

The Disruption of Hegemonic Discourses Through 70s Horror Films

By Robert Kelly

Introduction

Picture the 1970s. A time many classify as drugs, sex, and rock and roll. The 70s were certainly a uniquely different time period than its many predecessors, but in a century that constantly changed from decade to decade, why were the 70s so drastically different? The decade may not have been as monumental a change as entering the Industrial or Digital Age, but the 70s laid out new freedoms of expression that parallels much of the outcries we see today. Second-wave feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement demonstrated a demand for women's rights. These movements also resulted/coincided with a sexual revolution through the normalization and rise in of birth control, pornography, and public nudity. The Stonewall Riots also indicated a turning point in gay liberation movements. Civil Rights was perhaps one of the most prevalent societal movements of the 1960s to the early 1970s. The Vietnam war still was not over by the beginning of the 70s, and many Americans had expressed their anger over the war. This anger extends even further with the corruption of power through the Nixon administration and the blatant disregard for the American people's demands. This culmination of different movements can be summarized as a culmination of anger and discontent with the United States. Groups were marginalized and wanted to be heard. Maybe not so coincidentally, the Motion Picture Production Codes, which acted as restrictions for content in films, were abolished by the late 1960s. Unlike previous decades, filmmakers noticed that they were allowed to publish explicit content in their films. The days of the tongue-in-cheek Bette Davis and Vivien Leigh were numbered by the salaciousness of *Blow-Up* and *The Graduate*. By the 1970s, even these films would be considered tame. The earliest and most experimental adopters of vulgarity were horror films. These films acted as a visceral representation of the collection of various movements and qualms the American people had with their country. 1970s horror films were a testing ground

for new ideas and social criticisms that many mainstream films were late to adopt. These groundbreaking, explicit films were representative of American culture which the lasting effects can be seen to the modern day.

The Motion Picture Production Codes

Have you ever watched an old film and wondered why the dialogue sounds stiff, why the roles and plots seem tame, and the film devoid of any controversy? Conversely, have you ever wondered why elderly audiences criticize movies with profanity, sex, drug abuse, and violence? The answer could probably be answered to some extent through the “Hays Code” or, as they were formally known, the Motion Picture Production Codes. These regulations came to fruition during the Great Depression when entities that were heavily unregulated were at great risk of being controlled by the government.¹ Rather than have an outside party censor them, Hollywood collectively agreed on a set of codes to abide by. The team drafting these codes were rich, white, Catholic men in power during the 1930s.² Maybe not so surprisingly, the codes ended up being racist, sexist, and bigoted. However, the popularity of certain rebellious films with highly sexual dialogue, graphic violence, and sexual nudity such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Antonioni’s *Blowup* led to the abolition of these codes. With the abolition of the codes, all hell broke loose. Quite literally, one of the first extremely derogative films of the Codes was *Night of the Living Dead*, a film in which the dead rise back to life to haunt the living. The abolition of the codes coincided with the many social movements seen in the United States. These movements were

¹ Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968*, (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 23.

² Sarah J. Children Smith, *Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids*, (Tauris, 2005), 38.

incredibly complex issues simmering underneath America's alleged unity over hundreds of years. Their eventual outburst became a time known as the 1970s.

Societal Movements

The most relevant, prolific, and important issues that seem to be present in 1970s horror films relate to the women's rights movement, sexuality and the body, the gay rights movement, political distrust, and black representation and the civil rights movement. Two women's rights movements took place in the 1960s and 70s. The women's liberation movement and second wave feminism fought for the economic, psychological, and social freedom of all women.³ In the relation to horror films, many depict the exploitation of psychological and social freedoms of women. Women had several restrictions placed on their body during this time period by various government restrictions discussed later. Women still did not have significant power in their daily lives as men, and horror films took note of this discrimination.

