assumptions of a particular psychoanalytic theory or of psychoanalysis generally. Obviously, my proposed strategy does not encounter these problems. It does not adopt any particular psychodynamic theory or theory of sexual or gender difference. My third objection queried currently dominant presumptions about gender dichotomies between, for example, the aggressive masculine gaze and the passive female spectacular body. I avoid these sorts of assumptions about gender precisely by foregrounding as my first question the issue of *how* a film depicts gender. My fourth objection was a challenge to the theoretical reductivism of dominant feminist film criticism; on this point, I would hope that my strategy opens out to connected issues concerning race, class, and so on.

My fifth objection concerned the narrowness of psychodynamic feminism in comparison to other important forms of feminist theorizing. One could use the map I

propose in combination with many types of feminism. For example, to diagnose the gender ideology of a film, one could adopt the viewpoint of a Marxist or liberal feminist; in either case I would suppose one could be critical, though of different aspects of the film, and to different ends. Similarly, a feminist theorist steeped in Foucault or Donna Haraway might ask about some of my questions by looking at very different features of a film—at, for instance, how it portrays disciplines of the female body, or how it depicts women in relation to technology.

My sixth objection stated that one might equally well achieve the insights of feminist psychoanalytic film theory without its propping in a psychodynamic theory. I think that some of the questions I have listed above actually do this, that is, would work to take the place of others posed on the more problematic basis of, for instance, depth psychoanalysis. Questions about "the gaze," the sadistic male viewer, the masculine narrative order, and so forth, are replaced here by questions about whether the film presents women as primarily suffering and tortured physical beings, or whether they are also shown to be alert, curious, intelligent, capable of independent investigation, and so on, and also by questions about whether the women characters help move the narrative along, or are simply targets of the horrific spectacle. I would hope that a careful consideration of these questions would avert reductivism and allow flexibility in recognizing that horror movies often have very complex, mixed representations of women.

PART 3: ILLUSTRATIONS

It is time to illustrate how I would use my own recommended strategy to generate critical feminist readings of horror films and their gender ideologies. I will first discuss *Jurassic Park* and *The Fly,* films I choose specifically because, on the surface at least, they seem to present positive images of strong, intelligent, and active women. This makes them especially interesting to read for underlying ideologies. Next I shall compare these films to *Repulsion,* a film that on the surface seems problematic because it features a horrific female slasher/murderer, but which I find to present a surprisingly radical questioning of existing gender ideology.

I begin with *Jurassic Park.* First, how does the film represent women? Superficially at least, it displays a contemporary, 1990s feminist vision of women and girls. The female paleobotanist Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern) is presumably well-educated and authoritative in her own field; she shows enthusiasm and expertise in classifying the ancient plants in the park. She is courageous and physically active, and she makes cracks about the other characters' sexism. And the young girl is said to be a computer hacker.

Nevertheless, we can hardly call the movie an unmitigated feminist achievement. The paleobotanist's own scientific expertise is never treated as especially deep or relevant. It is rather the male scientist Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) who espouses a controversial theory (about dinosaurs' close relation to birds) that will get tested and confirmed in the park. Ellie is shown enthusiastically identifying plant species in the park but, importantly, the plants themselves are not intrinsically interesting here but function only as fodder for the dinosaurs. Thus, even in her scientific role, the woman could be said to be chiefly concerned with nourishment and caregiving. Amazingly,

she has never heard of chaos theory, and the male mathematician Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) explains it to her in the context of a teasing sex scene that treats her like a silly teenage bimbo. This sort of depiction is further enforced by the fact that she is blonde, pretty, slender, and at least ten years younger than her male scientist colleague and lover. Further, through most of the film she, unlike any of the male characters, consistently wears little shorts that show off her long coltish legs.

Similarly, the young girl (Ariana Richards) spends most of the film in abject fear of the T-rex. She is even afraid of the large gentle brontosaurus, who sneezes all over her and makes her look ridiculous. The fact that she is a computer hacker is introduced rather casually and coincidentally toward the end of the film and does not seem especially well integrated into her character. When she manages to get into the computer system, her task is the relatively minor one of figuring out how to get a door to close properly.

