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MONSTROUS MOUTHS, IM/MATURE LIPS: ORALITY AND THE QUEERING OF
AGE AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR

by

Kyle Christensen

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication

The University of Memphis

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ABSTRACT

Christensen, Kyle. Ph.D. The University of Memphis. August, 2018. *Monstrous Mouths, Im/mature Lips: Orality and the Queering of Age and Gender in Contemporary Horror*. Major Professor: Marina Levina, Ph.D.

This dissertation analyzes representations of the mouth in the horror genre. I focus on contemporary iterations of well-known figures of horror defined by monstrous uses of the mouth, including the female rape avenger and the act of spitting in *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), the blood-drinking vampire in *Let Me In* (2010), the voice of the slasher horror Final Girl in the television series *Scream Queens*, and the bite of the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight. I propose the term “horr/orality” to describe how the mouth provides a vantage point for exploring how identities—in particular, age and gender—are enacted through the body in horror. Applying Freudian psychoanalysis, queer theory, and critical feminist theory, I argue that horror’s monstrous mouths shift between binary registers of age. Monstrous mouths often present a form of orality that is excessive, out-of-control, and equated to a childlike/immature state prior to the internalization of social law. However, as monstrous oral bodies are brought under control, they shift into a state coded as adult and mature. This adult identity is linked to, and also subverts, the figure of the mother and her role in taming and training the bodies of her children within the normative family unit. In all, these monstrous mouths work to de-essentialize age and gender identity by presenting them as being performed through the oral body and showing that, based on how the mouth is used (in an im/mature manner), the body is capable of oscillating between and performing across age/gender binaries.

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Introduction

Orality and the Horror Genre

During the final act of 1990's *Night of the Living Dead*, a remake of the landmark George A. Romero horror film of the same name, audiences watch as the heroine Barbara (Patricia Tallman) walks through an open field overrun by a horde of zombies. Aware of the fact that these undead monsters have developed a taste for human flesh and will bite her if she gets too close, Barbara attempts to dodge these creatures, occasionally shooting at them with her trusty pistol. In one of the film's most jarring sequences, Barbara encounters a female zombie carrying a baby doll in her arms (Figure A). Identified as the "Doll's Mom Zombie" in the film's credits, it elicits an overwhelming emotional reaction from Barbara who is still reeling from the death of her own oppressive mother. Barbara stands still and begins crying, shaken by the image but also knowing what she must do to survive. As Barbara points her gun and prepares to fire, an extreme close-up shot shows the zombie growling and bearing her teeth menacingly (Figure B). Barbara pulls the trigger, and the zombie (and her doll) tumble to the ground.



Figure 1: Barbara encounters one of the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1990) (image captured by author)



Figure 2: The Doll's Mom Zombie displays its teeth in *Night of the Living Dead* (1990) (image captured by author)

I will return to *Night of the Living Dead* and its impact on future depictions of the zombie later in this dissertation, but I introduce this scene here because it illustrates three critical themes pertaining to contemporary horror that I explore in this project. First, the scene speaks to how figures of horror can complicate any clear representation of *age*. On one hand, the zombie is shown as an adult being: it appears to be a fully grown woman,

and one who is coded as having the adult responsibility of being mother to her inanimate offspring. On the other hand, it being a doll to which the zombie serves as guardian possesses childlike connotations, as if the zombie is less an actual mother and more a little girl pretending to play the part. However, in this scene, age automatically evokes gender, as well. The zombie is not just adult or child, but presents particularly gendered versions of adulthood and childhood. In this moment, the zombie's adult and child identities are linked with femininity and maternity; she can be seen as either a maternal, adult parent or as a child engaging in the make-believe fantasy of motherhood. Thus, a second theme, regarding representations of *gender* as it intersects with age in figures of horror, must also be addressed.

Third, and finally, the ultimate horror of this scene is connected to *the mouth*, it being the part of the body that when put to use obfuscates the age-gender identity of this character. When the Doll's Mom Zombie displays its teeth to the gun-toting Barbara, it can be interpreted as that of the adult parent snarling to ward off enemies and protect her young. And yet her ferocity, as she faces the prospect of being put down by a barrage of bullets, is also equivalent to the raging tantrum of a little child being put down for a nap. Of course, American cinema has long showcased figures of horror defined by their mouths, and continues to do so in the contemporary era. Along with the bite of the zombie, other examples include the vampire's proclivity for drinking blood and the frightened cry of the proverbial "scream queen," to name a couple. Despite this fact, there has been little sustained analysis of exactly why the mouth has occupied such a position of terror in horror, and what these representations of the mouth—and the corresponding representations of identity that become attached to it—might ultimately mean.

In light of both this gap in scholarly literature and the themes I have noted above, this dissertation will answer two primary research questions: first, (how) are the mouth and the functions of the mouth represented in figures of contemporary horror?; and second, (how) does the mouth come to signify age and gender in contemporary horror? The few scholarly investigations that exist on the mouth in horror tend to draw upon and sensationalize mythic fantasies of the mouth as displaced onto other parts of the body (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Fradley; Gohr). For instance, it is not surprising that there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the cultural myth of the *vagina dentata*—the toothed vagina—following the release of Mitchell Lichtenstein’s 2007 indie horror hit *Teeth*, in which a young woman utilizes this anatomical abnormality to strike back against the men in her life who have wronged her (Fradley; Gohr; Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge*; Kelly, “Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence”). However, the horrors of the literal mouth—with actual lips, teeth, and snapping jaw—has not been thoroughly examined by media critics. Furthermore, as will be explained in chapter 1, the mouth has recently become a site of interrogation for critical theorists (Connor, *Beyond Words*; LaBelle), offering an opening to finally begin addressing the critical implications of the oral orifice in horror.

In this dissertation, I use Freudian psychoanalysis in conjunction with critical feminist and queer theory to examine representations of orality (the mouth and its many functions) in American horror in the twenty-first century. As I have stated, my specific interest is in how orality informs representations of age and gender in the genre, a phenomenon I am dubbing “horr/orality.” Though this term is obviously a crude portmanteau of “horror” and “orality,” it is also inspired by Philip Brophy’s well-known

1984 essay “Horrorality.” In this essay, Brophy outlines how he saw the horror genre starting to evolve in the late twentieth century, stating that horror films increasingly came to include several elements not present in horror of the past. Amongst them, and most pertinent to this dissertation, is the horror genre’s curiosities regarding *the human body* and *the family*. These elements require further elaboration as horror narratives frequently posit that it is through the body, particularly as it comes to be regulated by parental authorities within the family, that identities and roles pertaining to age and gender are realized.

Studies of bodies in horror have often fixated on, as Brophy puts it, “the destruction of the Body” (8). Indeed, the body as it is not just destroyed, but broken apart, reassembled, and made unrecognizable has intrigued scholars for decades (Badley; Halberstam, *Skin Shows*; Tudor). Nonetheless, in continuity with critics who have used horror to question whether it is possible to rely on any singular-normative notion of “*the human body*” (Reyes, *Body Gothic*), I believe that it is crucial that scholars also begin to avoid discussing the body as a cohesive and unified whole. Larrie Dudenhoefter argues that it may be beneficial for scholars to carefully fragment the body and focus on the particular body parts that get repeatedly showcased in the horror genre. By “treat[ing] these organs as amputations from the whole of the text” (Dudenhoefter 216-7), scholars may be more attentive to these individual sectors of the body and the particular cultural messages tied to them. On these grounds, an in-depth analysis of the mouth, as one such “amputation” from the body in horror, is warranted because of the unique insights into human corporeality and identity that it might yield.