By the 1960s, various societal strides had come about such as the contraceptive pill and subsequent sexual movement.⁴ The contraceptive pill led to more promiscuity among men and women which was greatly admonished. This can be seen through the necessity of a court case, *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, which concluded that single people were allowed access to the contraceptive pill. However, this case was not decided until 1972.⁵ Additionally, the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case that provided a fundamental right to abortion for women had not been decided until 1973.⁶

³ Allan Bullock, *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*. Edited by Stephen Trombley, 3rd ed. (Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 315.

⁴ "The Birth Control Pill A History," (PBS, 2015), Accessed April 20, 2019.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/health/a-brief-history-of-the-birth-control-pill/480/>.

⁵ *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972).

⁶ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

Even after the case was established, *Roe v. Wade*'s vague conclusions allowed for a continued restraint on women due to differing states opinions of "viability" of the fetus.⁷ These two monumental court cases demonstrate that there was not only a demand for rights by sexually active people, but also a fervent outcry against their 'immoral' behavior. Many government entities attempted to elude various laws through their own interpretations. In addition to passing several laws that restricted many women and men's sexual behavior, many Americans felt as if they were not in control of their own bodies.

Similarly, the gay liberation movement demonstrated that the LGBT community was also protesting against control of their bodies. The LGBT community arguably faced a more extreme persecution from general condemnation and forced secrecy of gay behavior. The iconic Stonewall riots marked a significant turning point in LGBT rights as many in the community demanded less secrecy.⁸ Violence from police and U.S. citizens alike continued against the LGBT community, but the lasting effects persisted as gay pride parades and various LGBT organizations were created.⁹ Although the LGBT community had one of the loudest outcries from those of their own community, the 1970s demonstrated very little change in the protection of these individuals by the U.S. government.

Additionally, many groups inherently argued against the roles of a nuclear family. George Murdock described the role of the nuclear family as "a social group characterized by common

⁷ Bryant MD Jr, "State Legislation on Abortion After *Roe v. Wade*: Selected Constitutional Issues," (*American Journal of Law & Medicine* 2, no. 1, 1976), 108.

⁸ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights*, (Simon and Schuster, 1999), 12.

⁹ Martin B Duberman, *Stonewall*, (Penguin Group, 1994), 278.

residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It contains adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults.”¹⁰ As indicated by the sexual revolution, many Americans refused to have children, cohabit, or maintain a socially acceptable sexual lifestyle. The LGBT community made following this model impossible in addition to government entities failing to provide gay couples the opportunity to adopt. Although not necessarily present in this definition of a nuclear family, many were defined by a stay-at-home mother. Second-wave feminism also countered the nuclear family to an extent as fewer women wanted to stay home to raise their children.

The civil rights movement may be one of the most prevalent and memorable social protests during this decade and perhaps in the history of the United States. The various issues with black rights arising after the Civil War were finally being addressed out in the open after years of silence. Many agencies such as the US government and the KKK continued to try to silence these protests during the 60s, but the movement sustained itself until lasting change took effect. The various Supreme Court rulings and federal laws demonstrate that the black peoples of America were undoubtedly oppressed, but change occurred in some respect.

The loudest of many communities, however, was that of those who had issues with the current state of the government. Hopefully conveyed by now, the majority of Americans demanded change. Many felt as if they were not in control of their own bodies or their own lives. Two prominent and controversial government events led to further discontent within the United

¹⁰ Murdock, George Peter. *Social Structure*, (Free Press, 1965)

States. The first was the opposition to the Vietnam war. The war spanned from 1955 to 1973, but many began to question the necessity of the US' involvement by the mid 1960s.¹¹ Various protests ensued due to the drafting of minority groups and non-wealthy white Americans.¹² Similarly, the corruption of the United States was further pressed with the Watergate Scandal in which the transparency of President Nixon's administration was brought into question.¹³ Various groups demanded change from the government, but the government merely displayed signs of bigotry, corruption, and greed. A wealth of other protests such as the Chicano movement, Hippie culture, and the free speech movement also influenced many films, but will not be examined throughout this paper. However, all of these movements find some form of insemination of the films of the 1970s. The horror film was among the most conspicuous to demonstrate that America was upset and changing.

