**UNLEASHING THE FURIOUS FEMININE:
The Violence of Gender Discourse in Canadian Horror Cinema**

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By

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ABSTRACT

Recent horror film theory largely perpetuates the rigidly structured gendered readings popularized by psychoanalysis. Such ideas no longer compliment a genre whose self-awareness often challenges patriarchal expectations. This analysis of Canadian horror cinema illustrates alternative approaches to gendered readings by focusing on the Canadian imagination: wildness, horror and chaos not only break into an enclosed community, but burst forth from it. Bruce McDonald's *Pontypool* (2008) illustrates the way in which not all horror films operate along strictly "gendered" lines. Jaume Collet-Serra's *Orphan* (2009) indicates that even those horror films which do operate along "gendered" lines are *not always* structured around a "heterosexual divide". Paul Fox's *The Dark Hours* (2005) suggests those "gendered" horror films that *are* structured around the "heterosexual divide" can re-imagine viewership as both masochistic *and* sadistic. Ultimately, this study of female representations and female viewership endeavours to demonstrate the complexity and frequent misrepresentation of these issues.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One “What Are We Talking About?”: Deconstruction and Discursive Horror Language in Bruce McDonald’s <i>Pontypool</i> (2008).....	22
Chapter Two “I’m Not Your Fucking Mommy!”: The Ontological Horror of ‘Women’ and Women in Jaume Collet-Serra’s <i>Orphan</i> (2009).....	47
Chapter Three “How Does That Make You Feel?”: The Epistemological Horror of Spectatorship in Paul Fox’s <i>The Dark Hours</i> (2005).....	69
Conclusion.....	100
Appendix: Films Cited.....	106
Bibliography.....	108

INTRODUCTION

Now admittedly, a great deal of useless yammering has been concerned with the 'truly Canadian' qualities... and one's first instinct is to avoid the whole question... Nevertheless, no one who knows the country will deny that there is something, say an attitude of mind, distinctively Canadian...¹

Certainly, there are many challenges in determining what constitutes “Canadian” cinema. After all, there is no single formula of industrial determinants that conclusively articulates the essential “Canadian” identity. Beyond the elements of financial investment, government support, national content, production values, and/or casting, there is something further to consider, something which is emphasized by the horror genre in particular: the Canadian imagination.

In theorizing the Canadian imagination, especially as it relates to Canadian horror cinema, it is necessary to consult the work of several well-established Canadian literary theorists which describe this sensibility according to specific iconography – the Canadian landscape, the winter season, the image of the house – and specific themes, such as isolation, protection and confinement. Northrop Frye’s notion of the “garrison mentality”² is often referenced in relation to these elements. He describes the experience of founding settlements in early Canadian history, characterized by the small, close, communities and the security of those living conditions from the threat of the wilderness. Eventually, tensions within the community lead to the real threat posed “when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far

¹Northrop Frye, *The bush garden: essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd, 1971), 131

² Frye, 225

subtler than the struggle of morality against evil.”³ In Frye’s theories, the spaces of landscapes and mindscapes correlate, indicating “a tone of deep terror in regard to nature... a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest.”⁴ From these circumstances, then, arise tensions between the “outside” and the community, and the individual and the community.

Margaret Atwood’s theories also detail the relationships between landscape and mindscape. She describes an imagined state influenced by “the central symbol for Canada... Survival...”⁵ where one’s own survival is also “a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival... the land, the climate, and so forth.”⁶ This preoccupation leads to the sensibility that “the true and only season here is winter...”⁷ Though it does not follow that all Canadian horror films must feature a winter landscape, or that any film set in winter is specifically Canadian, winter is used as a symbolic device to denote a sense of alienation and isolation. Its harsh weather conditions often enhance the experience of space and distance, and emphasize the relationship between interiors and exteriors, where interiors have been coded ‘safe’ and exteriors have been coded ‘dangerous’.

Winter alters the landscape in extreme ways – freezing temperatures, ice, snowfall and blizzards – presenting some of the harshest conditions of the wild outdoors. Survival of harsh landscapes and environmental extremes entails a retreat from those conditions, to seek refuge within small communities and enclosed indoor spaces. Truth be told, the themes of alienation and isolation are inherent in most horror films, including *Psycho* (1960), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *Halloween* (1978). Moreover, it is true that those themes are often enhanced by

³ Frye, 226

⁴ Frye, 225

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1972), 32

⁶ Atwood, 33

⁷ Atwood, 49

a winter setting, as seen in *The Shining* (1980), *The Thing* (1982), and *Misery* (1990). But that this winter landscape often mirrors the mental landscape of characters is especially significant in Canadian horror films.

Gail McGregor discusses winter as a setting for the “border condition”⁸ which is, above all else, the “interface between civilization and the wilderness.”⁹ This dichotomy is particularly denoted by the winter season, in that “regardless of actual, measurable temperature and snowfall, the Canadian winter [is] *experienced* as unbearably harsh and, especially, long...”¹⁰ This experience of winter, she discusses, brings about the response of recoil,¹¹ whereby one retreats into protective spaces, which therefore establishes a relationship between the internal and the external, the mental and the physical. However, this experience also translates to a sense of confinement, which McGregor argues is crucial to the Canadian imagination; even if it is “not the only, or indeed the ultimate, expression of the Canadian’s sense of his relation with the universe... it is probably the most *basic* form.” It is this sensibility that promotes the use of framing, a common motif in McGregor’s investigations, as well as a number of Canadian horror films. The Canadian imagination is largely visualized according to the tumultuous relationship between the internal and the external, where the violence of pressure quietly mounts until it bursts forth from this border. This thesis will demonstrate that the imagery of such a relationship is paralleled by the violence in horror film theory, which is often confined to a limited gender discourse. It will challenge the necessity of a gendered reading, interrogate its hetero-sexual divisions, and then reconsider the violent woman, whose ontology (her existence) and epistemology (her knowledge of herself and of the world which she confronts) has been

⁸ Gail McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 3

⁹ McGregor, 3

¹⁰ McGregor, 48

¹¹ McGregor, 78

suppressed. This project will thus configure the *furiously feminine*, for it is she who ultimately signifies the unleashing of female agency in cinematic representations and in viewership.

As such, I propose a study of the expression of the Canadian imagination in Canadian horror cinema, in accordance with such elements here communicated via Frye, Atwood, and McGregor. There are many reasons for “framing” such an examination of horror cinema. My subjectivity is, in part, formed by the fact that I am Canadian, and so I am interested in horror films that appeal to an understanding of that identity. Also, Canadian horror films have not been exhausted by the scrutinizing examinations of horror theory to the same extent as American horror films, like *Psycho* or *Halloween*, though many of David Cronenberg’s films, such as *Videodrome* (1983), and other Canadian horror films, like *Gingers Snaps* (2000), are well on their way. I believe it is safe to say that the films in this study – *Pontypool* (2008), *Orphan* (2009), and *The Dark Hours* (2005) – are below the radar of most horror film criticism. Though Canadian horror films are overshadowed by the volume of American blockbusters, these films of ‘lesser interest’ offer just as ideal conditions for horror film analysis, with explicit gore, twisted macabre plotlines, abject and transgressive representations, and significant, interesting female characters.

These features are certainly true of the selected films, especially insofar as each film depicts strong, *violent*, female characters whose illustration thus lends to the concept of the *furiously feminine*. As Linda Williams argues, it is undeniable that, especially in horror, “the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain.”¹² I argue that Canadian literary theory is useful for supplementing our understanding of the female in horror films, and by extension female viewership, as it

¹² Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.44, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), 4

configures a vital sense of female violence heretofore avoided by contemporary horror film theory. For Atwood and McGregor, the female character is at the centre of the Canadian narrative, embodying both a benevolent and a malevolent disposition as conveyed through the imagery of the “Nature-Woman metaphor.”¹³

Like countless female viewers before me, I have been drawn to the allure of horror films. There is something delicious about the dark magnetism of those slow inching moments when your heart is thumping in your ears, when the low pulsing music suddenly leaps to a pitch, when the mysterious creatures, killers, and monsters creep out of the shadows; it sends electric shivers up my spine. Horror films have come to depend on the “Final Girl”¹⁴, the strong salient female saviour, to pick up a weapon and face the danger before her. But there is something more to be said regarding the vicarious experience of enacting deep, dark, primal violence; a frequent alignment with the “Final Girl” just does not cut it. Horror theorists have analysed the genre over and over again, ripping apart every aspect to expose its gory inner workings: the sinews of psychoanalysis, the fleshy tendons of feminist theory. I want to see more of the meat of the female monster that I know is buried in there, waiting to be unleashed.

Each of the films in this study depicts female monsters. Moreover, the films explore monstrosity and violence in reaction to external pressures, particularly the threat of the chaotic environment and the survival of the community. These forces enable the separation of an individual from the collective by emphasizing the dislocation of the individual. Inevitably, the pressures of distance and proximity, of borders and spaces, weigh against the individual,

¹³Atwood, 210; in *Survival*, Atwood’s chapter entitled, “Ice Women and Earth Mothers” is evocative of the duality of the Mother Nature imagery, and the various forms it may take. McGregor similarly speaks of Mother Nature as a “source of health” and “an arena for violence.” *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 21

¹⁴ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35

foregrounding the protagonist's ultimate confrontation with external forces. In accordance with ideas formulated by Frye, Atwood, and McGregor, Canadian horror films reveal an alternate understanding of Robin Wood's theory of the "Return of the Repressed"¹⁵: horror arises from the *reaction against* external forces. I intend to investigate the Canadian imagination within a context of Canadian horror films, in search of greater insight into issues of female representations and female viewership.

Recent horror film theory has assumed that the genre is rigidly structured along gendered lines, that the audience is predominantly young and male, and that women "are given so little to identify with on the screen"¹⁶, as female characters are victims who sympathize with monsters or, are abject monsters¹⁷, and that when female characters have heroic roles they can function only as stand-ins for the teenage boys in the audience¹⁸.

I propose to challenge these assumptions, but in doing so, I must return to a point in horror film theory where important distinctions are clearly being made. Robin Wood is among the first theorists to unearth the psychoanalytic body of theory in the horror film genre, particularly through his analysis of the "Return of the Repressed".¹⁹ In "An Introduction to the American Horror Film", Wood illuminates the generic features of horror, distinguishing between basic repression and surplus repression, repression and oppression, reactionary horror and 'apocalyptic' or progressive horror, and so on. He examines common arteries running through

¹⁵ Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason. Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 115

¹⁶ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15

¹⁷ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 41

¹⁸ Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 97

¹⁹ Wood, 115; on page 113, he describes the notion as a concern with "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses; its re-emergence dramatized... a matter for terror..."

most horror films by laying out the horror film corpus – left to rot by a number of film theorists the world over – and dissecting it with scalpel-happy enthusiasm, thereby elevating the genre for future critical discourse within Film Studies as a whole.

In the process of separating the reactionary horror limbs from the progressive horror limbs, Wood comments that horror films “are progressive precisely to the degree that they refuse to be satisfied with this simple designation – to the degree that, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, they modify, question, challenge, seek to invert it.”²⁰ However, his textual analyses of certain films (especially of those in David Cronenberg’s oeuvre) drip with disdain; he also includes Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), which parades around in progressive skin and “clearly wants to be taken, on a fairly simple level, as a ‘progressive’ movie, notably in its depiction of women.”²¹ But his analysis exhumes the underlying reactionary body believed to have been put to rest. He describes it with undisguised contempt:

What it offers on this level amounts in fact to no more than a ‘pop’ feminism that reduces the whole involved question of sexual difference and thousands of years of patriarchal oppression to the bright suggestion that a woman can do anything a man can do (almost). This masks (not very effectively) its fundamentally reactionary nature.²²

In some respects, Wood’s remarks speak the truth of many contemporary horror films: most horror films focus on the female body, and even in offering a female protagonist and a number of secondary female characters, these horror films reduce female representations to restrictive archetypes. Even if feminist theorists champion those ‘strong’ female characters, they fall into the paradoxical trappings of patriarchal expectations and assumptions of females. While I concur

²⁰ Wood, 134

²¹ Wood, 138

²² Wood, 138

with a number of Wood's arguments, it is troubling that, in Wood's opinion, "it is the reactionary horror film that dominates the genre."²³

Despite the emergence of countless critically engaging films since the time of his initial theories, Wood concludes that even those few films which predominantly feature the progressive horror tradition and "in their various ways reflect ideological disintegration and lay bare the possibility of social revolution," films like "*Halloween* and *Alien*, while deliberately evoking maximum terror and panic, variously seal it over again."²⁴ Wood does not champion many films as progressive horror films, and even those that have the potential, he dismisses as useless bloody organs and disposes of them as though they were biological hazardous waste. I, on the other hand, am curious to see what Frankensteinian monster can be created with those organs. Perhaps there is life in them yet.

Linda Williams' analytical scalpel also slices into the flesh of female representations. Her essay, "When the Woman Looks," draws on the theories of Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane to link the cinematic apparatus to a male gaze, thereby objectifying the female characters in films. She examines the frustrated female gaze, and the alignment of the monster and the woman in horror films, who are both icons of victimization in patriarchal society: the female is defined by sexual difference from the male, while the monster is defined in relation to its "own spectacular appearance."²⁵ According to Williams' argument, female characters that look at the monster draw a connection to their own difference and the similarity in their positions of exhibition. While Williams draws connections between the female character and the monster, she

²³ Wood, 140

²⁴ Wood, 140

²⁵ Williams, 18

overlooks the female's reaction to this connection, and therefore the female monster, which lurks in even the darkest corners of classical horror.

Despite her attempts to illustrate the female gaze in horror films, Williams' ideas are still overshadowed by Freudian concepts such as male castration anxiety. At first, Williams ushers in Susan Lurie's ideas to expose the real threat posed by the female: that the female has *not* been castrated. The female is physically whole in her own right, and furthermore is imbued with a sense of power based on this sexual difference. In effect, male castration anxiety is nothing more than a projection of the overactive male imagination. Female characters can indeed be deemed monstrous, but by virtue of a number of more substantial elements than the fearsome ghost of phallic absence. However, Williams inevitably transforms female *sexuality* into the real villain. She outlines figures of difference such as the vampire, who sucks "blood, sapping the life fluid of a victim so that the victim in turn becomes a vampire... similar to the female role of milking the sperm of the male during intercourse."²⁶ By and large, the monsters that support Williams' main argument are male: the phantom of the opera, Count Dracula, King Kong, Mark in *Peeping Tom* (1960), Norman Bates in *Psycho*, and Dr. Elliot in *Dressed to Kill* (1980). The latter two examples invite ambiguity, but alas, the evil and unstable female personalities in these situations are still understood as evoking the threat of castration, either figuratively in Norman Bates' case, or literally in Dr. Elliot's case.

But her ideas can evolve beyond patriarchal limits, to develop theories of female monsters. She makes an important reference to *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), where "the Bette Davises and Joan Crawford considered too old to continue as spectacle-objects

²⁶ Williams, 23

nevertheless persevere as horror objects...”²⁷ However, she undermines the film’s potential by suggesting that “there is not that much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned.”²⁸ Once again, she equates horror with a negative representation of sexuality and reduces horror figures to ‘objects’, which encourages their objectification by viewers.

Regrettably, Williams’ discussion maintains theories of male spectatorship, with the exception of her weak appeal to female viewers to recognize and change their apparent viewing habits:

It is crucial for women spectators to realize the important change that is taking place before our very eyes, but which habits of viewing, not to mention habits of not viewing, of closing our eyes to violence and horror in general, may keep us from seeing.²⁹

Granted, she allows that there are female spectators, but only insofar as those spectators sit cowering before the images, shielding their fragile minds. Williams’ examination is simply another discussion that ignores the potential for female horror characters to unleash a reign of terror as only monsters can, and underestimates the dark desire of female spectators to see as much.

Barbara Creed mends some of the wounds inflicted by Williams. She addresses the implications of psychoanalytic theory in horror by introducing the notion of the *monstrous-feminine*³⁰. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection plays an important role in Creed’s analysis, which illustrates the negative representation of the female as abject.³¹ Like Williams’ treatment of female characters, Creed’s argument relates a sense that female characters are deemed

²⁷ Williams, 21

²⁸ Williams, 21

²⁹ Williams, 32

³⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1

³¹ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” 36

‘monstrous’ because their gender differences determine them to be only “partially formed subjects”³², though Creed goes on to equate them with figures such as the corpse, vampires, zombies, ghouls, and werewolves, since these figures are all interstitial beings which reflect that “abjection is above all ambiguity.”³³

Creed uses the theory of abjection to analyse a more specific female figure in horror: the mother. This figure embodies a number of ‘abject’ aspects of the female, such as menstruation and “the procreative function of women.”³⁴ But horror films that revolve around these ‘horrific’ elements of female puberty or motherhood limit the depiction of female monsters to the ‘monstrous-feminine’. Creed’s arguments are useful, but her discussion of the mother figure accounts for only a portion of female representations in horror films. Her analysis is not necessarily applicable to the entire horror film corpus. Still, she bases the sexual difference not on what the female form lacks, but what it boasts, allowing the female character to be a monster in her own right, rather than by strict comparisons to male representations. Creed is concerned with female representations revolving around “the mother as originating womb... as outside the patriarchal family constellation... the mother as sole parent.”³⁵ But this female character, even in all of its maternal power, is still a negative representation. Her physicality is still objectified, and female sexuality is still demonized. Female characters can be monstrous in more ways than by their having murderous wombs: by her sense of reason, her need for control, and even at times by her sadistic nature. Violent female characters are not always driven by the basic need to survive or to castrate males; nor are they always sexually monstrous caricatures of femininity.

³² Creed, 36

³³ Creed, 40

³⁴ Creed, 54

³⁵ Creed, 53

Arguably, female violence often erupts against the pressures rising from social milieus, as a means to assert their agency and power.

Carol J. Clover's essay, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," positions horror films (particularly the slasher genre) as indicators of social climates and concurrent sexual attitudes. Like Wood, she argues that "because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, [it] gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, as least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience..."³⁶ She senses that the horror genre has been disturbed and awakened by the noise of negative gender representations, and determines that while horror films may resurrect original patriarchal notions, they are also quite capable of slaughtering them.

In order to examine female representations, Clover dismembers the slasher subgenre, chopping it in to distinguishable pieces: the killer, the locale, the weapons, the victims, the "Final Girl", and shock effects.³⁷ In the section describing the killer, she hypothesizes that the male killer, a symbol that the "male gender is in distress,"³⁸ is stuck in a state of "arrested development."³⁹ In contrast, her mention of female killers amounts to a few uninspired lines about the violence of the "scorned woman"⁴⁰. She then quickly abandons the discussion of female killers for a focus on a specific female archetype: the "Final Girl". Engrossed by female victims, Clover argues that females almost always die "because they are female"⁴¹ and often their deaths are of much more explicit and prolonged nature than that of the male characters. But

³⁶ Clover, 68

³⁷ Clover, 75; similarly, Vera Dika theorizes the stalker genre examines only those films released roughly between 1978-1981. *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Genre* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990).

³⁸ Clover, 75

³⁹ Clover, 75

⁴⁰ Clover, 77

⁴¹ Clover, 81

along comes the “Final Girl”, an evolved female figure who is the victim-hero, both vulnerable and strong. She is the symbol of female empowerment. Her self-awareness distinguishes her as the one who will battle the killer.⁴² Despite this description, Clover eventually reduces the figure to her ‘boyish’⁴³ qualities, and in effect, triumphs the heroic male archetype. She also describes the “Final Girl” as a point of alignment for the male viewer, who understands the figure as a position of “the adolescent male.”⁴⁴ She effectively shuts out the female viewer, depriving her of theoretical examination, thus leaving the complexity of female viewership relatively untouched.

Still, theories which discuss positive female representations in the slasher film are developing. On viewership and identification, Clover criticizes the “assumption that the sexes are what they seem; that screen males represent the Male and screen females the Female; that this identification along gender lines authorizes impulses toward sexual violence in males and encourages impulses toward victimization in females.”⁴⁵ The view that most horror films do not accurately represent the complexity of gender is one shared by a number of theorists beyond Mulvey and Doane. As Rhona Berenstein writes in *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, horror is “also a generic space in which human characters, male *and* female, behave monstrosly and transgress the social rules and roles that usually confine them.”⁴⁶ Gender, she surmises, is “a form of role play,”⁴⁷ and there is a definite “degree to which all women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artefacts... constructing the signifier ‘woman’.”⁴⁸ Moreover, many expectations of horror films do not accurately represent the complexity of gender. Theoretical

⁴² Clover, 86

⁴³ Clover, 86

⁴⁴ Clover, 97

⁴⁵ Clover, 89

⁴⁶ Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5

⁴⁷ Berenstein, 8

⁴⁸ Berenstein, 8

discussions thus far, including Clover, demonstrate that “representation itself is at issue.”⁴⁹ Contrary to the stigma of horror films being misogynistic, many slasher films seem to also say that only women (the “Final Girl”) have the strength to control male violence. But female violence can be just as cruel and calculating.