The mouth should be studied separately from the rest of the body for two reasons. First, the mouth is the part of the body that is most stringently regulated. These regulations are perceived as abundantly necessary because the mouth is the part of the body most capable of breaking down the barriers between ourselves and the surrounding world, based on what we allow to pass through our mouths and enter/exit our bodies. Second, and relatedly, identity becomes contingent on these regulations. For instance, when we follow the rules for how to use the mouth in respectable society, we enforce and enact an identity that is both “human” and “civilized.” These rules can have implications for what kind of language we use when speaking in specific environments, the etiquette for what “displays of affection” involving the mouth are acceptable in public, what objects are (not) deemed appropriate to put in one’s mouth, and so forth. For those who do not follow these rules, an identity defined as “inhuman” and “uncivilized” may be applied. As the above example from *Night of the Living Dead* demonstrates, though, the mouth is also the part of the body through which other identities can materialize, such as age and gender. These identities also have rules to be followed for how they are to be enacted through the body, including the mouth. However, what the horror genre can offer in particular are representations of the mouth, especially those affixed to non-normative and monstrous bodies, that at varying point both do and do not follow these rules, resulting in mouths that can shift between and represent several different identities (sometimes young/immature, sometimes adult/mature, sometimes masculine, and sometimes feminine).

My goal with this research is to employ the mouth in order to contribute to, but also push the boundaries of, existing writing on age and the relationship between age and

gender in horror media. To be sure, the fear of “becoming old” has been a recurring trope in horror history (going as far back as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1890]) and has been particularly examined by critics studying women and age in horror. For instance, Vivian Sobchack and Linda Williams have analyzed what has now come to be termed “hagsploitation” in horror (Billson, “Hagsploitation”), in which older women in films ranging from Oscar-caliber fare like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) to low-budget schlock like *The Leech Woman* (1960) are represented as abject monsters and objects of horror (“Revenge of *The Leech Woman*,” “Scary Women,” “When the Woman Looks”). Outside of horror studies, though, other scholars have fought against ageism in mass media by highlighting, first, representations of “aging heroes” (in other words, “older” protagonists) who remain vital and active in media narratives (Ed. Jones and Batchelor), and second, the successes of actresses perceived as older (e.g., Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, Courtney Cox, etc.) but who continue to excel in Hollywood (Whelehan).¹ Of course, these efforts to challenge ageism are commendable and necessary, especially given how ageism (as well as sexism) has manifested in the current American political climate.²

However, simply venerating and redeeming those persons who fall under the category of “old,” even while also remaining skeptical toward the glorification of the category of “young,” does nothing to question the very nature of these somewhat arbitrary social categories and the manner in which the body becomes instrumental to

¹Other recent efforts to undercut ageism in American media have included *Allure* magazine’s decision to abolish language referring to “anti-aging” in products featured in its pages in 2017, and the removal of age restrictions for contestants competing on the VH1 reality show *America’s Next Top Model* in 2018.

²For example, several commentators have noted how ageism and sexism were both contributing factors in Hillary Clinton’s failed 2016 Presidential campaign, ironically resulting in Americans electing Donald J. Trump, who, at 70 years-old, holds the record as the oldest individual to ever be sworn into office in his first term (Dvorak).

how age and age categories are constructed. I construe the mouth as a bodily marker of age, as learning to control the mouth and its functions (from significant milestones like manipulating the mouth to produce language to other activities like training oneself to keep one's mouth closed while chewing food or adjusting one's volume according to certain social situations) serves as an important, albeit oftentimes underappreciated, step in one's growth and maturation process. However, in those moments when figures of horror engage in oral acts that challenge normative standards of decency and decorum for how the mouth is to be used, I see these "monstrous mouths" as reverting back to an earlier childhood state and all of the oral excesses that come with it. Meanwhile, just as monsters can be thwarted on screen in order to restore the social order, these wild monstrous mouth can also be tamed as if bringing them back into a socialized adult realm. Thus, the mouth becomes a pivotal segment of the body through which age is performed, and more specifically, through which the oral body might oscillate between childish and adult identities.

While numerous frameworks can be used to define and differentiate these respective identities of child and adult being conveyed by the mouth, this dissertation defines these identities by considering how they are enacted within the family unit. This decision is based partially on the fact that the family institution has been integral to horror and horror scholarship (Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century*; Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home"; Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*). Much like the body, though, families are not altogether celebrated in horror but are often undermined and decimated. Brophy explains, "Whereas suspense [in horror of the past] was traditionally hinged on individual identification...it [has] now shifted onto not a

family identification, but a pleasure in witnessing the Family being destroyed” (7) and placed in grave peril.

Still, in another similarity to bodies in horror, recent scholarship has been interested not in looking at “the Family” as a united force, but in exploring its own individual “parts”—the individual members that make up the family—and the roles they play in shaping familial horror narratives. For example, Kimberly Jackson (*Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror*) notes that it has become more common in American horror films to witness representations of fathers who fail to protect and maintain authority over their households (e.g., *Insidious* [2010], *Oculus* [2013], *Orphan* [2009]). While Jackson reads these moments of “patriarchal decline” as metaphors for the anxieties felt over diminished American-patriarchal institutions in post-9/11 U.S. society (*Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror*, 8), she also adds that, in these films, “*the mother-child bond* is often portrayed as redemptive, but only if and when it can be released from the grip of bourgeois patriarchy” (*Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror*, 185, emphasis added). While I am less preoccupied with how this dwindling of father figures in horror reflects broader social issues, I am intrigued by the possibility of putting greater emphasis on the mother-child dyad in horror. This dyad offers the lens through which I view the roles of adult (mother) and child being reinscribed in the various operations of the mouth, especially because of the role, in psychoanalytic accounts of the family, that the mother (separate from the father) is believed to serve in training and socializing the child’s body (chapter 1), including and especially the mouth. Furthermore, by exploring the family through this dyad, it becomes possible to see how age identities in the family are

intertwined with gender, such as marking the identity of the mother as both “older” (in comparison to the younger child) and “maternal” (a term steeped in feminine cultural ideals).

Many scholars who have examined the family in horror have called upon tenets of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to do so (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine, Phallic Panic*). I wish to continue in this tradition for this dissertation, and particularly centralize Freudian approaches to psychoanalytic film and media criticism, for three reasons. First, Freudian psychoanalysis offers helpful explanations about the connections between orality and human development and maturation (“Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” “The Uncanny”). Second, despite the significant (although occasionally problematic) insights that might be revealed from a psychoanalytic perspective, psychoanalysis has been by and large rejected by scholars of horror and monstrosity in the Communication discipline, who have tended to analyze horror through rubrics of performance studies, rhetoric, or other branches of critical/cultural studies (Calafell; Levina and Bui, eds.; Phillips, *Dark Directions, Projected Fears*). Third, and lastly, even those Communication scholars who advocate for psychoanalysis and the work of Sigmund Freud, such as Joshua Gunn and Thomas Frenzt, have expressed concerns over the fact that “increasingly fewer and fewer critics are reading Freud’s primary texts” (274). This dissertation seeks to correct that oversight, turning to Freudian literature directly in order to make its case for the interplay between orality, age, and gender in horror.

