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Exploration Into the Dual Representation of Women as Monsters and Victims in Horror Cinema and Fine Art

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Exploration into the Dual Representation of Women as Monsters and Victims in Horror Cinema and Fine Art

Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of women in horror cinema and fine art through the recurring figures of the female victim and the female monster. Using the theoretical frameworks of Laura Mulvey, Barbara Creed, and Julia Kristeva, this analysis explores how these seemingly opposing archetypes are formed through shared patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality, the female body, and female autonomy. By analysing some key work that include Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960), Artemisia Gentileschi's Susanna and the Elders (1610), Brian De Palma's Carrie (1976), Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes (1620), Caravaggio's Medusa (1597), and John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps (2000), this dissertation argues that the transition from victim to monster is not solely about fear of female empowerment instead it highlights how by becoming the abject female bodies are seen as dangerous to the traditional patriarchal order

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my parents and my sister for their encouragement, and the rest of my family and friends for the moral support they provided.

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Introduction

The representation of women in the horror genre has, for a long time, been full of stereotypes on a scale between two extremes: the helpless victim and the terrifying monster. These conflicting archetypes can be seen to reveal societal and cultural anxieties surrounding femininity, sexuality and power. From tragic victims in classical paintings to the contemporary monsters of modern cinema, the female body is a site where societal fears are projected. Looking at the theoretical frameworks of both Barbara Creed and Laura Mulvey, this dissertation aims to compare how these two contrary representations of women are depicted in horror cinema and fine art and examines their intersection.

This dissertation explores whether the monstrous feminine and the female victim are oppositional archetypes or two manifestations of the same patriarchal fear of women's autonomy and power. Rather than treating these representations as mutually exclusive, this paper shows how they can overlap, showing how victimhood may transform into a more monstrous nature when female suffering is seen as threatening. Looking at how horror and visual culture reveal, reinforce, and sometimes resist gendered power structures.

This dissertation aims to explore these concepts in three chapters. First, it will examine the female victim in cinema and fine art, looking at Alfred Hitchcock's *'Psycho'* (1960) and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1610). The second chapter will explore the monstrous feminine, looking at Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620). Finally, the third chapter will explore works that blur the boundaries between victimhood and monstrosity, drawing on Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Medusa* (1597) and John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000). By comparing a range of cinema (1960-2000's) and fine art (primarily from the Baroque period), the dissertation highlights the history and persistence of gendered anxieties and the importance of female representation within a patriarchal order. Showing how visual culture seems to repeatedly return to the female body as both a site of fear and fascination.

Literature Review

While this dissertation will use many different sources to help back analysis, it will primarily draw upon Barbara Creed's '*The Monstrous-Feminine: film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis'* (1993), Laura Mulvey's essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*1975) and touch on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982). These each approach gender and representation in different ways, but their ideas share similarities when it comes to concerns surrounding power, sexuality and female autonomy.

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982)

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) is perhaps her most influential work, as it introduces and explores the concept of the abject, which is fundamental to Creed's theory and to this dissertation's topic. Abjection examines how and why particular artistic works can awaken emotional responses in audiences by confronting unsettling elements and challenging conventions. She defines the abject as, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Therefore, the abject is not only disgusting but also something that threatens, as it damages the clear boundaries between the self and the other.

Bodily fluids such as menstrual blood, pus and gore become examples of the abject as they break the boundary between inside and outside. They expose what should be kept hidden, threatening the idea of the "own and clean self" (Kristeva, 1982, p.53), and therefore become objects of both revulsion and fascination. Similarly, Kristeva links the aspects of the female body to abjection through its connection to reproduction, sexuality and the maternal body. The maternal body is seen as "nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject" (Kristeva, 1982, p.53), as it becomes a site where autonomy and identity become threatened through a lack of control. The body leaks, it cannot be contained or regulated, and therefore, women's bodies become abject in visual culture not only because they are sexual but because they resist containment.

While Kristeva's writings are not inherently feminist, her theories have been widely used by feminist scholars because of their close connection to the female body. Her theory is important to understanding how horror uses female bodies as sites of both fear and fascination, and it provides a strong theoretical foundation for Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, as she links the idea of the abject to how women can become monstrous through abject bodily processes.

Barbara Creed's '*The Monstrous-Feminine: film, Feminism Psychoanalysis'* (1993)

Barbara Creed's '*The Monstrous-Feminine: film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis'* (1993) is one of the most influential works of psychoanalysis that coined the term "monstrous-feminine" within horror films. She argues that little of the writing on female representation in horror focuses solely on the female monster and on what makes her monstrous, as she feels as though female monstrosity has been overlooked and misunderstood. The monstrous-feminine is influenced heavily by psychoanalysis, especially Julia Kristeva's take on abjection, as Creed argues that the female body becomes the site of horror due to her capacity for menstruation, reproduction and sexuality. This is important as Creed points out that the horror genre is repeatedly drawn to blood, bodily fluids and the transformation of women as they are seen as abject.

She rejects the point that female monsters are simply masculinised women, instead she argues that female monstrosity can often be put into common categories such as the Witch, the Archaic Mother, the Vampire, the Possessed Monster and the Monstrous womb, each with different characteristics that can be seen to reflect different patriarchal anxieties as they showcase women's ability to disrupt the traditional patriarchal order. They can also begin to reflect fears of castration and the fear surrounding the female body, female sexuality and women's reproductive capacity. Things such as menstrual blood become framed as horrifying instead of natural, making this natural process something that women should be ashamed of.

Creed argues that horror cinema not only mirrors fear of women but also actively creates it by associating femininity with danger, excess, and loss of control. Her framework is important to this dissertation as it supports the analysis of the films. *Carrie* (1976) and *Ginger Snaps* (2000), where menstruation and transformation are key themes that deepen our understanding of the characters. Furthermore, the idea of female power and sexuality becoming threatening as it challenges the passivity females are expected to have by patriarchal standards is key to the analysis of many of the female monsters this dissertation will look at.

