

7 Carrie's Sisters

New Blood in Contemporary Female Horror Cinema

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One evening I stood in the middle of my living room and I looked out at a blood-red sunset spreading out over the horizon of the Pacific. Suddenly [...] I saw a huge black centrifuge inside my head. I saw a tall figure in a floor-length evening gown approaching the centrifuge with a vase-sized glass tube of blood in her hand. [...] I watched as the figure carefully put the tube of blood into the centrifuge, closed the lid, and pushed a button on the front of the machine. The centrifuge began to whirl. [...] Blood was everywhere. [...] I looked out toward the ocean and saw the blood on the window had merged into the sunset; I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

(Jamison 2016, pp. 79–80)

A hallucinatory scarlet moment, full of images of blood. In the quote above, clinical psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison vividly describes her own experiences of bipolarity. When the gowned shape turns around, to Jamison's great horror, the figure appears to be herself. Her dress, cape, and long white gloves are covered in blood. The tube of blood splashing out centrifugally, leaving red splashes everywhere on the windowpane, on the walls and paintings, soaking into the carpet. Finally, inner and outer worlds fuse in the colour red. While this scene is not from a horror movie, it nevertheless brings together several elements that I want to explore in this essay: a female perspective and female agency (Jamison is both observant and observer) in horror aesthetics; the forms, affects, and meanings of the red/blood splashing, seeping, staining everywhere; and an intimate, inner perspective merging with perceptions of the outer world. These are all dimensions of the vein of 'new blood' in the contemporary horror cinema directed by women that will also run through the following pages.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the cinematographic horror genre reinvented itself, partly inspired by societal developments concerning sexual liberation and women's emancipation. While many of these developments found translations in generic images, the horror genre was nevertheless dominated by male directors, with the exception of a few female directors that confirmed the rule.¹ Barbara Creed's *The monstrous-feminine*

made a tremendous contribution in understanding the deeper gendered psychology of these popular horror films.² Beyond the classical idea of the male monster and the female victim as ‘damsel in distress’, Creed adapted Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection to identify the feminine, and especially its reproductive functions, as monstrous. And beyond Freud’s classical idea of the woman as castrated, she, rereading Freud’s case study Little Hans, made an argument for the dangerous ‘castrating’ woman. By referring to a large spectrum of horror subgenres, Creed demonstrated how monstrous femininity takes shape in these films that are by and large inspired by male phantasies and anxieties about the other sex.

Since the new millennium, a striking number of women have started to adopt and adapt formal and thematic elements from horror cinema.³ In this essay, I will look at some of interesting horror films directed by woman, asking how these films are indebted to Creed’s psychoanalytic concepts, and investigating if and how they might open new perspectives on ‘female monstrosity’ as abject or/and castrating. By following a common red thread of blood in the aesthetics (as form, affect and meaning) of contemporary horror cinema, I focus my arguments around Jane Campion’s *In the Cut* (dir. 2003) and Lucille Hadzihalilovic’s *Evolution* (dir. 2015). But let’s start by returning to Creed’s work and one of the bloodiest heroines of the 1970s horror cinema, Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (dir. 1976), and its remake by Kimberly Pierce in 2013.

Carrie and the ‘Curse of Blood’ as Abjection and Castration

One of the most seminal images of popular horror cinema of the 1970s is that of a girl in a soft pink prom dress drenched in thick red gushes of pig’s blood; the apotheosis of humiliation and shame that unleashes the shy (and bullied) heroine’s hidden telekinetic powers in Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). The film is based on the novel by Stephen King (1974), featuring Sissy Spacek as Carrie. Barbara Creed argues in the opening of *The monstrous-feminine* this scene symbolises one of the most striking images of abjection in the modern horror film: the association of pig’s blood with menstrual blood. As insisted by the film, girls ‘bleed like pigs’ when their bodies are ready for reproduction. The bloody alliance of the nonhuman and human, combined with the procreative and maternal function of the female body, summarises the monstrous feminine as confrontation with ‘the abject’. Creed transposes Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic notion of the abject as that which signifies the place where meaning collapses, the place where “‘I” am not’ (p. 8) to themes and images in the horror genre. The abject is related to any notion of an ambiguous border: between inside and outside of the body such as blood, wounds,retch and excrement; between mother and child; between human and nonhuman; and ultimately between life and death.

Creed convincingly argues that the horror film can be seen as a 'modern defilement rite' that 'attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies' (p. 14). It is the 'impure' feminine body that signifies the abject par excellence: menstrual blood, intra-uterine spaces as monstrous wombs, and terrifying mothers as obsessed and mad creatures that cannot let go of their bodily offspring are all images that find many translations in horror figures such as alien monsters, possessed women, lesbian vampires, and scary witches. In de Palma's film, Carrie White's own mother, who suffers from theomania, is the first to declare this abjection of the feminine body as she lectures Carrie on the 'sin and weakness of women' (the first sin being intercourse and sexual pleasure) and God's punishment as 'the curse of blood'. This curse of blood is first of all translated in another curse, the curse of childbearing. Blood signifies the abject as it defies the inside and the outside of the body (at least once a month for fertile women, and mothers in labour).