Of course, Freudian psychoanalysis has received its share of deserved criticism. In his discussions of the family (as it affects individual psychological development),

Freud tends to homogenize the identities of the individuals who comprise it. Because of his personal biases and his overgeneralizing from the very narrow pool of subjects whom he professionally analyzed, Freud's take on the family is one in which its members are decidedly white, middle-to-upper class, cisgender, and operating by heterosexual drives and desires. Consequently, Freud is oblivious to how different social, cultural, and historical dynamics might problematize normative constructs of identity and also influence the makeup of the family structure. Another major critique of psychoanalysis is its tendency to essentialize individuals. This critique has been especially noted in regard to how to how Freud essentializes gender, and in his insistence that certain anatomically sexed bodies are expected to take on certain predetermined gender roles (Firestone; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*). As I explain in chapter 1, though, the essentialist bent of psychoanalysis actually permits scholars to see how, in particular, patriarchal but also gerontological norms have influenced our perceptions of the world, particularly the family which is at the center of much of Freud's writing. That is, while its detriments remain, Freudian psychoanalysis can help to demonstrate the limited manner in which identity and the family come to be defined in normative Western culture—again, as Eurocentric, class-privileged, and, in what will be most germane for this study, cis-heteronormative and overdetermined by gender-age.

In chapter 1, I then complicate the essentialism endemic to psychoanalysis through queer theory and critical feminist age theory. Through queer theory, I gain a recognition of how identities are often normatively framed in binary terms (be it the masculine-feminine gender binary, or the young-old/child-adult age binary).

Furthermore, queer theory also allows me to examine how normative binary identities are

performed through the body, and how performativity allows these identities to become subverted, or rather, “queered.” Meanwhile, through critical feminist age studies, I come to better grasp how age and gender intersect. Along these lines, critical feminist age studies also illuminate how ageism and sexism are often reinforced through language of the family that especially affects women. The result, which I investigate in this dissertation, is that bodies marked as older and feminine become “maternalized” as their owners are labeled as mother figures. However, monstrous mouths can also confound this maternalization when they refuse to adhere to this identity or when “inappropriate” (i.e., young or male) mouths/bodies become maternalized.

Overview of Chapters and Case Studies

To reiterate, my argument is that the mouth operates as the part of the body through which figures of horror perform, signify, and subvert conventional age/gender and familial identities, shifting between uses of the mouth that are coded as uncivilized, monstrous, and childishly “immature,” and civilized, disciplined, and exuding adult-maternal “maturity.” This argument will be advanced through a series of six chapters. In chapter 1, I provide a detailed explanation of the theoretical/methodological approaches undergirding this study. In particular, I root my work in Freud’s concepts of the uncanny and castration anxiety, noting how orality informs them and their deployment in past horror scholarship. I also unpack how I am placing Freudian psychoanalysis in conversation with other theoretical points of view, including that of queer theory (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, *Gender Trouble*; Jakobsen; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*) and feminist critical age studies (Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*; Gullette, *Aged by Culture*; Segal). Finally, I outline my method of paratextual analysis (Brookey and

Gray, Brookey and Westerfelhaus, Gennette, Gray), asserting the importance of reading a text in relation to the supplementary texts that surround it.

Chapters two through five analyze each of the four case studies contained within this dissertation. Chapter 2 examines the figure of the female rape avenger in the 2010 film *I Spit on Your Grave (I Spit)*, a remake of the 1978 rape-revenge horror classic of the same name. In this chapter, I look at the plot of *I Spit*, alongside paratexts like the interactive menus, filmmaker commentary, and cover art that accompany the film on Blu-ray. In particular, I assess how the film depicts the oral act of spitting as it relates to two common Western-American patriarchal discourses: first, the manta of “boys will be boys” that is often used to justify acts of sexual violence committed by young American males; and second, the misogynistic attitude of aging as equated to states of decline for women, especially for those experiencing motherhood. I argue that these norms of age and gender become reorganized in the film. In *I Spit*, the film’s female protagonist, Jennifer, survives a brutal rape and attempted murder by a band of immature and emotionally regressive men, only to return weeks later and seek vengeance in a manner similar to how these juvenile “boys” attacked her. More specifically, Jennifer directs her violent retribution to the mouths of these men, leading to scenes of grotesque spitting which recreate the act of childbirth via the mouth, and which feminize/maternalize these men and ultimately result in their demise.

Chapter 3 analyzes *Let Me In*, a 2010 American remake of the 2008 Swedish horror film *Let the Right One*. I focus on the figure of the vampire as represented in the character of the ostensibly twelve year-old girl, Abby, and her compulsion for drinking blood. I evaluate this film as well as its interactive menus, director’s commentary, photo

galleries, cover art, and deleted scenes found on its DVD release. In *Let Me In*, the act of drinking is presented as a sexual act symbolizing female virginity loss and therefore, within the confines of the traditional patriarchal family structure, the emergence into motherhood. However, the film also muddles ageist principles assuming that women of a particular “mature” age (e.g., mothers) lose their social worth once they no longer appeal to a desiring youthful male gaze. Abby in *Let Me In* exploits these principles for her own gain, as she is allowed to be invisible to the world following each maternalizing act of blood consumption. Consequently, Abby not only escapes persecution through her invisibility but also debilitates—or, as I claim, *castrates*—the gaze.

Chapter 4 looks at the first season of the television horror comedy series *Scream Queens*, which aired on the FOX network in fall 2015. In particular, I consider the iconography of lead actress Jamie Lee Curtis who, prior to her appearance on the show, helped solidify the figure of the slasher horror “Final Girl” through roles in *Halloween* and other slasher films of the later 1970s-early 1980s. In this chapter, I examine the act of screaming by Curtis in the eighth episode of *Scream Queens*’s first season, entitled “Mommie Dearest.” In “Mommie Dearest,” Curtis recreates the infamous shower murder scene from the 1960 slasher forerunner *Psycho*, a scene that featured the horrific scream of Curtis’s mother, the late actress Janet Leigh. By considering the sequence itself alongside paratextual material from the season’s DVD release (including cover art, interactive menus, and subtitles), I argue that Curtis’s own scream as it is represented in this episode’s reimagining of the shower scene accomplishes two objectives. First, Curtis’s voice draws upon the feminine vocality of Leigh’s vulnerable-erotic scream in *Psycho* while also resituating the scream within the context of violent physical combat.

Second, the scream, in being intergenerationally and intertextually bound to both *Psycho*/Leigh and *Scream Queens*/Curtis, also enables the queering of age in that it signifies the filmic identities of both mother and daughter alike.