Next, how is monstrousness in the film related to femininity? All the monsters (dinosaurs) in the movie are female, but initially it seems that not much is made of this—nothing particularly horrific about primal mothers on the scale of *Alien,* at least. It is not easy to read the femininity of the monsters here, since it is not uniform, but seems to permit a great range of difference: some varieties are huge and voracious; others (the raptors) are smaller, clever, and vicious; yet others are large, gentle, cow-like beings vulnerable to indigestion or colds. I would suggest that the film presents a standard array of culturally coded, negative messages about females through its depiction of these various dinosaurs. Some dinosaurs, like some women, are fat, sweet, and gentle; and others are thin, vicious, and scheming. (There can be, in other words, no sweet, smart dinosaurs!) One could go further in noting that from the perspective of the male scientists who create and study the park, all female dinosaurs have a mysterious sexuality that is "other": their peculiar threat lies in their frog-derived ability to convert their sex so as to be able to reproduce independently. Thus on a deep reading, the female dinosaurs represent a culturally coded threat centering upon a kind of uncontrolled, rampant female sexuality, as well as awesome reproductive abilities.

Another question to ask about in assessing a film's gender ideology concerns who moves the narrative along, who its chief agents are; here, clearly in *Jurassic Park* it is not the woman or girl. There are no women involved in the creation or operation of the park itself. The key human agents of the movie who initiate the chain of events presenting the movie's central problem—the park mogul, the shark lawyer, and the computer wizard—are all men. Men are thus shown in the film as running the show in all the relevant senses: setting up the problematic situations, making them worse, and then resolving them. True, girls can be hackers and scientists, but this seems peripheral to their chief roles, since during most of the action sequences of the movie they are relegated to functions of nurturing the ill or taking care of men. Ellie is not at the center of the key scenes that depict the children's being threatened, then escaping, the tyrannosaurus. Instead, the male scientist/father figure does this, while she is confined mainly to nursing, first the sick triceratops, then the wounded mathematician. Her sudden interest in the sick triceratops seems poorly explained by her alleged scientific expertise in the plants it eats, but it furthers a general depiction of her as caring and nurturing. She has, literally, the ideal human mother's ability to deal with mounds of shit!

On the whole, then, the gender ideology of *Jurassic Park* seems to be to confirm that women, even when they are brave and scientific, must remain pretty, flirtatious, and nurturing. From the very start the film represents it as a central aim in Ellie's life to convince her lover to have children. Thus in the film's trajectory, Grant fulfills his chief aim, demonstrating his scientific hypothesis about dinosaurs, while she fulfills hers in parallel, as one of the film's closing scenes shows her smiling happily (in a view we share) at Alan, now appropriately fatherly, sleeping with the two children he has saved cuddled in his arms. The film's ending thus depicts a resolution that produces a happy, relieved, and idealized nuclear family. It includes none of the foreigners who are lowly park laborers, no computer nerds, no greedy lawyers, and no black members—just the white surrogate parents and grandfather whose regret signifies that he is to be exonerated for his mistakes in the otherwise "innocent" desire to entertain people. Even more significantly, the very last scene of the film is a vision of flying birds—pelicans who, seen in silhouette over the water, resemble pterodactyls. Thus the film concludes with a subtle message that reinforces the "heroic" male scientist's creative vision and theoretical achievement in hypothesizing correctly about the bird-like nature of dinosaurs.

I move now to my second example, David Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly*. In this film, the heroine, Veronica Quaife (Geena Davis), is represented as an ambitious, intelligent, pragmatic, and successful career woman, a science writer. She is also charming, funny, beautiful, and sexually forward—either a fantasy woman who falls straight into bed with men, or the confident new woman assertive about her own sexual desires. True, she could be said to behave in unprofessional ways (having first slept with one of her college professors, who is now her editor, and later with the subject of her current research article)—but so do the men in the movie. More problematic is the fact that she only seems to exist in the film in relations of subordination to men. As a science writer her position is more lowly than that of the creative scientists whose genius she will simply record and report on to the world. Similarly as a writer, she is subordinate to her editor at the science magazine.

