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# Vengeance is Ours: Safe Spaces and Critical Empathy in Horror Films

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Vengeance is Ours  
Safe Spaces and Critical Empathy in Horror Films

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
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Bridgewater State University

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## Abstract

Many genres of film seek to bring viewers to heightened emotional states, perhaps this is most true of horror films. Although often displaying extreme violence, such films paradoxically provide openings for critically empathetic viewings which allow viewers with diverse backgrounds and experiences to identify with victims and survivors and transcend elements of subjective identity. This project analyzes the capacity of horror films, including those of William Friedkin, David Cronenberg, Brian DePalma and others, to offer viewers space in which to be critically empathetic. Regarding gender issues in the genre as outlined by such scholars as Carol J. Clover, and the emerging scholarship on critical empathy, such as that of Todd DeStigter, this project offers new ways of thinking about horror both on screen and off.

## Introduction – How Can You Like That Stuff?

“How can you like that stuff?” is a question I’m often asked when telling people I’m a horror fan. Having been one most of my life, the way I’ve answered this question has evolved over time. One fanning that has guided my thinking came while listening to episode sixty of *Shock Waves*, a horror film podcast by Blumhouse Productions. Author and director B.J. Colangelo joined the regular hosts to discuss the controversial rape/revenge sub-genre. Colangelo, founder and writer of the blog *Day of the Woman*, is an assault survivor and, during the discussion, described her catharsis while watching Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left*: “It was the lack of score, lack of pulling the camera away. You don’t get to look at the birds or look at the woods, you have to look at everything. Not only that, but you have to watch her walk home and all of the aftermath... that really resonated with me” (Colangelo). Colangelo continued by saying that the only portrayal of assault survivors she was exposed to during that time was on *Law & Order: SVU* were “everyone is like ‘this is the end of their life’” (Colangelo). Whereas in *Last House on the Left* Colangelo says, “I saw someone be like ‘I’m not letting this ruin my life. It’s a thing that happened and I feel angry about it and I’m going to do something with this anger but it’s not going to define me forever’” (Colangelo). Upon hearing this, I was taken aback. Never had I considered horror films capable of being therapeutic for traumatic events. I had convinced them being potentially traumatic events in-and-of-themselves. But it seemed counter intuitive to me the one could achieve catharsis and resolution by watching horror films. Hearing Colangelo discuss her experiences prompted me to take a closer look into the horror genre and attempt to understand how we create safe spaces to explore our demons.

Now, I’d like to be clear that the clinical application of horror as a means for the cultivation of critical empathy is severely limited, but critical empathy connects viewers across the trauma spectrum. It’s important to note, in the case of Colangelo, as well as all horror fans, that the choice to watch these films is decided on the person’s own accord. Everyone sets their own limits to what they can handle

and such limits should be respected. My intention with this thesis is only to try to explain how the horror genre creates a public avenue through which we, as a culture, discuss and explore traumas, stigmas, fears, the supernatural and social taboos. Such subjects are not easy to tackle, be it in a film, a thesis or personal circumstances, but it's my hope that studying how horror allows us to deal with these matters, we can better understand how we communicate as a collective consciousness.

This thesis will analyze six films taken from major subgenres of horror and is split into three parts. Part one will examine William Friedkin's possession film *the Exorcist* (1973) and David Cronenberg's body horror *the Fly* (1986). Each of these films grounds their audience's empathy in clinical empiricism before exhibiting a supernatural bodily infestation that goes beyond our standard perceptions. In doing so, *the Exorcist* and *the Fly* create visual metaphors for the internal suffering that their respective protagonists are experiencing into order to convey their feelings outwardly to the audience. Part two analyze James Whale's Universal Monster film *Frankenstein* (1931) and Jordan Peele's psychological horror-comedy *Get Out* (2017) and how each film portrays the marginalization of persons in ways that be contextualized to the African-American experience. Part three views Brian De Palma's supernatural film *Carrie* (1976) and Robert Egger's period supernatural horror *the Witch* (2015) through the lens of Carol Clover's concept of the final girl, an archetype which is usually found in the slasher subgenre of horror, and how such characteristics in both films uncover gender dynamics more complicated than what initially appears.