Laura Mulvey's "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*1975)

Laura Mulvey's essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*1975) offers a greater understanding of the concept of the female victim. It is an influential work in feminist film theory and offers an essential counterpoint to Creed's work. She argues that mainstream media is a male-dominated field and is therefore often built around what she calls the "male gaze", which places women as more passive in their roles compared to their male counterparts. Drawing from the theories of Freud and Lacan to help explain why films create visual pleasure, she identifies two primary forms of pleasure: first, scopophilia, which "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey, 1975, p.10); in other words, it is the pleasure of looking and can often be voyeuristic. Then, identification, it is "developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" and needs the "identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like." (Mulvey, 1975, p.10). Through these, the film's narrative and conventions often line up with a male perspective and therefore reinforce patriarchal power dynamics, with women as objects to be looked at and men in a more active role as possessors of the gaze.

While Mulvey's essay is a highly influential piece of work, scholars have later critiqued some of its limitations as it relies on the heterosexual male perspective and doesn't delve deeply into female and queer perspectives in cinema. Many scholars, including Mulvey herself, have argued that the theory has limitations because it focuses on

classical Hollywood cinema and doesn't account well for contemporary genres and narratives in modern cinema (Guo, 2023).

Mulvey's theory is especially important to my analysis of the female victim, particularly in *Psycho* (1960) and *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), as her framework helps to explain how the act of looking and its voyeuristic nature become complicit in violence, and adds depth to female vulnerability. This dissertation also explores moments when women resist the male gaze and therefore adds depth to the understanding of both the female victim and monster.

Chapter 1. The Female Victim

1.1 Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)

The female victim often embodies vulnerability, passivity and punishment of the female character. This section will examine how the female victim can function as a product of the male gaze in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) argues that mainstream cinema uses scopophilia instinct, the pleasure in looking, in a way that aligns with male desire to satisfy unconscious patriarchal fears and desires they project onto women. She writes, 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.' (Mulvey, 1975, p.11) The woman on screen becomes the object of desire and a symbol of castration, which contains her. The narrative moves forward through the man's act of looking, while the women have a more passive role.

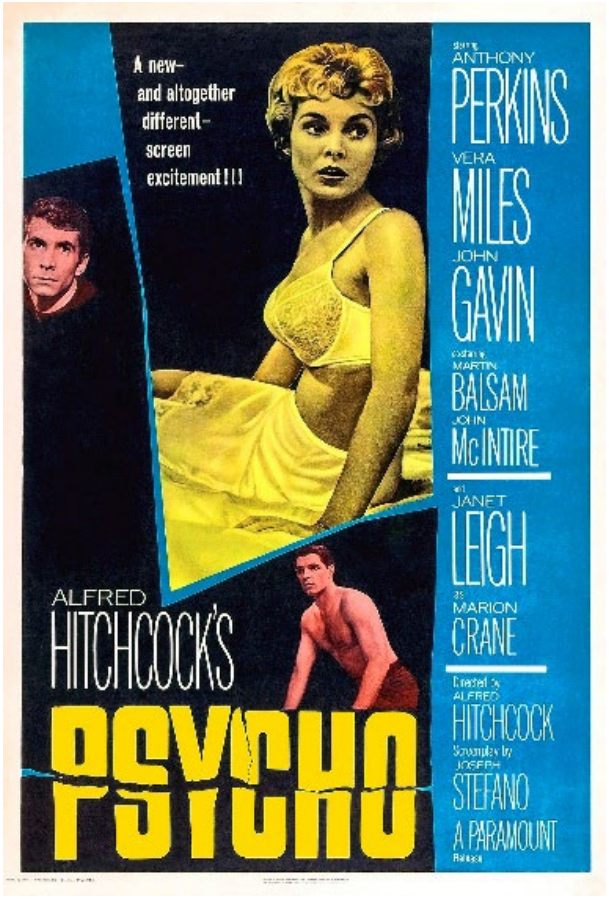

Figure1.1. Poster of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), artist unknown

We see a lot of this framework in Alfred Hitchcock's *'Psycho'* (1960), particularly within Marion Crane's death scene. Hitchcock's was well known for pushing the boundaries of

cinema at the time, notably this is the first film to show a clear close-up of a toilet flushing on the big screen. This moment occurs right before the infamous shower scene as Marion flushes evidence of her impulsive theft down the toilet, which can be interpreted as an attempt to cleanse herself of guilt. The shower scene itself unfolds slowly to begin with, with leisurely shots of her facing the water and enjoying the warm shower. The audience soon grow uneasy as we see a vague shape through the shower curtain as the bathroom door is opened, building a tense of tension as the scene progresses. Finally, as the shower curtain is ripped away and Marion is attacked, the shots become a rapid montage of cuts as she is brutally murdered.

The shots used in this sequence are deliberate. While we see close-ups of Marion's mouth as she screams and close shots of parts of her body, such as her stomach and hands, her genitals are never shown. These fragmented shots reveal her vulnerability and helplessness. The sequence is deliberately prolonged as she is stabbed multiple times. However, the camera continues to look at her skin and pleading movements, creating something both horrifying and sensual by merging violence and desire. The setting, naked in the shower, a place that should be safe and private, helps emphasise her vulnerability as it is not some supernatural horror, instead it depicts aspects of the everyday. This allows audiences to relate to aspects of the scene and therefore feel more strongly while they watch the scene (Er Pasin, 2016, p. 51). Her terror and panic are visceral, however, for much of the sequence the audience shares the perspective of her killer, highlighting the voyeuristic pleasure that runs through the scene and makes the audience complicit in these actions. This reflects Mulvey's (1975, p.9) theory on how mainstream cinema constructs "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy." Hitchcock manipulates film conventions, turning the audience from passive viewers into active voyeurs, intruding in a scene of intimate violence. By doing so, *Psycho* plays with the audience's desire to look as they are both satisfied and morally unsettled by the scene of female suffering.

