GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR IN FILM

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

Series Editor: Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK

As we re-imagine and re-boot at an ever faster pace, this series explores the different strands of contemporary culture and gender. Looking across cinema, television, graphic novels, fashion studies and reality TV, the series asks: what has changed for gender? And, perhaps more seriously, what has not? Have representations of genders changed? How much does the concept of 'gender' in popular culture define and limit us?

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Samantha Holland, *Screen Heroines, Superheroines, Feminism and Popular Culture*

GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR IN FILM

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

Samantha Holland

At the very start of this project, I met my colleague Rob Shail for morning coffee and asked him if he would like to edit a book with me about gender in horror; specifically about what – if any – changes in gender representation in horror films there have been. My idea was that such a book would tie in with the themes of the new book series *Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender*, and its publication would launch the series. Shortly afterwards, we recruited our friend and colleague Steve Gerrard as our third editor because of his love for and knowledge of the horror genre. I tweeted a call for chapters and we were overwhelmed by the positive response, receiving more than 80 abstracts and expressions of interest, as well as supportive messages. This was many more than we had anticipated (in fact, we had worried about whether we would receive enough) and resulted in us being able to work on three separate volumes, with each of us acting as lead editor for one volume: film, television and fandom and other media. This, then, is the first volume which concentrates on film. The books offer an overview of what is happening currently with gender in the horror genre; hopefully, they also begin a conversation. The reader can choose to read just one of the three, or all three, in any order.

All three volumes focus on the horror genre since 1995, the year that the first *Scream* film was released and the year that, arguably, horror films 'came back'. Horror fans had suffered something of a drought in the 1980s, displaced by action movies and 'musculinity', although admittedly this epoch resulted in some strong iconic screen heroines such as Ellen Ripley, Sarah Connor and Charlie Baltimore. But the *Scream* franchise (1996, 1997, 2000, and 2011) signalled a fruitful and lucrative new life for the genre, which still flourishes to date. The horror genre is thriving because it is able to remain current. Film franchises such as *Saw*, *The Conjuring* and *The Purge* speak to different aspects of our fears: horror is always based on contemporary anxieties and so will always find new ways to tell those stories and new styles to do so. The conventions and even the aesthetics of the horror movie will always be recognizable, such as the lighting and the score, but horror will always be up to date. The slasher films of the 1970s reflect perfectly the anxieties of the time, for example in the time of

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the women's liberation movement there was *Black Christmas* (1974); and the rise of consumption and consumerism prompted *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). More recently, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was arguably the first film to use the format of found footage, combining the very modern (film cameras and smart-mouthed University students in grunge-inspired plaid) with the very ancient: the fear of the wilderness, of being lost and of being threatened by something unseen and evil. It doesn't matter how much tech you have if you have no signal for your GPS and you never learnt to read a map. Found footage has become a staple in the genre partly because horror has always responded to our fears and mapped them onto narratives about the domestic and the everyday.

The chapters in this book owe a great debt to Carol J. Clover and her conceptualization of the 'Final Girl' character in horror films – in fact, eight chapters out of 15 refer to Clover's work. As Clover (1992, p. 42) points out, in a horror film, we will fear for a woman more than for a man. Men are killed in horror films but are less likely to face the torture, the chase, the 'graphic detail' (Clover, 1992, p. 35) of the terror that the female protagonist has to face, because she is 'abject terror personified' (Clover, 1992) and in order to identify with her plight we must watch her endure it. Nonetheless, endure it she does and her survival – and the audience's identification with her, whether they are male or female – is a key element of the success of the horror genre.

Clover's concept of the Terrible Place is also an important theme in the chapters which follow, whether explicitly or implicitly, that place of nightmares where there is no escape. Horror begins by establishing normality, a house, a school, where daily life is uneventful. Very quickly that safe place becomes a place of terror, where the most homely space can no longer be trusted – who is in the closet? What is under the bed?

The chapters examine all the mainstays of the horror genre, with subjects ranging from werewolves and cannibals to ghosts and zombies – all using a 'gender lens' and interrogating what, if anything, has changed in representations of gender in contemporary horror. Is horror really all about a blonde girl trying to escape capture and torture? Sometimes, it is; often it is much more than that. Indeed, the authors discuss torture, and alongside that feminism, Black or ageing masculinities, social media and new technologies, patriarchy, gay porn and the Gothic, amongst many other things, proving that the term gender encompasses just about all things for all people. A mixture of world horror cinema is included, for example, from the US, Spain, France, Turkey and Latin America. As editors, we were keen to include established scholars but also emerging writers, and we wanted to ensure a fair mix of male and female authors.

The book is structured in three parts, which broadly capture the overarching concerns of the chapters within them, and the horror genre itself: they are "Bodies," "Boundaries" and "Captivity." These are subjects that reflect the danger, pain, change, challenge and suffocating terror experienced in horror, and without which horror could not function. Laura Mulvey (1989, p. 17) argues that film, especially the horror film, will 'focus attention on the human form'. In doing so we see how vulnerable our bodies are. So in Part I "Bodies," the chapters deal with the Final Girl (threats to her body and her physical agency), with

masculinities (including the challenges of the aged body) and with the cannibal (who literally eats human bodies).