Does it make a difference when these female issues are presented from a woman's perspective? The question as to whether a feminine directorial gaze makes all the difference is a thorny one to which I will return at the end of this essay. For now, I just want to observe two differences between the versions of *Carrie* that provide us with a starting point. First of all, Kimberly Pierce's *Carrie* (dir. 2013) has added a prologue and changed the epilogue. Contrary to de Palma's version that starts with the gym lesson and Carrie's showering body erotically filmed in slow-motion and soft-focus (until she discovers the blood running down her legs), the new *Carrie* starts with a flashback of Carrie's panicked mother crawling up the stairs in the throes of giving birth, leaving a trail of blood, asking God for forgiveness, thinking she is dying, in shock discovering that she has delivered a baby, trying to kill her offspring with a knife, but finding herself unable to do so. The film also ends with a nightmarish image of a female body in labour. Now it is Sue, Carrie's only friend who survives the prom massacre, who finds herself pregnant in Pierce's version of the story. We see her body struggling with contractions, when suddenly Carrie's bloody hand shoots out of her body. As in de Palma's version (where Carrie's hand grabs Sue from the grave) this then appears to be a horrific nightmare indeed. The 'curse of childbearing' is literalised in this new prologue and epilogue and clearly resonates with Creed's notion of abjection. Nevertheless, these scenes seem to translate more the fears and anxieties from a woman's perspective, whose experience of having something growing inside her own body can be scary and alienating for herself as well.

Moreover, Pierce's version emphasises the necessity of knowledge for women to understand their own bodies, desires, feelings, and social and religious doctrines. A second difference is that the new Carrie, now embodied by Chloë Grace Moretz, has much more knowledge, agency, and

control than her 'twin sister' from De Palma's film. For instance, this Carrie counters her mother's biblical dogma that all women are sinful ('I am not Eve, mother!'). And when she discovers her powers to break glass or move things by her mental energy, she starts to read about telekinesis and practises her skills in her bedroom. In this way Carrie's feminine powers are not just wild, uncontrollable forces of nature that just unleash under great (social) pressure, but can be learned and practised.⁴ Both the internal, subjective female perspective and feminine knowledge agency and control seem important elements in female-directed blood-filled stories, to which I will return in the next sections as well.

Creed connects female monstrosity also in another way to 'the curse of blood', namely the blood of violence provoked by women as fearsome castrating figures, possessed by 'the curse of murder' as proclaimed by Carrie's mad mother. In the second part of *The monstrous-feminine*, Creed rereads Freud's case of Little Hans, insisting that 'Hans's various phobias and fears all stem from his original anxiety concerning his mother's genitals ...[which] ultimately represent castration, suffocation, death, the void – themes also common to the representation of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film' (Creed 1993, p. 102) Creed explains further that 'not knowing anything about the true nature of the female genitals, coition, and the origin of babies [...] he constructs a series of phantasies [...] in which he is almost always the passive victim of his mother's frightening sexuality'(p. 103). Creed discusses Carrie's witchcraft as a dimension of abjection and the ambiguous borders between the natural and the supernatural. Clearly, the unleashing of her uncontrollable, avenging, and murderous powers that turn the happy prom night into a blood flooded massacre colouring the entire lighting and mise-en-scène red, turns Carrie also into a dangerous, violent, and murderous femme castratrice, leaving no one alive, except Sue, the one schoolmate who was kind to her.

In de Palma's *Sisters* (1972), we also see this combination of monstrous femininity both as abject (the film opening with intra-uterine images of a Siamese twin) and as castrating (one of the twins embodying all the dark and murderous powers of the other). Like the images of abject femininity, the idea of the castrating woman takes many different forms, especially in the modern slasher film. It most prominently features in the subgenre of the rape-revenge movies of the 1970s and 1980s, one of the most controversial ones being Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).⁵ As Creed explains, the slasher film deals specifically with castration anxieties. Among the group of youngsters who become sexually active and who typically are one by one killed with primitive weapons (axes, saws, knives) by an anonymous murderer, there is always one girl who survives. In her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover called these resourceful and surviving heroines who are usually brown-haired and rather boyish (think of Laurie in *Halloween* [Carpenter dir.