Linda Williams argues in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* (1991) that in horror the female victim's fear shares the spectacle with the monster, as the monster begins to take "second billing to the increasingly numerous victims slashed" (Williams, 1991,

p.5), suggesting that it is the victim not the killer that becomes the main focus. In the shower scene, Norman Bates is the killer and voyeur, but it is Marion's body and terror which take the spotlight, while he is obscured by shadow. Her death is not just a necessity of the narrative but a show of excess, drawing the audience's horror and fascination. Williams (1991, p.4) explains that "the success of the genre is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on screen." Hitchcock achieves this through the piercing soundtrack and vulnerable close-up shots that encourage us to flinch and empathise with Marion. He blends horror with desire, directly reflecting Mulvey's (1975) idea of the male gaze and exposes the dark side of it: the same gaze that desires the victim also destroys her. Horror becomes punishment and pleasure, adding depth to the scene and drawing the viewer in even as it unsettles them.

1.2 Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1610)

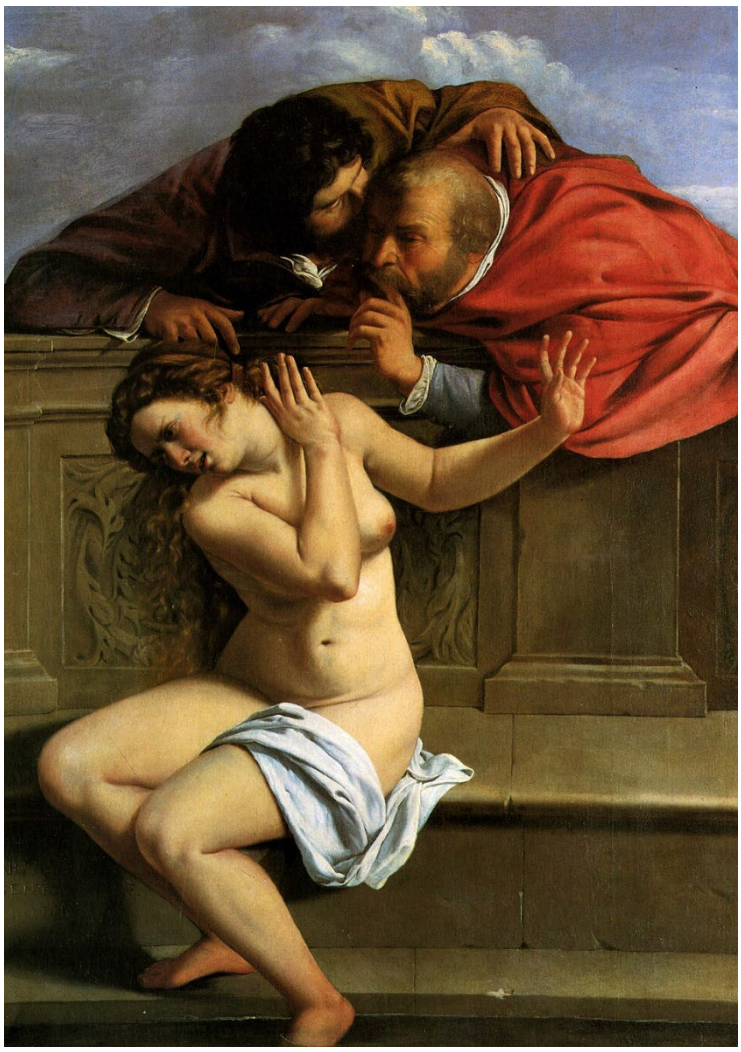

Figure 1.2. *Susanna and the Elders*. (1610) By Artemisia Gentileschi , Oil on canvas

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), as shown in Figure 1.2, provides an earlier example of the female victim; themes in this painting, such as the power of the gaze, were later developed by film theorists, including Laura Mulvey.

The painting depicts the biblical story of Susanna, who is watched and then threatened by two older men known as the Elders. They demand she sleep with them and make up a rumour that she has slept with a young man under a tree when she refuses. The story of Susanna became a popular subject matter within the Renaissance and Baroque art, perhaps because it became a key example of looking at sexual and moral issues, looking at female chastity within marriage and purity (Smith,1993, p.1). Other depictions of the tale (such as Tintoretto's many paintings on the subject) can often

have Susanna looking passive or unaware, however Gentileschi's painting clearly shows her looking distressed and uncomfortable. Her body is twisted away with her face angled down and away from her assailants, with her hands raised in protest as they loom over her. This helps the audience feel and understand the fear and pressure she is under.

Exploring the bath as a setting is also significant. A place of privacy and cleanliness becomes a place of exposure. Susanna's nakedness, partnered with the white cloth draped over her, can be seen to represent and symbolise her purity, but now highlights her vulnerability as her body becomes visible to the male gaze. The wall becomes her prison, trapping her between the Elders' assault and the viewer's gaze. This intrusion into the domestic space mirrors the violation she is experiencing, much like Mulvey's concept of voyeurism in cinema, the artist makes the viewer's act of looking uncomfortable. This turns anything that could be seen as erotic in this setting (her nudity, draped fabric, private setting) into a source of tension and danger.

Mary Garrad, an art historian, explains that Gentileschi's take on the story as a female artist is unique, as she can relate and identify with the victim rather than the aggressor, as she herself was a victim of sexual assault in her teens. This gives her a more personal understanding of "women's vulnerability to men" (Garrard, 1989, cited in Pollock, 1990, p. 502). She goes on to write that *Susanna and the Elders* does not simply show the act of violence itself but "the intimidating pressure of the threat of rape", giving us a very real reaction to male power. It is this real experience that shifts the painting from an example of virtue and chastity into a study of fear and resistance.

Unlike Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the viewer cannot be tempted to enjoy any part of the scene as the voyeur, instead they are forced to confront Susanna's fear and anxiety. This connects to Mulvey's idea that "the woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (Mulvey, 1975, p.11). Gentileschi challenges this theory, as she doesn't allow Susanna to become an object of male desire for viewers, but instead exposes the danger of being looked at (Jiang, 2025, p. 181). The viewer becomes aware of their own act of looking, comparing themselves with the unwanted gaze of the Elders, transforming the gaze from desire into one of empathy. By doing this, Gentileschi engages with and begins to resist the patriarchal gaze. We see a woman not only through men's eyes but also

explore the significance of being seen, turning the passive role as an object of the male gaze into a subject of resistance.

Chapter 2: The Monstrous-feminine

2.1 Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976)

Poster of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), artist unknown

Using Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, this chapter explores how female monstrosity in horror cinema emerges through the female body, particularly in moments connected to puberty, sexuality, and loss of control.