The major theory this thesis utilizes is called critical empathy and was first defined by scholar and English professor Todd DeStigter in his article, *Public Displays of Affection: Political Community through Critical Empathy*, describing it as

...the process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that

hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek. (DeStigter)

Essentially the cross section between critical thinking and empathic resonance, critical empathy allows us to go beyond individualistic caring, not just proverbially walk in someone else's shoes but attempt to believe another person's perspective by acknowledging the ways in which each person's point of view may differ and using that knowledge to find common ground. Within the context of horror films, critical empathetic theory would say that while *Person A* does not enjoy horror films, an attempt can and ought to be made to understand *Person B's* cathartic reaction to horror films through a personal, intellectual, emotional and sociohistorical awareness. While we can critically think our way to care for others DeStigter suggests we all possess the ability to go beyond that, to critically empathize with one another to the point where we don't just understand how someone came to reason but also understand how someone came to believe as well. Such a process has proven indispensable in deconstructing cinematic language and allowing it to be seen within the emotional setting as well as the intellectual, allowing us to see how horror movies can generate catharsis by their creation of safe spaces in a psychological sense rather than a physical one. What's more, critical empathy is vital in achieving a complete understanding of such extreme subject matter because violence, assault, stigmas, and mental health are issues which are often marginalized in our social discourse. Critical empathy allows for comprehension and compassion along the spectrum of this dynamic, creating an intellectual safe space for both angles to be explored to their fullest degree.

This thesis also employs and expands upon scholarship by film and mythology scholar Carol Clover from her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws* which discusses gender dynamics within the slasher, possession and rape-revenge subgenres of horror. Regarding on-screen identification within the slasher film, Clover states, "on the face of it, the relation between the sexes in slasher films could hardly be clearer," that slasher films are exactly what they appear to be, a dominating male chasing after a victimized female, and that an audience identifies, by default, with their assigned gender

(Clover). However, Clover continues to state that identification with on-screen characters isn't limited to gender, that "gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane," and "reverse gender identification" occurs (Clover). This suggests that any audience member, male or female, can identify with a character who was assaulted on-screen. Using Clover's work as a steppingstone, a thorough investigation into the topic of on-screen identification will reveal how a critical empathic viewpoint expands our analysis of the horror genre. This thesis combines these two modes together and offers an explanation as to what makes such identification occur. Further, it builds upon the understanding of the therapeutic possibilities, to mitigate the stigmas surrounding them and highlight the healing, catharsis and joy received by those who watch.

Part 1: Beyond the Flesh – Critical Empathy in *the Exorcist* and *the Fly*

The roots of horror films can be found throughout literature, in Greek myths, such as the tale of Cronos and how he ate his own children, as well as fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm. A prime example is *Cinderella*, which in the Brothers Grimm version sees Cinderella's sisters cutting off their toes and slicing their heels to fit into the glass slipper and, in versions which pre-date the Grimms, the fairy godmother is instead a magical tree which grows from the grave of Cinderella's mother (Thorpe). Using Todd DeStigter's critical empathy as a basis, we can break down horror films and understand how an audience is able to make such leaps in understanding. An analysis such as this shows how one grounds themselves and empathizes with what can be understood logically within a film, identifying with the real circumstances the characters face, such as serious illness or bullying, and then, as the supernatural elements come into play, we observe the extension of understanding and empathy to those aspects, seeing these elements as visual metaphors for the characters internal struggles.

Most of us don't know what it's like to be possessed by the devil (one would hope), as 12-year-old Regan MacNeil does, played by Linda Blair, in William Friedkin's possession film *the Exorcist*. Set in the modern day of the 1970s, we are shown the deterioration of Regan's psychological health during her possession as her mother, Chris MacNeil, played by Ellen Burstyn, attempts to find a medical cure or treatment with no success. We are shown Regan hooked up to electrodes, having blood drawn, x-rays and M.R.I.s taken, all the while the doctors end up no closer to a diagnosis than before. Director William Friedkin's pacing is masterful, not just in revealing the film's paranormal elements, distilling them in small doses for the movie's first half, but also in how it measures and sets up the audience's empathy and creates a psychological safe space. We can understand Regan's fear of being ill, of going to the hospital and fearing that doctors can't diagnose what's happening inside of us, and by grounding the audience in this medical empiricism, Friedkin allows the viewer to extend their compassion during film's final act, in which Regan performs impossible stunts like turning her head completely around,



talking in three different voices, and levitating over her bed. Whether one believes in possession and exorcism or not, we empathize with Regan during this latter half because we've been rooted in the film's logic and, therefore, our emotions can surmise that the metaphysical terror experienced is an extension of the realistic horror from earlier. As a result, the internal misery Regan experiences becomes outwardly seen and a viewer can then empathize with her despite never actually being in such a condition.