1978]) 'final girls' (p. 201). The final girl allows cross-gender identification, and could be called the more innocent, that is sexually non-active, sister of the avenging castrating women of the rape-revenge films. The castrating woman in this more feminist subgenre takes revenge after a sexual assault and makes sure all of her perpetrators end in a bloodbath.

However, in spite of the gruesomeness of the heroine's revenge that is always justified by the rape at the beginning of the plot, Creed observes that there is still a gender misbalance if one compares the utter humiliation of the rape sequences of the woman, to the masochistic pleasures of the men who often die lured by the prospect of intercourse as they are first seduced before being murdered. Which makes her conclude that *I Spit on Your Grave* is 'still misogynistic in its representation of women' (Creed 1993, p. 129). Coralie Fargeat's over-the-top bloody *Revenge* (dir. 2017) presents a femme castratrice of the #MeToo-epoch with cult potential. *Revenge's* empowered castratrice shows that it does make a difference when a female director films the same plot but with less masochistic pleasure for the men involved. Just like Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (dir. 2016) offers a feminist pastiche on witchcraft, presenting a smashing modern-day sorceress who puts men under her deadly spell. These films offer new appropriations of typical horror elements described by Creed that nevertheless stay close to the genre formulas and all seem to confirm male anxieties, albeit from a female perspective and with certain feminist twists.

The 'Curse of Murder' of a Poetic Final Girl in *In the Cut*

Jane Campion's film *In the Cut* (2003) offers an interesting case with which to reconsider a feminine perspective and agency more radically but also more ambiguously. Usually described as an erotic thriller, I think it is defensible to consider Campion's female lead character as an atypical slasher or rape-revenge heroine. The film is about Frannie Avery, a high school literature teacher who gets involved with the detective that investigates a series of brutal murders of women in her Manhattan neighbourhood. In the space of this article I will not be able to do justice to all of the film's rich complexity, but I will highlight a few salient elements that indicate a different take on gendered violence through horror aesthetics.⁶

Let me start with images from towards the end of the film where we see Frannie (Meg Ryan) in a red dress, smeared with blood walking barefoot on the roadside. She has just killed the man who raped and dismembered her sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh); a fate of several other girls in her neighbourhood, all 'disarticulated' in particular violent ways. We see bloody body parts being pulled out of a bathtub, a washing machine, and on graphic evidential photos – all images that we are familiar with from the slasher genre (and unfortunately also still resonate with socially

gendered violence). This gruesome fate was almost Frannie's as well. By escaping from the murderer she is a 'final girl' and by avenging her sister's assaulter she could classify as a 'castrating woman' of the rape-revenge plot (even though she uses a gun rather than a knife). In some respects, the typical gender roles of the slasher plot are reversed. Where in De Palma's *Sisters*, for instance, the twin sisters Danielle and Dominique (both played by Margot Kidder), symbolise the docile 'good girl' and the terrifying 'bad girl' Champion presents us with a perverse version of a 'good cop/bad cop' embodied by detective Giovanni Malloy (Marc Ruffalo) and his partner Richard Rodriguez (Nick Damici). Frannie gets sexually involved with Malloy and throughout the film there is a constant ambiguity whether or not he'd be a 'homme fatale'. In the final scenes, she finds out it was Rodriguez who is the murderer, and the film ends when she returns to Malloy whom she tied to the water pipe of her apartment.

Even if this role-reversal could be considered as a feminist perspective that the film offers, Champion does not just reverse plot roles. To understand why Champion's heroine gets involved in this potentially dangerous situation, it is important to take into consideration how the aesthetics of the film create a fusion between inner spaces and the outside world. From the beginning the film sets up a whole range of ambiguities. Over the opening credit sequence, for instance, we hear a sweet women's voice singing 'Que sera sera', while the accompanying piano music has threatening disharmonious tones. Images of a sleazy New York neighbourhood reveal garbage in the streets, filtered through a soft morning sunlight, a red flower painted on the pavement vaguely resembles the body contour of a crime scene; a courtyard garden is full of lush plants, some scarlet red flowers breaking the harmony and at the same time adding a lively dimension. Pauline, wearing a vermillion orange-red dress, is in the garden, drinking a coffee, observing the plants, the sky; suddenly white petals drop from the sky, dotting the summer scenery like a snowstorm. An interior shot shows the 'snowstorm' through the window, while a red Chinese wind chime in front of the window reveals a small cozy apartment. Frannie, still in bed half-awake, sees the white dots and dozes off again; the petals merging with snow-flakes of dreamy sepia black-and-white images of a winter landscape, a woman making pirouettes in ice, a man's hand forming a fist in close-up as if he is about to hit out but then he just skates away from the camera. When he returns towards the camera, his skate carves a deep black cut into the white ice. The cut slowly turns red, the title of the film appears, the letters seem to start bleeding.