Carrie (1976) dir. Brian De Palma's film adaptation of Stephen King's 1974 novel Carrie follows the story of Carrie White. She is a shy teenage girl living under the control of her extremely strict and religious mother and is frequently bullied at school. Because of her extremely sheltered and religious upbringing, she becomes scared and confused when she begins her first period in the showers at school, where she is mocked by the other

girls in her class. She soon discovers she has telekinetic powers, and the film builds to the climax where Carrie takes an extreme and violent revenge on her classmates and teachers after she is humiliated at prom. The film explores themes such as puberty and the fear of female power. By examining Creed's theory of the Monstrous-Feminine (1993), it deepens our understanding of the connection between horror and the female body, particularly its reproductive aspects.

Creed references Julia Kristeva's idea of the *abject*, described as something that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). In *Carrie,* menstrual blood becomes a symbol of the abject as it is something that is both part of the body and expelled by it. It brings aspects of the inside into the outside, becoming other. The association the female body has with "dirt, taboo, pathology and stigma" (Guilló-Arakistain, 2024, p.106) helps emphasise this negative view of menstrual blood, further emphasising that it is seen "as something uncontrollable that must be governed and hidden" (Guilló-Arakistain, 2024, p.106). When Carrie first gets her period, it symbolises that her body is no longer an example of innocence and purity, instead, her transition into womanhood marks her as uncontrollable and unpredictable. Her first period aligns with unlocking her telekinetic powers, linking her ability to reproduce directly to the fear and destruction she later inflicts (Lindsey, 1991, p.34). The female body is now both a source of creation and destruction, reflecting patriarchal fears of uncontrollable female power and sexuality.

One of the key scenes is the shower sequence at the start. This takes place in the girls' locker room at school, with soft lighting and the steam framing Carrie as she sensually washes herself. The shots are slowed, and we see her intimately washing herself. The tone is then abruptly changed when blood begins to run down her legs as she gets her first period. She panics and screams in horror, begging her classmates to help. Unfortunately, rather than helping her, they mock her and throw tampons and pads at her. This shifts the scene from sensual and private into a horror fuelled by public humiliation. The female body is often treated as taboo or unsavoury, as it can challenge the controlled and clean social order. This scene punishes Carrie for her enjoyment of her own body; her pleasure becomes the cause of her suffering. This highlights how cinema punishes women for their pleasure and autonomy, reinforcing patriarchal

control over female bodies when they go against sexual norms (Mulvey, 1975). This brings a new perspective to the slow, sensual camera shots at the start of the scene, which appear to invite viewers to look at Carrie's body. These voyeuristic shots are similar to Marion Crane's shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Both sequences turn moments of vulnerability into acts of violence and punishment, placing the viewer on the line between voyeur and witness.

Later in the film, Carrie's menstrual blood and this biological change become a representation of power that cannot be contained. This becomes clear during the prom disaster, where she is drenched in pigs' blood during a cruel prank organised by her classmates, and proceeds to harm almost everyone present. The pig's blood symbolises menstrual blood; when it pours over Carrie, it takes her back to the trauma of her first period, but now, she has fully grasped her telekinetic power. The blood does more than just humiliate her; it "serves both as a reminder of the traumatic event and of her menstruation as animalistic," Laura Mulcahy (2023, p. 112), as it brings her back to the trauma she suffered when she got her first period and dehumanises her. Her burst of deadly power is then seen embodying Creed's monstrous-feminine as a woman whose biology becomes the source of terror for a society that looks to control it.

This moment also emphasises her status as an outsider, as her moment of social acceptance as prom queen is shown to be an illusion, which pushes her mental instability. We see that throughout the movie Carrie is seen as 'other', her mother calls her a 'witch' and sees her menstruation as a sin, while her classmates ostracise her for not conforming to social norms. The prank forces Carrie to embrace the identity projected onto her by society, as she now truly believes her powers are a punishment for her true nature, which has become the witch her mother was so afraid of (Mulcahy, 2023, p. 112). This is when she completely embraces the abject, as, instead of the initial fear and humiliation she felt throughout the movie, she now unleashes her powers at full strength as her anger overcomes her shame (Greven, 2011, p. 92). She turns her humiliation and acceptance into destructive power, and she kills with a ruthlessness that emphasises her warped view of the world.

2.2. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620)