What's more, Burstyn's Chris MacNeil, Regan's mother, continues to ground the viewer's empathy once Regan becomes fully engulfed by her demons. While Friedkin initially roots the viewer's experiences with Regan, he also shows Chris' concern for Regan's odd behavior, building her worry during Regan's many medical procedures and her frustration in the follow-up meetings. For the film's duration, Chris is the viewer, lost within this phenomenon she doesn't understand, trying every test the team of medical professionals suggest only to receive no solace nor answers, so by the time Chris, a nonbeliever in the Catholic faith, seeks out an exorcism for Regan the audience has also made a leap of faith. Reaching out beyond the scope of medicine appears logical to the audience as we have seen what Chris and Regan have gone through only for medical empiricism to fail them.

The theme of a foreign entity taking over the body is a very popular idea to explore in horror. Popular nomenclature gives such a subgenre the title of body horror due to the genre's focus on the mutilation and deformation of the flesh (Wilson), such films taking a more gory and visceral approach than possession films like *The Exorcist*. Films identified in this genre include John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), in which a shape-shifting alien absorbs the crew members of an arctic research base, taking their shape and perfectly disguising itself as them, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), in which an alien parasite lays its eggs inside a crew member, hatches and then pops out from his chest, and David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), in which we meet Seth Brundle, played by Jeff Goldblum, a scientist who accidentally combines his DNA with a house fly's while testing his teleportation pods. While it's

unlikely that anyone has ever experienced such events, the fear of bodily infection, disease, addiction and lapses in mental capabilities in which these films are seeded allows an audience to make the emotional leap and rationalize what they see. For example, *The Fly* (1986) uses DNA as a metaphor to convey Seth's emotional state, with the takeover of this body by the fly DNA being an allegory for Seth's difficulties with intimacy while also displaying his privileging of his mind and work over his own body and the people he loves.

Like Friedkin, Cronenberg's pacing is also gradual, slowly revealing the emotional contours of body displacement. As we learn early in the film, Seth Brundle doesn't pay attention to physical pleasures and exists inside his own head, going so far as to limit himself to same five suits as to avoid wasting mental energy. We also discover Seth's struggle when he is unable to correctly reassemble DNA molecules which travel between his teleportation pods, as shown when one of Seth's two pet baboons returns from teleportation inside-out. As Veronica Quaife, a journalist and Seth's love interest played by Geena Davis, suggests his inexperience with the flesh (i.e. relationships and sex) makes him unable to crack the DNA code. Seth views living organic matter in such an emotionally detached manner that it is just another object to teleport and not as a living creature. Here, Cronenberg uses DNA as a metaphor for intimacy or rather, in Seth's case, the difficulties he has with it. For the viewer, our empathy allows us to create a mental safe space and contemplate our own difficulties with intimacy and extend such feelings to Seth's struggle with his teleportation experiments as Cronenberg has made us understand that, for Seth, human relations and the tele-pods are one and the same. This is expressed directly as Seth only cracks the DNA teleportation code after having sex with Veronica, for it is then that he can approach the flesh with the nuances of emotion. However, this creates a sensual/self-destructive addiction for Seth which is likewise expressed through the tele-pods as he teleports himself accidentally with a house fly, merging their DNA together. As the fly DNA overtakes Seth (becoming "Brundlefly," the human-fly hybrid) he seeks out sensual pleasures more aggressively, indulging in

excessive volumes of coffee and sugar, starting bar fights, and desiring disproportionate amounts of sex compared to his earlier desire in the film.