Chapter 5 is devoted to a discussion of the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*. Originally released in 2016, the *Zombie Mouth* is a male masturbatory sex “toy” that simulates oral sex and is, as its name suggests, modeled off the figure of the zombie. I examine this text in regard to Freud’s work on castration, and his belief in the power of children and children’s toys to serve as fetish objects that maternalize women/girls and compensate for their supposed penile lack. I trace the origins of the zombie bite, which fuels the castrative fantasies fostered by the *Zombie Mouth*, to the 1968 American horror masterpiece *Night of the Living Dead* (*Night*) and its 1990 and 2009 remakes. I pay particularly close attention to the character Helen, a downtrodden mother fighting off a sudden zombie uprising, and her daughter, Karen, a little girl who eventually turns into a zombie and murders her mother. I read this matricidal slaying of Helen by Karen as an act that symbolizes both violent castration and erotic entanglement, and one which is then recreated in users’ engagement with the *Zombie Mouth*. That is, the *Zombie Mouth* user—through the interactions of his hands and genitals—performs the roles of the biting/castrating daughter *and* the bitten/castrated mother from *Night*. As a result, I argue that the *Zombie Mouth* subverts Freudian theory, in that neither the child nor the toy (both embodied by the *Zombie Mouth*) promise fetishization, but only deliver further castration and reframe castration as an intergenerational erotic experience.

Chapter 6 offers my concluding thoughts to this dissertation. In this chapter, I express what I see as the greater implications of this study. Specifically, I propose that

horr/orality allows audiences to reimagine the process of “aging” not as a linear progression toward one’s advanced years, but as capable of temporally moving both backwards and forwards, and oscillating between polarities of young and old. Thus, among other possibilities, I contend that horr/orality can challenge the ageism that pervades mass media by exposing the performative aspects of age and refusing to privilege one age group over another. Lastly, I address some of the limitations of this study and suggest how this study might be expanded in future research.

Chapter 1

Theorizing Orality, Age, and Gender in Horror

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the theories and methodologies that inform this dissertation. In order to most effectively address the key issues that I have identified thus far—orality, age, gender, and horror—it becomes necessary to turn to a wide assortment of theoretical perspectives. First, I explore Freudian psychoanalysis, differentiating its take on orality from that of a more Lacanian approach and expounding upon how Freud’s insights into orality, human development, and the family have previously influenced horror scholarship. Second, I highlight queer theory and how it complicates normative-binary understandings of identity. Third, and finally, I investigate critical feminist age theory and underscore how it gauges binary identities of age (“young” versus “old”) as they are gendered and performed within the family in Western American culture. At the end of this chapter, I explain the method of paratextual analysis that I employ in analyzing this dissertation’s case studies. As I elaborate below, I value this method in that paratextuality allows scholars to recognize how the meanings and messages ascribed to texts can be influenced by other texts that surround, follow, or predate it, but that are also directly tied to it. I also detail the criteria I am using in selecting this dissertation’s case studies.

Psychoanalysis and Orality

Previous psychoanalytic scholarship on horror has attempted to combine the work of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, rather than situating itself within either a Lacanian or Freudian-specific framework. One particularly well-known example is Barbara

Creed's 1993 classic *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, which examines representations of femininity in horror films, Creed divides her analysis into two sections. While the latter section investigates horror through a feminist revisionist stance on Freud (which I will return to later in this chapter), the first section of the book is inspired by Lacan and the writings of Lacanian-feminist scholar Julia Kristeva.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva introduces the concept of the "abject." The abject, Kristeva claims, sits at the border between what Lacan calls "the Real" and "the Symbolic." The Real is a state of being experienced in one's early infancy prior to entering the larger social world. The Real often involves a fascination with, and reveling in, one's own body and bodily functions. At the same time, it can also include what psychoanalysts see as an infant's attachment to his mother's body; for example, an act such as breastfeeding is assumed to take place between infant and mother, permitting a pre-social merger of these bodies. By acquiring language and gradually learning social customs and norms, all of which come to be associated with the father, one begins to enter the Symbolic realm.

The abject is that which, while not able to pull a subject completely back into the Real, nevertheless serves as a reminder of that earlier state. Furthermore, the abject shows that one continues to be haunted by one's past, and that there is something both alluring and frightening about the prospect of returning to the Real. Kristeva writes that one's parting from the Real may be "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (13). What is especially "securing" about the abject is that it reminds one of the mother-child bond

fostered in the Real. As Kristeva describes it, “The abject confronts us...with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity...” (13, emphasis in original). Kristeva’s emphasized use of the word “maternal” is important to unpack here. While the notion of being maternal in Western American culture includes a variety of parental descriptors inherited from culture (loving, nurturing, protective, etc.), it is necessary to understand that psychoanalysis has often had little interest in exploring how the maternal might be applicable to both men and women. In other words, traditional psychoanalysis assumes that one is maternal simply by virtue of being a mother (female and participating in the birthing, raising, and rearing of children). Because Freud is woefully sexist in his writing, Freudian psychoanalysis has also been complicit in espousing patriarchal values, including the overvaluation of maternity to women’s lives. Strangely, though, the blatant phallogocentric biases of psychoanalysis also make it a theoretical tool that, as feminist thinkers such as Juliet Mitchell have noted, is well-equipped to illuminate just how easily patriarchal norms pertaining to the family have slipped into our cultural mores, schemas, and representations.¹ Therefore, throughout this dissertation, I will continue refer to “the maternal” as synonymous with “the mother” and motherhood; my agenda, though, is not to deny that maternal character traits might very well be embraced by men/fathers, but to demonstrate the normative gender standards that often become assigned to women in the family and that often come to be depicted in horror.

¹Reflecting on Mitchell’s groundbreaking 1974 text *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Elizabeth Wright states how Mitchell helped make it possible to see “psychoanalysis as a theory able to explain the process whereby woman and men came to internalize an oppressive ideology” (xiii). Of course, I also want to give credit to other early feminist critics (Firestone; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Millett) who also deconstructed Freud’s writings to expose the sexism that pervades them.

Kristeva outlines numerous objects and entities that may invoke feelings of abjection and cause one to recall the state of the Real, but those connected to the body and bodily waste are most relevant to this study. Kristeva notes two categories of “polluting objects” produced by the body that are steeped in abjection: the “excremental and menstrual” (71). In regard to the latter, the menstrual is a reminder of the reproductive capabilities of the mother who cared for oneself in the Real. Meanwhile, the excremental is reminiscent of one’s earliest infantile inability to control one’s bowels, as well as the role of the mother in the normative family structure in the child’s “sphincteral training” (Kristeva 71). Such training of the child’s body by the mother is indicative of Kristeva’s larger point that, “Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body...” (72). Thus, according to Kristeva, those abject objects related to the body and the maternal represent both the Real and the bodies within it that have not yet become controlled/trained/socialized by the maternal parent in order to be initiated into the Symbolic.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed argues that horror films are exercises in abjection. For Creed, horror films become a ritual for coming in contact with the abject through its representations on the screen (as if watching these films almost places audience members back in the Real), and then dismissing it through narrative closure (as if assuring audiences of their place in the Symbolic).² Horror films provide narratives centered on the flagrant displays of the body and its excessive by-products, replicating the kind of body-preoccupied and “messy” (excremental-menstrual) existence found in

²Kristeva also discusses the importance of rituals in which the individuals who participate are allowed to encounter the abject in a “safe” manner, but without becoming absorbed in the abject and resulting in the abject being purified or purged entirely.

the Real. As Creed states, “The modern horror film often ‘plays’ with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing the fragility of the symbolic order...” (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 13). Creed also writes that the abject is infused into the horror genre through “the construction of *the maternal figure as abject*” (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 11, emphasis added), citing numerous instances in which mothers have been presented as abject monstrosities in horror (*Alien* [1979], *The Brood* [1979], *Carrie* [1976], *Psycho* [1960], etc.).