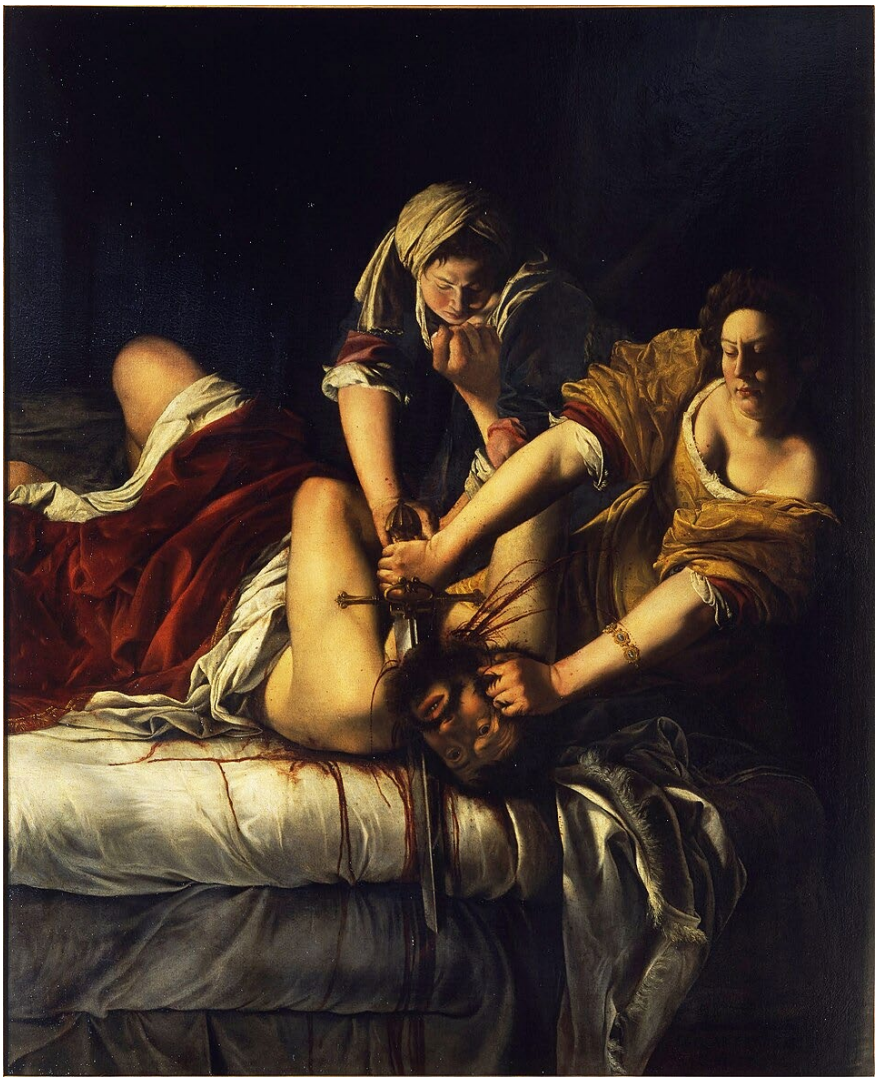

Figure 2.2.*Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620) by Artemisia Gentileschi, Oil on Canvas.

A strong example of a woman who becomes monstrous through her own bodily power appears in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620), see figure 2.2, a painting that presents the female body not as vulnerable, like Susanna, but as violently powerful. The painting depicts the biblical story of Judith, a widow who seduces and then kills General Holofernes to save her people. In the book of Judith, she joins him in his tent pretending to offer support for safety, waits until he is drunk, then proceeds to behead him with his own sword.

Within this painting, the female body is presented as a direct source of violent physical power. Her posture is strained, both she and her made servant are using their strength to hold the general down in the bed. Her expression is focused, with her brow furrowed

and lips pursed as she concentrates on her task of beheading Holofernes. She is not depicted as graceful or spiritual as was common in some earlier Renaissance imagery; instead, Gentileschi highlights her power and the force that is required in the act of beheading. Judith's power is not only shown at the moment of the killing but also seen in the actions she takes to get access to the tent. She weaponises her femininity, dressing beautifully and presenting herself in a way that lowers Holofernes' guard, allowing her to kill him. While she does not do this for pleasure, but for survival, her actions still align with Barbara Creed's idea of the monstrous feminine. Judith is a threat as she uses her body in a way that can be seen as outside of patriarchal control, turning her beauty, sexuality and her body into tools to carry out her plan. They become tools of agency rather than instruments of submission (Creed, 1993). She can be seen as monstrous not because of her morals but because she goes against gender expectations(Grace, 2023, p.8), using her abilities to manipulate male desires to carry out an act of extreme violence, placing her firmly outside of patriarchal control.

When compared to other historical depictions of Judith, Gentileschi can be seen to have a greater emphasis on female power, as other artists often presented Judith's role in the story as more passive or as more divinely guided rather than focusing on her own strength. Botticelli (see figure 2.3) is an example of this portrayal as he paints Judith as "gliding across the canvas" appearing as a "chaste widow looking meekly downward" (Delis, 2023, p. 149). There is little sign of struggle, and Holofernes' head rests in a sack carried behind Judith by her servant with very little sign of blood. The violence of the act here is downplayed, and the use of seduction is minimised. Instead, Judith appears more passive, holding the sword in one hand while she gently holds a branch in the other. This connection to nature makes her appear more delicate, as instead of holding the head she has cut off, she holds the branch she has severed from the tree, again distancing her from the act of killing. In this interpretation of the story, Judith is kept at a distance from the violence, and there is little sign of the abject that is present in blood and bodily fluids, allowing the painting to appear almost peaceful.

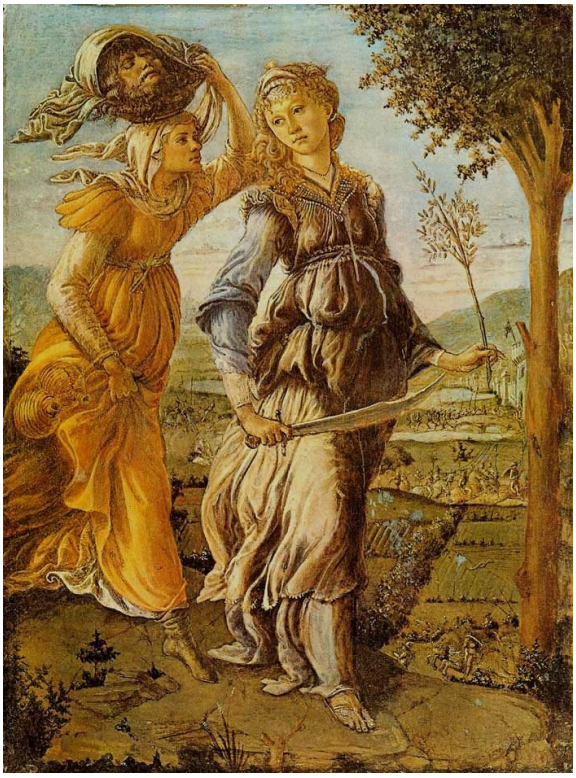

Figure 2.3. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c.1470) by Sandro Botticelli. Oil on Canvas.

Gentileschi's painting can also be compared to Caravaggio's interpretation of the story '*Judith Beheading Holofernes'*(c. 1598 – 1599). These paintings are often compared as they look as if Gentileschi was influenced by Caravaggio's depiction, as they share similarities visually, subject matter and the use of similar techniques. Gentileschi's approach and emphasis on female power become even clearer when the two are directly compared; for example, in Caravaggio's painting, Judith appears hesitant as she leans away from the act of violence she is committing, as if disgusted by the blood (see figure 2.4). She does not complete the action "with the same conviction" (Keillor, 2023, pp.53–54) as Gentileschi's Judith. Within Caravaggio's painting, the man becomes the main area of focus, his dramatic expression and lighting draw the audience's focus onto him and his struggle. Holofernes is portrayed as a man destroyed by his own pride and lust as he falls for Judith and pays the price. Caravaggio, who was known to struggle with his emotions, lust, pride and anger, was perhaps able to see more of himself in the general, which is why he becomes the centre of the painting (Gates Reggeti, 2024). In contrast, Judith in Gentileschi's painting is far more resolved; she has a determined expression and looks far more forceful. By turning away from the more reluctant depictions, Gentileschi's Judith emphasises women's ability for strength and violence.