Clover could have commented on how recent horror subgenres also re-configure the monster as a thinking female being: Jennifer seeks gory retribution in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978; 2010); both Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (1980) and Mrs. Loomis in *Scream 2* (1997) seek revenge for the theft of their sons, and formulate stratagems to ensure their own brands of punishment are dealt. In *Urban Legends* (1998), Brenda follows a similar scheme to enact her own sense of justice for the death of her boyfriend. These female representations become monstrous when they react to their lived experiences; they are capable agents of violence.

Sue Short considers the horror of lived experiences in *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage*. She examines the intersection of fairytales and horror films, and the reiteration of the myth of ‘Women’, by positioning horror films as female rites of passage. Many horror film narratives focus on the female as “misfit,”⁵⁰ as one who does “not fit the conventional mould of socially approved femininity, and can be seen to question it instead.”⁵¹ She points out that fairytales rely on this female representation and that sources of these tales originate from the mouths of female story-tellers, mothers who told their daughters haunting tales to both inform and caution them about the evils of society⁵². The trouble with folklore and fairytales is that they are part of an oral tradition. It is difficult to prove the precise origins of these narratives, since these narratives are exchanged like cultural currency.

⁴⁹ Clover, 90

⁵⁰ Sue Short, *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 13

⁵¹ Short, 13

⁵² Short, 10

Regardless of Short's gendered analysis of fairytales, she does allow that many fairytales in their pre-patriarchal forms "warned as much about women as they did about men."⁵³ Even more significantly, she argues for the greater contexts which lend to the study of horror films:

...horror's preoccupation is not with sex alone, nor even with sexual difference, but a host of concerns that reflect the period in which films are produced, the diverse interest of their makers, and the various meanings people have cared to read into the resulting texts... responding to changing cultural conditions.⁵⁴

However, Short's analysis primarily considers horror films as a means of articulating the female adolescent experience in such a way as to "reclaim the power to unsettle,"⁵⁵ by asserting a female heroine as the symbol for female experience, and rewriting the restrictive patriarchal notions of gender.

This female character celebrates "female cunning as a heroic quality" and presents "disobedience as a necessary survival skill,"⁵⁶ thus evoking images of Clover's "Final Girl". But Short implies that patriarchal depictions of female experiences can be overcome through the horror genre, through the provision of models of the female as a heroic figure in her own right.⁵⁷ I argue that it is also possible for a female figure to be a monster 'in her own right,' if her lived experiences lend to it. I argue that Short's notion of the "misfit" can also be understood according to divergences in courses of action, associated with the *anti-heroine* and the *anti-villain*, two figures whose moral ambiguity connote a similar sense of the outcast experience.

⁵³ Short, 154

⁵⁴ Short, 8

⁵⁵ Short, 162

⁵⁶ Short, 155

⁵⁷ Short, 33

An *anti-heroine* is an interstitial figure in a personal struggle with traditional moral notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as evidenced by her conspicuous lack of heroic qualities⁵⁸. In his work, *In Praise of Antiheroes*, Victor Brombert relates an understanding of the anti-hero as one who is often distinguished as the “negative hero.”⁵⁹ This figure is a “perturber and a disturber ... [where] the accompanying critique of heroic concepts involves strategies of destabilization...”⁶⁰ Anti-heroes are often theorized as those who destabilize traditional norms, and exist as marginal characters. This figure is described as one “who is deeply uncertain about his past and unsure about the meaning of the present activity he is engaged in and the very fabric of his identity.”⁶¹ These characters are inherently flawed, or fallen, and in recognizing this about themselves, they are redeemed by some action or evident change for the better. Ultimately, it is a character with whom we can empathize.

This figure is already notable in horror films. In *Psycho*, to use a very well-known example, Marion Crane is a definite morally ambiguous character: a thief with a conscience. When a real estate client gives her \$40,000 to deposit in the bank, she steals the large sum and quickly leaves town, a fugitive on the run. Later, she realizes the significance of her actions, and, struck with guilt, she decides to return the money despite the consequences. McGregor also describes this figure, indicating that the one “who *confronts* his isolation is still the exceptional man, the anti-hero, the rare individual whose terrible integrity sets him apart...”⁶² This character type is not specifically associated with one gender, as McGregor’s sentiment clearly indicates.

⁵⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Anti-hero,” accessed January 18, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anti-hero>

⁵⁹ Victor Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2

⁶⁰ Brombert, 2

⁶¹ Andrew Spicer, “Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir’s Existentialist Antihero,” in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 47

⁶² McGregor, 106

Anti-heroism thus features prominently into the Canadian imagination, as its correlation of the internal and the external suggests the tensions inherent in a position of isolation, as one who is “outside” the community.

By comparison, the *anti-villain* is a figure whose definition is primarily contemporary, still emergent in popular culture. This figure has yet to be fully theorized, given its noticeable absence from a number of traditional and official referential sources. However, it is currently understood to be an “antagonist who is not purely evil or entirely unsympathetic.”⁶³ The anti-villain is also a morally ambiguous character who inevitably turns down the ‘wrong’ path. Ultimately, this is a character that we condemn.

This figure, too, is already present in horror films. Returning to the previous example of *Psycho*, Norman Bates, a lonely motel proprietor who lives a relatively quiet existence with his mother out in the country can be understood as an anti-villain. He suffered emotional abuse in this co-dependent relationship with his mother. At the end of the film, it is revealed that he reacted violently to his mother taking a lover, and murdered both of them. Thereafter, he developed dissociative identity disorder, assumed his mother’s personality, and murdered the motel’s sole guest, Marion Crane. Though initially pathetic or pitiable, this character is stuck in a pattern of horribly wrong choices, and inevitably surrenders to his ‘evil’ side.

The outcast experience I will explore over the course of this study is further understood via a correlation between these character representations. The *shock of similarity* is the moment (or moments) of recognition shared between ‘misfit’ characters such as the *anti-heroine* and the *anti-villain*. They come to understand their individual instances of fragmentation and entrapment

⁶³ Urban Dictionary, s.v. “Anti-villain”, accessed January 18, 2011, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=anti-villain>

while sharing an emotional exchange or an exchange of knowledge unknown to other characters. In effect, this instance brackets them within the narrative realm.

Despite apparent correspondences with the Freudian theory of the uncanny doppelgänger, I hesitate to suggest that the two are interchangeable. Freud's discussion of the 'double' is contingent on three aspects: the identical likeness of physical appearance, the shared experience of knowledge or mental processes, and the recurrence of similar situations.⁶⁴ While the *shock of similarity* shares the latter two qualities, it is without the first of these aspects; this notion is not bound by the identical appearance of those experiencing it. The *shock of similarity* is not a narcissistic projection of one's self (or ego, as Freud would have it) onto another form. It is not that the self is being split apart so that elements of the self are constituted by separate beings; it is that each character oscillates between those elements, embodying both 'good' and 'bad' aspects together. As *Psycho* illustrates, Marion is both good-natured and capable of wrongful acts. Norman is an agreeable bachelor but also a psychopathic killer. We can contrast these two figures by considering the possible outcomes of such psychologically complex characters. Both of these figures symbolize a departure from an initial collective. Both are self-aware of their liminality, and of the implications of their actions. However, the *anti-heroine* returns to some sense of community on *her own terms*, while the *anti-villain* is often at a fatal disadvantage in remaining outside a collective. In short, it is only the *anti-heroine* who changes for the better (even if she ends up dead in a rundown motel washroom).

Because of their destabilizing ambivalence, the anti-heroine and anti-villain open up a space for a wide range of spectator alignments and subjective identifications not limited to the

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny"; first published in *Imago*, Bd. V., 1919; reprinting in *Sammlung*, Funfte Folge, Trans. Alix Strachey. Online PDF, accessed January 21, 2011, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>, pg. 9

binary opposition between monster and victim that conventional horror theories promote. Isabel Christina Pinedo relates the importance of subjective experience in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. She introduces herself as a horror film fan, a cultural analyst, and a feminist. She relates the influence of these aspects on her work, and describes her intentions of exploring contemporary horror film spectatorship with a focus on “representation and reception as sites of multiple and shifting identifications.”⁶⁵ Pinedo is describing the very ingredient that film theorists often overlook when theorizing the female viewer: subjectivity.

Pinedo’s analysis is also a personal investigation into female spectatorship. She writes, “As a feminist, I must raise these questions about female spectatorship. As a woman, they are ultimately questions about myself.”⁶⁶ Her analysis highlights the “autobiographical character of inquiry”⁶⁷ imbedded in film-viewing. The personal account of film reception can contribute to a larger theoretical account of female spectatorship, and Pinedo endeavours to do so while still conserving “the tension between critical distance and passionate involvement.”⁶⁸ Pinedo underscores the provision of an environment in which contradictory readings co-exist, which in turn serves the subjectivity of spectatorship. So, a female spectator may align herself with the “Final Girl”, the strong and resourceful saviour. But, she may also entertain unspoken sadistic pleasure by aligning with the female monster, or what I will later describe as “the violent woman,”⁶⁹ a term I borrow and expand upon from Hilary Neroni.

⁶⁵ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1997), 3

⁶⁶ Pinedo, 4

⁶⁷ Pinedo, 4

⁶⁸ Pinedo, 5

⁶⁹ Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman. Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2

Horror theorists have taken great care to analyse the heroine in horror films as the more likely point of alignment, especially for female spectators. But it is also possible that they may align with female killers, or at least, their actions; some female spectators enjoy watching the killer torment annoying characters, or recognize their own irrational fears coming to life onscreen. In effect, the female spectator can expel sadistic thoughts or irrational fears vicariously through the actions of the killer, without having to rationalize them.

Pinedo discusses the “Final Girl” as a female killer, since she must defeat (or at least subdue) the killer. The “Final Girl” kills as a means of self-defence, where murder is justified as long as it falls under the “by any means necessary”⁷⁰ exception. But there are female monsters who are motivated to kill for justice, for revenge, and even for sadistic pleasure. Furthermore, there are female spectators among us who can sit through the thrills of horror films without spilling their popcorn at each loud noise, or cowering in fear behind their hands. For these reasons, I will employ Pinedo’s discussion of “recreational terror”⁷¹ to underscore the experience of the *sadista*, the sadistic female viewer.

Over the next few chapters, I will delve into the nuances of gendered readings in horror films, and Canadian horror films in particular. In Chapter One, I will support the idea that not all horror films operate along strictly “gendered” lines, as noted in *Pontypool* (in which the monster, namely viral language, simply cannot be understood as a manifestation of the monstrous-feminine, no matter how much one might try to make it fit under Creed’s seemingly all-encompassing rubric). However, even those horror films which do operate along “gendered” lines are *not always* structured around a “heterosexual divide”. In Chapter Two, I will take

⁷⁰ Pinedo, 76

⁷¹ Pinedo, 5

Orphan as a case in point where “gender difference” can refer to the differences within *one* gender. Finally, in Chapter Three, I will address those “gendered” horror films, such as *The Dark Hours*, that *are* structured around the “heterosexual divide”, by arguing that these films do not always follow the “Final Girl” narrative or display the spectacle of the “monstrous feminine”. Instead, these films display the spectacle of violence through the *furious feminine*, which appeals to the masochistic *and* sadistic features of viewership in general, and the sadistic female viewer, in particular. Ultimately, this research on female representations and female viewership endeavours to emphasize the complexity of these subjects while contributing to our understanding of Canadian horror cinema.

CHAPTER ONE

“What Are We Talking About?”: Deconstruction and Discursive Horror Language in Bruce McDonald’s *Pontypool* (2009)

Derrida’s idea is not to let the first reading become the last word...¹

There is a misconception that all horror films can or must be understood in accordance with gendered readings. The dissemination of this idea is a misinterpretation of the fundamental mutability of the horror genre, which can *but does not necessarily* rely on gender difference as its source of terror. We need to correct this misunderstanding by recognizing the threads of concurrent discursive declarations in horror cinema, its inherent *différance*, its endless differing of signification through difference, as a “whole complex of... meanings at once, for it is immediately and irreducibly multivalent...”²

Bruce McDonald’s film *Pontypool* (2008) exemplifies not the dread of gender difference but the dread of linguistic *différance*, which breeds profound anxieties around verbal and textual instability. As such, it invites a reflection on the deconstructive processes of language, where not only language changes, but meaning does as well. This approach is a useful alternative against the dominance of gendered readings of horror films, for it illustrates that there are many ways to read horror films from a genderless perspective; in the case of *Pontypool*, the main issue is not gender but rather language. Its play on the fear of the destruction of language points to larger notions regarding (1) the fear of linguistic *différance*, and (2) how English is a language which is more drenched in a blood bath of *différance* and difference than other languages such as French.

¹ John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. and with a commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 81

² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 137

The film illustrates how, contrary to popular belief, “deconstruction is not... a destruction or a demolition, but a way of releasing and responding, of listening and opening up...”³ McDonald’s *Pontypool* is a metaphor which takes the English language, a language system that is so thoroughly “borderless” (both linguistically and geographically), as the clearest example of a language that is in a constant state of self-deconstruction.

“How Do We Make [Gendered Readings] Strange?”

Gender theory has dominated scholarship on the horror film for several decades, but it is by no means the only lens through which horror films can be viewed. MacDonald’s *Pontypool* is a site of illustration and divergence, where an attempt to adopt a gendered reading reveals more about the limits of the method, than it does in providing productive gender meanings. The film, set in the small wintry Ontario town of Pontypool, is centered around the claustrophobic interior space of a radio station where radio news anchor Grant Mazzy, producer Sydney Briar, and production assistant named Laurel-Ann Drummond, encounter an outbreak of a virus which infects the English language. This film encourages a reading where horror is less concerned with the boundaries of male and female, than with the boundaries of the visible and the invisible, interiors and exteriors. There are three main points through which one can challenge the conventional gendered reading.

The first concern is in relation to the monster. Though many film theorists indicate that the presence of a monster or monster-figure is not sufficient to characterize the horror genre⁴ as a whole, the monster is generally held to be the central crisis of the horror film. Robin Wood

³ Derrida and Caputo, 57

⁴ For example, Noël Carroll indicates that the monster is a useful mark of the horror genre, but that we must primarily concern ourselves with how the genre “is essentially linked with a particular affect – specifically, that from which it takes its name.” *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 14-15

declares that one of the most basic elements of the horror genre is that “normality is threatened by the Monster.”⁵ In turn, Barbara Creed (among other theorists) incorporates gendered difference into the genesis of the monster. She employs Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to describe the nature of the monster, where horror arises from the primal uncanny and “the classical male monster”⁶ whose constitution is based on a transformation evoking patriarchal “otherness” for its challenges to social expectations of gender and behaviour. Creed also speaks of the monster through the *monstrous-feminine*: the female monster, most often in the form of the castrated mother who is “defined in terms of her sexuality”.⁷ According to these terms, the monster or monster-figure is necessarily gendered.

However, in *Pontypool*, the source of terror does not abide by traditional conceptualizations of gendered monstrosity; instead, the threat to normality is posed by “a deadly virus being spread through language.”⁸ The trouble with the monster in this film is that we cannot actually *see* the body of the monster itself. According to Kirsten Ostherr in *Cinematic Prophylaxis*, “representational inoculation” is possible under the assumption that “if one can see the contaminant, one can avoid infection.”⁹ But this form of monstrosity, the virus, is invisible to the human eye. The virus is implied to be disembodied; it has no *easily* visible, tangible body of its own. Without a visual signifier, there is a “difficulty of visually representing the virus.”¹⁰ Attempts to identify – to contain – this form of monstrosity within gendered categories are

⁵ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film”, in *Planks of Reason. Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2004), 117; Stephen Neale also states that the definition of the horror film is dependent on the “images and definitions of the monstrous”. *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 21

⁶ Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic. Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Victoria: Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2005), vii

⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 3

⁸ *Pontypool*, directed by Bruce McDonald (2008; Canada: Maple Pictures, 2009), DVD.

⁹ Kirsten Ostherr, *Cinematic Prophylaxis. Globalization and Contagion in the Discourse of World Health* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2005), 2

¹⁰ Ostherr, 1

frustrated; gender is not a visible characteristic or symptom of this monster. If we cannot discern an instance of gender in relation to the monster, then there must be another way in which to visualize the threat. To clarify, it is not that gender readings are meaningless, or that an absence of gender theory necessarily implies a lack of meaning. Rather, it is that gender readings do not signify *entirely*. In a superficial way, a gendered reading could be applied to the concern that “the human body is a recurring object of anxious attention.”¹¹ However, it is even more apparent that the linguistic body is the object of anxiety.

A second concern with the difficulty of assuming a gendered reading of this film is in relation to the victim. Often, victims in horror films are theorized according to gender – that is, the woman is often the victim. A multitude of film theorists follow Laura Mulvey’s basic model of the woman/victim notion, whereby “typically in the horror film, the woman or visual object is also the chief victim sacrificed to the narrative desire to know about the monster.”¹² However, it is the case in films like *Pontypool* that victims of a virus are not discriminated via gender. The effects of the virus affect all victims according to the same stages of infection, regardless of whether the victim is male or female. In an interview, director Bruce McDonald describes the nature of this virus, indicating three stages which afflict all infected victims:

The first stage is you might begin to repeat a word. Something gets stuck. And usually it's words that are terms of endearment like sweetheart or honey. The second stage is your language becomes scrambled and you can't express yourself properly. The third stage you become so distraught at your condition that the only way out [of the] situation you feel, as an infected person, is to try and chew your way through the mouth of another person.¹³

¹¹ Ostherr, 47

¹² Cynthia A. Freeland, “Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films,” in *Film Theory and Criticism, Seventh Edition*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 628

¹³ “McDonald Describes *Pontypool*’s ‘Infected’”, ShockTillYouDrop, last modified August 26, 2008, accessed March 15, 2011, <http://shocktillyoudrop.com/news/festivaloffearnews.php?id=7454>

These symptoms of conceptual and bodily breakdown are true of all victims, from the stammering woman that Mazzy first encounters at a roadside stop, to the town's primary physician, Dr. Mendez, to the swarms of language-impaired zombies which eventually infiltrate the radio studio later in the film. In the end, the virus does not distinguish between its victims according to gender, sexuality, class, age, race, or otherwise. Even though it distinguishes between languages (English is the only language known to be infected), those who can understand the English language are just as susceptible to infection; as Dr. Mendez emphasizes, "it is when the word is understood"¹⁴ that the virus infects a victim. The virus is not a device which brings about the fetishization of a specifically gendered body, nor does it focus on the physical signifiers of the gendered body; rather the virus "fetishizes the invisible interior of the human body – where the contagious "difference" may be hidden..."¹⁵ In this way, the notion of difference is less preoccupied with gender, and more directed towards a broader sense of difference, one which still evokes a sense of border construction: interiors and exteriors.

The third concern in adopting a gendered reading of horror films like *Pontypool* follows from the previous point, by acknowledging a minor gendered division. It is true that there does seem to be a readable distinction between the explicit characterizations and the implicit characterizations of the virus' effects. For the most part, the female victims are sites wherein the progress of the infection is most often visualized: the first victim that we are led to believe is infected is the anonymous woman encountered at Mazzy's roadside stop. A member of the singing act which goes on-air at the studio in this time of turmoil is a young girl who repeats as if on loop, "I can't remember how it ends,"¹⁶ thus becoming what Dr. Mendez later describes as "a

¹⁴ *Pontypool*

¹⁵ Ostherr, 2

¹⁶ *Pontypool*

crude radio signal”¹⁷; she later launches herself at Mazzy and his producer, Sydney, though we do not witness the brutality of her death. Laurel-Ann, the production assistant at the radio station, is the most graphically depicted of the infected bodies; we witness her deterioration and self-violence, from her bloodied speech, to her torn mouth, to the spray of viscera which erupts from her and splashes against the sound booth window.

In comparison, the male victims are sites wherein the progress of the infection is most often only audible. A field reporter with the radio station, Ken Loney, transmits through his cell phone the aural horror of an infected male victim who bursts into the silo in which the reporter is hidden. The victim, a local teenager named Jesse, is heard emitting the bizarre sounds of “a child screaming inside his breath.”¹⁸ Later, we hear Ken’s own affliction as he babbles repeatedly, “simple, simple, simple...”¹⁹ Even Dr. Mendez is not exempt from the virus, as he eventually becomes stuck on the word “breathe”, and struggles to avoid infected ramblings.

This visual/aural distinction does not necessarily further the project of a gendered reading, but instead underscores two deviations. First, that even in the film’s act of female/visual, male/aural affectation, the objectification of the body is not at all centered on the sexualization of the female body; the infected females are distinct from screaming, victimized females who are chased by axe-wielding serial killers, and from those females with “monstrous wombs”. Rather, gender is incidental; that the victims in these cases happen to be female is secondary to the virus and its effects, since ‘femininity’ is not especially sought out by the virus. So, even if these victims were male, the progress of the virus would remain unaffected. Second, and more importantly, the suggested distinction between female/visual and male/aural is moot insofar as

¹⁷ *Pontypool*

¹⁸ *Pontypool*

¹⁹ *Pontypool*

the virus, which infects all its victims following the same series of stages, will entail the same displays of bodily breakdown in *all* bodies; both male *and* female victims who do not find victims to attack will internalize the infection further so that blood and other fluids leak or explode from their bodily orifices. So, the spectacle of the virus does not hold a specific gender hostage for exhibition; every victim is a spectacle of breakdown.