Dream and reality merge in the *mise-en-scène* of this opening sequence, bringing us closely into Fran's private space and mental world. Fran and Pauline (who stayed the night with her sister) leave the apartment, talking about slang words and their meanings, slang words that are 'either sexual or violent, or both' as they comment in their dialogue.

Fran has sticky notes with expressions and poetic phrases everywhere in her apartment. Soon it becomes clear that she is writing a book on slang, loves poetry, and teaches literature at a high school. Throughout the film we see her looking, noting down poetic lines on display in public spaces, savouring the words and expressions, enjoying language, and talking with her sister about lovers and sexuality. Back to the beginning of the film, by the time the sisters walk outside, the fluid frames of the camera work and frames within frames in the *mise-en-scène* have rendered all spaces small and intimate. The warm yellow-brown colour palette is covered in almost every scene with flecks of bright red (a dress, a chime, a curtain, a cap, a cup, a couch, a notebook, a flower, flecks of red light, bloodstains), and the soft summer light combined with the hints of violence in the music, the icy snow, the title design, and the words has established a familiar world that feels safe, and at the same time has a threatening undertone. The colour red that pops up consistently as flecks, dots, specks, and spots in the *mise-en-scène* indicates this ambiguity, perhaps even creates the double affective quality of violence and sexuality that runs throughout the entire film.

As Creed and Clover demonstrate, the combination of sex and violence is characteristic of the horror genre, but the differences in Campion's aesthetics are striking. Instead of a lonely girl in a terribly deserted house, there is confidentiality in an urban setting, an intimate bond between two sisters who talk about relationships, sex, work, and daily life; Campion presents us Frannie's private world, where dreams, memories, poetry, imagination, daily life and harsh reality of gendered violence all blend together. *In the Cut* explores the female psyche through eroticism and sexual desire (Benoit) but also through language and poetry, and through the female look (Frannie secretly observing a man receiving fellatio in the basement of a café being one of the most salient acts of looking). All this creates a deeply twisted appropriation of genre conventions of the horror film. Campion's film addresses something beyond the expression of male anxiety for the monstrous-feminine and the thrilling disgust that usually is the affect that the genre calls for.⁷ Rather, *In the Cut* stylistically constructs affective relations that open up the range of affects that the horror genre can reach for, thereby creating space for new perspectives. Here it is useful to make reference to Eugenie Brinkema, who argues for a more formal approach to the horror genre, emphasising that horror is a question of design and componentry that

opens up fields of possibility for thinking horror in unexpected places, within unexpected juxtapositions [...] horror as a problematic of aesthetics, form, design, element, and composition [...] insisting that textual structures and components are not incidental to affective charge but are indeed responsible for it.

(Brinkema 2015, p. 265; See also Brinkema 2014).

While I am not sure if form is responsible for affect and meaning (as I think all formal innovations are always connected to content and resonate with wider social developments), I do think that paying attention to the formal aspects of horror aesthetics, and especially thinking horror beyond the genre conventions, is helpful to rethink its affective meaning beyond gender conventions as well. I will just highlight one more element of *In the Cut* that speaks to this point. A central image in the film is the lighthouse. To the lighthouse is where the murderer takes his victims and where Fran is taken at the end of the film as well. It is here that she realises the truth, and where she kills her assaulter the moment he asks to marry her, offering her a blood-covered ring that all his victims wore when they were raped and killed. Obviously the lighthouse also refers to Virginia Woolf's famous novel *To the lighthouse*. Fran teaches the novel to her students, and in a scene at the beginning of the film we see her in class, a red lighthouse drawn on the blackboard, while she refers to Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style. One of her students complains that nothing happens in the novel, 'just an old lady who dies'. When Fran asks how many ladies have to die to make it good, the student replies 'at least three'. One cannot help to see this as a self-referential wink to the plot of the film, where indeed three women are brutally killed, perhaps as a formal reference to popular genre conventions, while at the same time the entire film is much closer to a subjective and meandering consciousness.

Virginia Woolf herself had a purely formal conception of the image of the lighthouse, as she stated: 'I mean nothing by the lighthouse, one has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together' (Woolf 2004, p. xiii). I'd like to suggest that the colour red in *In the Cut* functions in a similar compositional way as the lighthouse in Woolf's novel. The lighthouse functions as a beacon in the subjective worlds of Woolf's characters, such as Mrs Ramsay:

She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one's relation changes, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, so little her [...] but for all that, she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in the brain whose bursting would flood her with delight.