These relations of subordination parallel Veronica's position in the film's plot and narrative structure. She exists in the movie primarily in a dependent relationship to the male scientist Dr. Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum). The film is a variant on the mad scientist genre, and Brundle is the mad scientist at the center of its narrative trajectory. If this film reaches greater tragic heights than many other mad scientist movies, that may be because it fulfills some of Aristotle's criteria for a tragic plot: the hero is a great man, sympathetic, deserving of our pity, who engages in action that involves some sort of fatal mistake and hubris bringing about his downfall.[30] This film is a narrative about *the man's* activities, his heroism, and tragic downfall. Veronica functions in it as an aspect of his tragedy and loss, and also as a modern variant on the ancient Greek chorus guiding our responses of pity and fear (or in this case, horror). The film often puts viewers into her viewpoint, forcing us to observe from

[30]For some thoughts about the sexism implicit in Aristotle's basic articulation of the nature of tragic plot, see my "Plot Imitates Action: Aesthetic Evaluation and Moral Realism in the *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 111–32.

closer up, so to speak, the hideous transformations that occur as the fly takes him over.[31]

The particular horrific threat of this movie is an invasion by the other species of *both* the male and female body. It does take a specific turn against women when the scientist seeks his own rescue by demanding to use, and corrupt, her reproductive abilities (showcased in a disgusting nightmare she has of giving birth to a giant maggot). Yet ultimately it is he and not she who suffers; he is punished for his scientific hubris, as she fights for survival (with some male assistance, but nevertheless she is very courageous) and resists his final appeals to sacrifice herself for him. It is difficult to force a reading of the monstrousness here as a feminization of his body; what makes more sense is to see these transformations as metaphors for aging or for ravaging illnesses like cancer or AIDS.

The Fly's narrative has a very traditional, male-centered and male-driven form: the male scientist exceeds his role and must pay for it. The male acts, the woman feels. She occupies a traditional role in the sense that her emotions and perceptions are clues to guide us, the film viewer, to regard the man, despite his hubris, with love, pity, and sympathy. In *The Fly* as in *Jurassic Park,* the mad scientist who creates the crux of the story is a man, and the woman has to deal with the man's problem; love and empathy are the key female traits. There is no real challenge to this gendered division of labor or to the idea that stories are primarily about men, only secondarily about the women who love them. Consider, for example, the fact that Veronica's own tragedy in this movie is in itself a subordinate tragedy brought about by Brundle's mistake, and one centered in the realm of her body and her emotional life: the loss of a lover, together with a forced abortion. The movie makes absolutely nothing of the fact that she loses out on what could easily be the biggest scientific scoop of her journalistic career! (Indeed, wouldn't the savvy and competitive woman journalist she seemed to be at the start immediately begin writing up the whole thing, complete with video illustrations?) In other words, just as in *Jurassic Park,* beneath the surface depiction of an independent career woman in *The Fly* lies the ideological message that women are primarily creatures of their emotions who exist first and foremost in their love relations to men and potential offspring.

These are two examples of films I have chosen because they seem to offer positive depictions of independent women characters which I believe are undermined by deeper ideological messages. Further, they are interesting to examine in contrast with typical feminist psychoanalytic views because their depictions of the horrific monsters are not the typical ones of castrating woman or primal mother. Instead I would locate the most problematic aspects in their gender ideology at the level of their narrative, which is in each case predominantly a narrative focused on male energies, activities, triumphs, or tragedies.

[31]David Bordwell has suggested that a "reading against the grain" approach might take this film to be a subversive exposé of the mad scientist's "hypermasculinity" ("Nerd becomes barroom thug and rapacious seducer"). While this is an intriguing line of interpretation, I do not think it can work, mainly because of the film's continued sympathy for Brundle. Here again, as I suggest, the fact that Veronica's love and pity persist despite his ugly behavior and transformation is meant to be our guide as to how to react. I think my interpretation of the movie as a high-end horror mad scientist tragedy is more in accord with the plot and its ultimate conclusion when the creature mutely asks to be put out of its misery.