Yet the combining of Seth Brundle's DNA with a house fly's is also viewed as a visual metaphor of Seth's work obsession consuming him. As Lianne McLarty writes in her article, *Beyond the Veil of the Flesh: Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror*, "[the Fly] collapse[s] the distinction between the scientist and the monster... Seth's monstrousness is, if anything, a function of his violent expression of aggression and his will to control" (McLarty). Using Seth's wardrobe as an example once more, Cronenberg displays Seth's willingness to live inside his own head but also his obsessive traits and desire to control his environment. Once again, the viewer's empathy allows for an establishment of a mental space space to reflect upon our own difficulties balancing a busy work schedule with a private life and, with this emotional connection, interpret Seth's physical deterioration as a visual metaphor for his work addiction destroying his humanity. Such is especially communicated after Seth becomes Brundlefly and he still carries on with his Kafkaesque research by noting when every fingernail, tooth and ear falls out, even having Veronica record him demonstrating his new way of eating in which, like a house fly, involves Seth vomiting acid onto what he's eating.

Seth Brundle and Regan MacNeil are cases in which the familiar becomes the other, initially seen as normal at the start of their respective films until they are transformed by either an insidious entity or character trait. Yet there are instances in which the protagonist is the foreign object from the very beginning, never to morph or change, only be trapped within a society of stares and ghastly, violent reactions. Such is demonstrated in James Whale's *Frankenstein (1931)* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out (2015)* in which their protagonists represent marginalized people fighting for their lives.

Part 2: Frankenstein Gets Out – Critical Empathy in *Frankenstein* and *Get Out*

When James Whale's Universal monster film *Frankenstein* (1931) comes to mind, one conjures up the scenes of Boris Karloff in his monstrous make-up, black clothing, arms extended outward as he grunts while stiffly chasing after townsfolk. With only these iconic images in mind it's difficult to claim that Frankenstein's monster is a character worthy of empathy, yet for every scene in which the monster runs after or attacks someone there are equal if not more in which the monster is forced into the shadows and hidden from the human interaction he desires. Unlike the other Universal Monsters, such as the Wolf Man, The Creature from the Black Lagoon, and Dracula, Frankenstein's monster doesn't preexist his narrative, he is brought to life before our very eyes by Henry Frankenstein, played by Colin Clive. The fact that the monster is born within the film's timespan, along with his limited intellectual capacity, indicates that the monster is more so a child than a terrible creature, and desires affection. This notion is captured by Whale in the first encounter the monster has outside Frankenstein's lab, with the farmer's daughter Maria, played by Marilyn Harris, who invites him to toss flowers into a lake and watch them float. The monster visibly enjoys interacting with Maria, smiling for the first time in the film and even giving a hushed laugh. When the monster runs out of flowers to throw he looks at Maria and, believing she'll float like a flower, picks her up and tosses her into the water. Upon realizing that Maria doesn't float, the monster attempts to reach out and save her only for her to drown before he can grab her. In this moment Whale shows us that the monster isn't naturally malevolent, having thrown Maria in the lake only due to his lack of empirical experience and limited reasoning ability, with the monster expressing regret as he immediately recognizes and empathies with Maria's expressions of fear and danger as she splashes in the water. It's here that we begin to empathize with Frankenstein's monster, allowing ourselves to see him as a person with emotional faculties rather than a mere creature, and our empathy enabling us to recall times when we were also socially awkward or inept at social cues. Furthermore, the monster is seen only as such due to the lack

of preparation in which Henry Frankenstein displays. Essentially being a neglectful parent, Henry treats his creation like an animal, chaining him up in his laboratory upon the first outburst instead of subduing the monster's fears and fostering his curiosity as one should a child's. Ultimately, it is Henry Frankenstein who is the actual monster in the film, as Henry's anti-social behavior and objectification of the human body is what stunts the monster's development and causes him to be alienated as well as marginalized within the town.