This engages with Creed's theory that female power becomes threatening when it begins to operate outside patriarchal societal expectations. Judith becomes monstrous because she shows power and authority that challenge the passive female ideal that is often present in this period of art. Keiller (2018) argues that by the end of the Middle Ages, women were often seen as either pure, like the Virgin Mary, or corrupt, like Eve, they were not considered complex individuals with their own agency. Women who were seen outside these stereotypes were often criticised and socially ostracised, this view has had an influence on fine art in the years after (Keillor, 2018, p.50). Judith within Gentileschi's work refuses to fit into either category as she is a woman who acts with violent intent and power yet her refusal to fall into a stereotype is what marks her threatening within patriarchal imagery.

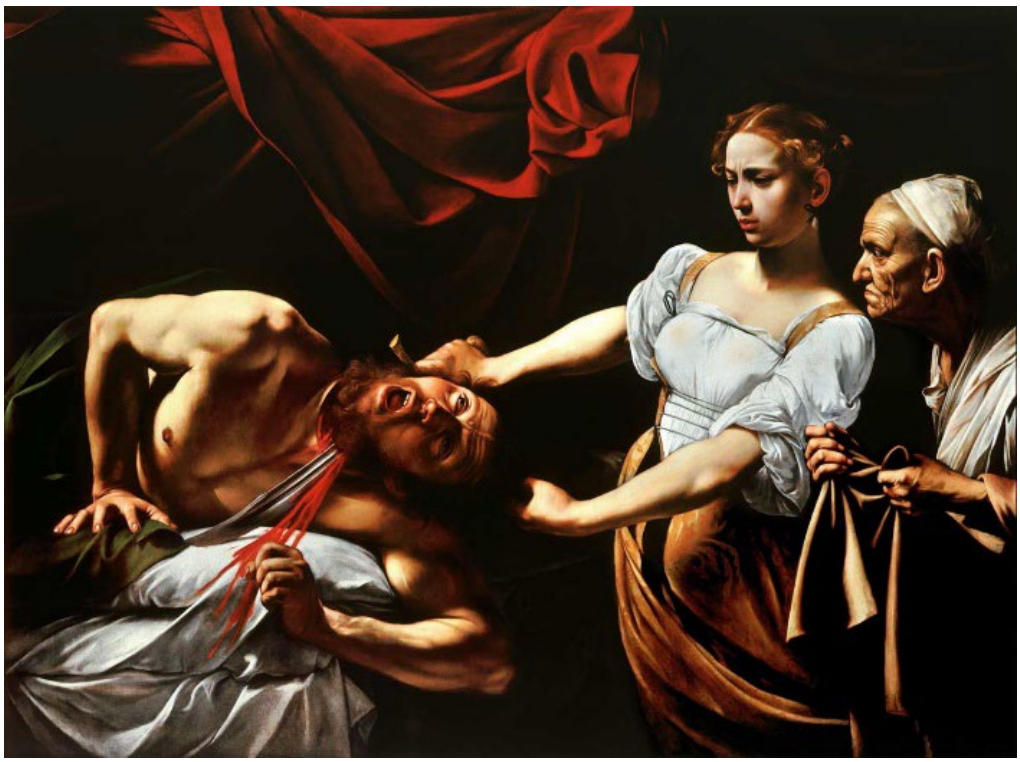

Figure 2.4 '*Judith Beheading Holofernes'* (1598–1599) by Caravaggio. Oil on Canvas.

Chapter 3: The Intersection Between Victim and Monster

3.1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Medusa* (1597)

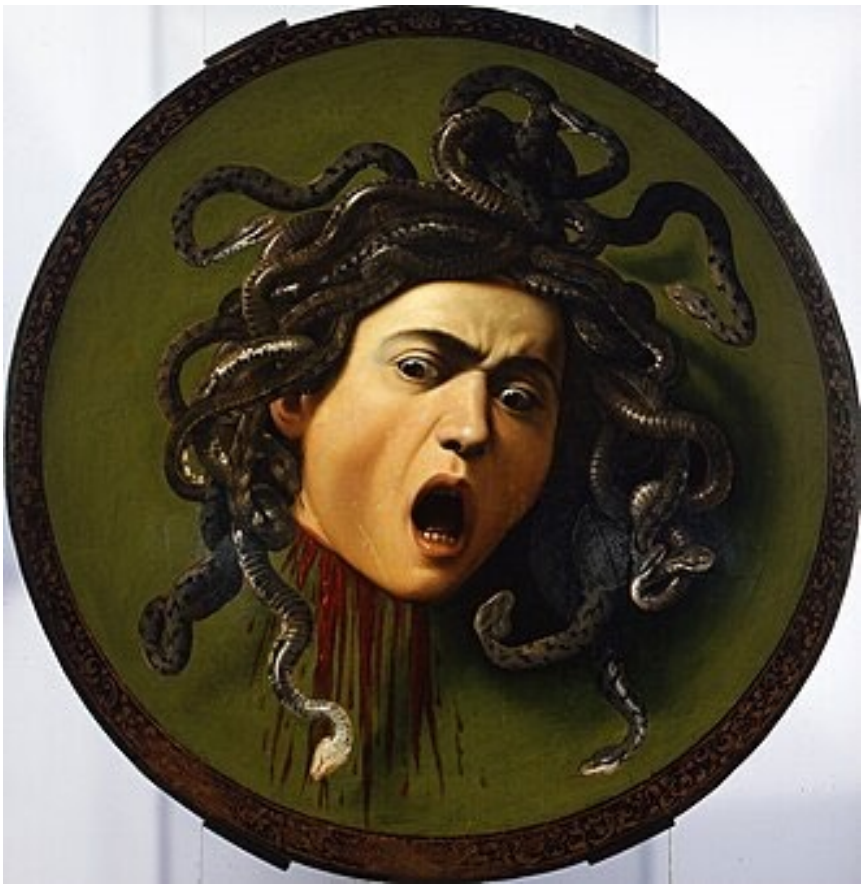

Figure 3.1. *Medusa* (1597), by Caravaggio. Oil on Canvas.