Now let me shift and describe a very different example of a horror movie with a quite different logic, *Repulsion.* Again I want to argue that surface appearances can be deceiving. On the surface this is a horror story in which a very beautiful and sexy woman, Carol Ledoux (Catherine Deneuve) becomes a mad slasher and villain who attacks and destroys men. One might initially suppose then that this is a sort of film noir anticipating the recent genre of *Fatal Attraction*-style villainess females. Carol seems to be depicted as the alluring yet shy and inhibited femme fatale whose repressed sexuality must unleash itself ultimately in horrific acts of violence against the men she desires. This view of her as repressed and even voyeuristic might seem to be confirmed by various aspects of the plot and the filmic depiction of her; she dresses demurely, speaks in a low voice, hides behind her hair, constantly peers out the windows of her flat, listens in on her sister's sexual moans and cries, inspects and throws away the shaving glass used by her sister's lover, and so on.

However, I think that this surface reading does not capture much that is going on in this film. Many of the point-of-view shots in the movie identify the audience members with leering men, from her erstwhile boyfriend to the construction workers who jeer and whistle at Carol as she walks past them on the sidewalk. On the other hand the film also switches to adopt the young woman's own viewpoint as she is chased and visually assaulted by these men. In doing so, it shows her to be a victim who merits our sympathy and empathy. Thus the feeling of the scene where she overhears her sister's lovemaking is less one of voyeurism than one of tormented embarrassment and the desire to escape. Clearly she feels threatened by her sister's involvement with the man and by her departure with him for vacation. Once she is alone in the flat, Carol becomes increasingly psychotic and delusional. As she goes mad, the audience shares her heightened perceptions, nightmares, and hallucinations. Polanski shocks and frightens us in parallel with her by showing faces that suddenly materialize in mirrors, hands that reach out from rubbery walls, or menacing shadows creeping from above on the bedroom ceiling, accompanied by weird and threatening grunting noises. Given this increasingly deranged system of perceptions, we can actually be persuaded that Carol's reaction as she reacts and kills men who enter her apartment is a reasonable one. This is particularly true when she repulses the advances of her lecherous landlord, who has offered to accept something other than money for his rental payments.

This means that what is really horrific in this movie is not the female killer (as it is, say, in *Basic Instinct* or *Fatal Attraction*); it is instead lechery, male attitudes of lust toward such a beautiful woman. The film highlights Carol's victimization by men and strongly hints that her psychosis and sexual repression stem from a history of child sexual abuse. She cannot escape the pursuit of men who wolf-whistle at her on the street, press her for dates, or attack her in her own apartment. Her sister's lover has carelessly scattered his personal hygiene items all around in the bathroom. She is even trapped in her job as a manicurist in the industry of making women beautiful so as to please men. By repeated shots linking Carol to the naked, stripped rabbit that rots uncooked on an empty plate in her flat, she is represented as childlike, vulnerable, and psychically decaying.

The overall narrative structure of *Repulsion* reflects a logic of disruption and fragmentation rather than resolution; of suffering and reacting, rather than action. The story could not be said to be a tragedy in the classic sense, even one like that of *The Fly.* That is, *Repulsion* does not offer a narrative of a deed and its consequences, or a heroine whose action is somehow flawed, precipitating her tragic downfall. Instead this is a sort of antinarrative that presents an inability to act, a continual waiting, passivity, and suffering. Even Carol's final acts of killing the two men seem to be reactions rather than genuinely intended deeds. Surely Carol does not "deserve" her suffering, nor is she an evil *Fatal Attraction*-style femme fatale. To be sure, this film is not visionary in the sense of offering up an alternative model of gender roles. Nevertheless, it certainly does call existing roles and attitudes into question in a particularly interesting way, by implicating the audience in watching this woman—who is indeed very beautiful—by following her as she walks down the street, by extreme close-ups of her face and appearance—so much so that she begins to seem to want to hide from the camera itself behind her long pale hair.