The marginalization of persons which James Whale expresses in *Frankenstein*, as well as its sequel *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), with their images of torch bearing crowds with dogs as they chase after a fugitive invoke parallels with lynch-mobs which were extremely prevalent in America at the time of both films' releases. Elizabeth Young writes in *Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in Bride of Frankenstein*, "Captured partway in [*Bride*], [the monster] is strung up on a tree as an angry cluster of men surround him. This visual moment is so shockingly reminiscent of the imagery of lynching that, as with the monster's 'blackness,' the film here radically rewrites boundaries between the 'fantasy' of horror and the 'realism' of other cinematic genres" (Young). Young offers us a framework for the monster as psychic manifestation of the marginalized and persecuted. In this framework we approach the monster from within our own selves, carrying whatever perceived persecutions and traumas we might have. The lynching of Frankenstein's monster brings to foreground the terrible fate of people who were mutilated and murdered for having only different skin color at the time of the film's creation. The monster, being assembled from the mutilated and dismembered parts of corpses emphasizes these connections with lynching, "for the corpses of lynching victims were similarly desecrated," writes Young, "as in the case of George Armwood, who 'was mauled and mutilated before he was lynched ...and whose body was then burned and further desecrated'" (Young).

Another film which brings race to the foreground and deals with the loss of autonomy within a marginalized body is Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). We meet Chris Washington, played by Daniel

Kaluuya, a person of color who travels to a modern-day countryside town with his white girlfriend Rose Armitage, played by Allison Williams, to meet her family for the first time. Jordan Peele masterfully distills what Chris uncovers throughout the film, at first making him, as well as the audience, presume that the inhabitants of this tranquil, too friendly country townsfolk gaze upon him with an eerie fascination due to their limited exposure with persons of color. However, as the story progresses Chris discovers the town's conspiracy in which persons of color are kidnapped and their consciousnesses are replaced with those belonging to the town's older residents such as Rose's grandparents. *Get Out* focuses the audience's empathy onto Chris, at first displaying his uneasiness in being surrounded by the sense of fake comradery as well as having his skin color being the topic of most conversations. In these early situations the viewer's empathy conjures up times when we've also felt alienated or were made the center of attention despite wishing otherwise. By showing Chris being objectified by the town's collective eye, Peele allows the viewer to further create an intellectual safe space and empathize with Chris in the latter half of the film once the conspiracy is out in the open. The metaphor of a white society trying to control a black body via consciousness transplant is seen by the viewer as not only an extension of how Chris feels by being objectified during the film but how African-American culture feels in a white America. Much like Frankenstein's monster, Chris feels helpless as he cannot shake being judged solely by how he looks and the persons of color who have already undergone the consciousness transplant have lost control of their autonomous body and are subject to a force beyond their control. The townsfolk, on the other hand, are equals with Dr. Frankenstein in how they neglect marginalized bodies and deprive them of their freedom.

While *Frankenstein* and *Get Out* focus upon the marginalization of bodies that are mostly male, the Bride in *Bride of Frankenstein* having a lackluster five minutes of screen time in total, the slasher subgenre of horror puts the female body at its focal point. These films present a lone female character, known as the final girl, defeating the mass murderer who has killed her friends, with both the final girl as

well as the killer displaying characteristics which blur gender lines. This ambiguity offers a critique of gender and social norms, displaying how such distinctions aren't always so clear-cut.

### Part 3: She's Got the Power – Critical Empathy in *Carrie* and *the Witch*

Of all the subgenres in horror, the slasher film offers the most challenging examples for critical empathy as its stories consist of a group of young adults (or teenagers) getting murdered one-by-one at the hands of a violent killer(s). However, even with its gruesome narratives, the slasher film has proven to be one of the more popular subgenres of horror with notable works including as *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho* (1960), Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) and Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Film and mythology scholar Carol Clover observes in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws* that “while on the face of it, the relation between the sexes in slasher films could hardly be clearer, that a dominating male chases after a victimized female and an audience would appear to identify with their assigned gender by default.” Clover continues to point out that this is only surface presumption as there are aspects within the slasher which challenge this notion and that viewers will often identify with opposite sex characters, that “gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane,” suggesting that any audience member, male or female, can identify with a character who is assaulted on-screen (Clover).