While many of the previous examples do often have characteristics of both the female monster and victim, this chapter will solely explore works that clearly blur the boundaries between victimhood and monstrosity as both a way to subvert or reclaim traditional depictions of women in horror.

Michelangelo Caravaggio's *Medusa* (1597), see figure 3.1, begins to blur the line between victim and monster. The myth of Medusa originates from Greek mythology, and her story has been told in many different ways. One of the most recognisable accounts of this myth comes from Ovid's Metamorphoses, where Medusa is depicted as originally a mortal woman who is raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, then transformed into a monstrous gorgon as punishment. Throughout the story she is both the victim and the threat and symbolises patriarchal anxieties surrounding sexuality and power.

Caravaggio's painting depicts Medusa's head in the moment of her decapitation by Perseus, her expression frozen in shock. She is terrifying but also terrified, this duality is what makes Medusa such an interesting character and a central figure for feminist readings of horror and the monstrous feminine.

Within Caravaggio's *Medusa,* the face is often believed to resemble the artist's own features, which means the painting becomes a form of self-portraiture. It is thought that this was done to allow the artist to explore more complex facial expressions rather than relying on a model. The decision, while perhaps made for practical reasons, begins to complicate the traditional binary between male painter and female monster/victim, as it places the artist within the painting. Medusa's story has been retold many times through male voices, shaping her identity and narrative around patriarchal anxieties and stereotypes rather than from her own perspective (Tan, 2021). By painting himself as Medusa, Caravaggio inserts a male subject into a figure historically defined by male fear. This could suggest that Caravaggio, in some way, identifies with the victim, becoming a way in which male vulnerability is projected onto the female body. It also begins to blur the lines between masculine and feminine positions. It's noted that when watching horror films, male viewers may begin to identify with heroines who display agency and strength as the 'final girl' takes on more 'masculine' traits to survive(Clover, 2015). Caravaggio does the opposite as the male artist identifies as the woman, but it is not only her strength that he relates to. This suggests that the monstrous feminine embodies anxieties surrounding male vulnerability. Medusa becomes a symbol onto which the male fear of being overpowered and exposed is projected, as the monster is not only female but also can be seen a reflection of masculine fear.

Further exploring Medusa's facial expression in the painting, we see that she is not a triumphant monster but rather appears shocked and terrified. Her mouth is open in what looks to be mid-scream, and her eyes look down in horror as she sees herself decapitated. This vulnerability directly contrasts her monstrous features, with her hair formed of snakes, her appearance closely resembles the mythical gorgon she is meant to be. It is not the all-powerful Gorgon you see depicted in the painting, instead it is a woman frozen in fear as she realises she is about to die. Gurnham (2018) explains that victims of sexual assault can be shown as threats through patriarchal narratives, as

their suffering is shaped into something dangerous. Through this way of thinking, Medusa's scream becomes a scream of fear, instead of one of aggression. This victimhood can be further emphasised through the origin of her transformation, as in many iterations of the story, her transformation is punishment for Poseidon's actions. We see her suffering from the monstrous appearance imposed on her. This strongly aligns with parts of Creed's (1993) theory that aspects of the monstrous feminine are constructed by patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality, as it is clear her monstrous nature is not something she chooses nor something that is inherent to her, but is something that has been forced upon her.

3.2. John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000)

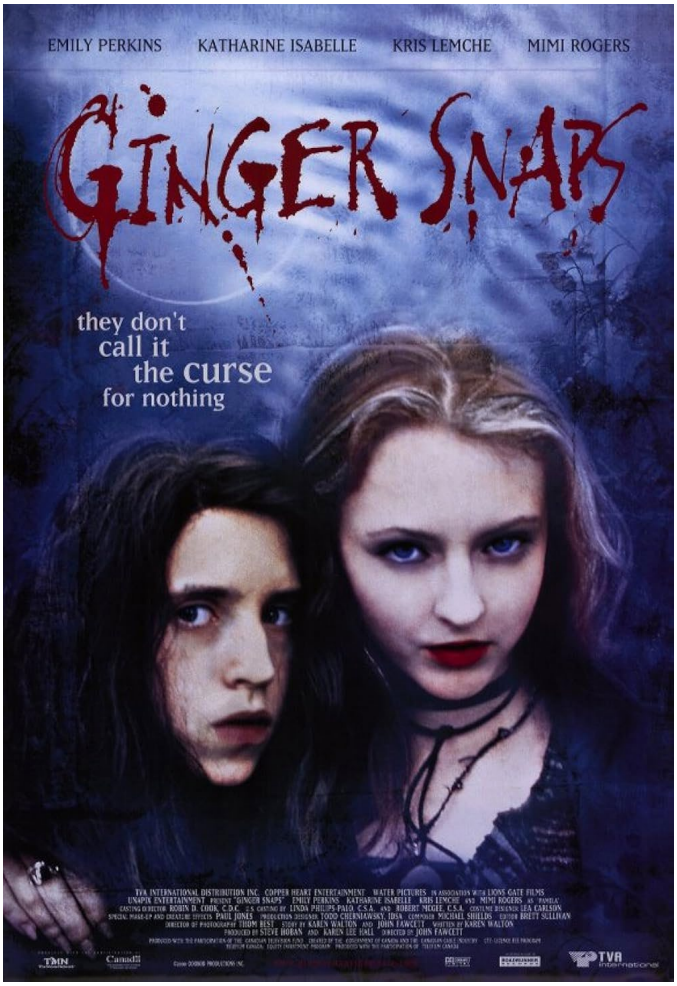

Figure 3.2. Poster of John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000) artist Unknwon.