Subgenres of Horror Films

Most horror films can be classified under various umbrellas: The Slasher/Splatter films, the Science Fiction/Monster films, the Supernatural/Gothic films, and the Zombie films. Many of these films fall under multiple classifications, especially as these genres grew more mainstream. The slasher/splatter films were the most prominent in this time period. These films often involved some form of penetration with a sharp object, a male killer, and above all buckets of blood. The slasher/splatter films tend to display subversive signs of repressed sexuality and homosexuality playing off of the many changing societal norms of the time. The prominence of blood as a cheaper horror tactic also infiltrated various other subgenres of horror and could be

¹¹ Barbara L Tischler, *Sights on the Sixties*, (Rutgers University Press, 1992), 188.

¹² *Ibid.*, 188.

¹³ Keith W. Olson, "Watergate," *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*, (2012), 479.

considered a mainstream effect on the genre. Science fiction and monster films of the 70s examined the role of technology and nature, but mostly acted as metaphors for social criticisms. The supernatural and gothic horror films operated in a similar way. Often times the demons, vampires act as some projection of societal fears. The zombie films of this time period could also be categorized under monster movies but were kept separate due to the subgenre belonging mostly to the iconic George A. Romero during this time period. Zombie films after the abolishment of the Hays Code up to *Dawn of the Dead* dealt with criticisms of the government, the inability to control one's body in a modern world, as well as a critique of modern lifestyle. These films relay many of the movements discussed earlier in an almost poetic subtlety and in blatant simplicity.

Before examination, one trope stood out more than others. The 'Final Girl' trope transcended subgenres and was present in every film in some form or another. The prominence of women in horror films, especially slashers, has been extensively documented and written about. The final girl trope, was first penned by University of California Berkley professor Carol J. Clover. The final girl trope, self-explanatory in name, explores how the majority of horror films end with only one woman left standing after a spree of murders or events that leave the main character to fight for herself in the end.¹⁴ Horror films tend to utilize this trope to both empower or disenfranchise women. However, many of these films might work towards both depending on the viewer's perspective. Ultimately, only a few films act in an overt fashion to empower or disenfranchise women, while the majority leave that decision up to the viewer.

¹⁴ Carol J Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, (Princeton University, 2015), 260.

The Birth of the Slasher Film

Before discussing American slasher and splatter films, it is absolutely necessary to discuss the almost inimitable works of giallo director Dario Argento. Argento's work is relevant to the many slasher and splatter films of the 1970s due to it mainstreaming knives, blood, and penetration. Despite many directors not identifying Argento's work as a key point of influence, the subgenre clearly had an effect on the future of American horror.¹⁵ Many of the themes and tropes of the giallo film appear throughout slashers and splatters. Argento's three most impactful films, *Deep Red*, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, and *Suspiria* all demonstrate an extreme affinity for gore and many graphic depictions. His films spotlight women who do not fit traditional roles. These are strong, independent women who are actively against the patriarchal symbols in both films. In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, this is seen through subverting expectations and revealing the murderer to be a woman. Additionally, the murderer's inspiration stems from a painting in which a murderer stabs a young woman. However, the painting vaguely depicts the young woman's blood rushing down her skirt and undergarments possibly implying menstruation. This can be analyzed as the death of youth through the time period's expectations in which women are valued as sexual symbols at puberty. This is further substantiated by the deeply salacious nature of the murderer. In *Deep Red*, a wife's murder of her husband symbolizes an absolute destruction of the nuclear family. The film relays her disdain against reliance on a man and extends to the importance of being a single mother. In *Suspiria*, the disruption of patriarchal symbols can be seen numerous times throughout the film from the

¹⁵ Mikel J Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*, (Scarecrow Press, 2006), 170.