Such on-screen identification can be seen in the representations of “the final girl,” a term coined by Clover in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* to describe the consistent phenomena in slasher films after 1974 in which everyone is murdered except for a lone, female survivor who defeats the slasher film's killer in its conclusion. Clover outlines the characteristics of a final girl in her book, stating:

The gender of the final girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from the other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of the cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the ‘active investigating gaze’ normally reserved for males and punished in females when they assume it themselves; tentatively at first and then aggressively, the Final girl looks *for* the killer, even tracking him to his forest hut or his underground labyrinth, and then *at* him, therewith bringing him, often for the first time, into our vision as well. (Clover)

While final girls can be seen in many slasher films, the subgenre’s popularity has led to many of the slasher film’s tropes emerging in other horror subgenres. Brian De Palma’s supernatural horror *Carrie* (1976) and Robert Eggers period supernatural horror *the Witch* (2015) provide excellent illustrations of the final girl as their protagonists and situations are more dynamic than those usually seen in a slasher narrative while still maintaining all the characteristics of a final girl which Clover mentions. Expanding Clover’s observations of the final girl into additional subgenres of horror demonstrates that on-screen identification occurs outside of the slasher film and allows for a more encompassing analysis of a viewer’s empathic identification in horror films overall.

In Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976), we meet Carrie White, played by Sissy Spacek, who is a shy sixteen-year-old girl that is constantly bullied, especially so during the film’s opening scene in which Carrie has her first period while showering in the girl’s locker room. When Carrie runs out of the shower to ask for help, the other girls laugh and begin to pelt Carrie with tampons while shouting, “Plug it up, plug it up.” In this opening scene De Palma exhibits the traits of the final girl within Carrie, with her apartness from the other female characters being so blatant as to convey Carrie being punished for assuming an active investigating gaze as she reacts dismayed at her own menstruation (sexuality) yet still goes out to investigate why this is happening to her. While the active investigating gaze is used by the final girl to defeat the killer in a slasher film, Carrie goes on to become the film’s victim, hero



and representative monster in tandem, suggesting that Carrie is using such a gaze to seek out and destroy the stigmas of menstruation and womanhood. Clover notes in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* that Carrie's "status in [the roles of hero and monster] has indeed been enabled by 'women's liberation.' Feminism, that is, has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge" (Clover). This is further communicated in the scene in which Carrie's fanatical mother, Margaret White, played by Piper Laurie, locks her inside a prayer closet to atone for the "sinful thoughts" which caused Carrie to start menstruating. After leaving the closet, Carrie stares at her reflection in a mirror and, using her telekinetic powers, shatters its glass. In this scene, Carrie's telekinetic powers become a metaphor for her active investigating gaze and implies that she seeks to destroy the negativity in which her body, and woman in general, are seen by the outside world.

In the final act of *Carrie*, we witness Carrie White go on a telekinetic rampage after two classmates cover her in pig's blood upon being named prom queen. Carrie transforms from victim into the monster as she takes her revenge out on those she believes treated her wrongly, impaling them with glass shards and setting the gymnasium on fire. Yet it's the following, final confrontation with Carrie and her mother which sees Carrie battle her own duality, being someone who's been taught to fear their own body while being someone whose body grants them great power. Ultimately, Carrie takes both her and her mother's lives as their house is set aflame and collapses upon them. While no viewer knows what it's like to have telekinetic abilities, our empathy allows us to establish a mental safe space and view Carrie's deadly powers as a metaphor for the anger and resentment which comes from being disempowered, marginalized and alienated. What's more, by introducing Carrie to the audience at her most vulnerable in the girl's locker room, De Palma humanized Carrie before she would transform into the film's monster. So once Carrie's inner rage and agony becomes extroverted and tangible, we are still able to empathize with her overwhelming anger despite disagreeing with her murderous solution.