(2004, p. xiv)

Similarly, the composition of the images, sounds, and words in *In the Cut* create a stream-of-consciousness, create a subjective sphere of intimate relationships, of female sexuality as personal experience rather than display, of poetry, vulnerability and sexual pleasure, of trust and fear – and above all of creative agency.⁸

Maud Ellmann argues in her introduction to *To the lighthouse* that 'if the lighthouse is the "central line" it stands for all dividing lines that holds design together, for division as a principle of creativity. [...] *To the lighthouse* intimates that art is necessarily ambivalent, destructive and reparative by turns' (in Woolf 2004, p. xxii). As an element of composition, the redness of her lighthouse (and of all the other red splashes in the settings) stands for the poetry and erotic love that Frannie is quietly looking for, writing down lines of poetry in the metro, sticking them on the walls of her apartment. 'I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees', Malloy reads one of her notes when he visits her apartment for the first time. The metaphor is strong, connects to the summery petal storm at the beginning of the film, and starts to do its creative subconscious work in the aesthetics of the film, where the destructive physical violence afflicted on women's bodies is countered with reparative happiness of intimate pleasure; where the love for a potentially dangerous man has nothing to do with masochistic thrill-seeking but with a search between trust and distrust; and where reality merges with subjective perceptions, ambiguous feelings and thoughts in the composition of images and sounds. In short, if we can consider *In the Cut* as a feminine take on the horror film, it renders the notion of the monstrous-feminine itself ambiguous, presenting us with a 'dreamy final girl'. The abject as an ambiguous notion or border, cut and extended into creative abjection reaches beyond the typical horror emotions of fear, disgust, and other negative emotions infusing it with notions of poetry and feminine desire.

Posthuman Evolution and the 'Curse of Childbearing'

Let me return now to the curse of blood in relation to the curse of child-bearing to see if, here too, we find new perspectives. As Creed observed, one of the most salient features of monstrous femininity is related to 'the fear of her generative power' (1993, p. 16), Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) contains not only a reworking of Freud's primal scene (where the child sees the parents have intercourse and phantasies about the question: where do babies come from?) as a scene of birth, but also the idea of the archaic parthenogenetic mother, the mother who can give birth without the help of a male counterpart. Creed analyses several different variations of birth scenes inside the mother-ship of *Alien*, all staged by the invisible alien archaic mother. Moreover, *Alien* is also an example of a horror film that contains 'monstrous wombs ...intra-uterine settings that consist of dark, narrow, winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or other symbolic place of birth' (Creed 1993, p. 53). Other horror films refer to the monstrosity of the womb belonging to a woman who usually gives birth to some kind of terrifying creature; see David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (dir. 1979) as case in point. Again, the point of view on the terrifying 'curse of child bearing' in 1970s horror cinema is presented from the point of view of male anxiety.⁹

In spite of its gendered specificity, it took quite a while before female directors picked up the question of pregnancy and childbearing themselves. Petra Costa and Lea Glob recently translated the anxieties about and changes caused by pregnancy in their beautiful docufiction *Olmo and the Seagull* (2015). While not a horror film, the inner experiences and uncertainties involved in this feminine life changing experience are nevertheless powerful and terrifying. Considering the transformative bodily experience that pregnancy is, Alice Lowe, who directed herself in *Prevenge* (2016) while being pregnant, indicates that ‘pregnancy is the perfect time to make a horror movie’ (in Miller 2017) As Harriet Cooper indicates, ‘*Prevenge* is a black-comedic slasher film about a pregnant woman turned serial killer working on the instructions of her fetus’ (Cooper 2017, p. 1) that explores the status of pregnant women ‘with a marvelous and hilarious directness’ (ibid.). However interesting these films are, I will focus again on another female-directed film that addresses the questions of alien, alienating, and archaic motherhood and primal birth scenes, in more oblique and obtuse ways. *Evolution* (2015), directed by Lucille Hadzihalilovic addresses monstrosity in terms of striking and strange horror aesthetics. In 2004, Hadzihalilovic made *Innocence*, a film about girls growing up in a secluded boarding school deep in the woods who at the age of seven arrive in a coffin, all dressed in white, the colour of the ribbons in their hair indicating their age stages in becoming a proper woman. It is a film about the education of girls. Hadzihalilovich’s soft use of horror elements in the mise-en-scène and narration creates feelings of unease, as Nikolaj Lübecker analyses in his book *The feel-bad film* (2015). *Evolution* also contains elements of mystery, mythology, and menace and striking formal elements that infuse Creed’s notions of motherhood with new elements of ambiguity and ambivalence, addressing the feminine and female consciousness in a comparable yet different way than *In the Cut*.