murder of the only elderly male to the subtle gay iconography of the male dancing students. Additionally, the films had distinct lesbian themes throughout the film which was a clear indicator for late 70s American horror films. Although these two films were shot in the latter half of the 70s, Argento's earliest hit, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, laid out a few distinct tropes for future slashers to imitate. Gore was a given, but Argento created an incredibly unique and suggestive way of displaying women in peril. When the killer is almost dead in the beginning of the film, she models blood as a sexual agent. The other leading women in the film is also highly sexual in nature and is almost murdered in the film. Again, Argento conveyed the coming to sexual maturity as almost a death sentence to women due to the expectations of a patriarchal society. However, the killer knows the power of her sexuality and is able to subvert male expectations through trickery. Additionally, the killer's weapon is a knife. The knife and other sharp, protruding objects designed for penetration can be seen sexual in nature as a phallic symbol. The repressed sexuality is apparent through the knife as the murderer penetrates several men throughout the film. Smart women, blood as a symbol of sexual nature, and the symbol of the phallus through sharp objects all are incredibly present in the American slasher and splatter films of the 1970s. The latter half of the decade also implemented much of the lesbian symbology in Argento's works to convey confused or indistinct and blurred sexuality.

Slasher and Splatter Films

The slasher and splatter films of the time did not take off immediately in terms of box office success. The early American films of the subgenre could be seen as a loose mixture of *Psycho* and Argento's works. Two notable films that did reasonably well were *The Last House on the Left* and *Sisters*. Both of these films serve as an early presence of a slasher following. Arguably,

The Last House on the Left works entirely as an exploitation film focusing on sexuality and social criticisms directly rather than implementing metaphors on the murders themselves. The film's most obvious observation of modern society is the changing youth personality. Young women are dressing more freely to emphasize the sexual nature of their body. They participate in drugs, drinking, and actively use profanity. The movie parallels this new youth with the morally "superior" older generation who lacks all of these vices. The film sheds light on the clear differences between the older idyllic family of the 1950s with the new promiscuous generation. However, Craven brings into question this superiority as the older generation is pushed to violently murder. Is the older generation truly morally sound when they are willing to kill in the most menacing ways? The film can be seen as a definite response to the troubles with the governments involvement in Vietnam. At home, the government (the older generation) condemns vices of the youth but is pushed to commit tremendous acts of extreme violence. The film conveys this message all under the guise of extremely graphic murders and sets a strong foundation for the rest of the decade.

Mentioned alongside Wes Craven's first film, Brian De Palma's *Sisters* also worked as a cutting social critique without truly mainstreaming the subgenre. The film is revolutionary in depicting graphic images, utilization of its leading black actor, and critique of the 'monstrosity' that is femme. Arguably, the most critical point of the movie is the representation of the black community in the film. Up to this point leading black actors were incredibly sparse and often depicted as stereotypes of the race or cast exclusively in Blaxploitation features. Not only does the film create an intensely relatable representation, it shines a bright spotlight on the hypocrisy of the viewer. The fictional gameshow in the film's opening has contestants betting that the man

will act in a perverted fashion, but to the surprise of the contestants and audience, the man acts in a more chivalrous manner. The film further follows him as he sexually engages a white woman but is quickly murdered soon after. Although De Palma's intentions for this first short story are vague outside of setting the dominos for the rest of the film, he pulls a few controversial observations of society at the time. Already stated was the importance of depicting a relatable and realistic black man. He is smart and charming in comparison to the many stereotypes of the time. The controversial nature of miscegenation is also noteworthy. However, his death begs the question whether a black man can survive in a white world even with education and social acumen. De Palma might be suggesting that the current attitude and treatments of African-Americans is so broken that a black man "fixing" his intrinsic personality to better shape the mold of society will still result in his downfall. A significant part of the film also examines the importance of women's liberation. Only three women are present in the film. A reporter and two twins who were born conjoined. Operating in a man's world, the reporter experiences oppression from police and her job. Similarly, the sisters are also oppressed due to the sexual exploration designed in the film (including the interracial relationship). Robin Wood defines the monster of the film as "that which threatens normality" so because the women of the film disrupt this normality, Wood defines "the monster of Sisters as women's liberation."¹⁶ The film is another early example as to how horror films operate underneath the radar to explore the changing societal structures.