Though Kristeva’s Lacanian perspective on psychoanalysis is instructive—particularly the idea of the abject, which I will intermittently return to throughout this dissertation—my goal is to look at horror from a more Freudian psychoanalytic vantage. I find that the work of Freud, though undoubtedly controversial, can offer a more nuanced pathway to begin exploring those concepts already isolated by Creed: the body in horror and its relationship to the maternal parent. Moreover, in terms of the body, Freudian psychoanalysis is more equipped to examine representations of orality—that is, the functions of the mouth—in its many forms. To the extent that Lacanian scholars grapple with orality in their writing, it is almost strictly in regard to the mouth as a device used for conveying verbal language. For instance, in discussing what follows the eventual diminishing of the oral bond of child and mother through breastfeeding, Kristeva states, “Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss now more than ever, I elaborate that want, and the aggressivity that companies it, by *saying*” (41, emphasis in original) In other words, Kristeva claims, “There is language instead of the good breast” (Kristeva 45) that occupies the mouth.

However, to boil orality down to solely the verbalizing dimensions of voice is problematic for several reasons. For instance, as other scholars have warned, a focus on verbal language runs the risk of forgetting about the body that produces the voice (Cavarero, Salvaggio, Schlichter). In her essay on voice as an object of desire in psychoanalysis, Alice Lagaay states, “[T]he voice is actually devoid of...[bodily] substance. In Lacanian theory, the function of [voices]...is actually to extinguish the material to which they owe their existence” (59). One outcome of Lacanian psychoanalysts’ overlooking the body in acts of vocal orality is that they outright ignore the mouth, resulting in what Denise Riley has called “a voice without a mouth” (57 ff.). Mindful of this fact, cultural theorist Steven Connor has attempted to augment his well-known research on “voice-bodies” with a consideration of the mouth in particular. In *Dumbstruck*, published in 2000, Connor postulates that when we hear voices they instill in us assumptions about the bodies that generate them (35). However, in his 2014 follow-up *Beyond Words*, Connor suggests that voice-bodies may be more finitely reconceptualized as “mouth-bodies” (13). Connor explains, “The mouth that is at work in vocal iconicity is not just the producer of sounds, it is also itself produced by them” (13). In other words, while the voice that one hears is but an index gesturing to the mouth from which it emerged, the nature of the voice also shapes our impression of that mouth. I would argue that the qualities of the voice also affect one’s expectations of the identity of the individual wielding the mouth. As I have stated previously, the mouth serves as a bodily signifier of age and gender based on how it is used, manipulated, and regulated by a subject, and the voice may imply an age-gender tethered to the mouth of the individual doing the vocalizing.

That being said, even if one does acknowledge the oral-corporeal materiality of the voice behind verbal messages, to reduce orality to mere vocality also minimizes the various other operations performed by the mouth that can be just as significant as an individual matures and develops. Later psychoanalytic philosophers following Freud, such as Donald Meltzer, would claim that “the physical space of the oral cavity is utilized as the theater of fantasy and play” for children (179). Meltzer argues that “The placing of fingers and objects in the mouth [by an infant] is accompanied by the awareness of teeth, tongue, jaws, salivation and vocal capacity” (179). Therefore, as part of a child’s maturation, he not only discovers his voice but his mouth and all of its capabilities (the teeth that gnash, the tongue that licks, the saliva that dampens, etc.). While I do not deny the importance of voice to Freud³ and will certainly revisit voice later in this dissertation, I also find that it is wise to supplement discussions of orality-as-voice in horror (as a more traditionally Lacanian criticism might) with Freud’s other insights into orality and the myriad actions of the mouth that aid in human psychological-social development.

Before delving further into the writings of Freud, I want to briefly highlight Brandon LaBelle’s *Lexicon of the Mouth*, a text to which my study is very much intellectually indebted. Inspired by Meltzer’s “theater of the mouth” and all the actions that the mouth can perform, Brandon LaBelle argues, “[T]he voice is but one type of production generated by the mouth” and that scholars should recognize the mouth as the “extremely active cavity” that it is (1). LaBelle contends that the vast “lexicon” of the

³Laagay states that, during sessions with one’s analyst, “certain disturbances of the voice, from stammering and tongue-clicking, to unintelligible clackings, sputterings and groaning, or the phenomenon of aphonia or total speech loss, came to be seen by Freud as manifestations of unconscious conflicts and tensions which it was the purpose of psychoanalysis to release” (54).

mouth (its many functions, such as speaking, biting, kissing, whistling, eating, and so forth) should also be evaluated through critical lenses.

The mouth is a crucial segment of the body for LaBelle for two additional reasons. First, LaBelle claims that the mouth is contingent on “acts of *coming out* as well as *going in*” and “of entries and exits” (7, emphases in original). In this way, the mouth mediates our relationship to the world, as we bring into ourselves the materiality of our surroundings (consuming, masticating, and swallowing it) and also give back material substance in return (expelling it as we vomit, expectorate, blow, etc.). Second, LaBelle argues, citing Kristeva, that the mouth is the site through which the abject often sneaks into our lives. Social decorum dictates how the mouth is to be used (and not used) in public, and yet “what is held back, repressed, or marginalized also returns to generate all types of sudden productions” of the mouth (such as the accidental spitting or belching that can sometimes occur much to our dismay) (43). As LaBelle states, “[T]he more the mouth reveals of the body the more it oversteps social acceptability” (43). Thus, from LaBelle, I see the need to not only address the mouth for its many (vocal and non-vocal) functions, but also take note of how the mouth and the manner in which the body is orally entered and exited might bring about an encounter with that which reminds us of a childish past that we attempt to relegate and move past en route to becoming socialized adult subjects.

Orality (which, again, I am not linking exclusively to voice) has been indispensable to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” Freud makes the provocative claim that children/infants, rather than being pre-sexual or asexual, harbor sexual urges and longings that manifest differently than

they do in adults. For instance, Freud argues that infants' earliest sexual energies are directed toward the mouth. The oral orifice becomes a pleasure center for the infant, through such acts as sucking from a pacifier or bottle, or more profoundly for Freud, *the mother's breast*. I emphasize this point because in diagnosing the cause of the oral fixations, like thumb-sucking, in some of his patients, Freud interprets these oral acts as a desire to resume infancy and rekindle the oral connection between mother and child. Freud states that the individual "who indulges in thumb-sucking is determined by a search for some pleasure which has already been experienced and now remembered" ("Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," 263). The experience recreated through the meeting of thumb and mouth is for Freud, of course, that of "the child's first and most vital activity, his sucking at his mother's breast, or at substitutes for it, that must have familiarized him with this pleasure" ("Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," 263).