Evolution is set in a remote microcosmos, a seaside village, filmed at the rocky shores of the Canary island Lanzarote. The village is uniquely populated by pre-adolescent boys, each of them living with a mother that might not be their biological mom. The women have a special connection to the sea, all alike in a sober, skin-coloured light-brown dress, wet hair worn in a tight tail, something alien in their black ‘vaguely cetacean’ eyes (Combs 2016, p. 71). At the beginning of the film, Nicolas (Max Brebant) is swimming in the sea when he sees among the waving corals a glimpse of a drowned body of a boy, a starfish on his body. Frightened, he runs home where his mother (Julie-Marie Parmentier) tells him that ‘the sea makes you see strange things’. A little later, she swims to the surface with a huge and bright red starfish as proof that he imagined things. She feeds him with slimy black-green seaweed and makes him swallow a black substance that is his medication ‘because at your age your body is changing and weakening like lizards or crabs’.

The eerie qualities of the setting and figures that populate this coastal commune, evoke horror scenarios in our mind but fail to fit any well-known template or affective response.

The starfish is an important and recurrent figure in the film. Besides its compositional bright red colour (to which I will return) it represents among others the Virgin Mary as Stella Maris (Star of the Sea), and as protector and guarantor of safe conduct over troubled waters (Combs 2016, p. 71). Connecting thus the sea (*la mer* in French) to motherhood (Virgin Mary, *la mère* in French) and to the language of the unconscious (the sea being a powerful force of nature and symbol for unconscious imagination). If Marguerite Duras, who was a master in describing *la mer/la mère* in poetic connection to the unconscious of her abstract characters, would ever have made a horror movie, she could have made *Evolution*. The starfish, however, also indicates a more posthuman conception of the unconscious, reproduction, and sexuality. One of the characteristics of starfish is that they can reproduce both sexually (by spawning, releasing sex cells into the water, usually in groups) and asexually (by breaking in two and regenerating the missing parts). And Hadzihalilovic has indicated in an interview that the film does not deal with sexuality, rather addresses a pre-sexual unconscious (in Prigge 2016).

Therefore, while the images that raise 'archaic motherhood' in first instance are more poetic and less horrific (the sea the starfish rather than an alien monstrous creature) Creed's notion of monstrous femininity is still relevant, albeit with another twist. As already indicated, the boys get some kind of medication to prepare them for 'changes in their body'. After the starfish incident, Nicolas becomes suspicious of his mother and follows her when she leaves the house at night. From behind a rock, he observes how the women of the village have grouped their naked bodies in a star-like pattern, crawling on the rocks like fish on dry land, seemingly giving birth to strange small creatures, or perhaps they are spawning. Definitely there is some form of nonhuman sexuality and reproduction going on; the women groan and cry, almost like a siren or mermaid call. Shocked and horrified, Nicolas runs back home. When he sees his mother later taking a shower, he notices strange suction cups on her back. Nicolas starts to rebel (drawing pictures, asking questions about the medication, openly doubting whether his mother truly is his mother). As a punishment he is brought to a gloomy hospital where all the doctors and nurses are also women. Here he undergoes an operation on his belly and is impregnated. The boys in the clinic, not all of whom survive, give birth either on the operating table or in some kind of water tank.

Here, we are in the full nightmare of phantasies about the monstrous feminine, archaic and parthenogenetic motherhood, and fearsome powerful women. While the operations on the boys' bellies and their giving

birth to some kind of creature certainly has a Cronenbergian touch to it, the body horror is all rendered in a very quiet way, subdued by the unmoved faces of the nurses who are watching the operation. And by the boys who are afraid but also very calm. There is no screaming that could invite the audience to do likewise. At the same time, also contrary to the male horror films about scary motherhood and primal birthing phantasies, it's a boy's body that undergoes the scary transformation. While for Hadzilalilovic the choice of young boys has more to do with a pre-pubescent gender-neutral perspective that she wanted to convey, she realised that choosing a girl would have brought in all the cultural connotations there are (in Prigge 2016). However, in spite of this neutral sexuality she intends, the fact that these are all boys in the hands of scary mother figures who, moreover, seem to undergo typical female experiences, does address a man's worst nightmare embodying monstrous femininity. But there is also more.

The boys regain strength on the ward. Here one of the nurses who takes care of Nicolas (Roxane Duran) is kind and protective of him and helps him to escape from the hospital and from the island, using her own cetacean mermaid body as his oxygen tank they swim underwater, in an ambiguous embrace, an 'underwater odyssey that is also a kind of mating' (Combs 2016, p. 71). Perhaps we could even argue that *Evolution* presents us with a thwarted tale of a 'final boy' who manages to escape, if only with the help of a not-completely-human friend. The nurse takes Nicolas to a boat far from the shore, where she dives back into the water, leaving him behind. It is only at this moment, at the end of the film, that he shouts her name and we learn that she is called Stella. Thereby recalling the starfish from the beginning of the film and closing the dreamlike, nightmarish loop. Hadzilalilovic comments in an interview that *Evolution* is an 'intimate and psychological story' (in Prigge 2016). So even if the film addresses something that we could call a collective unconscious, raising the symbolic images of the sea and the starfish, just like Campion did in *In the Cut*, Hadzilalilovic constructs a dreamy (nightmarish) world, borrowing some elements from the horror genre, but also completely transforming its aesthetics, opening to a wider array of emotions and an ambiguous open-ended meaning.