The large breakout slasher film that most remember from this time period is Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The film is memorable due to its monstrous family (especially the

¹⁶ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, (Columbia University Press, 1986), 135.

iconic Leatherface) and explicit use of sex and violence. However, on a much deeper level, the film analyzes the dichotomy between conservative rural America (and to a larger extent government frustration) and the counterculture youth. The film lies to the audience by stating it is based on real events. Director Tobe Hooper defends this lie in the film's commentary by relaying the distrust of the news media and government of the time. The lies illustrated through Watergate and the Vietnam War depicting violence could be seen as an homage through the opening title cards. The film starts by making a strong political statement saying that the American government is lying and further implying that the American people will remain implicit in buying into these lies. The oversexualization of the film is also apparent in the first few minutes. Both women of the film display an overt sexuality by refraining from wearing bras, tight form fitting pants, and their casual discussion of sex. The first couple murdered convey their intent to have casual sex but are swiftly murdered by Leatherface. This quick denial of sexuality brings into question the role of the rural family. The rural family, devoid of any female figures enforce traditional conservative values: condemnation of casual sex, blue collar work, a patriarchal family. However, the family is also experiencing its own problems and identity crisis. The blue-collar worker son is experiencing change in the factory as jobs become replaced through technology, and a lack of a women in the house causes Leatherface to don a more feminine appearance implies a very troubled family. The film clearly defines a confused dichotomy between the future of Americans, blue-collar workers, and modern youth culture.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre spawned several imitators, criticisms, as well as mainstreaming the subgenre. Whereas films that traditionally relied less on gore and more on the supernatural and subconscious, various filmmakers turned to the low-budget grindhouse style of *The Texas*

Chainsaw Massacre to convey their ideas. The horror and success of violence and blood translated so well across the horror medium that many films began implementing extremely graphic scenes into their films. While *The Exorcist* was groundbreaking for different reasons to be discussed later, the film did not depict murder or the shedding of blood through violence. In fact, the majority of violence in that film was shown offscreen and was by comparison incredibly tame. Films like *Alien* and *Jaws* depict extremely graphic violence and blood that would have been impossible to depict had Hooper's film not gotten the attention it did. To emphasize the monumental change that the film had, I draw parallels between Vincent Price films. Classic horror star Vincent Price was notorious for creating horror films based on the gothic. His films never shed blood and rarely ever resulted in anyone's death let alone a horrific one. His films played upon mystery and magic rather than violence and gore. However, his first film released after the mainstreaming of splatter films, *Madhouse*, depicted copious amounts of blood, decapitation, and several horrific death sequences. The role of the horror film was changing and clearly reflected the wants of the audiences. These films come from knowing that America is in a time of anger and uncertainty. The filmmakers mimicked citizen frustrations and created an outlet to release those issues in an incredibly visceral way. The shedding of blood and arrival of terror draws incredibly strong parallels between film and world news.

In *The Driller Killer* a young artist is tormented by commercialism and a quickly changing society. His release is through the act of incredibly graphic and violent murders by the very weapon marketed to him from television. Homelessness is also a strong theme in the film. While the government would be fruitless in helping the homeless, and capitalistic materials harm more than help, the only separation between homelessness and safety is through violence.

Violence sustains the character to stay sane in his personal life. The film offers a critique of splatter films and society by addressing the irrationality of condemning horror but having mainstream news outlets and government selling violence.