To reiterate Cynthia Freeland, psychodynamic gender readings are too reductive. Focus on this aspect alone leads us “to neglect many other important features of the [horror] film”²⁰ which can comment on fears beyond the dread of gendered difference. In *Pontypool*, the virus functions as a metaphorical backdrop for a larger issue, *another meaning* that is at hand (or, in the case of the film’s “conversationalists”²¹, at mouth). While, as I will discuss presently, the notion of deconstruction is central to the meaning of this film, *Pontypool* does not explicitly engage in a deconstruction of gender. Rather, it functions as an expression of the fear rooted in a deconstructive understanding of language. The “monster” in *Pontypool*, then, is ‘language in *différance*’ and especially ‘*différance* in English’.

In effect, borders are still being constructed to distinguish differences. In a context of globalization, borders are permeable and are penetrated by language, especially one which is as prevalent as English. In *The Bush Garden*, Northrop Frye describes “the need for continuity”²² through “the unity of communication.”²³ Frye points out that communication is a complex structure and that Canadian communications theorists like Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan

²⁰ Freeland, 632

²¹ “McDonald Describes *Pontypool*’s ‘Infected’”, ShockTillYouDrop, last modified August 26, 2008, accessed March 15, 2011, <http://shocktillyoudrop.com/news/festivaloffearnews.php?id=7454>

²² Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 223

²³ Frye, 223

warn us “against making unreal divisions within it.”²⁴ In *Pontypool*, horror is generated through the social criticism of fearing ‘unreal divisions’; in this case, the English language is at stake. Set in a Canadian locale which acts as the nexus of languages (from Canadian English, French, and British English), the film explores how language itself is political, thereby evoking McLuhan’s pervasive phrase, “the medium is the message”²⁵. The film comments on social anxiety surrounding the mutability and supposed ‘decay’ of the English language through its many forms and variations. In a sense, ‘unreal divisions’ are separating ‘pure’ English and distorted or ‘impure’ English, and fear in the film emerges from the breakdown of this ‘unreal division’.

The origins of this fear are rooted in a systematic approach to language rules. The fear of these language variations can stem from a number of sources, from the purist attitude “that there are standards of correctness which should be adhered to”²⁶, to a resentment of change. Regardless, the English language is one which evolves based on its usage, its “rapid turnover in vocabulary and the continual changes in the meaning of words,”²⁷ rather than its adherence to strict rules. So, by reflecting on Derrida’s notion of *différance*, which indicates a “juncture”²⁸, a system of “assemblage”²⁹ whereby language is always in an inescapable state of signifying slippage, we can examine how *Pontypool* confronts the fear of the ‘decaying’ English language by functioning as a site of “the *play* of differences.”³⁰ In the words of the film’s rhetoric: virus is not virus; virus is breakdown; virus is variation; virus is metaphor.

²⁴ Frye, 223

²⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 7

²⁶ Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay? Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001), 10

²⁷ Aitchison, 17

²⁸ Derrida, 130

²⁹ Derrida, 131

³⁰ Derrida, 130

Virus is Breakdown

To determine whether changes in the English language are indicative of progress or decay is not the specific point of this exercise. Rather, we should consider how changes in the English language are recognized by the film. In *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*, Jean Aitchison asserts that “We only pause to think about [language] when the rules break down, or when someone uses rules which differ from our own...”³¹ This observation regarding language change is represented in *Pontypool* as part of an illustration of the deconstructive conception of language. Though it features both French and English, the film’s reflection is primarily concerned with the latter, since French is much more regulated by comparison. While all languages, including French, are engaged in an endless process of *différance* and therefore are irrevocably unstable, English provides a more obvious manifestation of endless semantic movement, differed signification and fluid meaning. It is the characteristics of the English language which enable a more effective social criticism:

English is a pluricentric language, and its speakers have never... tried to enforce a rigid single standard. Thus, there are American English, British English, Canadian English, Irish English, South African English, ...These are all accepted as English – unlike French, for example, whose speakers try to maintain a single world-wide standard.³²

This pluricentric quality is an essential element for the film’s reflection. Like deconstruction, the film does not seek to demolish or destroy our conception of language. Instead, it intends to illustrate how changes within language spread as either conscious or unconscious variations.³³

Resistance to these unstoppable variations and staunch insistence on normalization can only lead

³¹ Aitchison, 15

³² Ulrich Ammon, *The dominance of English as a language of science: effects on other languages and language communities* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001), 18

³³ Aitchison, 55-56; I would clarify that in stating that some changes are conscious variations, I do not intend that they are *voluntary*, but instead are changes which are recognized for emphasizing the mutability of the English language in a ‘strange’ way, and are thus deemed *unacceptable*; these changes draw negative attention to themselves.

to horrific results. Acceptance of *différance* is the only viable option (or so the film ultimately seems to suggest in its short epilogue which playfully mixes and matches all sorts of cultural and cinematic conventions). Aitchison elaborates on the irrational fear of linguistic changes:

In general, people do not pay much attention to the behaviour of others, unless it is dramatically different from the norm... However, once people notice the oddity, they tend to over-react... The same thing happens with language. People either do not notice a minor deviation from the norm, or they over-react to it...³⁴

In *Pontypool*, there is a play between these two forms of variations. The conscious changes, or rather, *unacceptable* changes are self-evident: the two protagonists, Mazzy and Sydney, encounter a number of stuttering, stammering citizens whose distortion of language and meaning is magnified by the drama of infection; they are turned into mindless zombies, and stand out from the uninfected citizens. There are multiple instances of these conscious changes or variations. As field reporter Ken (in his “sunshine chopper”) illustrates, words are repeated:

“Simple, simple, simple, simple, simple...”³⁵

Dr. Mendez is not exempt from infection, as his language, too, is ensnared by an infected word:

“Breathe, breathe, breathe...”³⁶

Phrases are also blurted out in strange contexts. After a singing troupe, “Lawrence and the Arabians”, finishes their on-air performance at the radio station, one of the young female members abruptly babbles to herself while onlookers are puzzled:

“I can’t remember how it ends. I can’t remember how it ends...It just keeps starting over and over, and over and over, and it’s not called the Lawrence and the table, is it, not anymore, no...”³⁷

³⁴ Aitchison, 68

³⁵ *Pontypool*

³⁶ *Pontypool*

Before becoming infected, Ken informs the studio that a swarm of zombies has passed his hiding place. He expresses confusion at this phrase which he hears them crying out:

“Look out for U-boats! Look out for U-boats! Look out for U-boats!”³⁸

All of these divergences within the norm of English language are exaggerated through repetition and absurdity to illustrate how “a person’s brain would become overloaded with fragmented pieces of information,” rendering efficient communication “difficult, if not impossible.”³⁹ Characters are often aware of their own troubled communicative efforts. In hearing their speech and discovering that it does not coincide with the intended expression, they “correct what they hear... if they notice that something needs correcting. Sometimes they simply get confused by sounds which seem alike to the ear...”⁴⁰ However, their efforts to correct language errors draw more attention to their affliction. While in conversation, Laurel-Ann’s infection becomes apparent to the audience before it even crosses Sydney’s mind:

“I’m going to go see if Mr. Mazzy’s missing...missing...missing...missing...missing...missing...missing...missing...miss-I mean Mr. Mazzy’s missing as in he’s not here.”⁴¹

Sydney misinterprets Laurel-Ann’s search for the right words as an indicator of stress, a simple struggle. However, it is apparent that the production assistant has latched on to the infected word, “missing”, which is overheard in Mazzy’s radio speech playing in the background.

Another noticeable variation is that of syntactic change: sentence structures become disordered, incomplete, and/or senseless. Laurel-Ann’s stunted speech continues, becoming a clue to the other characters that something is amiss with the production assistant:

³⁷ *Pontypool*

³⁸ *Pontypool*

³⁹ Aitchison, 169

⁴⁰ Aitchison, 159

⁴¹ *Pontypool*

“Mr. M-... Mr. M-... Mr. Mendez is missing Mazzy. No. No. I’m missing... I’m missing Mazzy, I have to... I...”⁴²

Near the end of the film, a cure is sought for the infected. Sydney also hits upon an infected word, and stumbles over it. Realizing this dire situation, Mazzy suggests a solution which is evocative of Orwellian ‘double think’⁴³, that one must change the meaning of the words:

“Kill isn’t kill, kill isn’t kill. Kill is blue... Kill is baby... Kill is mayonnaise garden... Kill is kiss. Kill is kiss!”⁴⁴

When communication repeatedly breaks down, other characters become aware that they are in contact with an infected person since these variations are bracketed as occurrences of the virus. Other characters retreat from those who are infected, indicating an attempt to separate from the contagion. In short, they are *conscious* of these *unacceptable* language variations.

Virus is Variation

The phenomenon of language change, especially as illustrated in *Pontypool*, is also characterized by minor language variations which are apparent but remain unnoticed, or are cause for little reaction. We can understand these language fluctuations as being overlooked because they are *normative* fluctuations within the standards of a language. It is apparent, then, that not all change in language is feared because we become desensitized to changes which are commonplace and even expected; these variations are subconsciously accepted. We can compare the instances of normative variations in accordance with the way in which borders are used to organize them: geographical/regional variations, social variations, and personal variations.

⁴² *Pontypool*

⁴³ On pg. 121, Aitchison references George Orwell’s novel, in which slogans read: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 1949/1954), 32

⁴⁴ *Pontypool*

Geographical or Regional Variations

These variations are dependent on the forms and styles of language which are specific to geo-political spaces. Certain language codes, accents, or dialects are generally associated with locations. In *Pontypool*, several forms of language collide: there are instances of Canadian English, French, and British English. The first of these languages is the primary language of the film; all of the main characters engage in it as inhabitants of a primarily English-speaking town in Ontario. Viewers (or listeners, since the film was simultaneously released as a radio play⁴⁵), are able to compare variations in the forms of English when Nigel Healing from the BBC contacts the station, asking to be patched in to the broadcast. The languages become linked through technology, as Sydney connects the radio personas together:

Nigel Healing:	We are talking to Grant Mazzy, the news radio anchor from Pontypool, Ontario, in Canada, who broke this story. Mr. Mazzy, are you there?
Sydney Briar:	(whispers) Grant?
Grant Mazzy:	Yes, Nigel, hi.
Nigel:	Mr. Mazzy, is it true that French Canadian soldiers have set up roadblocks preventing people from leaving and entering your area in rural Canada? If it's political—
Sydney:	(to Grant) – I haven't heard anything about this, Grant. I don't think he knows what he's talking about—
Nigel:	– and if so, does this have anything to do with your country's history of separatist terror groups?
Grant:	Well, uh, mm, Nigel, um, none of that is true. Um, the military of course, is-is rumoured to be involved, and, uh, the police are responding as we speak, but uh, from what we can tell there's nothing organized, um, nothing political, uh, certainly not terrorist or o-or separatist... ⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "CBC Original Radio Play", *Pontypool*, Special Features. DVD. Directed by Bruce McDonald. 2008. Maple Pictures. 2009; significantly, the radio play, which was broadcasted on CBC radio at the time of the film's release, is also featured on the BBC website. "Worldplay: Pontypool for World Drama," BBC World Service website, last modified June 21, 2009, accessed March 2011

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/06/090617_pontypool_audio.shtml

⁴⁶ *Pontypool*

This excerpt taken from the film and featured in the radio play is at a disadvantage when transcribed; automatically, it loses the distinctiveness of vocal fluctuations, patterns, and accents. But even so, there is a noticeable difference between the formal speech of Nigel Healing, and the more informal speech of Grant Mazzy. However noticeable it is for the audience, the characters disregard the differences, accepting that “people from different geographical areas are likely to display differences in their speech.”⁴⁷ As Aitchison reminds us, “this type of variation does not present any insuperable problems.”⁴⁸ Despite the differences between the forms of English, Mazzy and Healing are able to communicate and comprehend one another easily. The same can be said for the difference in language codes between English and French. Even when the CLSY radio’s broadcast signal is interrupted by a message from the French military, the characters react to the sudden disruption only insofar as they cannot discern the source of this incoming message. Within minutes, they are able to translate the words to English so that Mazzy can announce it on-air. Like minor variations in English, the difference in code is acceptable because French is an easily *recognizable* language code. A different language code merely requires translation. It does not call into question the very notion of verbal meaning. As such, neither a minor variation nor a different code elicits fear from the characters. It is only when there is a *major* variation within the same code, as brought about through the virus, that characters react with trepidation because such major variations highlight the profound instability of language produced by deconstructive *différance*.

Another occurrence of communication lapse takes place after Dr. Mendez appears at the station, and attempts to decipher the circumstances of the virus, speaking quickly and forcefully in languages other than English. Mazzy and Sydney exchange worried looks, believing the

⁴⁷ Aitchison, 39

⁴⁸ Aitchison, 39

doctor, who blurs the distinctions between languages, to be trapped by infected gibberish. That is, they believe this only until the doctor blurts out, “It is only the English language that is infected!”⁴⁹

Following this incident, there is also a mixing of French and English in the attempt to avoid infection. Unable to rely primarily on French, Mazzy and Sydney converse in a broken melding of the two languages, filling in certain gaps in their knowledge of the French language with the occasional English word. The protagonists’ language use is at its most jumbled when Mazzy and Sydney argue over who should be responsible for dispatching the doctor whose infection is bound to transform him completely. Mazzy insists that since Sydney has killed the girl from the singing troupe, she should be the one to dispatch the doctor as well. Sydney replies with a frustrated cry, “Je ne.. kill... pas l’enfant!”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the film offers subtitles to clarify the conversation. Despite its mixed forms, the use of language in these circumstances is still coherent enough that both the characters and the audience are able to comprehend the conversation.

Social Variations

Differences between formal modes and informal modes continue within social forms of speech. These variations are dependent on the differences and/or hierarchies inherent in social categories of class and occupation. The employer and employee relationship demonstrates a sense of hierarchy, generally distinguishing the upper levels of management from the lower level employees. However, in the CLSY radio station setting in *Pontypool*, workplace language rules which typically deem certain words ‘inappropriate’ (for example, curse words and crudities), are

⁴⁹ *Pontypool*

⁵⁰ *Pontypool*

relaxed so that even when the producer, Sydney Briar, verbally reprimands the employee, Grant Mazzy, for his “take no prisoners”⁵¹ attitude, she declares that his approach is going to make everyone think he’s “a dick”⁵². There is another level of distinction within this spectrum, between Mazzy as a news anchor and his listening audience. Mazzy’s radio voice, though friendly and generally colloquial, is still an authoritative one, since he is imparting urgent news to the uninformed general mass. His words are chosen carefully, and are edited or censored for appropriateness. Sydney, his producer and therefore also the figure of authority above Mazzy, qualifies his radio voice by creating words:

“Grant, I want your Mazziness, I hired your Mazziness, I want the Mazziness, I just need the Mazziness to come in a little slower, a little more ‘get-to-know-you’... a little... a little slower.”⁵³

The term “Mazziness” is not a word which can be found in the dictionary, nor would it be recognized as a noun in another other language. But it is formulated and normalized through informal usage, in order to denote the general quality of Grant Mazzy’s radio voice and radio attitude. No one challenges or rebukes the word usage, as they generally accept the term and comprehend the way in which Sydney employs it. The birth of this term indicates an attempt to simplify a description by developing a more concise or more efficient means of explanation. It follows the similar practice of *generation-special words* whereby “a number of cumbersome phrases are being replaced by new shorter words.”⁵⁴

The formal and informal divide in language is also exhibited in relation to other forms of authority, those which are associated with medical and/or legal institutions. The film offers several figures from these institutions. It is especially apparent that even within the institution of

⁵¹ *Pontypool*

⁵² *Pontypool*

⁵³ *Pontypool*

⁵⁴ Aitchison, 229

law enforcement, there are language variations. We hear audio excerpts of police reports broadcasted on the police ‘wire’ which Laurel-Ann has tuned in to:

“...roger that. We still have a code forty-eight in progress...requesting back-up, weapons present, ten-four...”⁵⁵

This abbreviated, short-hand speech and coding system is contrasted with the more formal language used by OPP Constable Bob Roseland, whose language commands attention and announces its authority with stiffness. It is systematic and reminiscent of the formality of written police files:

“At 7 o’clock this morning, our officers answered a 911 call... to discover a large number of people occupying the building...”⁵⁶

A similar rigorous formal speech is used in the French military announcement⁵⁷ which interrupts the studio’s live broadcast. Laurel-Ann translates it as the following:

“For your safety, please avoid contact with close family members, and restrain from the following: all terms of endearment, such as honey or sweetheart, baby-talk with young children and rhetorical discourse. For greater safety, please avoid the English language. Please do not translate this message.”⁵⁸

These instances of language reflect different standards of English within the main strain of the English language, as well as the differences between English and French. But once again, these standards are established changes: they are expected, familiar, normal. This is also true of

⁵⁵ *Pontypool*

⁵⁶ *Pontypool*

⁵⁷ The French message as it is heard in the film is roughly as follows: “Pour votre sécurité merci d’éviter les contacts avec votre proche famille. Et évitez ce qui suit: limitez les charmes comme mon miel ou mon amoureux. Parler-bébé avec les enfants en bas âge. Discours rhétorique. Merci de ne traduire pas cette annonce.” This use of the French language is troubling: the English translation is incongruent as it adds the sentence “For greater safety, please avoid the English language”, which is not mentioned in French; the strange syntax and awkward pronunciation suggest that it is not a native French speaker; and the last sentence is syntactically incorrect. It is unclear to me whether the film intended to use poor French to connote a non-native French speaker as a comment on the attempt to adopt the French language as a military-sanctioned safety precaution, or if the film unintentionally muddled the use of French. If the former is true, emphasis is again placed on the fact that only the English language is ‘infected’, mutable. If the latter, the film’s attempt to refer to the nation’s bilingualism is a shameful one.

⁵⁸ *Pontypool*

another institutional sense of language featured within the medical community, as represented by Dr. Mendez. When he joins Mazzy and Sydney in the radio station sound booth, his use of language is informative, instructive and authoritative; he also imparts knowledge to the listening audience. He rationalizes a diagnosis of the virus through detached, educated observations, and attempts to relay the information to the listeners:

“It’s viral, that much is clear. But...not of the blood. Not blood, not on the air, not on or even in our bodies. It is here... It is in words. Not all words. Not all speaking. But in some. Some words are infected, and it spreads out when the contaminated word is spoken...Oh, we are witnessing a new arrangement for life and our language is its host...”⁵⁹

The observations noted by Dr. Mendez, serve as an interesting illustration of a Derridean mode of thinking, suggesting that language is the medium that contains our entire consciousness as humans. As Dr. Mendez describes above, this new use of language is “a new arrangement of life”, thus emphasizing the sentiment once stated by Derrida, “*There is nothing outside the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de ‘hors-texte’*]”.⁶⁰

Moments later, when Laurel-Ann’s internal fluids erupt against the window of the sound booth, Mazzy and Sydney are at a loss for words and react in horror (one is startled and recoiling, the other vomits). Meanwhile, Dr. Mendez remains cold and detached, astounded by the new biological developments:

“So this is what happens when a victim can’t find another victim! This is the fate they are trying to escape. God, that was impressive!”⁶¹

Clearly, a medical physician is familiar with the ways in which the human body functions. But the difference between a medical professional and the average citizen is even distinguished in the

⁵⁹ Pontypool

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158

⁶¹ Pontypool

relationship of speech and lack of speech in this context. Regardless, these individuals all demonstrate an understanding of the events, even if it is largely due to the explanations offered by Dr. Mendez. All of these aforementioned social variations are normalized and accepted insofar as “this type of variation does not surprise us... we simply need to specify the minor rule alterations which occur between the different strata of society.”⁶² Evidently, the characters are aware of their language variations as they pertain to different social strata. However, social variations are also determined, in part, through personal usage.

Personal Variations

These variations are constituted by the natural tendencies specific to an individual’s personal style and mode of speech. Habitual patterns and vocabulary develop according to an individual’s natural language usage, which is influenced by frequency and context. Aitchison emphasizes that even this type of language variation is unsurprising, since “almost all speakers of a language alter their speech to fit the casualness or formality of the occasion, though they are often unaware of doing so.”⁶³ Given the occasion within the film – the outbreak of a virus transmitted through language and meaning – there is a sense of panic shared by a number of characters, and each individual’s speech is affected by this sensibility.