As in in Campion's film, the colour red is the formal element in the mise-en-scène that constructs all these layered and ambivalent meanings. Godard's famous 'not blood, just red' and 'not red, just blood' comes to mind (Barry 2012, p. 4).¹⁰ In *Evolution*, most of the settings are in dark or bleak colours: the black volcanic rocks of the island; the sand or skin-coloured dresses of the mothers; the white houses of the village at night covered in yellowish light points; and the green of the walls in the hospital matching the colour of the sea water in the deep sea scenes, sometimes filtered with some yellow sunlight, rendering the hospital like an underwater space of the unconscious (this also created

the impression that the scene where Nicolas gives birth in a water tank could also be a dream). And in these monochromatic fields, red speckles, dots, and splashes stand out. The red starfish in close-up at the beginning of the film covers almost the entire scene, like a gigantic and almost hallucinatory pool of red. Nicolas is the only boy who wears red swimming trunks, and when he runs on the rocks in a long shot, his body is seen almost as a moving red blood drop. In the hospital, the boys are covered by a dark red blanket, drenching their bodies in the subdued but violent redness of dried blood. Nicolas has a brown notebook and charcoal pencils to make his drawings, but Stella gives him a red pencil which he uses to colour the starfish on the belly of the boy in his drawings, and the curly vermillion hair of a female figure that he draws, and that seems to be inspired by the trails of wavy coral plants that he has seen in the deep sea.

All these formal elements in the *mise-en-scène*, and especially the construction of colour as both dangerous and trivial, nightmarishly mythical and mundane, add to the intimate, dreamlike, private unconscious dimensions of the film where the inner world and outer world seem to merge and where the nonhuman and human seem to combine in a posthuman universe.¹¹ This creates new dimensions of the monstrous-feminine where perhaps not everything is negative, and not every story needs to end in a gush of violence. The construction of colour red creates a psychological inner environment that invokes both danger and wonder. We see here how the notion of abjection as a liminal space between dream and reality, between the human and nonhuman, moves beyond Freudian psychoanalysis, perhaps into a posthuman mythical collective consciousness that is lurking below sea level.

A Trail of Red Transfusions

In talking about 'new blood', I cannot avoid one of the most notorious blood-sucking human/nonhuman abject figures of the horror genre: the vampire. Within the space of this article, I can only conclude by gesturing towards this bloodletting subgenre that prominently features in *The monstrous-feminine*. As Creed argued, the vampire, especially the female vampire, signifies the 'menstrual monster' par excellence (1993, pp. 59–72). Moreover, she is also an archaic mother-figure, giving and taking life, living for eternity herself as in *Daughters of Darkness* (Kümel dir. 1971) and *The Hunger* (Scott dir. 1983). One of the most striking new vampire films directed by a woman is *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Ana Lily Amirpour (dir. 2014). While the girl-vampire in Kathryn Bigelow's earlier take on the genre in *Near Dark* (dir. 1987) is brought back to a 'normal human life via a blood transfusion, leaving the question whether or not she is happy with that confirmation of the status quo at the end of the film dubious' (Schneider 2003,

p. 87), Amirpour's vampire girl is the first Iranian-American vampire that does not return to humanity. She is lonely, roams the streets of 'Bad City', her black *hijab* floating around her like a bat cloak. She feeds on bad guys and spares those who are good. The film is filmed in beautiful black-and-white cinematography. Red appears only in the posters but is absent from the *mise-en-scène* of the film. And yet, as Richard Misek has pointed out, in black-and-white film, blood is an example of an 'absent colour, that trace of colour reality that underlies black-and-white-images' (2010, p. 83). And so, also in this vampire film, there is a construction of 'red' at certain pointed (or rather 'fanged') moments in the film. Like *Campion* and *Hadzihalilovic*, Amirpour has created an inner space by using elements of horror aesthetics, in particular a formal and new red/blood. It is 'the Iranian environment in my brain' she explains in an interview, where she also talks about her interest in Jung's archetypes and *Jodorowsky's* dream logic (Juzwiak 2014).