The last notable slasher film of the 70s was John Carpenter's iconic *Halloween*. This film is truly responsible for mainstreaming the "final girl" trope as well as solidifying slashers as the mainstream subgenre of the 70s. The film addresses themes of repressed sexuality (both male and female) and female empowerment reflective of much of second wave feminism. The dichotomy between Laurie, the heroine of the story and Michael Myers, the villain, can be closely examined to see the great differences but also the similarities. Laurie is a woman devoid of sex and sexuality. Throughout the film, her friends can be seen as purely sexual beings, existing and coexisting for the sole purpose of casual sex. Laurie is the opposite, never mentioning her desire for sex and even going so far as to surround herself with children. Michael Myers acts as the foil to Laurie's sexuality through his incredibly provocative existence. He murders the over sexual with an overtly phallic object, his knife. The knife penetrates skin and draws blood in a horrific manner, but in many ways also appears uniquely sensual. Myers appears to draw some kind of sexual pleasure or fascination with his stalking and killing. So, one figure holds too strong and uncontrollable sexuality while the other abstains. However, the climax of the movie releases "all that repressed energy" because Laurie is "the most sexually frustrated".¹⁷ Both Myers and Laurie are sexually repressed victims of their time period. The film relays the power structure of a modern society as men being free to express their sexual

¹⁷ John Carpenter and Todd McCarthy, "Trick and Treat: John Carpenter Interviewed by Todd McCarthy," *Film Comment* 16, no. 1, (1980) 17.

openness while the only “good” women are the virginal who abstain. However, these women are simply victims due to repressing their sexuality. The film’s examination of this power structure provides a very simple solution to the power struggle between men and women at the time: stand up and fight back. Much of the second-wave feminist work was simply letting voices be heard, and similarities can be seen through Laurie’s ingenuity of fighting back.

Science Fiction and Monster Films

When people think of midnight drive in movies, chances are they were thinking of z science fiction or monster movie from the 1970s. Although these two genres are not necessarily the most related, they often operate in similar ways. Again, zombie films were written about in their own category due to the inimitable traits of the genre. As to be expected, monsters and science fiction acted as easily relatable metaphors to discuss modern events and changes. These films did not necessarily rely as heavily on blood as the slasher and splatter films did, however most directors did not shy away from the hard-hitting social commentary known from the genre.

Perhaps the most recognizable monster film of this decade was Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*. The monumental success of the film could potentially be attributed to the film’s blend of graphic violence and allegorical representation of the Nixon administration. The film was handled with such excellent maturity in terms of cinematography and story, that it mirrored big budget dramas more so than horror films. The film relied on it’s realistic animatronic shark to suspend reality for audiences and make the film more lifelike. Although the film focuses entirely on white males, the film does address how this particular community was impacted by the current government. In the film the three main characters are uniquely different based on their social

class: one is a college education upper middle-class youth, one is the middle-class everyman who participates in blue and white-collar work, and the other is a blue-collar war veteran. Although these are all white men, the film classifies this range of poor to upper middle class and uneducated to educated as being heavily disenfranchised by Watergate. The shark acts as a community terrorizer that came about through complacency. The passiveness of the summer village allowed the shark to infiltrate and affect the entire town, and the only ones who have the power to change this structure are solely white men of differing social status. The film may subtly allude that only having this group act on behalf of the rest of the village (and by metaphor, America) is incredibly dangerous due to the many flaws existing among them. However, the film primarily focuses on the neglect of the US population due to the Nixon administration and how the impeachment of Nixon was a “communal exorcism, a ceremony for the restoration of ideological confidence”.¹⁸

Similarly, the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* marked a stark contrast from its original due to its emphatic political commentary. The original film focused on the reliance on large government, police authority, and, ultimately, acted as an allegory for the fight against communism.¹⁹ The remake depicts America as the aggressor by shipping various ideologies through the form of ‘body snatchers’ to change how other parts of the world act. While the original body snatchers came about as communist infiltration, the remake depicted the body snatchers as practically home grown. In a time where many felt they were not in control of their lives or bodies as seen through the various women, black, gay, and sexual movements, the

¹⁸ Andrew Britton, "Jaws", In Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, (Wayne State University Press, 2009), 237.