In moments of heightened emotion, such as panic, characters become dazed, confused, disoriented. Their speech patterns and choice of words reflect emotional expression to the extent that their distress is often easily misunderstood as a sign of viral affliction, though those who are emotionally distressed are largely unaware of their language changes. After hearing the disturbing sounds of an infected local teen whose unusual voice was broadcast on-air through the

⁶² Aitchison, 40

⁶³ Aitchison, 40

field reporter's phone, Mazzy is unable to make sense of the situation. A new addition to the town, and thus unfamiliar with many of its inhabitants and its general social workings, he becomes paranoid and suspicious of the day's events, insistent that people are purposefully playing games on him; his incomprehension induces and advances his fear. His speech slows to a confused pace as he tries to offer a concluding remark to the audio clip: he stutters and pauses, leaving incomplete sentences as he hears un-sourced and almost inaudible voices and sounds stealing his attention away from the broadcast. Sydney tries to get his attention, and in witnessing his bewilderment, she approaches him with caution, suspicious of his strange behaviour as he sits wild-eyed and hunched over in the sound booth. Initially, it seems that Mazzy has become infected by the virus, but his ensuing angered dialogue suggests that he is instead affected by a mix of stress, Seasonal Affective Disorder, and even cabin fever.

The field reporter, Ken, experiences panic also, though his emotions have a much more extensive impact on his speech. His fear hinders his ability to offer a clear 'exclusive' of the terror outside the radio station. His panicked voice is heard in a live, on-air phone conversation with Mazzy, as he reports on a nearby mob which he can see from his hiding place in a silo on the outskirts of town:

"cannibals..Some were, were naked, and... and like dogs, and their, their eyes, that look, it's just uh, it's startled, kind of wild, uh, uh,..... no, no, no, you don't understand, I'm looking, uh, through a little door, there's a little door at the base of the door, some kind of, uh, cat door or something, and uh, uh, I can see the, uh, just (heaving), let me move so I can see the, Oh! Look out! Oh god! They're, they're pulling two people out of a van... there's a bunch of them. They're-they're-they're people, but they're crazy. They're-they're pulling these two out of the van – oh my g-god! They're, they're biting them! They're actually carrying them to the ground in their mouths..."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Pontypool*

Though fraught with pauses, stuttering, bizarre observations, and incomplete sentences, Ken's shocking message is still, more or less, an intelligible one. The impact of his emotions on his speech is overlooked by the other characters who struggle to comprehend the imagery he relates; they understand he is fearful, and that his disjointed speech is a normal effect of the circumstances.

Aside from these three forms of unconscious or accepted language changes, there are various instances where radio voices, character voices, sounds and music overlap and blur the distinctiveness of words. The geographical or regional borders, social borders, and physical borders which delineate interior and exterior spaces are shown to be permeable. These borders become ambiguous: language cannot be contained to one locale. It can transgress national and international boundaries and penetrate through physical walls of buildings and conceptual walls of quarantines. Language can also pass through biological borders and, in the visible case of Laurel-Ann, it can literally turn a person inside out, much like a virus can.

Virus is Metaphor: Revisiting the Film's Analogy

One major *play* of differences is the way in which these overt linguistic changes and covert linguistic changes are related within one body of work. Jean Aitchison's study of linguistic change is useful in underscoring *Pontypool's* viral threat as an analogy for fear of the breakdown of English language and linguistic meaning.

Aitchison describes a similar metaphor of disease when outlining the spread of language change. First, he writes that changes "usually originate from elements in language which get borrowed and exaggerated."⁶⁵ As previously outlined, these features – borrowings and

⁶⁵ Aitchison, 82

exaggerations – are clearly established in relation to language variations in *Pontypool*. Second, these changes spread “like disease, since people tend to conform to the speech habits of those around them.”⁶⁶ The small town’s inhabitants quickly spread this ‘disease’ of infected language within the span of several hours. In a community where neighbours are relatives or childhood friends, the spread of the virus occurs at a much quicker rate. Aitchison’s third aspect in the disease analogy indicates that “conscious changes are usually in the direction of speech forms with overt prestige, such as standard British English” whereas “subconscious changes are often movements away from overt prestige forms.”⁶⁷ In this aspect, Aitchison’s analogy diverges from that of *Pontypool*’s analogy. While the film distinguishes a clear example of the prestige form in the incorporation of Nigel Healing’s dialogue as a representative of British English, the movement described in Aitchison’s model is not congruent; rather, conscious or *unacceptable* changes (those of the infected or contaminated language) seem to be changes in the direction away from prestige.

The fourth aspect of his model entails that “changes move from group to group possibly via people who casually come into contact...”⁶⁸ This is evident in the film; characters that are in contact with infected victims can contract similar symptoms. However, “contact” assumes another meaning than the physicality of contact in Aitchison’s model: *Pontypool*’s analogy indicates that contact is also the act of communication, via radio, cell phones, conversation and so on. The fifth feature of Aitchison’s model suggests that “changes move onward from group to group.”⁶⁹ This movement between groups is especially noted in the narration featured over the end credit sequence: we hear snippets of various conversations assumed to be taking place over

⁶⁶ Aitchison, 82

⁶⁷ Aitchison, 83

⁶⁸ Aitchison, 83

⁶⁹ Aitchison, 83

radio broadcasts. Nigel Healing is recognizable as the final voice in the narration, and his preoccupation with the name of the small town (“... Pontypool... Pontypool... Ponty...p-ool...”⁷⁰) suggests that the virus has become an international phenomenon. In this way, it becomes clear that the fear of language change is “conceptualized as a problem of global proportions by linking contagion with transnational communication.”⁷¹ Just as bodily “contagion is omnipresent and therefore unavoidable”⁷², so, too, is the fear of language contagion.

The Medium is the Message: Spreading the Infection

This analysis would be amiss if it did not address, at least in part, the implication of the many variations of the *Pontypool* narrative. As such, the analogy of the spread of the virus in *Pontypool* can also be understood in terms of its spread from one medium to another. The film, whose narrative origins lies in a textual source, was also produced simultaneously as a radio play. Author Tony Burgess adapted his original source material, the novel *Pontypool Changes Everything*⁷³, to cinema, altering the visual extent of its horror, and adding the aural source of its horror in the radio play. Like disease, the terror of the narrative is communicable, spreading across media, adapting to new texts and exploring other meanings.

George Bluestone’s approach to film adaptation, described by James Naremore in his introduction to the anthology *Film Adaptation*, argues that some films “do not debase their literary sources; instead they “metamorphose” novels into another medium that has its own formal or narratological possibilities.”⁷⁴ This is certainly true of the forms of *Pontypool*. That the

⁷⁰ *Pontypool*

⁷¹ Ostherr, 128

⁷² Ostherr, 151

⁷³ Tony Burgess, *Pontypool Changes Everything* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2009) Kobo Edition

⁷⁴ James Naremore, “Introduction”, in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 6

original source is a novel emphasizes the Derridean notion that written text “becomes the model for all linguistic operations, including speech, to the extent that they always involve a dependence on the difference, spacing, and rupture that the speech model occludes. Writing thus comes to stand for otherness in general.”⁷⁵ The film adaptation diverges from the novel in a number of ways: the setting is restricted primarily to the location of the radio station (versus the novel’s mobile setting); it assumes an objective stance of a few key characters (rather than adopt the perspectives of several infected victims and various townspeople, as in the novel). These divergences affect greater visual and aural tension between the inside and the outside; the non-infected and the infected. However, the film offers visual imagery as an additional set of signifiers. The radio play, whose abridged dialogue is primarily lifted directly from the film, mirrors the aural horror of the film, and arguably augments it by removing the visual imagery so that imaginations are further piqued by the invisible threat of the virus.

Despite the many differences between these media, there is a consistent factor which unites them: the writer. His primacy is underscored by the fact that he not only wrote the novel, but adapted it to film, which in turn provided the dialogue for the radio play. Dudley Andrew’s approach to film adaptation addresses “the broader notion of the process of adaptation” whereby there is “a strong sense [that] adaptation is the appropriation of a meaning in a prior text.”⁷⁶ Not only is there an appropriation of meaning, but a variation on that meaning. Regardless of the fidelity of translations, it is apparent that a certain meaning has not been lost across the formal translations of the *Pontypool* narrative: we fear not only *what* but *when* we do not understand.

⁷⁵ Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9

⁷⁶ Dudley Andrew, “Adaptation,” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 29

The *Pontypool* narrative as it appears in each of these media therefore reflects yet another instance of *différance*: similarities and differences across media are collected within the *Pontypool* signifier, whose ongoing evolution into other forms indicates that it, too, is never fully stabilized⁷⁷. In this way, this media series reflects Derridean deconstruction, whose tasks “becomes one of defining (and constantly redefining)”⁷⁸ meanings. The comparison of the spread of disease and the spread of language change (not to mention the fear of this change) illustrates that “continual language change is natural and inevitable.”⁷⁹ As such, we are inevitably drawn back into the nexus of horror film theory and its many readings to realize that even in focusing on the linguistic body and its movements and changes, we must also recognize the problems inherent in rendering the body as an indexical, visible, representation of the impact of the invisible. While the theme of language in *Pontypool* is not the only possible, valid, reading, it demonstrates that gender is also not the only theme that Horror is interested in. Invariably, the visualizing of the body (human, linguistic or otherwise) in relation to metaphors of disease often entails a slippage to visualizations of the *gendered* body. This is part and parcel of Derridean *différance*, which reminds us that we must consider all potentialities, both present and absent. Thus, the gender theme can still be a functional reading. However, we must keep in mind that which Grant Mazzy asserts in his last enlivening on-air speech in *Pontypool*: “It’s not the end of the world...”⁸⁰ As the next chapter will illustrate, even when Horror *is* interested in gender, the heterosexual paradigm is definitely *not* the only one that can be applied.

⁷⁷ There is speculation that McDonald is set to direct a sequel to the film, rumoured to be titled *Pontypool Changes*, suggesting that the narrative is expected to carry on and evolve into a more complex storyline. “*Pontypool* Sequel is a Go”, ShockTillYouDrop, last modified May 15, 2009, accessed March 27, 2011, <http://www.shocktillyoudrop.com/news/topnews.php?id=10522>

⁷⁸ Brunette and Wills, 13

⁷⁹ Aitchison, 259

⁸⁰ *Pontypool*

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m Not Your Fucking Mommy!”:

The Ontological Horror of ‘Women’ and Women in Jaume Collet-Serra’s *Orphan* (2009)

We seem trapped. However we try to cast our potential feminine identifications, all available positions are already constructed from the place of the patriarchal other so as to repress our “real” difference.¹

The trap of traditional gender assumptions in horror cinema are rooted in the frequent exploitation of psychoanalytic theories of the patriarchal ‘Other’, what Barry Keith Grant identifies as the “dread of difference”². There is an “essential truth” about the genre, Grant suggests, in which “it is preoccupied with issues of sexual difference and gender.”³ The conventions of the horror genre indicate that the notion of difference is significant in interpreting gender representations. As Judith Butler emphasizes, the notion of difference, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality, is

not one that one can wish away or argue against, or even make claims about in any reasonable way. It is more like a necessary background to the possibility of thinking, of language, of being a body in the world. And those who seek to take issue with it are arguing with the very structure that makes their argument possible...⁴

As such, this analysis will address three female archetypes in horror theory which relate this principle: Linda Williams’ suggestion of the *helpless victim*; Barbara Creed’s notion of the *monstrous feminine*; and Carol J. Clover’s discussion of the *Final Girl*.

¹ Christine Gledhill, “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism,” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, 1984), 42

² The title of Grant’s anthology points to this sensibility. *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996)

³ Barry Keith Grant, ‘Introduction,’ in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 1

⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Florida: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 176

Each archetype is a limited characterization and maintains conventional notions of gender, by perpetuating the patriarchal demonization of female gender and sexuality within a strictly hetero-gendered, binary structure. However, we can understand the female representations in Jaume Collet-Sera's film, *Orphan* as demonstrating the difference within *one* gender, thus destabilizing the opposition of 'male versus female', and traditional notions of 'Woman'. It illustrates alternative character types, such as the *anti-hero* – or rather the *anti-heroine* – and the *anti-villain*, indicating "a return to woman as woman as independently existing."⁵ These two figures correlate through a moment (or moments) of recognition, where commonalities *and* differences in experience are acknowledged. Ultimately, this film conveys that horror consists of more than the "dread of difference"; it is also the *shock of similarity*.

Other recent Canadian horror films contemplate alternative female representations which also reflect the imagery of female violence. Some, like John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000), examine the transitional experience of female puberty. In doing so, however, this film retains a monstrous image of the female gender by equating monstrosity with female puberty and sexuality. Pascal Laugier's France-Canada co-production, *Martyrs* (2008), boasts a number of female representations in its depiction of revenge, spirituality and the female gender. However, its focus on the female body as site of transcendence constantly victimizes the female figure. Other gender readings question the construction of gender, sexuality, and identity. Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2009) offers insight into the mutability of identity and sexuality. However, not only does it uphold a gender dichotomy by continually pitting one gender against another, it also demonizes aspects of the female gender, particularly that of motherhood.

⁵ Allan Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 132

In contrast, the female representations in Jaume Collet-Serra's *Orphan* challenge previous archetypes by providing conditions for a theory of the anti-heroine and the anti-villain. The two main female characters in *Orphan* are misfits who "do not fit the mould of socially approved femininity, and can be seen to question it instead."⁶ The protagonist, a mother named Kate, is struggling to overcome the grief of a miscarriage, a lost career, a battle with alcoholism, and a troubled marriage. The antagonist, an orphan that she adopts, named Esther, is presented as a young girl whose maturity, charm and skills set her apart from the other girls at the orphanage. Her gender performance allows her to keep hidden a dangerous secret: she is, in truth, Leena, a psychologically unbalanced thirty-something Estonian woman with hypopituitarism, an unusual biological condition that is a form of proportional dwarfism.

As the Canadian imagination emphasizes though Frye's notion of the "garrison mentality"⁷, horror often originates from the tension between the individual versus the collective, where there is a pervasive sense of isolation within both the "[assimilation] into or purging from the community."⁸ An analysis of the two main female characters in *Orphan* reflects yet another form of tension, one "between expectation and actuality."⁹ The film, centered around the Coleman home, buried in the snowy outskirts of town, parallels the interior landscapes of both Kate and Esther. Each is burdened by a sense of isolation and in trying to fit in to the socially approved notions of 'family', 'community', and 'Woman'. Both female characters struggle against external forces often beyond their control, and are joined together by a search for love, social acceptance, and self-acceptance.

⁶ Short, *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6

⁷ Northrop Frye, *The bush garden: essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 225

⁸ Gail McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 106

⁹ Atwood, 51

On Existing Female Archetypes

Consider the female representation which appears in Linda Williams' discussion: the *helpless victim* archetype. This type is most often a female character, whose oppression in society is mirrored by that of the monster-figure. She is a passive figure depicted with inherent weaknesses which render her powerless to prevent her objectification and victimization. Unlike the monster-figure, this figure rarely reacts against external forces, and as such, often relies on a stronger character, often male, to rescue her. She is unable to bring about her own salvation. The helpless victim, upon seeing the monster-figure, regards the figure as "a distorted reflection of her own image,"¹⁰ that is, one which is dominated by a patriarchal gaze. Williams' discussion of this archetype revolves around the affinity between monster and 'woman', whose "look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing"¹¹ as figures defined, and ultimately punished, for their difference. Like the monster-figure, the helpless victim is an individual who is dislocated from the collective.

In some ways, this archetype could describe both Kate and Esther. These two characters are thematically and visually linked by location and more importantly, dislocation. The first encounter with each character reinforces the dynamic of the individual versus the collective. In the opening sequence, Kate dreams of being rushed to a hospital in which she has complications with a pregnancy, and of desperately crying out for help to both her husband and the medical staff, all of whom ignore her pleas. In effect, she is alone. It is also fitting that Kate and her husband, John, first discover Esther in an orphanage in the country. Esther is discovered alone, painting in a classroom, away from the rest of the girls at the orphanage. The characters are

¹⁰ Linda Williams, 'When The Woman Looks,' in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 22

¹¹ Williams, 18

officially united upon Esther's arrival at her new home. The location is important, as its secluded location evokes the imagery of the cabin-in-the-woods, of "a cabin around which snow swirls constantly".¹² By extension, this imagery is also evocative of the significantly Canadian 'house' motif, which elucidates the notions of inside/outside by "the fact that it can be seen as connoting either protection or imprisonment."¹³ The imagery of winter and the 'house' motif (also apparent in both *Pontypool* and *The Dark Hours*), is especially formidable in Canadian horror, which often "makes it seem as though nature itself... must inevitably overwhelm and extinguish the puny efforts of a merely human will."¹⁴ This threat of engulfment represented by the landscape and weather are paralleled with the experiences of the two main characters who struggle to maintain a sense of self.

Moreover, both characters demonstrate nonconformity to conventional notions of female gender roles, and are thus victimized. Kate is undermined as a 'mother' by her frequent failure to protect her children from dangers, posed by the backyard pond, her alcoholism, and later, the threat of Esther's rage. Her role as 'wife' is unstable, given her husband's previous sexual indiscretions, the implication of further acts of indiscretion, and the apparent lack of trust within their marriage. Kate is also subjected to scrutiny from her mother-in-law, who openly criticizes Kate's failed career, poor parenting, and alcoholism. In comparison, Esther is biologically unable to become a 'woman' due to her condition, which is marked by arrested physical development. Esther is unable to remain a 'girl'; she has not been a child for some time, and by the end of the film she is no longer masquerading as a 'girl' in order to hide her condition.

¹² McGregor, 63

¹³ McGregor, 102

¹⁴ McGregor, 63

Finally, both characters are bullied or made pathetic by those around them. In short, they are victims of external forces. Esther is bullied by a girl in her new class. Upon being introduced, and clutching a Nelson Spelling book defensively to her chest (a textbook produced exclusively for the Canadian education system¹⁵, I might add, and thus one of the instances where the film's Canadian specificity breaks through), one little girl ridicules Esther to the amusement of their classmates. The same girl later calls her names and knocks her books to the floor in the hallway. Esther's new brother, Daniel, openly disavows her to his friends, criticizes her appearance and manners, and ignores her at school, when she is being bullied. Kate is belittled by her mother-in-law and her husband, both of whom question her suspicions about Esther. She is also looked down upon by her therapist, who questions Kate's recovery from alcoholism (among other things), as well as her relationship with the seemingly innocent Esther. Kate is also threatened by Esther, whose ulterior motives consist of designs for her husband.

However, Williams' description of the helpless victim is insufficient for conceptualizing female characters in *Orphan* for several reasons. First, while both Kate and Esther are victimized by external forces, they are not exactly helpless; each character reacts to those external forces. When her husband, mother-in-law, and therapist question her suspicions about her adopted daughter, Kate defies their criticisms by investigating Esther's history at the orphanage, and learning of Esther's history at the Saarne Institute, a mental hospital.¹⁶ Kate also reacts against

¹⁵ The home website for Nelson Spelling features a banner at the top of its main page, identifying the company as "Canada's Learning Advantage". It further relates a brief history of its Canadian exclusivity, and its partnership with American affiliate, Cengage Learning, in the section entitled 'About Us'. "Nelson Education Ltd. – About Nelson Education", accessed January 17, 2011. <http://www.nelson.com/aboutus/>

¹⁶ This is another example of Canadian specificity that recurs throughout the latter half of the films. The image used for this institution is that of Alma College, a former all girls' private high school in St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada. News coverage relates that Alma College was destroyed by arsonists in May 2008, thus imbuing the fiery images hidden in Esther's paintings with a note of truth, and reinforcing a Canadian presence. Eric Bunnell, "Arson at Alma", *St. Thomas Times-Journal*, last modified: May 29, 2008, accessed January 17, 2011. <http://www.stthomastimesjournal.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?archive=true&e=1049409>

Esther's malicious and sadistic attacks aimed discreetly at Kate – destroying her beloved roses, breaking her own arm to turn Kate's husband against her, reading her diary, smothering Daniel as he lies in the hospital in critical condition, and so on – by physically lashing out against her on several occasions.

Similarly, Esther reacts against external forces. She manipulates the nuns at the orphanage, her new parents, her new siblings, and her therapist while in pursuit of her desire to belong to a family and lead a 'normal' life. She enacts revenge against the school bully in the playground, pushing her from the play structure and injuring her. In the middle of the night she surprises her new brother with threats uttered at knifepoint. She resorts to murdering Sister Abigail and attempts to murder Daniel on more than one occasion, to prevent them from interfering with her plan. These are hardly the actions of a 'helpless' victim.

Moreover, Williams' account of the woman's 'look' is troubling. She writes that "the woman's look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster or the freak's own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trancelike passivity that allows him to master her through *her* look."¹⁷ But she describes a *male* monster, and does not address the impact of a female monster. She also does not factor in various forms of monstrosity with which a female victim may not sympathize. Esther's unusual physical condition suggests that she is monstrous as a result of a biological oddity. That she oscillates between 'girl' and 'Woman' without embodying one role completely suggests that she is monstrous in comparison to traditional concepts of gender. As an 'orphan', she projects the image that she has been abandoned by her family, her friends, and society, thus positioning her as a social oddity. Finally, her unstable mental status, frustrated psychology and murderous actions suggest that she

¹⁷ Williams, 18

is monstrous due to her psychological oddity. This also points to the fact that William's discussion suggests a singularity of the female gaze. In their first exchange of the woman's 'look', Kate is only aware of one form of Esther's monstrosity, which is that of her social oddity as an orphan, and Esther sympathizes with her troubled mother. But as the film unfolds, multiple 'looks' are revealed.