In *The Fly* too the heroine's story revolves around her emotional suffering, but as I interpreted that film's gender ideology, it represented such suffering as appropriate for a woman character whose fate is basically subordinated to that of the male hero. Her suffering functions as a cue for us in the audience, guiding us to react "appropriately" to Brundle with sympathy and pity. By contrast, in my view *Repulsion* presents a certain gender ideology in such a way as to raise a number of serious questions about it. It constructs a surprisingly critical representation of male sexual desire and the accompanying objectification of women, and it even links this kind of visual objectification to acts of violence and sexual abuse like incest. Moreover, and finally, it suggests that when women fight back against such violence and abuse, their actions may be reasonable and warranted. But it does *not* suggest, as do many movies in the recent "rape revenge" genre, that women who fight back against such abuse will achieve psychological satisfaction or be backed by a powerful judicial system.[32] It would be a less good movie, in my mind, if it did so—more problematically ideological—because it would misrepresent and gloss over existing power and dominance relations within patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I would like to make one cautionary point about my recommended framework for producing readings of horror films that focus on their gender ideologies. One reason I distinguish my recommended feminist ideological critique from an ordinary Marxist sort is that I want to resist a certain sort of Marxist line that places great power within the hands of the productive apparatuses of Hollywood, and correspondingly little power in the hands of audience members, treated generically as members of one social class. I believe that audience members have the power to create individual, often subversive readings of films. To speak of a film's ideology suggests that some powerful agent is distorting a message for sinister purposes of domination and control. This is misleading, I think, both because the nature of the agency in question in filmic representation is actually very diffuse, and also because it makes

[32]On the rape revenge genre, see Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws,* chapter 3, "Getting Even," pp. 114–65.

viewers into powerless Pavlovian dogs. Horror movie viewers are in fact often highly sophisticated and critical; horror movie screenings, in my experience, may be much more participatory than other forms of films. If the dominance relations distorted by ideology in my approach are those of patriarchy, I believe that individual viewers, in particular female viewers, may either see through such relations or reread intended ones in subversive ways.

This means that even when a film presents a problematic image of women, the audience reaction may subvert or undercut it. For example, the audience may react so as to bring out the potential dark humor of a scene. Let me offer an example here. Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, in their book *Camera Politica,* adopted a more standardly Marxist view of film ideology than my own. Ryan and Kellner discuss, among other topics, sexist ideologies of horror films in the early 1980s, which they interpret as expressing male backlash against feminist advances of the time.[33] They are highly critical, for instance, of the bondage scenes in *Cat People;* their discussion seems to assume that the filmmakers had an agenda that would determine audience responses by buying into their assumed agreement, that is, a shared resistance to new feminist values. Yet when I saw the film in a crowded theater in New York at the time of its release, the audience hooted derisively at just these scenes. That is, they seemed to see through this maneuver of the filmmakers so as to resist the film's surface ideology. Horror films seem often to solicit just such cynical, subversive audience responses.

In this paper I have presented not so much a feminist *theory* of horror films as a framework that I hope will prove useful for producing readings of horror films. I would like to emphasize that in my view, for any given film, a number of feminist readings might be possible. Feminist film readings interpret how films function as artifacts, and to do this they may successfully explore such diverse aspects of a film as its plot, editing, sound track, point of view, dialogue, character representations, use of rhetoric, or narrative structures. But film artifacts function within a context, and the context is constantly changing. I do not contend, for example, that the sort of reading of *Repulsion* I have offered here would have been possible or even appropriate in 1965 when the movie was released. We may see this film differently in retrospect, for example, against the contemporary background of *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct,* as well as by comparison with the recently emerging genre of the rape revenge movie. Further, there is much greater social awareness in 1995 than in 1965 of problems of incest and child sexual abuse, and these might significantly affect how a feminist of today sees certain slight allusions in the film.

My quick sketch here of film readings of *Jurassic Park, The Fly,* and *Repulsion,* is only that, a sketch. I have mainly intended to suggest how such critical feminist readings can be engaged in, and prove potentially fruitful, without psychodynamic underpinnings. Again, I emphasize films as functioning complex artistic artifacts, and I emphasize audience's critical readings rather than purportedly universal or totalizing psychological responses. My readings ask a set of central questions about films' representations of gender roles and relations, the horrific monster, and the type of resolution presented. I believe that my proposal offers a more flexible, potentially illuminating framework than psychodynamic approaches for constructing creative feminist readings of horror films.[34]

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[33]Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 136–67.

[34]For a more extended illustration, see my discussion of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* in "Realist Horror," in *Philosophy and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1995).