However, I propose that two qualifications should be made to how both Freud and Kristeva construe the subject's restoration of earlier infantile oral activities. First, Freud believes that pleasure for the infant is defined by "the incorporation of the object" into the mouth ("Three Essays of the Theory of Sexuality," 273). As a result, earlier scholarship examining orality in the horror genre tended to focus mainly on the horror of monstrous incorporation, such as Diana Fuss's psychoanalytic reading of cannibalism in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) ("Oral Incorporations"). Such readings, though, are too simplistic and shortsighted because, as LaBelle observes, moments where the mouth seems to mimic those earlier repressed childhood states are not limited to acts of incorporation. The mouth can be retreating back to childhood in those episodes in which

the mouth becomes an exiting orifice as well (e.g., the saliva that one might inadvertently project while talking that is reminiscent of infantile spittle).

Second, Kristeva associates the mother, and the infant's oral attachment to her, with the abject. However, as will be explicated in next section of this chapter, even though the mother's body may serve as a reminder of infancy, to position the mother in the territory of the abject ignores the monumental role played by the mother (in the cis/heterosexual/heteronormative family that is central in psychoanalysis) in preparing the child for his eventual immersion into the social world. Fittingly, other scholars of horror have recently argued that the maternal is not always detached from the social-Symbolic. Sarah Arnold writes that paradigms of the maternal in horror can be sub-classified into those of the "Bad Mother" and the "Good Mother." Arnold states that Bad Mothers are those abject versions of the maternal whose presence invites a reversion to childhood. But Arnold adds that "a Bad Mother, who identifies too extremely with the child, prefigures a Good Mother who will give up this identification for the Law of the Father" (11). As a result, Arnold states that "[t]he mother, therefore, has a dual function within the overall patriarchal economy of the horror genre; as an antagonist who provokes negative...fantasies of death, engulfment, and/or eradication, or as the heroine who provokes...fantasies of nurturing and sacrifice" for the sake of the child's adjustment into society (33). Thus, the mother may actually be aligned with the larger social order more so than Kristeva may apprehend.

The Uncanny

To make more distinct the roles of child and mother in the family, and the implications of orality to them, it is helpful to move away from the abject and look at its

origins in Freud's notion of "the uncanny." The uncanny refers to that which strikes fear because it "goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" but has since become unfamiliar (Freud, "The Uncanny," 124). More specifically, according to Freud, the uncanny is that which "derives from repressed childhood complexes...[that] are revived by some impression" ("The Uncanny," 154-5). Interestingly, Kristeva claims that the uncanny and the abject are "[e]ssentially different" from one another in that, with the abject, "nothing is familiar" (5). Still, what the uncanny and the abject do have in common is an awareness of the fact that it is impossible to entirely discard the preoccupations and anxieties of childhood; even as one matures into adulthood, the uncanny reverberations of childhood still linger.

The abject and the uncanny also see these earlier childish behaviors and fears as being rooted in the home (Freud describes the uncanny as having a "homely" familiarity and yet also being "unhomely" and unfamiliar ["The Uncanny," 134]). Consequently, the uncanny is also embedded in the family. As Jamie Russell states, the uncanny is "a confrontation in which all that was *famil*-iar is transformed into something unrecognizable and horrifying" (56, emphasis in original). Likewise, the mother and the maternal body are also crucial to the uncanny. Freud states that the female genitals can be perceived as uncanny by the male subject because they symbolize "the entrance to man's old 'home,' the place where everyone once lived" ("The Uncanny," 151) inside the womb.

Other tropes of the uncanny are introduced by Freud in his analysis of the classic German story "The Sandman," written by E.T.A. Hoffman in 1816.⁴ "The Sandman" tells

⁴For the purposes of this dissertation, I will rely on Ritchie Robertson's 1992 translation of "The Sandman."

the tale of a young man, Nathanael, who is traumatized by childhood memories of one of his father's associates, Coppelius. As a child, Nathanael convinced himself that Coppelius was the Sandman, a mythical boogeyman who steals the eyes of children. In adulthood, Nathanael meets a salesman named Coppola, from whom Nathanael purchases a small telescope but who he believes is Coppelius in disguise. Using the telescope, Nathanael begins spying on his neighbor, the beautiful Olimpia. After falling in love with Olimpia, Nathanael learns that the object of his scopophilic obsession is not human but an automaton, a revelation that comes after Nathanael witnesses Coppola stealing her lifeless body but leaving behind her artificial eyes. Nathanael is driven mad and eventually falls to his death. Freud reads this tale as a literary rendering of the uncanny, in which Nathanael's childish dread concerning the Sandman reappears later in life, much to his horror.

In addition to his argument about the assumed uncanniness of the female genitals, Freud identifies other motifs of the uncanny in "The Sandman." A second example of the uncanny is the fear of losing one's eyes that is vital to the story, which Freud interprets as "a substitute for the fear of castration" that he alleges plagues the male subject in childhood (Freud, "The Uncanny," 139). Third, Freud notes that uncanniness informs the theme of doubling and the repetitious use of figures who represent the resurfacing of the childhood past (e.g., Coppola as a double for Coppelius) ("The Uncanny," 142). A fourth and final example of the uncanny from Freud's reading of "The Sandman" that I will indicate here is the uncanniness of the "living doll," Olimpia, who merges together the familiar and the unfamiliar by bringing life to what should otherwise be a lifeless piece of machinery ("The Uncanny," 141). Each of these prototypes for the uncanny turn up in the

case studies of this dissertation (the uncanny womb in *I Spit on Your Grave*, the threat to the gaze in *Let Me In*, the daughter as uncanny double for mother in *Scream Queens*, and the illusion of the living toy in the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*).

However, I have devoted these pages to discussing the uncanny because I believe it has applications to the study of orality and age in ways that psychoanalytic scholars have not previously considered. To begin, I want to draw attention to how Hoffman explains the Sandman's motives for why he snatches children's eyes. Nathanael is told the following by his sister's nurse:

He's [the Sandman] a wicked man who comes to children...and throws handfuls of sand into their eyes; that makes their eyes fill with blood and jump out of their heads, and he throws the eyes into his bag and takes them into the crescent moon *to feed his own children*, who are sitting in the nest there; *the Sandman's children have crooked beaks, like owls, with which to peck the eyes of naughty human children* (Hoffman 87, emphases added).

Though Freud includes this detail in his essay on "The Sandman" and the uncanny, he continues to characterize the Sandman as *the* villain of the story but without looking further into the horrific figures that are the Sandman's own offspring. While what the Sandman does is cruel and despicable, it is all an effort to satisfy the insatiable hungers of his monstrous children. With their gruesome, beaklike mouths clamoring for eyes to devour, it is evident that what is driving this narrative is not just the paternal Sandman, but an out-of-control, ravenously consuming orality coded as frightening and *childlike* in nature. Although the nurse who tells Nathanael about the Sandman could be perceived as a stand-in maternal figure, Nathanael's actual mother denies the figure's existence. Thus,

the Sandman continues to be presented as an evil that springs forth from both the orality and the imagination of children.