There are other manifestations of the woman's 'look' which Williams' account does not indicate. With Esther's increasingly malicious misbehaviour, another form of 'look' is exchanged between the two characters, one in which Kate realizes Esther's cruelty, but does not sympathize with it; we see this in the scene where Esther presents the cut roses to Kate as a fake gesture of appreciation, and the terrible significance of the act is recognized by both characters. This 'look' is one intended to provoke the protagonist, rather than express a sympathetic alignment. It is a 'knowing look', used by the antagonist to manipulate the protagonist into reacting in a way that further isolates the protagonist from others.

Yet another 'look' is exchanged in the final sequence, where the two female characters engage in a scuffle on the frozen backyard pond. At this point, each character has learned the other's history and is finally aware of the other's true identity. However, Esther resumes her 'innocent little girl' façade, and Kate ultimately rejects her by defeating her. In this 'look' each character is truly before the other, and yet this is not a 'look' which "paralyzes" Kate or presents her as sympathetic. She is not "mastered" in this moment by Esther or her sympathy for Esther. Williams' suggestion of the female victim only allows the gaze of a female viewer insofar as it assumes the woman's 'look' of affinity with the ontological oddity of the monster. Her theory does not incorporate the 'looks' which enable female viewers to align with a variety of female characters, such as a 'look' that entails an admiration of the female character's strength, intellect,

or choices, or for that matter, that of a male character's. Nor does it calculate the sadistic female gaze (a notion which I will explore in greater depth in the next chapter), a 'look' that not only approves of certain violent actions (or reactions as the case may be) of a character, but encourages and enjoys the depiction of those images, especially as illustrated through acts of vengeance, justice and punishment, control and, in term of the Canadian imagination, in reaction to pressure. It seems that Williams' account overlooks "...a sense of satisfaction for a subject who does not merely spectate but actively participates in the good of the experience."¹⁸

Next, consider Barbara Creed's notion of the *monstrous feminine*. Creed argues that female monstrosity is discussed "as part of male monstrosity... that woman only terrifies when represented as man's castrated other."¹⁹ In short, a female is monstrous simply in that she is the female opposite of the patriarchal male. Creed's discussion employs many useful notions in distinguishing the female monster. For example, her reliance on the broader interpretation of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, of "that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules,' that which 'disturbs identity, system, order',"²⁰ is practical for many female representations in horror, and she references Susa Lurie to advocate the productive idea that "the male fears woman *is not* mutilated like a man might be *if he were* castrated; because woman is physically whole, intact, and in possession of all her sexual powers."²¹ Both Kate and Esther disrupt traditional notions of the female gender, and given Esther's biological transgression of border, it would initially appear that Creed's theory might be functional.

¹⁸ Dennis Giles, "Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema" in *Planks of Reasons*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 38

¹⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 7

²⁰ Creed, 36

²¹ Creed, 7

However, Creed inevitably settles on the notion that female representations are “partially formed subjects”²², thereby reiterating a sense that females are still incomplete in some sense; something is lacking, or underdeveloped. Her list of subjects includes supernatural or mythical female figures, from vampires and witches, to Medusa and the *vagina dentata*. The trouble is, Kate and Esther are both entirely human and clearly none of these figures. Moreover, her notion of the monstrous mother does not sufficiently apply to either Kate or Esther.

It could be argued that the nightmarish scene of Kate’s miscarriage evokes her ‘monstrous mother-ness’, especially in relation to the abjection of bodily wastes. However, the miscarriage (a dream sequence) is not depicted as the result of her inherently ‘evil’ nature as ‘Woman’. Rather it manifests a failure of medicine (a very masculine institution), as the medical staff appears to be, at best, utterly indifferent and, at worst, overtly malevolent. In effect, this instance reflects a sense of “monstrous” medicine. Kate is also not a ‘monstrous mother’ for being overprotective or repressive, since her children frequently end up in harm’s way when she is unable to protect them. She is also not a clear example of the castrating mother. The only suggestion of castration – implicit or otherwise – is in relation to Esther. Upon realizing that her new ‘brother’ is suspicious of her actions, she threatens to cut his “prick off before [he] even figures out what it’s for.”

The Creedian mother type does not account for Esther either, since her hypopituitarism renders her physically unable to reproduce; clearly, this biological condition is not something she can control or change. As a result, her ability as a mother to naturally conceive children is disabled. While she has designs on John (Kate’s husband), Esther shows no interest in becoming

²² Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection”, in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 36

a mother to their children, Max and Daniel. Despite the reality that she is, in fact, close to their mother's age, Esther is not a mother figure. Even in her liminal status between 'girl' and 'Woman', Esther's body is never shown to have transformed into something "monstrous", as she never achieved a 'normal' adult female form in the first place to then have it deteriorate, transform or decay. And, while Kate is the adoptive mother of this evil 'girl', Esther is not Kate's natural child. In fact, on more than one occasion, Kate openly disavows her as her own. In the final climactic confrontation between the two, Kate cries out with brute force, "I'm not your fucking mommy!" In essence, Kate is not simply rejecting Esther; she is symbolically rejecting Creed's archetype. The *monstrous feminine* does not successfully account for either female character. Rather, it is only apparent that these two female characters are monstrous in their 'un-motherliness', and 'un-womanliness'.

A third archetype theorized in the horror genre is Carol J. Clover's discussion of the *Final Girl*. She champions this victim-hero as an evolved female figure who is both vulnerable and strong. This figure is empowered by self-awareness, and is not specifically defined by relationships to males. As such, she is capable of confronting and battling the killer.²³ In *Orphan*, Kate constitutes the closest example of Clover's archetype. Since Esther's function is ultimately as the killer, and given that fact that she does not, in fact, survive to be considered within the realm of the Final Girl, she is excluded from this archetype immediately.

However, Kate is both vulnerable and strong. She is constantly reminded of her inability to measure up to traditional social expectations. Her suspicions about Esther's true character distance her from those around her, reflecting the sense of isolation often experienced by the

²³ Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 86

Final Girl. She displays an awareness which several of the other female characters do not. Aside from Max, whose role as an active female character is minimal, and whose survival is still dependent on her mother, Kate is the only female who “perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril”²⁴. And, since it is unlikely that her husband, John, survived the brutal stabbing at the hands of Esther, and it is unclear that Daniel will fully recover from his critical condition, it is apparent that the survivor is ultimately a female. Kate is the only character who is capable of challenging the threat posed by her adoptive daughter. In the end, she is the character who defeats Esther, the killer.

Despite these significant similarities, the archetype set forth by Clover’s theory is troubling as well. Unfortunately, it operates on conventional notions, and is guided by gender binaries. Also, this figure is discussed primarily in relation to a male killer. The figure is promoted for her strength, and ability to face down the male killer, and is essentially the only figure capable of curbing male violence. But how does this figure manage female violence? While the Final Girl enacts violence in horror films, it is largely in self-defence or to protect the innocent or loved ones. However, Esther’s violence cannot be described in this way. Her acts of violence are not in self-defence, but in self-preservation. She is not afraid of injury to her physical being (considering that she breaks her own arm to spite Kate); rather, she reacts against that which threatens her conceptual being as a woman. Esther strives toward what she interprets to be a ‘normal’ adult woman, despite the fact that her ‘womanhood’ has taken another form. She wants to be a mature and attractive female with romantic and sexual relationships, whose appearance, speech, and behaviour reflects her age and experience. Her frustrations result from the irreconcilability of the ideal form with the actual form, and, those who obstruct her means of

²⁴ Clover, 35

achieving that idealized form remind her of this ontological dissonance. They may be doing so unintentionally, and are not necessarily trying to cause her harm or bring about her physical death. Nevertheless, Esther responds with violence in order to prevent any further obstruction. Clover does not address this kind of violence.

The only discussion of female killers in Clover's theory relates to how they "generally show no gender confusion"²⁵ and that their motives are not "overtly psycho-sexual; their anger derives in most cases not from childhood experience but from specific moments in their adult lives in which they have been abandoned or cheated on by men."²⁶ However, Clover's interpretation of 'gender confusion' does not acknowledge the potential for a female killer whose gender confusion consists of a struggle with gender expectations. Such is the case with Kate who struggles with the expectations of gender roles. This is also true of Esther, who struggles with notions of 'girl' and 'woman', without ever fully belonging to one ideal or the other. Also, while Esther has a history of trying to seduce the fathers of the families which she infiltrates, their rejection of her advances is only part of the larger frustrations which motivate her murderous tendencies.

Clover's essay largely indicates "representation itself is at issue"²⁷, and which raises important questions: "...Why, if viewers can identify across gender lines and if the root experience of horror is sex blind, are the screen sexes not interchangeable? Why not more and better female killers...?"²⁸ But her claims and questions raise other questions: if the root experience of horror is, in fact, sex blind, then how is it that psychoanalytic theory, which is based upon gender and sexual differences, has been able to act as the main voice of horror film

²⁵ Clover, 77

²⁶ Clover, 77

²⁷ Clover, 90

²⁸ Clover, 92

theory for so long? As mentioned in the introduction, it seems that Clover has underestimated the potential of female killers existing in Hollywood horror films, not to mention the number of female killers in foreign horror films and, of course, in Canadian horror films.²⁹

Despite the favourable description of the Final Girl as an empowered female who symbolize “female independence, a will to power and monstrosity, male fear and effeminacy...”³⁰, which Rhona Berenstein identifies as ideas which push the parameters of patriarchal culture, Clover still attributes the triumph of this figure to ‘boyishness.’³¹ Perhaps her goal is to emphasize the collaborative effort of conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity within the same character, but her discussion still privileges the ‘masculinity’ of this figure, based on the assumption that “those who save themselves are male, and those who are saved by others are female.”³² Clover’s discussion of the Final Girl in relation to male characters and male viewers states that “the Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male,”³³ who takes this figure as a point of identification. But if Clover’s theory is intended to shed light on female representations and female viewers, it is clearly counterproductive to focus on an analysis of the male viewer. While identification across gender lines points to the permeability of conventional gender distinctions, Clover’s points about the Final Girl centralize around the male viewer and his identification with the Final girl, without

²⁹ For instance, she could describe Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th*; Helen in *Candyman*; Annie Wilkes in *Misery*; Mrs. Loomis in *Scream 2*; Brenda in *Urban Legends*; and most recently, Amanda in *Saw II*. In foreign horror films – especially given Hollywood’s inclination to remake those films – she could describe Eli in Sweden’s *Let the Right One In*, remade as *Let Me In*; Sadako in Japan’s *Ringu*, remade as *The Ring*; Su-Mi in the South Korean *A Tale of Two Sisters*, remade as *The Uninvited*; she might also discuss Asami in Japan’s *Audition*, whose psychotic and sadistic nature should not be overlooked. In Canadian horror films, she could describe recent figures like Lucie in *Martyrs* and Sam in *The Dark Hours*.

³⁰ Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 9

³¹ Clover, 86

³² Clover, 103

³³ Clover, 97

giving the female viewer the same attention, and therefore leave the complexity of female spectatorship relatively untouched.

On Alternative Female Representations

In theorizing gender assumptions, it is imperative that we take into account Allan Casebier's statement on how "the generalizations that we use to describe a woman apply to all women but are true only with a certain degree of probability."³⁴ Previous female archetypes, though useful in some circumstances, are not necessarily true of all female representations in horror cinema. By considering alternative female representations like the anti-heroine and the anti-villain, we can discuss the form of *human* monstrosity, beyond notions of the supernatural or the mythical, and beyond the images of helpless victims, mystical demons, or Final Girls.

Though these alternative character types are not specific to one genre, or even one gender, they can and do provide insight into the female characters displaced by previous archetypes. An *anti-heroine* is a morally ambiguous "negative hero,"³⁵ often viewed as a "perturber and a disturber"³⁶. This negative hero or heroine is one who destabilizes traditional norms because of his or her inherently 'flawed' nature. In recognizing this, he or she is redeemed by some action indicating an evident change for the better. Ultimately, it is a character with whom we can empathize. As previously mentioned in the introduction, *Psycho* offers the character of Marion Crane who is one such anti-heroine: an independent woman who is a thief, but one who is still guided by her conscience.

³⁴ Casebier, 122

³⁵ Victor Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes. Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2

³⁶ Brombert, 2

In contrast, an *anti-villain* is a figure whose definition is primarily contemporary. As indicated in the introduction, this figure is one who yet exists outside of traditional and official referential sources, but is currently understood to be an “antagonist who is not purely evil or entirely unsympathetic.”³⁷ This morally ambiguous character inevitably turns down the ‘wrong’ path, and so, he or she is ultimately a character that we condemn. To reiterate the example provided in the introduction, anti-villains like *Psycho*’s Norman Bates, are initially pathetic and pitiable but inevitably succumb to horrific behaviour.

In the film *Orphan*, Kate is an example of an anti-heroine: she struggles to regain a sense of belonging and a sense of self after her miscarriage, her husband’s indiscretions, her loss of career, her battle with alcoholism, and her daughter’s near drowning, among other things. She is pressured by family members and her therapist to meet the expectations of her traditional roles as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and so forth. These pressures are exacerbated with the adoption of another child, Esther; in fact, most of these issues are only revealed after Esther’s arrival, either in arguments with family members, or as voiced by Esther, who exposes the contents of Kate’s diary. Kate generally lacks heroic qualities, as she is often unable to protect her children or save others, but she continues to strive towards those heroic qualities. Her unrelenting pursuit to expose Esther’s true identity and embrace her own identity leads to her eventual redemption.

Esther is an example of an anti-villain. She is an outcast from the community of the orphanage, from a traditional sense of family, and from her school community. In her new family, her unusual manners and appearance cause her to stand out. She is constantly reminded of her adopted status by her new brother, Daniel. At times, she shows concern for others, and an

³⁷ *Urban Dictionary*, s.v. “Anti-villain”, accessed January 18, 2011, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=anti-villain>

interest in developing relationships. In learning of Kate's miscarriage, and in spending time with her, she demonstrates an appreciation for her new 'mother'. She seems protective of her new little sister, Max, who is hearing impaired; she even quickly learns sign-language in order to communicate with her. However, Esther's emotional detachment prevents us from fully aligning with her actions. She is able to kill a bird that Daniel injured without hesitation, to "put it out of its misery." She easily dispatches an unsuspecting school bully in the playground. Later, Esther coldly plots and executes the murder of her former guardian, Sister Abigail, and manipulates her new siblings to prevent them from exposing her actions. She is gleefully vindictive when torturing Kate. These deplorable actions lead to her inevitable downfall.

Kate and Esther's correlation is emphasized by the similar ways in which their ontological struggles are cinematically rendered: they are framed so that their images are divided, intersected, confined or distorted, thus illustrating a key feature of the Canadian imagination, identified by McGregor as " 'the containment' motif"³⁸. Mirrors are used to divide Kate into two sections so that her head is in one mirror, and her body is in another. Esther's image is fragmented by a broken mirror, which she smashes, suggesting her dissatisfaction with her image; it does not reflect her unity of self, but her multiple 'selves' as both Esther, the 'girl' and Leena, the 'woman'. Like the mirror, she, too, is fragmented. In effect, this dissection symbolizes "divergent realities"³⁹: the struggle between what each female thinks and what she does, or rather how she is, and how she is expected to be.

These characters are also framed by windows, whose fragile glass is symbolic of separating indoor and outdoor, the internal and the external. Its frame boxes each character in,

³⁸ McGregor, 95

³⁹ McGregor, 74

creating “the strong sense of being contained – physically, not just mentally.”⁴⁰ Reflections in windows (that of plants, the landscape, other people or the weather) distort not only their images, but obscure our perception of these characters. As McGregor and Frye both relate, weather elements affect our control over visual conditions. It is a particular quality of “snow, along with other ambient effects, [to become] less a ‘thing seen’ than a control on the conditions for ‘seeing’...”⁴¹ as they obscure our perception of these characters. More importantly, these elements interrupt the wholeness of the character’s image, reflecting the disturbance their ontological being.

Kate’s framing in relation to the kitchen window, which overlooks the backyard pond, is especially significant. Given the near-drowning of her daughter, Max, we are to understand that Kate dreads venturing into the symbolic and literal wilderness of her backyard. Her view of these elements from the kitchen is extremely telling of her personal struggle. By applying McGregor’s ideas of framing, it is apparent that Kate’s “determination not to be depressed or intimidated by her circumstances effects an apparent transformation of the wilderness into a kitchen garden”⁴², made so by the framing of the kitchen window around her view of the wilderness. This imagery denotes Kate’s coping mechanism of breaking things down into manageable pieces. The ‘kitchen garden’ is therefore a mode of defence against the terror of her past, particularly represented by the threat of the landscape, or more specifically, the pond. This attempt to ‘manage’ the wilderness is further emphasized by the actual kitchen garden Kate has created: the greenhouse.

The two female characters are also depicted in small spaces, which protect and confine each character: Kate is often featured in vehicles, or in bathrooms, like Esther. These framing

⁴⁰ McGregor, 78

⁴¹ McGregor, 74; in her chapter, entitled ‘Re Definition’, McGregor discusses Frye’s ideas about weather elements as “a major tool for directing or undercutting or qualifying or even *exploding* simple semantic meaning”.

⁴² McGregor, 40

techniques emphasize their struggles against the pressures of gender assumptions. In Canadian literary terms, this form of entrapment can be interpreted as an image of the ‘isolated fort’, which McGregor identifies as a “correlative for the beleaguered human psyche attempting to preserve its integrity in the face of an alien, encompassing nature.”⁴³ In some cases, characters occupy small spaces for the sense of security they provide through isolation. Esther seeks out the security of the bathroom to reveal her true self. Its confines allow her to hide while she vents her frustrations. After a session with Kate’s therapist, Esther excuses herself to go to the washroom, where she locks herself in a cubicle. A high angle shot reduces her size and frames her while in the throes of a frustrated tantrum: she kicks at the walls, slams her fists, and shrieks at the top of her lungs. This emphasizes her child-like appearance and behaviour in order to suggest the affect of her physical arrested development: she is trapped.

The correlation between Kate and Esther is disclosed through the *shock of similarity*, a moment of recognition between the two characters as they come to understand one another’s positions, not simply as victims of patriarchal ‘otherness’ but as liminal figures. Unlike the Freudian theory of the uncanny doppelgänger⁴⁴, this correlation is not bound by the identical appearance of those experiencing it. Moreover, it is not a narcissistic projection or splitting of one’s self, but a *shared sense of connection with another, clear and distinct being*, who also embodies the capacity for both good *and* evil. This moment brackets them within the narrative realm, highlighting their fragmentation from some collective (family, traditional notions of femininity, and so on). Horror is not necessarily inherent in the moment; rather, this moment acts as a catalyst for the horror which erupts as a result of it.

⁴³ McGregor, 5

⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”; first published in *Imago*, Bd. V., 1919; reprinted in *Sammlung*, Funfte Folge. trans. Alix Strachey, online PDF, accessed January 21, 2011, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>, 9. Freud’s discussion of the ‘double’ is contingent on three aspects: the identical likeness of physical appearance, the shared experience of knowledge or mental processes, and the recurrence of similar situations.

In *Orphan*, the *shock of similarity* can be examined in three main sequences. These instances depict female monstrosity as the disruption of gender assumptions, where attempts to perform according to conventional notions of ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ result in horror, and where ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are blurred. The first instance establishes the conventional sensibilities of female categories; in effect, the scene ‘constructs’ femininity. Early in the film, Kate guides the newly adopted Esther through a tour of the lush greenhouse, and relates the sad story of her miscarriage and the sentimental value of roses which have been grown from the miscarried child’s ashes. Esther expresses a tearful understanding and appreciation for Kate, declaring that anyone would be lucky to have Kate as a mother. They recognize in one another a shared sense of loneliness and disconnection. This moment evokes images of conventional ‘feminine’ traits: Kate is cast as a nurturing, caring, and gentle mother, while Esther is cast as a helpless, innocent, and sensitive little girl. These categories of ‘woman’ and ‘girl’ are related in accordance to the mother-daughter relationship, set amidst a ‘pretty’ backdrop of flowers and gardens.

These images contrast with the second instance. Further in the film, Esther maliciously inflicts emotional injury on Kate, whose roles as ‘wife’, ‘mother’, and ‘woman’ have been questioned through the revelation of her many failures. In one scene, Esther actively and purposefully destroys “Jessica’s roses” and presents the bouquet to Kate in front of John. She performs as an ‘innocent little girl’, pretending the act is a gesture of appreciation and thoughtfulness, a gift for her ‘mommy’. Her bright smile and innocent façade are meant to disguise the true nature of the deed from John, so that only Kate will recognize the significance implicit in the act. In this moment of recognition, Esther provokes Kate’s rage, encouraging her to act not only ‘un-motherly’ but ‘unwomanly.’ Kate violently lashes out at Esther, while Esther

continues her ‘innocent little girl’ performance, crying out a fake claim of injury to exploit Kate’s rage, to maintain her girlish façade, and to win John’s sympathy and attention.