And so, in concluding, I argue that the increase of female directors who have appropriated the elements of horror aesthetics, indicates that the monstrous-feminine as a figure signifying bloody abjection and violence, is still incredibly valuable. At the same time the strictly Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of the monstrous-feminine have opened up to other perspectives where female empowerment, agency and creativity create different kinds of ambiguities, different kind of affects, especially between inner streams of consciousness and outer perspectives on social injustice, power balances, and our relation to the world. Granted, the extension of horror aesthetics beyond fear and disgust, and across other genres in appropriating formal elements to address the notion of the abject in new ways, is also happening in male-directed films. Think of the friendship between a bullied young boy and a girl-vampire (who is a victim of child abuse) in Thomas Alfredson's *Let the Right One In* (dir. 2008). But then again, this 'gender neutrality' can only happen by working through the notions of the monstrous-feminine, by transfusing the fresh blood of the multiple feminine perspectives of *Carrie's* sisters with other human and nonhuman, natural and supernatural consanguineous relationships central to the horror film.

Notes

- 1 Stephanie Rothman directed *Blood Bath* (1966) and *The Velvet Vampire* (1971); Amy Holden Jones made *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982). Deborah Brock and Sally Matison directed the second and third part of this trilogy, all made within Roger Corman's production company. Katherine Bigelow co-wrote and directed the vampire-western *Near Dark* (1987). Other female directors in the 1980s are Jackie Kong (*Blood Diner*, 1987), Mary Lambert (*Pet Semetary*, 1989) and Katt Shea (*Dance of the Damned*, 1989). I also should mention here from the art world the short 8 mm films by Ana Mendieta such as *Sweating Blood* (1973), *Blood Writing* (1974), *Blood Sign* (1974), *Blood and Feathers* (1974), *Blood Inside Outside* (1975), *Siluetas Sangrientas* (1975) and *Corazón de Roca con Sangre* (1975).

- 2 Carol Clover's *Men, women and chainsaws* (1992) and Rohna Berenstein's *Attack of the leading ladies* (1996) are other important studies on horror and gender from the same period.
- 3 Between 2000 and 2018 the list of female directors who have appropriated the horror genre has become quite impressive and this essay is part of a book length study on female authored horror cinema. Among the directors that have used the language and tropes of horror cinema in one or more films are Mary Harron, Claire Denis, Marina de Van, Jane Campion, Lucille Hadzihalilovic, Kerry Ann Mullany, Julie Delpy, Karen Kusama, Emily Hagins, Andrea Arnold, Lynne Ramsey, Jen and Sylvia Soska, Kimberly Pierce, Axelle Carolyn, Helene Cattet, Ana Lily Amirpour, Leigh Janiak, Carol Morley, Jennifer Kent, Veronika Franz & Severin Fiala, Ruth Plath, Karyn Kusama, Kate Shenton, Anna Biller, Julia Ducournau, Alice Lowe, Jovanka Vuchovic, Annie Clark, Roxanne Benjamin, Lisa Bruhlman, Issa Lopez, Coralie Fargeat, and Shin Su-Won.
- 4 Pierce's *Carrie* thus resembles one of the heroines in Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power* (2016), who discover they have electrical superpowers that they can use (and abuse) to change the gender balance in the world.
- 5 See David Maguire's 'cultography' (2018) on this film (originally called *Day of the Woman*) and its remake and sequel by Steven Monroe (in 2010 and 2013) for its historical and political contexts and its polemic status as 'ground zero' for the rape-revenge genre and its countless imitators.
- 6 The film received mixed reviews, especially from male critics. Philip French, for instance, after wittily but flatly summarising the plot, remarks that the film just repeats the plot of *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (Kershner dir. 1978) to conclude rather condescendingly that of course the difference is that now, 25 years after male directors broke the taboo subject (a woman falling in love with a murderer), a feminist director changes the style, singing 'non, je ne regretted Ryan' (French 2003). See for an overview of *In the Cut*'s critical reception Lucy Butler (2014). See for an extended analysis of Campion's film Gozde Onaran's *Escaping entrapment* (Onaran 2017, pp. 117–157) and Catherine Benoit, 'Sex and violence as phantasm: eros and thanatos in Campion's *In the Cut*' (Benoit 2006).
- 7 See also Linda Williams, 'Film bodies: gender, genre, and excess' (1991).
- 8 See for the international reception of *In the Cut* Lucy Butler (2014).
- 9 Another worthwhile example to mention here is David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (dir. 1977), a film filled with anxieties about pregnancy and a monstrous brood that was inspired by his own experiences of becoming a parent.
- 10 'Not blood, just red' was Godard's commentary on the colour scheme of *Pierrot le Fou* (1965); 'Not red, just blood' was what he noted about *La Chinoise* (1967).
- 11 In Horror film: a critical introduction, Murray Leeder recalls H.P. Lovecraft's short story 'The colour out of space' in which Lovecraft describes the polluted consequences of an alien meteorite as a 'colour that was almost impossible to describe' (Leeder 2018, p. 186). Lovecraft's story then is the starting point for reflections on chromophobia and chromophilia in relation to the construction of fear through colour in horror cinema.

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