Carrie White finds a kindred spirit in Thomasin in Robert Eggers' *the Witch* (2015), played by Anya Taylor-Joy, whose experiences reflect that of the final girl and becomes a victim-hero-monster as well. After Thomasin's family is banished from their Puritan plantation, they venture into the New England wilderness and settle on the edge of a forest where they have various encounters with witches while tensions within the family boil over. Eggers highlights Thomasin's apartness from the other female characters through the animosity between her and her mother Katherine, played by Kate Dickie, with such animosity being especially direct in a scene in which Katherine accuses Thomasin of stealing her silver cup merely because Thomasin would always look at it. Thomasin is reluctant, arguing for her own innocent until it's revealed later that Thomasin's father sold the cup. However, the accusation that Thomasin's gaze should be punished implies that she has exercised the autonomy and resourcefulness in which the active investigating gaze is rooted. Such autonomy is shown when Thomasin's twin siblings Mercy and Jonas, played by Ellie Grainger and Lucas Dawson, accuse her of being a witch while Thomasin tries to do chores. Eventually, Thomasin plays along and embraces the persona of a witch to scare off the chastising twins. What this moment suggests, as well as the many other witchery charges placed upon Thomasin, is the metaphorical connotation of witchery in which Thomasin isn't a magical being but an autonomous female who is consistently breaking gender norms with her curiosity and assertiveness. While Thomasin does her best to help her family they never allow her to escape the bondage of the gender prejudices, ironic considering her family was exiled from their village due to the Puritan townships' similar close-mindedness.

Yet the ultimate display of Thomasin's active investigating gaze comes at *the Witch's* conclusion in which she kills her mother in self-defense, leaving her the only person in her family to survive. This final confrontation between Thomasin and Katherine symbolizes Thomasin's internal struggle, with Katherine being the embodiment of the oppressive, judgmental attitude toward women in

which Thomasin is always being attacked. As Thomasin deals the death blow to her mother and is freed from that which has tormented her, she still finds herself lost in the wilderness. Desperate for food and shelter, she seeks out and finds Black Philip, a mysterious black goat the family found in the woods, and asks for his help. To her surprise, Black Philip answers (having now changed into a man) and asks her to join the same coven of witches whom have terrorized her throughout the film. Yet, instead of being terrified to do so, Thomasin stripes naked and follows Black Philip deeper into the woods, with the final scene showing her subtle smile erupt into full laughter as she floats in the air. By grounding the audience in Thomasin's antagonistic family dynamics, Eggers allows us to empathize with Thomasin's victimization and view her monstrous turn as her escapes an oppressive society, embracing the darkness and mystery which accepts her rather than be within the shackled existence of her family and Puritan society. What's more, the fact Thomasin must become naked before entering the woods suggests that she fully embraces the femininity which was previously suppressed and by doing so, like Carrie White, is granted immense power.

While De Palma's *Carrie* and Eggers' *the Witch* demonstrate the final girl experience in which the positive traits of both masculinity and femininity are used to challenge, protect and destroy those who threaten them, the monstrous turns of their protagonists convey the oppose and display examples of how toxic masculinity as well as toxic femininity are used to deliberately harm and seek out destruction. Such toxic traits are equally embodied within the killers of slasher films, as Carol Clover writes in *Men, Women and Chainsaws*,

Just as the Final Girl takes on masculine traits in the slasher film, the killers take on feminine aspects as well. While the killer's phallic purpose, as he thrusts his drill or knife into the trembling bodies of young women, is unmistakable. At the same time, however, his masculinity is severely qualified: he ranges from virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual, and is spiritually divided ('the mother half of his mind') or even equipped with vulva and

vagina (Clover).

This mother half of the mind is evident in both *Carrie* and *the Witch*, as Carrie White's fiery rampage being an extension of her mother's poisonous traits, in that her mother is so nurturing that she's oppressive, whereas Thomasin's leaving of regular society to become a witch is directly influenced by her mother's pernicious and malevolent attitude. Yet, what's interesting with Carrie and Thomasin is that both are shown battling this duality as each character has a final and deadly confrontation with their respective mothers. This is in stark contrast to slasher film killers such as Jason Voorhees in Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), who is consistently guided kill by his mother's vengeful voice, or Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), who takes on the avatar of his dead mother when he murders people, with neither killer making any attempt to fight the mother half of their minds. What this does is make the slasher film killer less empathic to an audience in that they have lost the dynamic qualities which makes them human, losing the ability to fight what's toxic and, instead, becoming a vengeful killing machine. What De Palma does in *Carrie*, and Eggers with *the Witch*, is bring humanity to such characters, allowing an audience to identify and empathize with Carrie and Thomasin's struggles as they attempt to deal with them as best they can. While both films result in bloody conclusions, the empathy of the viewer isn't lost as we were initially grounded by the empirical realities of Carrie and Thomasin's supernatural and extreme circumstances, during which the viewer forms a psychological safe space to expand their empathy for what the two characters are going through.