Part II "Boundaries" is about physical and imagined boundaries, which both are central to the horror genre. Horror films are full of people crossing boundaries, going places they shouldn't and doing things they will regret. How many times have you shouted at the screen 'don't go in there!' This part, then, includes chapters about ghosts, hauntings and vampires – but also about porn and social media, two spaces where boundaries are frequently crossed.

Finally, Part III "Captivity," looks at ideas about being trapped – whether in a place, or in your own body, reflecting decades of feminist work about the captivity of gender roles.

The authors set out to address the challenges and changes to be found in modern horror films around gender, and in doing so, they demonstrate the breadth and richness of the genre, and how it precisely mirrors our anxieties and preoccupations.

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PART I
BODIES

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Chapter 1

‘It’s So Easy to Create a Victim’: Subverting Gender Stereotypes in the New French Extremity

Maddi McGillvray

> Man endures pain as an undeserved punishment; woman accepts it as a natural heritage.
>
> – Anonymous

The female victim has been a reoccurring cinematic image since the development of the medium. Not only has the female form become the conventional site of pain and suffering in film, but this correlation has also become particularly quintessential in the horror genre. Linda Williams notes this in ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess’ (1991), arguing that genres such as horror, pornography, and melodrama hinge on the spectacle of a sexually saturated and victimized female body (Williams, 1991). Women have been at the centre of the horror genre since its origins (Dani, 2017). They are the last ones standing at the end, hunted and slaughtered by psychopathic killers, haunted and/or possessed, give birth to the monsters of such films, and in some rarer cases, they are even the monsters themselves. Nevertheless, misogynistic depictions of women have frequently appeared within the horror genre since its emergence. Starting with *Le Manoir du Diable* (Méliès, 1896), which is often cited as the first horror film, and continuing until today, the presence of gendered specific violence has been a recognizable trope throughout the history of horror cinema.

Despite such narratives, horror is one of cinema’s most consistently popular and lucrative genres (Prince, 2004). Not only is horror experiencing what many are calling its ‘golden age’ with the critical success of films like *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), *It* (Muschietti, 2017), and *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), but the popularity of television shows such as *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) and

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American Horror Story (2011–present) also suggests that horror and images of violence and gore have become normalized elements of our media and viewing culture. As a result, more is required in order to shock and stimulate today's audiences. The last decade has seen the birth of extreme cinema, which is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* as, 'a group of films that challenge codes of censorship and social mores, especially through explicit depictions of sex and violence, including rape and torture' (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). This trend has not only seeped its way onto North American screens, but has also gained prominence among international markets as well. For instance, in North America, torture porn films such as *Saw* (Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth, 2005) have become contemporary franchises comparable to the *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Similarly, so-called 'Asia Extreme' films including *Audition* (Miike, 1999), *Ichi the Killer* (Miike, 2001) and *Oldboy* (Park, 2003), as well as 'European Extreme' shockers such as *A Serbian Film* (Spasojevic, 2010) and the American co-production *The Human Centipede* (Six, 2009), have also gained prominence in the global film market (Jennings, 2008, p. 5).

However, as scholar Erin Jennings states, 'nowhere is the surge of excess sex and violence in film more apparent than in France' (Jennings, 2008, p. 6). *Artforum* critic and programmer James Quandt coined the term 'New French Extremity' to describe the growing presence of extreme violence and sexual brutality in French films at the turn of the twenty-first century.[1] Referring to a series of transgressive films by French auteurs such as Gaspar Noé, Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, and Catherine Breillat, Quandt cites the New French Extremity as, 'a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of visceral and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and submit it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement' (Quandt, 2004). While Quandt initially wrote about the New French Extremity as an art-house movement, in the years that followed, the title quickly become synonymous with horror films. Consequently, the New French Extremity has earned a reputation for eliciting excessive reactions from critics and audiences, including mass walkouts, fainting, and vomiting. Despite the vociferous reactions and controversies these films have elicited, they have had an undeniable impact on French cinema, as these films have both flourished nationally and continue to gain popularity beyond French borders.

At the centre of this cycle, as scholar Tim Palmer states, is an emphasis on human sexuality rendered in stark and graphic terms (Palmer, 2006a, 2006b, p. 58). The correlation between sex and violence is not exclusive to the New French Extremity, as France has a unique history of representing such themes in art. The New French Extremity extends a libertine tradition that includes the

[1]At the time of his article, Quandt labelled the New French Extremity as an art house 'movement'. That being said, the title has since been applied to an ongoing list of startling and deeply upsetting French horror films. This has led many critics and scholars to contend whether or not the New French Extremity is in fact a cinematic movement or a genre in and of itself.