The third instance positions each female against the other: they are no longer ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’, but woman and woman, both troubled by their failures to meet traditional gender expectations, and both struggling against the gender trap in which they find themselves. The climactic battle on the backyard pond epitomizes each character’s confrontation with conventional notions of gender. As they quarrel, both fall through the ice and are plunged into its murky depths. The landscape of this confrontation is therefore significant: it is in this scene that the pond, which evokes McGregor’s imagery of ‘the bright lake’, “strikes the only positive note, representing as it does an escape route... through which happiness and liberty [can] be again secured.”⁴⁵ In other words, the pond’s ice breaking and opening up under the weight of the characters’ struggle creates a portal which ultimately reveals the film’s outcome for these characters.

Just as Esther has embraced her malformed femininity by removing the ribbons which bind her true identity, Kate has embraced her own malformed femininity, by symbolically rejecting the binding expectations of motherhood. However, at the last moment, Esther assumes the role of ‘girl’ once again to play upon Kate’s mothering instincts, begging her to “Save me, mommy.” Kate’s forceful reply initiates the inevitable outcome: while Kate is able to climb out of (gender) trouble and save herself, Esther drowns in the (gender) trouble from which she cannot escape.

⁴⁵ McGregor, 6

Ultimately, the *shock of similarity* in Jaume Collet-Serra's *Orphan* reveals how gender assumptions and gender experiences are not congruent. It articulates the idea that there are "differences of women from Woman" and that there are "differences among women, or perhaps more exactly... differences *within* women."⁴⁶ This correlation between the anti-heroine and the anti-villain illustrates that the construction of gender is often an ideological misrepresentation, where horror is a consequence of the trap from which misfits like the anti-heroine and the anti-villain struggle to escape. As a result, the 'horror' of gender difference can be understood in alternative ways: in this chapter, it suggests the differences within a homo-gendered paradigm. In the next chapter, the 'horror' of gender difference envisions an approach to the hetero-gendered paradigm which allows for masochistic *and* sadistic pleasure to flow back and forth between male and female spectators.

⁴⁶ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2

CHAPTER THREE

“How Does That Make You Feel?”: The Epistemological Horror of Viewership in Paul Fox’s *The Dark Hours* (2005)

*How to make sense in film if not through vision, film with its founding ideology of vision as truth?*¹

How do we know? The epistemological pleasure in horror rests on the border between knowing and not knowing. Stephen Heath argues that in the film viewing experience we come to know film through vision. Dennis Giles adds that horror film viewers often rely on the intentional obscuring of vision, where “the pleasure in not seeing” entails that full vision of terrifying imagery is “delayed, blocked or partial”². This form of anticipatory vision is, in part, a defensive and expectant emotional reaction. Julian Hanich adds that this correlation of sensory experience with emotional experience is inherent in cinematic fear, as “a visual or aural experience that frequently coincided with fear in the past can easily respark fear in the present simply through perceiving it.”³ That we continue to seek out similar experiences of cinematic fear indicates the pleasure in knowing, and thus the epistemophilic⁴ nature of horror film viewers who are intrigued by the tension between the known and the unknown. It is in the permeable border between the known and the unknown that the viewer can find a space to challenge conventional spectatorial positions and to explore the pleasure in *not knowing*. It is this unconventional spectatorial position that I examine in Paul Fox’s *The Dark Hours*.

¹ Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space,” in *Screen*, 17:3 (Autumn 1976), 91

² Dennis Giles, “Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema,” *Planks of Reason. Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 39

³ Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers. The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 20

⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, sv. “Epistemophilia,” accessed February 5, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epistemophilia>

The fluid border is central to the Canadian sensibility of *The Dark Hours*, as it undermines the dichotomy between the known and the unknown, internal space and external space. It evokes Gail McGregor's notion of the "border condition" of the Canadian experience, a dynamic useful for its concern with the line where "two realities and two states of mind come together."⁵ Horror film theory initially sets forth two spectatorial states: the male gaze and the female gaze. The works of theorists like Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Linda Williams propose the dominance of the activity of the male gaze and the passivity of the female gaze. More recently, theorists like Barbara Creed, Peter Lehman, and Aviva Briefel, are considering the masochistic potential of the male gaze. But what of the sadistic potential of the female gaze, which has received so little theoretical attention? Within the spectatorial space theorized in this chapter, the "border condition" can refer to the circumstances where the 'male' gaze and the 'female' gaze come together.

This dynamic spectatorial space⁶ that I argue describes all horror film viewers, de-prioritizes gender and leaves room for both masochistic *and* sadistic pleasure for, as Pinedo states, as "much as the horror film is an exercise in terror, it is simultaneously an exercise in mastery..."⁷ This position goes against the conventional dichotomy of film theory between the male/active/sadistic gaze and the female/passive/masochistic gaze. It also enables us to re-imagine the relationship of gender and violence in spectatorship, through the illustration of the

⁵ Gail McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 3; while evocative of Kristeva's theory of the abject in terms of ambiguity and transgression pertaining to the 'border'⁵ as reiterated by Creed, this account divorces itself from being specifically anchored in psychoanalytic interpretations of the maternal figure or the female body, and favours a broader conceptualization. *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, feminism, psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 8

⁶ This point or spectatorial space I describe is evocative of De Lauretis' "me" space, which disassociates the specificity of a gendered gaze, while simultaneously taking it into account, along with other social and cultural identifiers which may impact viewership. Teresa De Lauretis, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," in *Female Spectators. Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 190

⁷ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1997), 5

furious feminine (“the violent woman”) as more than an object of violence, but as an agent of violence as well⁸. Horror thus makes room for a sadistic female gaze: the *sadista*.

The Predominant Theory of Viewership

The prevailing sensibility regarding the cinematic gaze has been the equating of “the masculinity of the male subject with activity, voyeurism, sadism, fetishism, and story, and the femininity of the female subject with passivity, exhibitionism, masochism, narcissism, and spectacle.”⁹ Previous film theory has suggested that the cinematic gaze maintains the patriarchal notions and phallogentric ideology set forth in psychoanalytic thought. In conjunction with Freudian theory, Laura Mulvey argues that the male viewer derives visual pleasure from the objectification of the on-screen female form in order to cope with underlying anxieties disturbed by the threat of castration. The male viewer disavows the threat of castration that the female symbolizes by positioning himself as the active viewer. However, there is still the possibility of intimidation, as the female, “displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of the men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.”¹⁰ Mulvey suggests that the male viewer comes to disavow the threat of castration in two ways, either by

...preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object... or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous...¹¹

According to Mulvey, the female can only passively receive the gaze. It is through the male gaze that the female in horror films comes to represent the victim and monster. The male identifies the

⁸ Pinedo, 6

⁹ Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, “Introduction”, *Screening the Male. Exploring masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 2

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 31

¹¹ Mulvey, 21

female as a threat, or monstrous figure, but attempts to overcome his anxiety over this threat by either deriving a sadistic pleasure from the punishment of the female form, or envisioning her sexualized form in a way that is less intimidating, in a manner that renders her as a victim.

Mulvey's addendum to her initial theory attempts to address the female viewers of films. She again draws upon Freudian theory to describe the female viewer as ultimately limited by conventional notions of 'masculinity'. The problem lies in the sense that "the feminine cannot be conceptualized as different, but rather as only opposition (passivity) in an antonymic sense, or as a similarity (the phallic sense)."¹² This evokes a distinction between traditional concepts of the normal and the abnormal, a comparison that relies on a troubling sense of opposition. As such, Mulvey indicates that this distinction based on "opposition or polarity, leaves woman also shifting between the metaphoric 'active' and 'passive'."¹³ Essentially, the female viewer can really only reconcile her passive sense of identity with the supposedly lost active sense of identity when she "temporarily accepts 'masculinisation' in memory of her 'active' phase."¹⁴ But even in this act of assuming the 'masculine' positioning of spectatorship, the female is never quite sated as the "fantasy of masculinisation [is] at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes."¹⁵ Mulvey's discussion points to the ineffective way in which the patriarchal notions in psychoanalytic theory attempt to represent femininity.

Linda Williams' account of the 'female' gaze follows from Mulvey's claims. Williams describes the female gaze as frustrated and/or punished, and likens the figure to that of the

¹² Mulvey, 31

¹³ Mulvey, 31

¹⁴ Mulvey, 37

¹⁵ Mulvey, 37

monster, who shares in a similar status as a “biological freak”.¹⁶ While she allows that the woman’s look involves “the curiosity and desire *to see*... Everything conspires... to condemn [that] desire and curiosity.”¹⁷ As a result of her association with the monster figure, she is “punished by not being allowed the safe distance that ensures the voyeur’s pleasure of looking,”¹⁸ thereby disassociating her with the position of voyeur and sadist, and denouncing her as masochistic.

Williams diverges from Mulvey’s ideas in aligning with Susan Lurie’s discussion of “power-in-difference”¹⁹, indicating that rather than assuming a victimized position, the female can adopt a position of power. This power results when there is a creation of fear of “not her own mutilation, but the power to mutilate and transform the vulnerable male.”²⁰ While this can work towards a theory of “the violent woman”, Williams’ strategy undermines the ‘power-in-difference’ possessed by female characters by relating the significance of “the monster’s death [as] an exorcism of the power of their own sexuality.”²¹ In effect, Williams’ theory empowers the woman’s look, only to later demean it as “the ‘natural’ complement to the voyeur’s sadistic pleasure.”²² No less important is the sense that Williams is primarily concerned with the woman’s look as it pertains to the female character, rather than the female viewer, implying that both forms of the female gaze are interchangeable.

Mary Ann Doane’s writings share much in common with the ideas of Mulvey. She also explains the ineffectuality of psychoanalytic theory to account for femininity as a result of the

¹⁶ Linda Williams, ‘When The Woman Looks,’ in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 20

¹⁷ Williams, 19

¹⁸ Williams, 19

¹⁹ Williams, 23

²⁰ Williams, 23

²¹ Williams, 24

²² Williams, 25

preoccupation with the male's sexuality and desires. She examines the displacement of female spectatorship and the way in which male ontology complicates or excludes it. Even Freud, she points out, literally excludes females and fails to theorize the female as a signifier in any terms but in relation to the male. Doane concentrates on Freud's lecture on "Femininity", where he articulates the problem of the female, suggesting that she is "too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma, she could not step back, could not achieve the necessary distance of the second look."²³ The terms 'proximity' and 'distance', which distinguish Doane from Mulvey's terms of the 'active' and the 'passive', highlight yet another apparent deficiency of the female: the inability to distance herself from her image. That which prevents her from having such an ability to do so entails that the dominant distinctions established in male sexuality and female sexuality persist, that "this body so close, so excessive, prevents the woman from assuming a position similar to the man's in relation to signifying systems."²⁴ Once again, a heterosexual divide is being maintained, declaring an apparent irreconcilability of the female gaze and the male gaze.

Doane suggests that attempts to achieve necessary distance are sought through Mulvey's notion of transvestism or Doane's notion of masquerading, of assuming a gaze with the knowledge that it is different from the female's own, or that the appropriation of the gaze is in a sense, a façade, an attempt to achieve distance. In any case, there is a sense of fluidity in the sexual identity of the female, and even Freudian theory supports this in its reference to "the bisexuality, which is present... in the innate disposition of human beings, [that] comes to the fore much more clearly in women than in men."²⁵ In this context, the female gaze is discussed as inherently bisexual, allowing a sense of movement in spectatorial space. However, the theories

²³ Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator" in *Screen*, Vol. 23: 3-4, (1982), 75-76

²⁴ Doane, 79

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1927-1931), 228

of Mulvey, Williams, and Doane continue to rely on gender coded behaviour, a strict dynamic which challenges the fluidity of identity and hinders further theorizing of the spectatorial space.

On Alternative Male Viewership

There is evidence that the strict dynamic of the male/active/sadistic gaze and the female/passive/masochistic gaze is uncoupling. According to Cohan and Hark, the female is not the only casualty of restrictive gender divisions, since “the male image on the cinema screen is... as significant a representational stake as the female.”²⁶ There are filmed men and male film characters who are “performing their gender, in neurotic (and even psychotic) relationships to it, or seeking alternatives to masculinity as culture defines it.”²⁷ This, in turn, directly impacts the male viewer, whose voyeurism has been theorized in limited ways, often excluding homoerotic elements²⁸, as well as the capacity to sympathetically align with both male and female characters.

Barbara Creed outlines the mechanisms of the male monster in ‘Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the horror film’, emphasizing the inherent feminine position of this figure through the discussion of specific ‘feminine’ imagery and transformations. Creed theorizes the masochistic nature of masculinity through the male desire to create, man’s desire for castration, and the male death wish.

She describes the evocation of menstrual cycles in the periodic replenishing of blood of the titular character in *Dracula* (1931), and the significance of transformation as symbolic of man giving birth to himself in another form²⁹ in *The Wolf Man* (1941). The male monsters

²⁶ Cohan and Hark, 3

²⁷ Cohan and Hark, 3

²⁸ Cohan and Hark, 3-4

²⁹ Barbara Creed, ‘Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the horror film’, in *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 125

associated with the sensibility of menstrual cycles and the sensibility of blood as life force evoke a similar sense of ‘male womb envy’ as suggested by the image of the male mother/scientist, whose attempts to create new life forms are actually “bizarre [attempts] to usurp reproductive powers”³⁰ which only result in the formation of monsters.³¹ The inability of the male body and the male figure to create or rather, “birth” natural new life is therefore depicted as a perpetual failure, as it is attempted repeatedly with some experience of pain, to no avail.

Male masochism is also configured according to transvestitism and transexuality. Creed argues that the male monster figure in both *Dressed to Kill* and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is one who masquerades as or desires to become a woman. As such, monstrosity is depicted in relation to the sense that “woman’s body is represented as the ideal body desired by man.”³² Through a process of transformation, some semblance of the woman’s body is, in effect, achieved. The ultimate in bodily changes in the process of physical feminization is the removal of the penis in the procedure for changing sex. Therefore, these instances of the male monster can be read as those desiring a form of violence to the male form: castration.

Creed also interprets the desire to be castrated as a form of the male death wish, especially as noted in the rape-revenge film. As both *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Naked Vengeance* (1984) illustrate, the male becomes a victim in certain castration scenes, where the protagonist enacts revenge upon her rapists. That the audience is positioned alongside the protagonist as the vengeance-seeker suggests that “the audience is intended to enjoy his savage punishment.”³³ Creed adds that the way in which the scene leads to castration is through the seduction of the rapist, who “willingly surrenders to the woman he has previously brutalized and

³⁰ Creed, 129

³¹ Creed, 129

³² Creed, 119

³³ Creed, 129

who has good reason to wish him dead.”³⁴ In these instances, sex and death are aligned insofar as man is suggested to possess “a secret longing for extinction in the act of reunion with the woman...”³⁵

She adds that the monster is “frequently represented as a sympathetic figure with whom all spectators are encouraged to identify”³⁶, which therefore allows for masochism in male viewership, though Creed’s engagement with this aspect is much less a priority. The bulk of Creed’s focus on the nature of male desire and imagination to lend itself toward a reading of male masochism continually returns to the feminization of the male monster, suggesting that the male monster is essentially masochistic in accordance with the feminine position of masochism. In effect, she argues that ultimately there is no “male” position of masochism; there is only the understanding of male masochism as a feminized position. Granted, her investigation of male masochism demonstrates the ambiguity of identity, however, Creed’s theory of male masochism invariably reiterates the medieval view to which she draws attention: femininity is a flaw in the otherwise perfect human form best represented by the male.³⁷ Still, it is this type of investigation which works towards the uncoupling of conventional heterosexual divide.

In his essay, “Don’t Blame This on a Girl’: Female rape-revenge films”, Peter Lehman echoes some of the ideas Creed sets forth. He theorizes the spectacle of male punishment in both the rape-revenge film – especially *I Spit on Your Grave* – and the slasher genre by discussing male spectators “who [find] pleasure in watching the gruesome deaths of the men.”³⁸ Lehman

³⁴ Creed, 129

³⁵ Creed, 130

³⁶ Creed, 131

³⁷ Creed, 119

³⁸ Peter Lehman, “Don’t Blame This on a Girl: Female rape-revenge films,” in *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 110

argues that “male spectators are positioned to be disgusted by the rape and to identify with the avenging woman,”³⁹ suggesting that audiences will “feel that what follows is justified.”⁴⁰ However, this spectacle of male punishment extends beyond the desire for a sense of justice; Lehman suggests that male viewers, particularly of rape-revenge films, have “more invested in them than a simple desire to see justice done.”⁴¹ Heterosexual male viewers are also concerned with desire for the female protagonist and the elimination of competition for her. Male viewers of the rape-revenge film are allowed to “hate rather than simply identify with these men who embody desires similar to his own.”⁴² Repulsive male characters express those desires to an unacceptable extent through extreme and excessive violence – specifically through acts of rape – and so male viewers “cannot, of course, acknowledge any similarity between themselves and the rapists,”⁴³ without, in some sense, being morally reprehensible as well. The pleasure for male viewers in “seeing the rapists killed may come from being rid of other men who also desire her.”⁴⁴

In addition, male viewers may be facing deep-seated issues while viewing the rape-revenge film. They may contend with potentially repressed feelings of either (a) homosexuality, or (b) homophobia, two states which relate the displacement of something within the viewer himself. Lehman argues that “it may be the unique function of the female rape-revenge genre to disguise that homosexuality by having a beautiful woman brutally attack the male body in general and the genitals in specific.”⁴⁵ The trouble is, if male viewers do experience homosexual or homophobic feelings, the response that Lehman’s theory allows for in regards to this

³⁹ Lehman, 104

⁴⁰ Lehman, 104

⁴¹ Lehman, 111

⁴² Lehman, 112

⁴³ Lehman, 112

⁴⁴ Lehman, 112

⁴⁵ Lehman, 116

experience is necessarily one of *hatred* towards any figure who may bring out those experiences. Though Lehman briefly attends to the male rape-revenge film by referencing *Death Wish* (1974) and *Cat Chaser* (1988), his discussion does not fully address the implications of male masochism in the correlation of the male viewer and the *male* rape victim, or the *male* as vengeance-seeker against his rapists. Instead, the discussion is primarily concerned with the female rape-revenge film, and the way in which the woman in the female rape-revenge film is essentially reduced to the “surrogate for male desire”.⁴⁶

Aviva Briefel’s article, “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror film”, also attempts to break away from conventional conceptualizations of the sadistic male, and foregrounds how “masochism is central to the construction of male monsters, who initiate their sadistic rampages with acts of self-mutilation.”⁴⁷ A number of male monsters exemplify this tendency: Jekyll’s repeated ingestion of a potion to painfully transform himself as part of an experiment in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931); the maniacal hitchhiker who slices into his own hand in front of the travellers in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974); and Freddy’s various self-inflicted cuts in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. (1984) and its sequels. This trend of male self-mutilation is unique, as “female monsters do not inflict pain on themselves before undertaking their sadistic rampages.”⁴⁸ According to Briefel, a female monster only engages in masochistic acts “either by coercion from an outside force or as a way of terminating her

⁴⁶ Lehman, 115

⁴⁷ Aviva, Briefel, “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film,” in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 58: 3 (Spring, 2005), 16, accessed February 18, 2011, <http://www.davidsterritt.com/Masochism,%20Menstruation....pdf>

⁴⁸ Briefel, 20

monstrosity;”⁴⁹ such is the case with the possessed Regan’s self-inflicted assault with a crucifix in *The Exorcist* (1973), or Carrie’s self-destruction in *Carrie* (1976).

Briefel briefly refers to Peter Hutchings’ take on horror movies, which extends Clover’s ideas to position the monster as a site of masochistic identification. He argues for the vulnerability of the monster figure, as one who “frequently suffers in the horror film”⁵⁰ and that through this suffering, the male viewer is offered a masochistic position with which to identify, since “it allows the spectator to experience a ‘willing subjection’ that makes [the monster’s] return to authority all the more powerful.”⁵¹ However, immediately following this reference, Briefel challenges these claims by arguing that that the male monster’s acts of self-mutilation distance the audience from the character. In witnessing instances where the male monster engages in acts of self-mutilation, “the strangeness of his act and the unknowability of his pain prevent us from fully identifying with him...”⁵² She adds that even in witnessing the visible expression of the male monster’s pain, viewers remain distanced as this form of violence is a self-referential violence – it draws attention to itself, and to viewer identification since “it cannot go anywhere during the masochistic moment.”⁵³

Briefel’s theory is productive in its discussion of the masochism of male monsters, however, her argument that viewers (especially male viewers) are unable to identify with such instances of male masochism assumes that the circumstances which enable a masochistic sensibility are restricted specifically to identification with the male monster, and not with other characters, or in the partly masochistic nature of horror film viewership itself. Moreover, her

⁴⁹ Briefel, 21

⁵⁰ Briefel, 17

⁵¹ Briefel, 17-18

⁵² Briefel, 19

⁵³ Briefel, 18

reference to Hutchings' concept of the vulnerable monster is useful in a discussion of the masochistic nature of male viewers, and should not be discarded so easily.