Furthermore, while Freud, in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” argues that a fascination with the oral orifice is indicative of an earlier immature childhood state, “The Sandman” shows that orality and activity directed to the mouth do not just recede in adulthood but take on a different, more “mature” form. In the story, Nathanael’s mother serves as a counterpart to Coppelius and his monstrous progeny. Nathanael describes how vile he and his siblings found Coppelius to be, such as in this revealing excerpt that Freud fails to replicate in his re-telling of the story:

His entire appearance was repellent and disgusting; but we children had a particular aversion to his big, gnarled, hairy hands, and anything touched by them ceased at once to be appetizing. Once he noticed this, he took delight in finding some pretext for fingering *a piece of cake or fruit that our kind mother had surreptitiously put on our plates*, so that our loathing and disgust prevented us, with tears in our eyes, from enjoying the titbit that was supposed to give us pleasure (Hoffman 89, emphasis added).

Though Nathanael’s initial repugnance toward Coppelius is aimed at his hands (the same hands he allegedly uses to seize the eyeballs of his victims), it is ultimately that Coppelius touches the children’s food that is truly sickening, curbing their appetite and interfering with their ability to eat. Hoffman is careful to specify that it is the food that Nathanael’s *mother* has prepared for him that is being tampered with in his scene. Perhaps not coincidentally then, just a few sentences later, Nathanael states, “Our mother seemed to hate the odious Coppelius as much as we did...” (Hoffmann 89). The

adjacency of these passages suggests that it is the threat Coppelius poses to her children's diet that she finds particularly contemptible. What disturbs Nathanael's mother about Coppelius is that he shows no respect or consideration for her maternal authority and her attempt to discipline and manage the oral activities of her children, including managing their food intake.

Therefore, "The Sandman," Freud's exemplar par excellence of the uncanny, confronts its readers with contrasting depictions of orality delineated along the lines of age and gender. On one hand, there is a childish orality (like that of the Sandman's children and their gobbling beaks) that is framed as monstrous, rapacious, and out of control. On the other hand, there is an orality that is trained and controlled by an overriding maternal figure (like Nathanael's mother). Through these bifurcated representations of orality, "The Sandman" illustrates the uncanny potential of the mouth. The mouth represents an orifice that, too, has the potential to be familiar and yet serve as a reminder of something from the past made unfamiliar. Put differently, depending on how the mouth is employed, it can signify an adult-maternal maturity that is in control of the mouth's functions and abides by proper social norms and practices, as well as a childish indulgence in all of the excesses of the mouth that wider society would rather repress and restrict.

Past scholarship on horror and the uncanny has emphasized how the genre conceives of monstrous creatures that warp the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, and the cultural and uncultured. In her book *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primary Uncanny*, Creed analyzes male monsters in horror cinema. Creed argues that "the male monster is familiar yet unfamiliar, a monstrous creature that is male and phallic

yet also deeply connected to the domain of the primal uncanny” (*Phallic Panic*, xiii). While these monsters project normative masculinity but also a femininity that is usually repressed in patriarchal culture, Creed also contends that these monsters are uncanny in that they are “caught between the opposing forces of culture and nature, the civilized and the primitive” (*Phallic Panic*, xv). To be sure, this dissertation is still mindful of the gender variables of the uncanny, particularly given the Western politics of gender that confine women within the heteropatriarchal family and essentialize them as maternal caregivers. However, Creed’s remarks about the uncanny as destabilizing the threshold between the “the civilized and the primitive” also allow for greater contemplation of the uncanniness of *age* in the family and the oscillation between civilized (maternal) adulthood and uncivilized childhood, which I will continue to argue is most noticeable through the oral body.

Castration

The mouth’s uncanny propensity for representing states of both childhood and adulthood, particularly in the horror genre, becomes clearer when combined with Freud’s writings on castration anxiety. Freud surmised that, during childhood, the male subject is confronted with the realization that his mother does not possess a penis like him. As a result, the child believes that she has been castrated and assumes that his father is the culprit behind the act. Sensing his own vulnerability in that “if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger” (“Fetishism,” 842), the child, Freud claims, learns to direct his sexual energies away from his mother in order to avoid rivaling his father for her affections and receiving his violent wrath. Thus, castration anxiety helps in the maturation process, prompting the move away from childhood

(defined by an immature sexual attachment to the mother) into eventual adulthood (in which one matures and begins pursuing more suitable objects of desire).

However, the male child also needs to overcome the anxiety felt upon first seeing the image of the (allegedly mutilated) female body. To do so, Freud claims that the male child is compelled to select a fetish object that will serve as a substitute for the mother's missing sex organs. This fetish object elicits arousal for the male subject, thereby "endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects" ("Fetishism," 843) and preventing him from turning to same-sex objects of desire.

Freud also argues that the female subject as a child, upon spying the anatomy of a male peer, perceives her own body as castrated. Not only does the female child develop an envy for the penis—which Freud claims she views as "the superior counterpart of [her] own small and inconspicuous organ" ("Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," 252)—but she distances herself from her mother, blaming the maternal parent for her penile lack and for having "sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped" without the male genitals that she covets ("Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," 254). While the cisfemale subject will obviously never acquire male genitals and eventually realizes that she is not in fact castrated, Freud purports that she will nonetheless attempt a kind of self-fetishization through motherhood. Freud writes that the female subject "gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child..." ("Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," 256). What Freud terms the "penis-child" ("Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," 256) helps her to overcome earlier feelings of genital bereavement.

While I will return to the topic of the fetish in chapter five's analysis of the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*, I want to examine this theme of castration anxiety more, partially because it has recurrently appeared in academic literature on horror. In particular, feminist scholars have used horror cinema to reconsider Freud's theory of genital castration and shed light on its sexist underpinnings (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Williams, "When the Woman Looks"). I call upon this scholarship because it permits me the opportunity to elucidate on how depictions of violent castration *through the mouth* functions in horror narratives as a turning point signaling the shift from childish immaturity to adult maturity.

In the second half of *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed moves from a Lacanian to a more Freudian point-of-view on horror. Still, Creed seeks to correct what she believes is Freud's fundamental misunderstanding of how castration anxiety tormented the minds of his male patients. Using Freud's infamous case of the child known only as "Little Hans," Creed points to how this boy's fear of his mother's body stemmed from his perceiving her genitals "not as *castrated*, but as *castrating*" (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 89, emphasizes in original). Freud accentuates and twists particular elements of Hans's story, such as Hans's learning that his mother bleeds (menstruates) from her genitals, which Freud claims the boy takes to mean that she has been violently castrated by her husband/Hans's father. However, Creed notes how Hans had also imagined women as having knives tucked away within their genitals. While Hans does describe this concealed knife as a "widdler" (his juvenile term for the penis), this widdler is also imagined as having "a sharp, cutting blade, like teeth" (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 96). Therefore, even if the

blood that escapes from Han's mother's vagina is thought to be a sign of her castration, her genitals are also thought to be the agent of castration and not the father.