¹⁹ Danny Peary in *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird and the Wonderful*, (Gramercy Books, 1998), 157.

American government could be clearly seen as accountable for preventing any change as they ship off these ‘body snatchers’.

A more specific criticism on the control of the female body can be further examined through *The Stepford Wives* in which housewives are replaced by replicant robots. The film parodies the “idyllic” nuclear family with a more modern one where the only change in the equation is that women are more independent. The film ends with the women being devoid of any intellectual or social acumen as they lack any organizational structure. The dichotomy between the women of the film and the progressive women in the real world is obvious as the film critiques male control of women and their prevention in any true progress. By not allowing women to congregate in groups, they are prevented from further expansion of their ideals and social change. This is further substantiated by the secret society that the men hold in the film, further implying their complete control over all facets of life.

The science fiction monster movie, *Alien*, might be the most critical of male control and the horror genre as a whole. Taking notes from *Halloween*, the film also implements a ‘final girl’ trope but utilizes her as a powerful and resilient heroine. The character of Ripley is inherently reflective of changing times as she mirrors the in-control leadership and education many women pursued during this time period. Although Ripley plays a pivotal role in representation and moving away from male dominated science fiction and female oversexualization, the true star of the film is the alien, the xenomorph. The xenomorph, also female, acts as the epitomal emasculation tool. The xenomorph represents fears women experience daily. The xenomorph controls the power to inseminate men with her children and effectively end their lives. A

reversal of power structures is apparent through the xenomorphs forceful entry as “it's about sex, and reproduction by non-consensual means... it's about this happening to a man.”²⁰ The film is taking a genre whose audience is traditionally dominated by men and reversing it to show the horrors being forced on women.²¹

Supernatural and Gothic Films

Supernatural films such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* also showed an obsession with the female body. The similarities between *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* are quite apparent despite only having similarities in the demonic in terms of plot structure. Both films focus on the strength of and independence of young mothers, but both fall to the overt presence of men. However, these films can be interpreted in numerous ways to understand whether they are helping or harming the hegemonic structures defined previously in this paper. The semantics of critique and warning versus promoting a movement through worst case scenario example is up to the viewer. However, these films demonstrate a verifiable presence of new social movements.

Although *Rosemary's Baby* does not show overt signs of gore or graphic violence, the film portrays a relatively graphic rape scene and the acceptance of the demonic into one's life.

Acting entirely on the superficial, these themes would have been banned before the departure of the Hays Code. The film follows a newlywed couple, where the bride is forced into bearing the son of Satan. Although Rosemary relays that she would like to conceive a child, this action would presumably be done on her own terms. The Satanic child may possibly represent the

²⁰ David McIntee, *Beautiful Monsters: The Unofficial and Unauthorized Guide to the Alien and Predator Films*. (Telos Publishing, 2005), 43.

²¹ Clover, *Men, Women*, 65n.

constraints of the older generation and the idealism of the nuclear family. Comparing the two options, a child between Rosemary and her young husband could be seen as the birth of the new generation that is apparent in the changing societal movements. However, a child of a demon will result in the perpetual fortification of the hegemonic society it is so desperately trying to move away from. This theory is further supported by Rosemary's haircut representing the transition into a new generation. The hair cut is Rosemary's rebellion against the norms and rules of the previous generation as she defiantly transitions from an 'idyllic' model style hair to the short, androgynous style of many women of the time period. Although the film only really touches on Women's Liberation Movement and moving away from the pressures to look and act in a nuclear family, *Rosemary's Baby* marks the start of utilizing horror films to spotlight changing societal movements.