On Alternative Female Viewership

In "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films", Cynthia A. Freeland critically engages with the proponents of the psychodynamic approach to horror films. She works toward an understanding of the feminist theoretical framework in terms of plurality and diversity, as she doubts that "there can be any one 'feminist theory of horror'"⁵⁴ because there is an "astounding variety of styles, nuances, and tones within this genre."⁵⁵ Despite the dominance of psychoanalytic theory, there are overwhelming flaws which render its foundations unstable, thus begging the question which is certainly on Freeland's mind: what other theoretical frameworks are there?

Freeland's strategy of horror film reading aims to "look 'below' its surface representations of male or female characters to consider gaps, presumptions, and even what is "repressed"... blocked, omitted, or avoided, in these representations."⁵⁶ Our understanding of the female gaze is incomplete, as much of previous horror film theory avoids certain aspects of this complex state. Of course, it should be recognized that "a feminist reading need not be a 'complete' reading of the movie that purports to attend to all its many elements";⁵⁷ however, in the efforts to uncouple the male/active/sadistic gaze and the female/passive/masochism gaze, a space has been created in which we can finally discuss the blocked, omitted, and avoided sadistic female gaze: the *sadista*.

⁵⁴ Cynthia A. Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," in *Film Theory and Criticism, Seventh Edition*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 636

⁵⁵ Freeland, 636

⁵⁶ Freeland, 639

⁵⁷ Freeland, 641

I employ this notion to refer to any female viewer who is especially drawn to horror films due, in part, to her often, but not necessarily, suppressed pleasure derived from audio-visual engagement with violent and malevolent acts against others. This experience is often based on a response to the on-screen impression of the “the violent woman.” As Hilary Neroni indicates in her book *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*, there is a need for “inquiry into filmic violence because of the way we experience this violence.”⁵⁸ Although our experiences of “the violent woman” can be of those archetypes suggested by Williams’ conceptualization of the helpless victim, Creed’s idea of the monstrous feminine, or Clover’s depiction of the “Final Girl”, our experience should not be limited by psychosexual readings. Instead, consider how this figure – often blocked, omitted, or avoided in horror film theory – can exist as the *active* killer; this is a way in which female viewers can experience violence in film. This representation of “the violent woman” is especially welcome in a context of Canadian horror, as both Atwood’s and McGregor’s theories describe the Woman-Nature metaphor; Atwood indicates that the female character can often be seen as “malevolent, sinister, or life-denying,”⁵⁹ while McGregor suggests that “violence lurks just below the surface.”⁶⁰ This female figure is not simply an object of violence, but an agent of violence, motivated to kill for reasons of justice, vengeance and/or sadistic pleasure. For this reason, I also identify this figure as the *furious feminine*.

The relationship between the *sadista* and *furious feminine* indicates that a specific element inherent in the active aspect of the gaze – control – does not necessarily entail a

⁵⁸ Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2

⁵⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd, 1972), 199

⁶⁰ Gail McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 38

movement to a cross-gender assumption of the male gaze. Sharing Freeland's sense of an ideological reading of gender, Neroni describes the dual affect of the "the violent woman". Her violence is often (a) explained away by narrative attempts to "conceal antagonism"⁶¹, and (b) revealed, often contrary to narrative efforts, to cause trauma⁶². Thus, following the Canadian sensibility of 'the Return of the Repressed' (as the horror resulting from the violent reaction against external forces), this violence of the female character, though at times repressed by the pressure of narrative means, inevitably bursts forth to enact damage against others.

Neroni's account applies across genres, taking a number of "violent women" as examples.⁶³ However, her treatment of "the violent woman" in the horror genre is limited to the "Final Girl", a female figure whose innocence deflects "the trauma of her violence by highlighting her victim status and, in this way, justifying any means she uses to save herself."⁶⁴ While she contrasts this figure with the femme fatale to demonstrate that the violence of the "Final Girl" is "far more gruesome, physical, and bloody... usually based on physical strength (rather than firing a gun),"⁶⁵ Neroni lamely concludes that violence in this model "can only occur when she is tortured, violated, and pushed into a state of total fright."⁶⁶ In this sense, violence is a consequence of self-defence, the basic need for survival. But surely this is not the only reason violence is enacted by a female character in horror films. How, then, can we understand "the violent woman" in the horror genre beyond Neroni's account of the "Final Girl"? We can discuss

⁶¹ Neroni, 11

⁶² Neroni, 11

⁶³ Throughout her book, Neroni refers to "the violent women" of action films, Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and Trinity in *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels; in suspense/thriller films, Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992); in crime/drama films, Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and Thelma and Louise in *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

⁶⁴ Neroni, 32

⁶⁵ Neroni, 32

⁶⁶ Neroni, 32

the gruesome, physical, and bloody strength of “the violent woman” as an *active killer*, by focusing on that which is inscribed in the active gaze: control.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo’s notion of “recreational terror”⁶⁷ reveals a great deal about control, particularly within viewership, as “the pleasure of recreational terror depends on the tension between not (fully) seeing, the pleasure of recoil, and seeing (more fully), the pleasure of the gaze.”⁶⁸ To this, I add the pleasure in *not knowing*, or rather, *not (fully) knowing*, as it also contributes to “the game that one plays with the text”.⁶⁹ In this context, pleasure is determined in part by control, and in part by the loss of control, especially as it relates to generic conventions and generic expectations. As Philip Brophy suggests, “The contemporary Horror film knows that you’ve seen it before; it knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know.”⁷⁰ It will follow and break its own rules in favour of unsettling and disturbing its viewers. At the same time, viewers are aware of the artifice of the genre, for they willingly “submit to the tension and fear provoked by body horror, a highly conventionalized spectacle of violence in which controlled loss substitutes for the loss of control that people who come to these films are already experiencing.”⁷¹

For the *sadista*, the appeal of this relationship of control and loss lies in a number of factors, including the “combination of arousing such anxieties in men while securing female

⁶⁷ Pinedo, 5; Julian Hanich also describes cinematic fear, but in terms of several categories: direct horror, suggested horror, cinematic shock, cinematic dread, and cinematic terror. Pinedo’s “recreational terror” is similar to Hanich’s “cinematic terror”, as both are anticipatory forms of fear; however, the terms are distinct insofar as Pinedo uses ‘terror’ to refer to the collective cinematic experience of horror, whereas Hanich argues that it is one of many separate types of cinematic horror. *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, 19

⁶⁸ Pinedo, 54

⁶⁹ Brophy, 5

⁷⁰ Philip Brophy, “Horrority – The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films”, *Screen* (1986) 27 (1), 5, accessed June 17, 2010, <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org>

⁷¹ Pinedo, 66

victory.”⁷² While Pinedo seems to present this statement as an expression of one sentiment, I would argue that “arousing anxieties” and “securing female victory” are not mutually dependent. These instances appeal most to the *sadista* when they are sought by *furious feminine* because of the way in which her violence illustrates the often overlooked “legitimacy of female rage”.⁷³ Unfortunately, Pinedo’s case study of *The Stepfather* (1987), a feminist horror film which fulfills De Lauretis’ “call that a feminist film create a space for the female subject without abandoning narrative and visual pleasure,”⁷⁴ only describes the female as a *reactive* killer, as one whose violence is in response to a physical threat, as is the case with self-defence, and whose violence is therefore morally and narratively justified; in the logic of ‘kill, or be killed’, no person of sound mind who values his or her well-being will choose to be killed. However, not all threats are necessarily physical; there can be non-physical (emotional) threats as well, which do not specifically entail a response of violence. As such, we need to consider female violence in terms of the *active* killer, as one who *chooses* to kill, and whose violence is not morally and/or narratively justified.

In the theory of *furious feminine*, female aggression must also be conceived of in terms of the intensity of rage, the dominance of the female, and the distortion of morality, as these elements contribute to the exploration of “the diversity of women’s consumption of horror.”⁷⁵ In fact, a prime example of this figure is found in both the original and the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*, whose protagonist, Jennifer, exhibits each of these characteristics. While these elements might translate to a ‘loss of innocence’ within the conventional gender ideal of the innocent female, they also point to the fragility of gender stereotypes. They are actively shattered by the

⁷² Pinedo, 85

⁷³ Pinedo, 95

⁷⁴ Pinedo, 95

⁷⁵ Brigid Cherry, “Refusing to Refuse to Look: Female viewers of the horror film,” in *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: The British Film Institute, 1999), 190

partnership between “the violent woman” and female viewers, who can adopt a defiant gaze characterized by Brigid Cherry as the “refusal to refuse to look;”⁷⁶ in other words, female viewers who approve of strong female characters and the destruction of stereotypes.

In *Misfit Sisters*, Sue Short’s discussion of female experiences supports these instances of violence, which are enacted by violent females “as a measure of dissatisfaction and refusal,”⁷⁷ evidence of female self-determination. Short argues that females are just as capable of active violence because they can also possess “‘primitive’ emotions, such as envy and anger”⁷⁸. In *Seductions of Crime*, Jack Katz places a similar emphasis on emotional experience and violence. He indicates that:

Central to all these experiences in deviance is a member of the family of moral emotions: humiliation, righteousness, arrogance, ridicule, cynicism, defilement, and vengeance. In each, the attraction that proves to be most fundamentally compelling is that of overcoming a personal challenge to moral – not to material – existence.⁷⁹

The moral existence of “the violent woman” is often marred by emotionally-clouded judgment and, as an *active* killer, this figure is one who invariably embraces evil as “the experience is a personal construction.”⁸⁰ Despite the moral disturbances of “the violent woman”, Short argues that viewers can “admire the self-possession displayed by these characters, and their unwillingness to comply with the rules by which conduct and morality tend to be governed. Even as they are punished, far from necessarily breathing a collective sigh of relief, we may equally sigh with disappointment at the measures taken to bring such misfits in line.”⁸¹

⁷⁶ Cherry, 187

⁷⁷ Sue Short, *Misfit Sisters. Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 105

⁷⁸ Short, 105

⁷⁹ Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime. Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil*, (New York, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1988), 9

⁸⁰ Katz, 23

⁸¹ Short, 106

The *sadista* is indeed capable of experiencing Pinedo's notion of "recreational terror", especially since the genre's self-reflexivity contributes to the pleasure of horror film viewing. Horror film imagery is based on "a realistic though imperfect 'illusion of people in torment,' so the artifice can be appreciated and the torment enjoyed... Awareness of artifice, then, is not a flaw but an essential ingredient of recreational terror."⁸² Ultimately, the relationship between the horror film and its viewers, including its female viewers, is one of a power struggle. This genre is marked by a tension between the known and the unknown; we desire to see the threat, to expose the figure of horror and render it knowable, thereby removing uncertainty. But despite generic conventions, there will always be variations in the processes of unveiling the unknown; moreover, that which may be visually revealed may not be narratively unexplained, and therefore not fully comprehensible. As such, there is also a definite tension between epistemophilia and epistemophobia, where as viewers *we both desire and fear to know* and often are unable to know. Dennis White describes this fear of the unknown in "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye"; he writes:

Generally, the force at work in a horror film might be defined as the triggering of our basic fear of the unknown, our fear of being unable to deal with our environment. The most obvious embodiments of this fear are monsters, and nightmarish situations beyond our comprehension and control.⁸³

This sense of powerlessness motivates viewers to return a sense of control. According to Neale, we rely on the narrative process of horror films to unveil "that specialised form of knowledge which will enable the human characters to comprehend and to control that which simultaneously embodies and causes its 'trouble'."⁸⁴ As a result of this relationship of control and loss of

⁸² Pinedo, 55

⁸³ Dennis White, "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1971), 8

⁸⁴ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London, British Film Institute, 1980), 22

control, it is apparent that each viewer is both masochistic *and* sadistic, though not to the same degree as everyone else at all times.

The Merriam-Webster account of 'masochism' describes "a sexual perversion characterized by pleasure in being subjected to pain or humiliation especially by a love object"⁸⁵. But masochism is also understood as pleasure derived from being controlled or having a loss of control, where there is "pleasure in being abused or dominated: a taste for suffering"⁸⁶. By setting aside the focus of *sexual perversion*, we can adopt a more flexible sensibility of the term, one which does not entail the gendering of terms; instead, we can say that anyone can have a degree of 'a taste for suffering', since horror film viewers are aware of the generic conventions, and willingly submit to watching the exposing of the ruined body; as Pinedo states, viewers willingly "rehearse the loss of control over the body through gory special effects."⁸⁷

The Merriam-Webster account of 'sadism' describes "a sexual perversion in which gratification is obtained by the infliction of physical or mental pain on others"⁸⁸. But sadism can also be understood as the pleasure derived from control over others via "delight in cruelty."⁸⁹ If we set aside *sexual* gratification, which is but one form of gratification (the source for satisfaction or pleasure⁹⁰), we can employ this latter sense of sadism, and adopt a more flexible sensibility of the term, one which will not entail the consequential engendering of terms. Instead, we can say that a 'delight in cruelty' is a capability of any viewer, as according to Pinedo,

⁸⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "masochism," accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/masochism?show=0&t=1296351554>

⁸⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "masochism"

⁸⁷ Pinedo, 60

⁸⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "sadism," accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sadism>

⁸⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "sadism," accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sadism>

⁹⁰ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "gratification," accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gratification>

viewers are drawn to horror genre for its ‘illusion of torment’ and for the opportunity to relish “the act of showing the ruined body of another.”⁹¹

A number of horror film theorists recognize the diversity of the spectatorial experience, which supports the understanding of the “border condition” apparent in viewership. In addition to Pinedo’s ideas, Brophy’s theory suggests that “the gratification of the contemporary Horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism – a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenalin.”⁹² These two elements – sadism and masochism – ultimately co-exist within a spectatorial space that seeks to avoid (1) problematic dichotomies, as well as (2) the trap of oversimplification, as Rhona Berenstein states that both of these issues “narrow [horror’s] overall ideological project”⁹³ and are forgetful of the genre’s “power to both frighten and mesmerize spectators.”⁹⁴ Berenstein speaks of gender mobility, and also agrees that “male and female spectatorship needs to be viewed as flexible, an experience in which a range of affective states, some prescribed and others not, are induced and adopted.”⁹⁵ In turn, she recalls Miriam Hansen, who views the “conceptualization of spectatorship as an oscillation between sadistic and masochistic poles... slipping between identification and desire, between dominance and passivity.”⁹⁶ Judith Butler’s discussion illustrates the relevance of the border in the construction of identity as sexual difference “operates as a chiasm, but the terms that overlap and blur are perhaps less importantly masculine or feminine than the problematic of

⁹¹ Pinedo, 57

⁹² Brophy, 5

⁹³ Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 10

⁹⁴ Berenstein, 10

⁹⁵ Berenstein, 17

⁹⁶ Berenstein, 37

construction itself...”⁹⁷ These dialogues acknowledge the complexity of gender and sexuality, suggesting the complexity of identity in general. Thus, a spectatorial space that is both masochistic *and* sadistic is an actuality which we can further discuss.

The Case Study

Paul Fox’s *The Dark Hours* is a clear example of “the violent woman”, as it depicts several occurrences of violence enacted by its protagonist. Upon discovering the growth of her inoperable brain tumour, psychiatrist Samantha Goodman decides to ‘get away from it all’ by visiting the winter cottage where her sister and her writer husband are working. Soon after her arrival, she encounters unexpected guests, one of whom is a distraught former patient bent on seeking vengeance for his medical mistreatment. The film illustrates the “border condition” in the Canadian horror experience, particularly in relation to what Jason Anderson identifies as “space constraint”⁹⁸, the tension between internal and external spaces. The themes of isolation and confinement are inscribed in the setting, where the central location is a winter cottage out in the woods; the protagonist’s mindset is similarly a site of isolation. The cottage comes to symbolize the interior spaces of Samantha’s state of mind: the smaller sublevel spaces of the root cellar and the basement are suggestive of her attempts to hide, to avoid confrontation; she wants to remain herself, unaffected by the tumour. But she must return to the main floor to confront her circumstances. Samantha is unable to escape the cottage, the interior: she tries to break through the lattice in the root cellar, to no avail; she tries to run away from the cottage after breaking free, only to find that when she stops running, she is back at the cottage.

⁹⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Florida: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 186

⁹⁸ Jason Anderson, “Cabin Fever – *The Dark Hours* points to a Canadian film tradition: the one-room thriller” from CBC, last modified: Nov. 15, 2005, accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/film/darkhours.html>

Clearly, the “border condition” manifests in the representations of the setting and the protagonist, as each one is a point of oscillation between two states: the known and the unknown, the external and the internal. At the same time, spatio-temporal dissonance in the diegetic world comes to affect viewership. By watching the film, and taking the protagonist, Samantha, as the primary point of alignment, it entails that my gaze is subject to similar experiences as that of the protagonist, replicated via inconsistencies in aural, visual, and narrative dissonances. Within this context of spatio-temporal dissonance, there is difficulty in determining what is ‘real’ within the diegesis and what is not. This difficulty is further complicated by Harlan, the former patient, whose voice murmurs in my ear, poking and prodding my mind: what would *you* do? How do you *know*? This film is a point of illustration of the epistemophilic *and* epistemophobic aspects of horror film viewership. It creates a space for me, as a viewer, to consider the oscillation between the known and the unknown, for I am further implicated in the filmic space through the use of cue moments which precede instances of violence. Ultimately, *The Dark Hours* demonstrates that the spectatorial space is a chiasm, a point where two states of mind – masochism *and* sadism – meet.

While violence is carried out by a number of characters, the design of the film encourages a focus on “the violent woman”. Samantha or, as the other characters refer to her, “Sam”, is a thirty-something attractive psychiatrist, whose body is the site of transformation as a result of a growing brain tumour which affects her mind state. Sam is the embodiment of the relationship between control and loss. She is depicted as a capable, intelligent female: a leading psychiatrist at a psychiatric institute, where she is entrusted with patient care and assessments; the breadwinner in her family, as her husband’s income as a writer is meagre in comparison. She is a controlling force in that she oversees patients, colleagues, her family, and her own medical

treatment. Even when she and her family are held hostage by Harlan, her former patient, and his male partner, Adrian, Sam tries to handle the situation by talking Adrian down from his panicked state. However, Sam's tumour is the real threat to her sense of control, and her attempts to regain that control by manipulating others (her patients, her family) inexorably lead to loss and trauma.

Harlan: "We have to stick to the rules or nothing's learned."

Sam does find herself being manipulated, with Harlan, her captor and former patient, hanging over her shoulder, encouraging her eventual wrath in such a way that depicts this "violent woman" as being both masochistic *and* sadistic. During Harlan's array of sadistic mind games or 'psychological tests' (his favourite, "Strip Phoner"; "Punishment," correcting patterns of behaviour; the mysterious "Scorpion"; and the classic, "Truth or Dare") Sam is generally left to the sidelines to watch as her family members are tormented. Her participation in the last of Harlan's sadistic games, "Truth or Dare", indicates that in some ways she does agree with Harlan's comments about rules. She submits to the game as a strategy to hear her suspicions against her husband and her sister confirmed, as Harlan holds an axe at her neck, threatening to send her head clear across the room; "It's the only way", she declares. Though Sam and Harlan are constantly positioned in terms of opposites – mind/body, doctor/patient, homeowner/invader, sadistic/masochistic – the film implies that both are connected; together they form a whole.

By and large, the instances of Sam's expressions of physical violence are a result of dissatisfaction and a refusal to comply with the 'rules' set forth by others: she refuses to be held captive and crudely disposes of one of her captors by driving a nail into the side of his head; she refuses to be victimized and humiliated, and so commits a crime of passion in killing her husband and her sister who are depicted in the throes of a sexual affair; though we do not witness

the act, she is later implied to have shot the family dog, Bruiser. Her violence conveys her dominance as a killer and the increasing distortion of her sense of morality; even her last name, ‘Goodman’, is an ironic hint that she is actually a ‘bad woman’. When left with the decision to direct violence towards herself, first in her self-injected medical treatments and later in cutting off her little finger, she does so not out of pleasure, but to regain some semblance of control over her circumstances. She is trying to defeat her tumour and therefore her mortality and, when the distinction between the known and the unknown becomes wholly unclear, we experience direct horror as she cuts her finger off with a resounding crunch of the bone in order to distinguish between illusion and reality; as Harlan states, “Pain is the only reality.” In the end, she succumbs to an overdose on her treatment, and is understood to have attempted a last gesture in asserting control and demonstrating intentionality: knowing the result of such an overdose, she self-injects too much serum so as to purposely induce a coma. Sam is an agent of violence who seeks control.

Violence is also afflicted against our senses in *The Dark Hours*. Over the course of the narrative, the viewer’s sensory experience is increasingly confounded with the protagonist’s sensory experience. In effect, my gaze is paralleled with Sam’s gaze. When Sam’s senses malfunction, the film sound and aesthetics imitate her experience and replicates it so that I am sharing the experience.

Harlan: “When did you first hear the sounds?”