## Conclusion – Stay Scared!

This thesis presents the multitude of ways in which our empathy allows us to understand the experiences of on-screen characters as well as fellow viewers who express positive cathartic reactions to horror films and explain how the horror genre creates a public avenue through which we, as a culture, discuss and explore traumas, stigmas, fears, the supernatural and social taboos. Such subjects are not easy to tackle, be it in a film, a thesis or personal circumstances, but it's my hope that by highlighting how horror allows us to deal with these matters, we can better understand how we communicate as a collective consciousness. English professor Peter Elbow describes a process of empathic reasoning called the "believing game," and defines it in his article "The Believing Game—Methodological Believing":

In contrast [to the doubting game which represents the kind of thinking most widely honored and taught in our culture], the believing game is the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter; not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them; not just trying to restate them without bias; but actually trying to believe them. We are using believing as a tool to scrutinize and test, but instead of scrutinizing fashionable or widely accepted ideas for hidden flaws, the believing game asks us to scrutinize unfashionable or even repellent ideas for hidden virtues. Often, we cannot see what's good in someone else's idea (or in our own!) until we work at believing it. When an idea goes against current assumptions and beliefs—or if it seems alien, dangerous, or poorly formulated—we often cannot see any merit in it. (Elbow)

Elbow's "believing game" concisely describes the critically empathic perspective of Todd DeStigter in which this thesis approaches horror films, attempting to understand the belief in which movie-goers can garner empathetic reactions while watching extreme subject matter. Such was the case with William Friedkin's possession film *the Exorcist (1973)* as believing that supernatural activity can

be interpreted as visual metaphors for real issues allows us to observe how Regan MacNeil's possession is a metaphor for her deteriorating health, creating a safe space for the audience to expand their empathy when the supernatural phenomena becomes heightened, while also empathizing with Chris MacNeil, Regan's mother, and her leap-of-faith in hiring an exorcist. Similarly, in David Cronenberg's body horror *the Fly* (1986), our belief in the metaphor of the supernatural grants us the ability to examine how DNA is used metaphorically to convey Seth Brundle's Kafkaesque obsession with his work as well as his desire for intimacy, so much so that it overtakes his humanity and shows him become a monster from within himself. In approaching James Whale's Universal Monster film *Frankenstein* (1931) with the belief that the monster represents a marginalized body, we analyze how Frankenstein's monster is the oppressed and not a malevolent creature that has to be chained up, as well as observe how Dr. Frankenstein is the true monster in the film due to his neglectful treatment of a human being with limited mental faculties. Additionally, we can take this belief a step further and analyze how in Whale's *Frankenstein*, through its images of torch bearing crowds with dogs as they chase after a fugitive, invokes parallels with lynch-mobs which were extremely prevalent in America at the time of the film's release. In Jordan Peele's psychological horror-comedy *Get Out* (2017) it is through believing that marginalized persons can be represented on screen which allows us to see how the townsfolk's objectification of Chris Washington conjures up feelings of alienation by forcing him to be the center of attention despite him wishing otherwise. By believing that slasher films contain a discussion regarding gender representation, we can examine Brian De Palma's supernatural film *Carrie* (1976) and Robert Egger's period supernatural horror *the Witch* (2015) through the lens of Carol Clover's concept of the final girl. We witness how Carrie White and Thomasin embrace the 'active investigating gaze,' normally reserved for on-screen males, to further embrace their autonomy and femininity while also seeing how toxic gender influences cause both characters to become their film's representative monster.

It is through our intellectual and empathetic faculties that we can critically empathize and attempt to believe another person's perspective by acknowledging the ways in which each person's point of view might differ from ours and using that knowledge to find common ground. In doing so, as a culture, we allow ourselves to go beyond the dismissal of ideas, beliefs and various types of media at face value, and allow ourselves to have more meaningful experiences with every person we come across. While horror films and all its subgenres might not be for every viewer, it is believed that this thesis grants a greater appreciation for these films as well as its fans, with the hope that it will spark a curiosity to dive further into the countless titles which bare its label. As macabre and grotesque as they might be, the horror genre of film does play a role in the processing of life's most difficult conditions and it is hoped that we all come out stronger in the end.

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