Similarly, *The Exorcist* examined themes of female empowerment. This film, however, is much more criticized for its reluctance to embrace androgyny or masculinity in women.²² These criticisms of course are referring to the unmistakable masculine voice of the demonic. The demon which infiltrates the young girl, Regan, is notoriously sexual seen through the depiction of the large phallus. Regan speaks in a manly voice, violently masturbates, and expresses her/his sexuality overtly. The controversy arises through the depiction of these activities as unnatural and horrific, particularly for a girl going through puberty. Additionally, feminist criticism of the film often points out the ethicality of taking away these traits and condemning them.²³

²² Ian Olney, *Unmanning The Exorcist: Sex, Gender and Excess in the 1970s Euro-Horror Possession Film*. In *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, (2014), 561.

²³ *Ibid.*; 561.

Regardless, the presence of these traits further emphasizes the inimitability of the film and how the film took into account in some respect the changing social climate.

Zombie Films

The zombie horror films of George A. Romero and subsequent other filmmakers inherently expressed their obsession with the body, but the ceasing of bodies in these films are uniquely different than the ones in possession, monster, and other science fiction films. Zombification neither targets women nor masculinizes the target. Zombie films actually have a resounding effect on various other horror films that express similar tropes such as *The Stepford Wives*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. These films express very similar traits to those of the zombie films but differentiate themselves on the basis of sex and femininity. Questions of the purpose of the body and whether we control our bodies are brought into question.

The work of George A. Romero stimulated observation of several social critiques. As pointed out by Linda Badley, *Night of the Living Dead* was the “first truly modern horror film”.²⁴ The film introduced several features that could not have been possible to show without the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Codes. On the most superficial level, the grotesque features of the zombified victims and their morbid feasting on bloody human feature were incredibly new as “splatter – the cannibalism – was the message”²⁵ These inimitable traits acted on multiple levels as intentions to scare and defy tradition, but also acted on the metaphorical level. The contrast between the living and the dead is often blurred. The fresh, living flesh is consumed by the dead.

²⁴ Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, (Greenwood Press, 1995), 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

In the context of this time period, Romero employs several metaphors for this consumption. One theory is that older generations feast on the younger ones. This theory is supported by the zombies in the film as the real-world dead of the past. The theory parallels society's obligations to uphold traditions mindlessly and aimlessly. Although the decrepit members of society are gone, their influence still acts as a leech upon society. The dead of yesteryear can be seen as the truly dead who were the first to implement constraints on society. Wage slavery can be clearly seen immortalized through the eyes of the zombie. The film also introduced a very controversial decision to include a black actor as the lead character. Representation was crucial, and the film included a very realistic representation of black men at the time rather than building upon racist stereotypes. Ultimately, the film stands as a critique of the harshness of corporate life while implementing graphic violence and diversity.

Closing Thoughts

Why do we love horror? A medium designed to surprise, scare, and terrify the audience certainly sounds unwelcoming. Strangely enough, audiences have loved these tropes since the dawn of cinema. Early silent films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, and even the earliest horror film, *The Haunted Castle* indicate that moving picture audiences always had an odd obsession with facing the terrifying. Looking back at this analysis, several revelations stood out more than others. First, we can see how some horror films truly tried to depict the African-American community in a much more positive and realistic light. Black actors were encouraged to move away from the stereotypes present in previous decades and were cast beyond the expected and typical thug stereotypes. Although only a few movies truly tried to change this perception of African-Americans, the presence was much greater than the many mainstream

counterparts of the time. The depiction of women also stood out. With the ‘final girl’ theory reigning very true throughout these films, I did not realize the vast amount of female representation in horror films. Regardless of intent, 70s horror films put the spotlight on women, and featured the discrimination, harassment, and fears women of the time period experienced. Additionally, the metaphorical and allegorical critiques far exceeded my expectations. These stories were meant to reflect the hegemony of the time but did so in interesting and deeply penetrating ways. These films could be enjoyed at face value as exciting thrillers or could be examined for their underlying socio-political messages. The American people were collectively in a distinctly frustrated time period, and films — especially horror — reflected that.

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