Sound is a means of signalling movement from one state or location to another. Dialogue is often used to overlap scenes, bridging them together. At one point, Sam is anchored in reality; the next, she is overwhelmed by an unnatural state created by the side effects of her tumour and

her treatment. Certain of these sounds become unnaturally distinct. On her way to the cottage, Sam makes a rest stop at a diner. While she sits at the counter listening to the server, individual sounds afflict her one by one: the cash machine chiming, cutlery scraping against plates, a ticking clock, eggs sizzling on a burner, even a dripping faucet. These sounds bombard Sam until their layering creates an amplified din. Then it suddenly ceases, and once again she is listening to the server describe the headless local farm animals that provide her excellent veal cutlets. In several instances peppered throughout the scenes at the cottage, scratching noises can be heard, first by all characters, and later, heard only by Sam as a side effect of her medication. It is dismissed as “mice in the attic”, but its recurring nature contributes to Sam’s subjective experience and mine by extension. This sound not only mirrors the cringe-worthy instances where Sam scratches the rash around the injection point on her thigh, but it also references the fact that the same experimental drug was used to treat tumours in mice, resulting in destruction of brain function. When Sam’s sensory experience shifts, my sensory experience shifts also.

The aural dissonance of Sam’s experience is also conveyed through the muting of sound. In the same diner scene, the server’s voice is muted inexplicably, allowing for the individual sound effects to overwhelm Sam. Later, when trapped in the basement, Sam notices a single yellow flower sprouting up through a crack in the cement floor; all sound is muted at this point as she contemplates the plant. There are also fluctuations in the sound volume. On her drive to the cottage, Sam pulls onto the shoulder of the road, overcome with emotion at the news of her malignant tumour. The camera creeps along the side of the car as though out of concern, and turns to face Sam at the driver’s door, sympathizing with her. In this moment of grief, I watch for several moments as she sobs and gasps. A car horn suddenly blares, not only startling the protagonist but us as well. The abrupt volume change serves to not only remind Sam of reality,

but to emotionally distance me from her, as the camera shifts to a different perspective, a close-up facing Sam from in front of the vehicle. In the next shot, there is a close-up of the headlights of another vehicle, captured in her rear-view mirror. As Sam turns in the driver's seat to inspect the source of the horn, she is facing the camera – facing me, as I am now sitting in her backseat. In this instance of sound, my subjective experience (as shared with Sam) involves changing perspectives and changing states, highlighted by the movement between indoor and outdoor spaces.

At times, sound is unsourced and even unexplained. Though I am assured that the scratching sounds are mice in the attic, I never see these mice. Further along in the narrative the disconnection of sound from its source increases. Sam, with blood splatter still upon her face, hallucinates a past dinner with her husband, though he is now freshly murdered. I hear the din of a fine restaurant from long ago: light piano music, clinking cutlery, the murmuring of those dining nearby. Again, the sources of these sounds are never visually confirmed for me. Subjectivity is also emphasized by the recurring sound of a doorknob being rattled as someone tries to open it. The first time Sam enters the bathroom at the cottage (to escape the emotional drama after the revelation of her tumour), the doorknob creaks and turns. But it is accompanied by the voice of her husband, who pleads for her to open the door. A second occurrence of the bathroom scene is found at the end of the film when Sam seeks refuge in the bathroom to administer a final dose of the experimental drug. As she lies comatose on the bathroom floor breathing heavily, the scratching returns, and the rattling doorknob resumes. Since I assume that her husband and sister are both dead at this time, and no voice pleads for Sam to open up, I cannot help but wonder who is at the door. The last shot of the film is a blackout paired with Sam's breathing, thereby simulating her comatose state for our experience. Sound is also used to

emphasize moments of heightened tension situated around an instance of violence (after Adrian shoots Bruiser, after a brutalized David wakens from a stupor and hits Sam, etc), though it alternates between diegetic and non-diegetic occurrences.

I can also experience Sam's visual dissonance, which is often paired with instances of loud sounds. The film employs "black out" scenes to signal a change of state: short, abrupt shots of black nothingness simulate the experience of a black out and disrupt the flow of the narrative. Each of these "black out" scenes is introduced by a loud sound: the clanking of the bag that Harlan drops marks his arrival; the slamming shut of the root cellar door after Sam is dragged back upstairs to face Harlan; Harlan's sudden grasp around Melody after she and Sam escape from the basement; and the mounting sounds in Sam's state of awareness as she falls into a coma at the end of the film. Additionally, there are several sequences in which characters are shown to be situated in one sense of temporality, but alternate between incongruent locations. Early in the film, Sam places a phone call to her husband from her office. In an ensuing shot, David is present in the office during their supposed phone conversation. When it ends, David is no longer present, and Sam hangs up the phone.

A more extensive display of the spatio-temporal incongruity is shared by Sam and Harlan during the final round of "Truth or Dare", when Harlan forces Melody to perform a sexual favour for David. As Harlan and Sam look on, the scene changes to the moment of the supposed indiscretion earlier that night, prior to Sam's arrival. Harlan questions Sam about her condition and the experimental treatment, and in that one conversation they are simultaneously at the cottage *and* reliving Sam's day. They alternate between locations: from the cottage to the medical institute, where they examine the x-ray of Sam's brain; to Sam's office, where Harlan watches as she injects the serum kept in her desk drawer; to the diner rest stop; to Sam arriving at

the cottage; and back to the scene of Melody and David's supposed indiscretion. Beyond these instances of aural and visual dissonance, the narrative itself is a site for diverging realities, and the film's ambiguous ending suggests that the true reality is *unknowable*.

Harlan: "How does that make you feel?"

Overall, the result of this sensory alignment is that I am primarily situated in Sam's position within the narrative. As such, I am similarly placed in situations where control and loss are being contemplated; the film creates a sadistic game of 'Knowability or Unknowability' and I must play. Narrative conditions provide a bracketing of violence initiated by a narrative hesitation intended for the viewer to consider their stance on the violence suggested by the narrative. These narrative cues allow me, the viewer, to consider whether I would enact violence. It asks me: What would *you* do? How do you *know* what you would do?

There are two main narrative cues that lend to this contemplation of violence: the scene in which Sam kills Adrian (the moment with the nail), and the scene in which Sam kills David and Melody (the moment at the axe). Each one highlights "the violent woman" (Sam) as central to the bracketed moment of violence. However, it is the second cue that ultimately signals a loss of control (though the final injection is Sam's last attempt to regain a semblance of control).

Consider the first narrative cue: the moment with the nail. There are certain facts that I am encouraged to consider as a viewer; the facts are these: Adrian has a gun. He killed the family pet, and may likely kill again if influenced to do so. He is holding Sam (and by extension of the alignment, me) and her (my) family member hostage in the basement. The only defensive weapon at hand is a large rusty nail. Adrian is currently distracted by the implications of his near betrayal of Harlan, who is preoccupied upstairs. During the slow, calming dialogue that

momentarily subdues Adrian, the film asks me: what would *you* do? Sam chooses to dispose of Adrian, partly in self-defence (Adrian's gun still poses a threat), perhaps to protect her sister, and likely to regain control of the situation. But, if *I* were in that situation, would *I* drive the nail into the side of Adrian's head through his ear in one swift and forceful movement as she has done? If it meant that I would save myself and my family from fatal harm, that I had to choose to kill or be killed, then I rationalize that self-defence would motivate me to undertake such violent action. *But how do I know for sure?*

Consider the second narrative cue: the moment at the axe. Again, there are certain facts that I am encouraged to consider as a viewer; the facts are these: I have discovered my premature death is fast approaching, and it is more or less beyond my control. I seek out my family members to break the news, hoping to approach the subject rationally, to keep my emotions in check, since it is one of the last remaining things over which I can assert control. After a long drive to the family cottage, I arrive to find my husband and my sister engaged in a sexual indiscretion. I am shocked and devastated to such a degree that I cannot speak. I lean against a wall, and my hand falls upon the handle of an axe. During this hesitation to act, the film asks me: what would *you* do? Sam chooses to pick up the axe, and when David and Melody realize her presence, she bursts across the room in a rage-storm of humiliation and wrath to bury the axe repeatedly in their flesh, punishment of betrayal. But if *I* were in that situation, would *I* erupt with violence because of continually repressed emotions, and murder my family members? In real life: God, I hope not. But when in the position of controlled loss that an alignment with Sam affords me, the viewer, I am given the opportunity to satisfy the deep desire to butcher those who should support me, but who have betrayed or wronged me; I am not only allowed, but *encouraged* to unleash fury upon them. Sam's actions with the axe – *unlike the scene with the*

rusty nail –cannot be justified as “self defence”. The axe scene is an “unjustified” act of sadistic violence; it has nothing to do with the “final girl”, or the basic need for survival. These violent actions are deemed the “unwomanly” thing to do. My association with Sam indicates that I am also “the violent woman”, as one who delights in an experience of violence, and therefore the destruction of stereotypes. And that is exactly why it is the most deeply pleasurable moment in the film.

Harlan: “We all carry our ghosts with us.”

This chiasm of control and loss, the known and the unknown – this “border condition” – is a source of pleasure in horror films in general, and *The Dark Hours* in particular, because it allows the audience to be simultaneously entertained and horrified by the contemplation of enacting extreme, gory, violence. As Brophy reiterates, this effect is “not unlike a death-defying carnival ride: the subject is a willing target that both constructs the terror and is terrorised by its construction.”⁹⁹ I, the viewer, am both masochistic *and* sadistic. I do not *actually* have to undertake extreme measures in these horrific circumstances, for I recognize that the experience is not truly my own as it is the protagonist’s experience, even if my sensory experience becomes confounded with that of the protagonist. *I know* it is a simulation and I delight in it. Though I do not *know* what *I* would ultimately do in those situations, I am given the opportunity to entertain a violent outcome. It is the curious ability of the horror genre – the genre whose concern is most often to address or expose the fear of the unknown – to attract returning viewers on the principle that there is also pleasure in *not knowing*, that ‘recreational terror’ also entails that *knowledge* is delayed, blocked, or partial in the horror experience.

⁹⁹ Brophy, 5

CONCLUSION

This study of the Canadian imagination and Canadian horror cinema highlights the tension between the internal and the external, where there is horror in intrusion, invasion, and reaction. As with Frye's model of the "garrison mentality"¹, we are obligated by social mores to meet certain expectations in order that the collective will continue to thrive; when one individual fails to conform, the status of the collective is compromised. Each of the films in this collective was chosen for its appeal to the Canadian imagination. They share very similar surface features from recognizable Canadian institutions, buildings, and historical elements to the iconography of the Canadian winter setting and landscape. There is also a unified sense of themes apparent across this body of work; each film examines notions of isolation and dislocation. That each film incorporates female agency is especially significant, as contemporary horror film theory often sidesteps the issue. These films can be understood in accordance with Canadian literary and communications theories (primarily through Frye, Atwood, and McGregor, but also through McLuhan, who writes that communication is an element we use to "abolish space and time"²), which foreground the tumultuous relationship between internal and external spaces. Most importantly, all of the films feature a preoccupation with spatial tension between interiors and exteriors, and that even though the borders of these spaces are transgressed, they continue to co-exist.

¹ Northrop Frye, *The bush garden. essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd, 1971), 225

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 3

As the films in this analysis have shown, wildness and chaos not only break into an enclosed community, but burst forth from it. We can apply this perspective to horror film theory as well. In attempting to account for the unique psychology of the horror genre, contemporary theories have inadvertently placed the genre in a psychoanalytical stranglehold. In Chapter One, the analysis of McDonald's *Pontypool* seeks to offer insight into a non-gendered reading of horror cinema. It addresses philosophical concerns through deconstruction, Derrida, and an alternative in understanding difference as *différance*, where one must consider that which is present and that which is absent within the same idea. This method enabled an exploration of universal fears, rather than gendered fears, by focusing on the fear of the linguistic breakdown.

Even in challenging the application of gendered readings to horror films to demonstrate the occasional weakness of such application, it is undeniable that the gendering of horror is still overwhelmingly present in contemporary horror films. But as Chapter Two describes, there are other ways of understanding gender difference and horror. Collet-Serra's *Orphan* provides an opportunity to consider the gendered reading as a different approach to difference, where archetypal characterizations of female representations are addressed and challenged, and where other characterizations, such as the *anti-heroine* and the *anti-villain*, can be explored. The film is a site where horror not only arises from the dread of difference³, but from the *shock of similarity* as well.

With the pervasiveness of gendered readings, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which heterosexual binary opposition are still evoked in the horror genre. However, as Chapter Three outlines through Fox's *The Dark Hours*, a heterosexual binary divide can be used to consider a

³ Barry Keith Grant, 'Introduction, in *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 1

character type that is often overlooked by contemporary horror theory: the violent woman⁴. This figure evokes the “border condition”⁵ inherent in the nature of horror film viewers in general, who are both sadistic *and* masochistic. As such, the female gaze can be understood as being comprised, at least in part, by the notion of the *sadista*, or the sadistic female viewer.

Over the course of this project several conclusions can be ascertained. First, we should emphasize that there are, in fact, alternative *feminist* readings which can be applied to horror cinema. Not only are there other feminist theoretical approaches which are as functional as psychoanalytic theory, but at times, these approaches can be even more functional in examining horror cinema than the psychoanalytic approach, because of the way in which they can avoid falling into the same self-perpetuating traps as feminist psychodynamic theory. As Cynthia Freeland states, the psychoanalytic strategy of reading “has mysteriously acquired a predominance within feminist film theory that is completely disproportionate to its status within contemporary feminist theorizing in general.”⁶ One of my main intentions in undertaking this study was to seek out and highlight useful analytical modes which can easily find a place within horror film theory without dragging along the burdensome, “problematic universalizing views about human psychosexual development.”⁷

A second conclusion indicates that the feminist theoretical framework can employ a philosophical approach to the horror cinema as an effective means of examining the genre. The threads of philosophy woven through each textual analysis in this selection of Canadian horror

⁴ Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2

⁵ Gail McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome. Explorations in the Canadian Langscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 3

⁶ Cynthia Freeland, “Feminist Frameworks For Horror Films,” in *Film Theory and Criticism, Seventh Edition*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 633

⁷ Freeland, 635

films range from the post-structural and philological analysis of language change in *Pontypool*, to the ontological examination of female character types in *Orphan*, and extend to the epistemological experience of horror film spectatorship in *The Dark Hours*. Each investigation effectively scrutinizes a number of features which psychoanalytic theory has also commonly focused on: the monster, universal fears, film spectatorship, horror conventions, and so on. The philosophical approach accomplishes this task by incorporating gender issues into the background of the analysis, rather than prioritizing them. Moreover, this approach readily acknowledges that general claims about the horror film genre are never absolute.

A third conclusion that this study reaches is that there are indeed variations in horror film viewing experience which can affect both male *and* female audience members alike. The relationship of the viewer to a given horror film is described in accordance with one of three main levels of spectatorial engagement. The analysis in Chapter One suggests that the viewer's position is an aural alignment, emphasizing that the viewer's position is like that of a radio audience member. In *Pontypool*, the narrative relies on the premise that there are people listening to Grant Mazzy's morning radio show. With its heavy reliance on aural horror, the film viewer becomes a listener, witnessing the terrible events and hearing the sounds of terror, but distinctly removed from the characters' experience of horror.

In Chapter Two, the viewer experiences the addition of a visual alignment with the experience of certain characters. The film *Orphan* acknowledges the viewer to a greater extent when creating instances where the viewer experiences the literal point of view of one or more of the main characters. When Kate is hospitalized after an outburst against Esther, she is sedated, and when addressed by her husband Peter, her sight is blurred as an effect of the medication; the viewer can experience that effect also. Later, after Peter unwinds with several glasses of wine,

his vision becomes impaired, blurring and distorting everything in sight. When addressed by Esther, who has altered her appearance so as to seduce Peter, the viewer sees from Peter's perspective, also experiencing the alcohol-induced effects of impaired sight.

Finally, in Chapter Three, there is a more extensive conceptual alignment of the viewer with a main character. In this instance, there is little difference distinguishing the viewer's perspective from the character's perspective. In *The Dark Hours*, the narrative and aesthetic features toy with audio and visual experiences to create a disrupted spatio-temporal experience. As Kate experiences the distortion of her hearing and her vision as symptoms of her illness and her medication, so does the viewer. As the film progresses, it moves between states of reality and illusion so that the viewer is subject to the same surreal experience to which Kate is also subject. In effect, the two experiences are blurred to the extent that they almost become one and the same.

Despite the practicality of employing philosophical readings of horror cinema to comment on the subjective experience, it is expected that certain issues, such as gender, will remain or generate additional questions. In the very least, the ways in which we approach gender in horror cinema need to be reconsidered. Teresa De Lauretis argues that sexual division is an element that is always already present⁸, lingering in the background. But the project of gendered readings should not be to simply point out those present distinctions. Also, why are gendered readings given such prominence in horror cinema, above all other social conditions of identity? Why is so much of contemporary horror film theory unable to move past the cyclical argument of gender difference?

⁸ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8

Inevitably, gendered readings are bound by a sense of probability: not all generalizations about gender are true of all horror films at all times. Rather than returning to difference as it is known through gendered division, we can reflect on *différance*, the present *and* the absent, so that we can “open a possibility of agency and self-determination at the subjective and even individual level...”⁹ that is informed by a recognition of the construction of difference. However, theoretical approaches characterized in part by the absence of a gendered focus still evoke the continual presence of gendered readings, which are ‘always already there’. How does one acknowledge gender in some way that does not entail “falling back into a system of analysis that does nothing but repeat, in practice, those very same pitfalls”¹⁰? Perhaps it is our understanding of ‘cyclical thinking’ which needs to be reconsidered. The basis of critical engagement is, after all, one which relies on a system of responses. It is possible that the point is not to break the cycle, to never settle on one single concept at the expense of another, or “allow *any* text to remove itself from the play of difference”.¹¹

⁹ De Lauretis, 9

¹⁰ Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 13

¹¹ Brunette, and Wills, 21

APPENDIX: FILMS CITED

<i>Alien.</i>	1979. Ridley Scott.
<i>Audition.</i>	1999. Takashi Miike.
<i>Bonnie and Clyde.</i>	1967. Arthur Penn.
<i>Candyman.</i>	1992. Bernard Rose.
<i>Carrie.</i>	1976. Brian De Palma.
<i>Cat Chaser.</i>	1988. Abel Ferrara.
<i>Dark Hours, The.</i>	2005. Paul Fox.
<i>Death Wish.</i>	1974. Michael Winner.
<i>Dracula.</i>	1931. Tod Browning.
<i>Dressed to Kill.</i>	1980. Brian De Palma.
<i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.</i>	1931. Rouben Mamoulian.
<i>Exorcist, The.</i>	1973. William Freidkin.
<i>Fatal Attraction.</i>	1987. Adrian Lyne.
<i>Friday the 13th.</i>	1980. Sean S. Cunningham.
<i>Ginger Snaps.</i>	2000. John Fawcett.
<i>Halloween.</i>	1978. John Carpenter.
<i>Hand That Rocks the Cradle, The.</i>	1992. Curtis Hanson.
<i>I Spit on Your Grave.</i>	1978. Meir Zarchi.
<i>I Spit on Your Grave.</i>	2010. Steven R. Munroe.
<i>Let Me In.</i>	2010. Matt Reeves.
<i>Let the Right One In.</i>	2008. Tomas Alfredson.
<i>Martyrs.</i>	2008. Pascal Laugier.
<i>Matrix, The.</i>	1999. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski.
<i>Misery.</i>	1990. Rob Reiner.
<i>Naked Vengeance.</i>	1985. Cirio H. Santiago.
<i>Nightmare on Elm Street, A.</i>	1984. Wes Craven.
<i>Night of the Living Dead.</i>	1968. George A. Romero.
<i>Orphan.</i>	2009. Jaume Collet-Serra.

<i>Peeping Tom.</i>	1960. Michael Powell.
<i>Pontypool.</i>	2008. Bruce McDonald.
<i>Psycho.</i>	1960. Alfred Hitchcock.
<i>Ring, The.</i>	2002. Gore Verbinski.
<i>Ringu.</i>	1998. Hideo Nakata.
<i>Saw II.</i>	2005. Darren Lynn Bousman.
<i>Scream II.</i>	1997. Wes Craven.
<i>Shining, The.</i>	1980. Stanley Kubrick.
<i>Silence of the Lambs.</i>	1991. Jonathan Demme.
<i>Splice.</i>	2009. Vincenzo Natali.
<i>Stepfather, The.</i>	1987. Joseph Ruben.
<i>Tale of Two Sisters, A.</i>	2003. Jee-woon Kin.
<i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day.</i>	1991. James Cameron.
<i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The.</i>	1974. Tobe Hooper.
<i>Thelma and Louise.</i>	1991. Ridley Scott.
<i>Thing, The.</i>	1982. John Carpenter.
<i>Uninvited, The.</i>	2009. Charles Guard, Thomas Guard.
<i>Urban Legend.</i>	1998. Jamie Blanks.
<i>Videodrome.</i>	1983. David Cronenberg.
<i>Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?</i>	1962. Robert Aldrich.
<i>Wolf Man, The.</i>	1941. George Waggner

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