John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000) also explores similar themes, looking at female sexuality, transformation and is complex enough that it toes the line between victim and monster. The film follows the story of two sisters, Ginger and Brigitte, who share a close bond and who, like Carrie, are seen as social outcasts. Their bond is disrupted when Ginger is attacked by what is later revealed to be a werewolf and begins to transform into one herself. Her body and mind change as she becomes simultaneously empowered yet dangerous as she becomes increasingly uncontrollable. Much like Medusa, her transformation is beyond her control, but it seems she begins to embrace the power and nature of her transformation as the film progresses.

Ginger's transformation, while not directly tied to her first period, is still closely linked to her coming of age and awakening sexuality as her desire becomes threatening and a source of empowerment. Before the attack and her first period that she gets afterwards, she shows very little sexual desire or interest; in fact, both she and her sister seem to view their peers who follow the usual status quo by participating in sexual activities with distrust and disgust. After she is attacked and bitten, she becomes progressively more interested in sex and begins to become more assertive with her desires. This aligns with the argument that werewolves often act as "a figure of transgressive sexual desire" (Kenny, 2024, p.5). This becomes even more obvious within the representation of the she-wolf as she also deals with the "feral feminine desires that women are taught to suppress" (Kenny, 2024, p.5). Consequently, Ginger's hypersexuality aligns with aspects of Mulvey's Male Gaze as her body becomes more sexualised throughout the movie. However, she is still punished for her desires as female pleasure is seen as excessive and threatening, as it closely relates to female agency and power.

Ginger also begins to use her increasing sexuality to punish those who desire her. During her encounter with Jason, a boy she goes to school with, she infects him with lycanthropy when they have unprotected sex. This can be seen as symbolically reversing the usual power dynamics as she takes away his control over the situation and punishes him for trying to use her body for his own pleasure. According to Cohen (1996, cited in Kenny 2024) the monster can embody both attraction and repulsion at one time as it both attracts and repels, exposing repressed desires. This further emphasises how Ginger's increasing sexuality becomes monstrous as she refuses to be confined to

either victim or predator, once again escaping the usual patriarchal categories women can be placed in.

We further see this attraction and revulsion as aspects of her transformation that embody the abject. Similar to Carrie, it is made clear from the start that both Ginger and her sister Bridgette are already seen as 'other', especially within the high school social order, as the sisters take an interest in death instead of sex, and even vow to try escape the confines of their town when they are sixteen. Positioning Ginger as 'other' early in the movie helps intensify her monstrous nature but also puts her into a position where she accepts her transformation more readily, as we see that she has little power within her everyday life. As her transformation progresses, she develops excessive body hair, gains strength, and becomes more aggressive. This excess of thick body hair becomes especially troubling as her body no longer fits within social conventions. According to Cininas (2015, p. 77), "Anxieties reach their zenith when female hair growth exceeds not only the social parameters set for her gender, but also those for her species." These traits are traditionally seen as masculine and disrupt the more passive nature expected of the female body. Her body is now between human and animal and occupies the space between female and male and self and other. By existing between binaries, she embodies Kristeva's (1982) idea of the abject as her transformation reveals cultural anxieties that surround the female body, where excess and contamination challenge the patriarchal order. While she embraces her transformation and the abjection it represents, this embrace grants her power. However, this does not grant her total autonomy or liberation instead it begins to erase her humanity, forcing her to truly become the abject.

Conclusion

This dissertation drew on the theoretical frameworks of Laura Mulvey, Barbara Creed, and Julia Kristeva to explore the representation of women in both horror cinema and fine art, examining the contrasting figures of the female victim and the female monster. By analysing multiple works, it explores how these archetypes are drawn from similar patriarchal anxieties that surround female sexuality, the female body and female autonomy. Furthermore, examining how, in both historical and contemporary works, women are seen as threatening because of their capacity to disrupt established orders grounded in gendered power structures.

By examining the works *Psycho* (1960) and *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), chapter one explores the female victim. Using Mulvey's take on the male gaze provides a framework for understanding how women can be rendered passive and objects of voyeurism, as their suffering can become a spectacle both within the work and by the viewer. While Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) incriminates audiences as they are drawn in by cinematic techniques that explore the voyeuristic aspects of the gaze, Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) begins to resist the gaze by exposing its dangers, emphasising female distress in a more nuanced way.

Chapter two focuses on the monstrous-feminine by analysing the works *Carrie* (1976) and *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620), using Creed's theory to show how female monstrosity is constructed when women begin to express bodily power, sexuality and violence that goes against the normal social boundaries. Both Carrie and Judith embrace aspects of their monstrosity when their bodies become representations of power, illustrating how female power is often seen as dangerous.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on works that exist between the lines of victim and monster, examining Caravaggio's *Medusa* (1597) and Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000). Both explore forced transformation and female suffering, exploring how these concepts become threats as they support Creed's argument that aspects of the monstrous-feminine are often created through patriarchal fear instead of female intent. Their victimhood and circumstances leave them with no choice but to embody their monstrosity.

Overall, this dissertation argues that within horror, the female body is repeatedly seen as a site of contradictions as it is both vulnerable and powerful. Whether they are framed as the victim or the monster, women are punished within these roles for existing between binaries and for not aligning with existing patriarchal norms. It is revealed that often the transition from victimhood to monstrosity, while temporarily empowering women, also represents a shift into the abject. The move into abjection often ends with exclusion, destruction and death, once again reinforcing restrictions seen placed on female agency within patriarchal standings in visual culture.

This dissertation shares limitations with Mulvey's theory, as it lacks an exploration of queer representation and theory. Further reading into gay, trans and non-binary works would expand and deepen the analysis. Related to this, moving on to more contemporary works of both cinema and fine art would support this expansion and allow this topic to be explored through new perspectives. The dissertation only focuses on Western Visual Culture and psychoanalytic theories that take influence from theorists such as Freud, which may subsequently exclude different cultural perspectives present across the world when looking at the representation of the female victim and monster.

However, even with these limitations, this dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations surrounding gender and representation in horror as it demonstrates that the monstrous-feminine and female victim are not in fact total opposites. However, they are both reflections of the cultural fear of surrounding women who cannot be controlled or contained within a binary framework

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