In contrast to Freud's male paternal castrator, Creed proposes the archetype of the *femme castratrice*, or the female castrator. The *femme castratrice* is a variant of the *vagina dentata*, the mythical toothed vagina that I discussed in the introduction and whose features are certainly reticent of the "sharp, cutting" maternal-vaginal "widdler" that Little Hans concocted in his head. Creed is clear that this figure of the woman who possesses the ability to castrate, an ability which Freud exclusively reserved for men, is not to be considered a feminist development. Instead, the castrating vagina "points to the duplicitous nature of women" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 106) as they come to be portrayed in Western patriarchal discourses.⁵

Creed only briefly reads into the presence of the *vagina dentata* in literal mouths in horror, such as in "[c]lose-up shots of gaping jaws, sharp teeth and bloodied lips" from films like *Alien* (1979), *Jaws* (1975), and *Tremors* (1990) (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 107). However, just as the *vagina dentata* is itself not an actual mouth but a mouthlike opening subsumed within the genitals, Creed's later examples of the *femme castratrice* (in films such as *Sisters* [1973] and *I Spit on Your Grave* [1978]) include female characters who inflict castration on their male counterparts but without any involvement at all from the oral orifice. To a degree, this dissertation attempts to make greater connections between orality and castration in horror by analyzing texts, in chapter three and chapter five (on the film *Let Me In* and the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*, respectively),

⁵For instance, as I will discuss more in chapter 3, Casey Ryan Kelly examines Creed's *femme castratrice* in the film *Teeth* (2007) as a reflection of misogynistic American fears concerning young women's sexuality in the era of George W. Bush ("Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence").

in which the actions of the monstrous mouth do amount to a kind of violent, metaphoric castration.

However, what is more critical to this dissertation is how castration is featured in horror narratives so as bring about a shifting of age. For example, the Freudian (male) child is said to have sexual desires that are inappropriately geared toward the maternal, but that the threat of castration brings about initial maturation by demanding that he funnel these sexual yearnings toward more socially acceptable avenues (other female figures besides his mother). As a parallel, the mouths that abound in horror are also childishly immature and out of line (they spit too much, drink too much, scream too much, bite too much, etc.), but the castrative violence of these tales leads to these mouths being forced to “grow up,” settle down, and act more adult. Thus, while figures of horr/orality can make categories of age uncanny—both recognizably discrete (as child or adult) and unrecognizable (as signifying both at different points)—I use Freud’s notion of castration anxiety to observe those moments in horror when the mouth experiences its uncanny segue from childhood into adulthood (with adulthood, again, associated with the maternal).

Alongside Creed, I also want to consider the post-Freudian insights of Linda Williams from her canonical essay “When the Woman Looks.” Williams argues that horror films have consistently equated women with monstrosity because of their bodily “difference.” Much like the perceptions of the Freudian male subject who views his mother’s body (the stand-in for the female body as a whole) as appallingly different, monstrous figures in horror possess bodies that are also broadcast as different to the viewer and the other characters on screen. The monster is seen as “as double for the

women” of the narrative and of Western culture (Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” 20), and in many instances, the monster can be characterized as being “symbolically castrated” (“When the Woman Looks,” 20). For instance, Williams nods to the 1925 silent horror film *The Phantom of the Opera*, in which the titular Phantom, after he is unmasked by the film’s heroine, is marked as ghastly because of his deformed face, congruent to the “disfigured” female genitals encountered by the Freudian male child. As a result, Williams states that the heroine “recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference” (“When the Woman Looks,” 21).

However, Williams argues that later horror films became fixated not on representing the monster as castrated figure, but on enacting misogynistic-castrative violence onto the bodies of women. Williams makes this claim based on the work of feminist scholar Susan Lurie and her critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis. In “Pornography and the Dread of Women,” Lurie repudiates Freud’s portrayal of women’s bodies as castrated in the eyes of the young male subject. For Lurie, Freud is in denial of the fact that what most likely distresses the male subject is that the female genitals are not castrated, but instead are simply unique from his own. Relatedly, Lurie states that “the idea that women possess a whole range of individual powers that the male identifies with his penis and yet have ‘no penis,’ is what is so terrible” to him (166). Furthermore, Lurie writes, “Unlike his penis, this vagina is not [as] easily vulnerable to sight and grasp” (167), meaning that the male subject is susceptible to having his body wounded, and his genitals prone to being castrated, in a manner that the female body could never be.

Following Lurie, Williams states that beginning in the 1960s, American horror frequently included representations of women who break out of traditional feminine roles

(women who are rebellious, thrill-seeking, sexually active, etc.) These behaviors, seen in characters like Marion Crane in *Psycho* (1960) and Kate Miller in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), are indicative of some of the “powers” that women hold that men fear. To control these women, violence against them becomes necessary, as in those notorious scenes from Marion and Kate’s respective films in which they are stabbed to death—and metaphorically castrated—by a deranged male assailant. While in classical horror a creature like the Phantom is monstrous because of his castrated difference (coded as female), the woman in modern horror “*is* the monster, [and] her mutilated body is the only visible horror” (Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” 31, emphasis in original). Ultimately, violence is used to punish such a female character for treading beyond the parameters of what patriarchy allows, and to deprive her of some of her so-called powers. Williams states, “The problem... is that she is not castrated: the fantasy solution of the male psychopath and the film itself is symbolically to prove that she is” (“When the Woman Looks,” 32).

Like Creed, orality is also present, though more subtly, in these representations of castrating horror that Williams describes. Unlike Creed, though, orality is not the source of castration, but defines those who are being castrated. In the now famous shot from *The Phantom of the Opera* as the Phantom is unmasked, the monster stares into the camera with his mouth wide open, an expression of shock as his unsightly face is exposed to the viewer. And in both *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill*, Marion and Kate scream out in horror as the knife penetrates them. Thus, orality is crucial to these moments in which “monstrous” individuals presented as out-of-control are brought under control, either when they are defeated following the revelation of their castration (e.g., the Phantom) or when they

become castrated and have their voices silenced (e.g., Marion and Kate). Once more, castration and orality operate hand-in-hand. In chapters two and four, I analyze the film *I Spit on Your Grave* and the television series *Scream Queens*. In these chapters, I am attentive to how the mouth is not only that which performs castration (like the *femme castratrice*), but how an oral response (i.e., the spitting and screaming) from the individual being castrated in horror may also signal a move from childhood (the raving, out-of-control mouth) into (a more controlled) adulthood that is taking place.

I should reiterate that Creed and Williams saw castration in horror as symptomatic of patriarchy and a tolerance of violence toward women. On this, I am in agreement with them. Nevertheless, I also believe that even in spite of its sexist premises, the Freudian hypothesis of castration anxiety can still be a useful theoretical apparatus for inspecting how aging is envisioned in horror and how figures of monstrous (castrating/castrated) orality exemplify the fluidity of age and age-gender identity in this genre.

Because the parent-child family dynamic is the *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis, it seems most promising for giving us a glimpse into how the family institution can hold sway over how we define age and gender. However, the study of horr/orality is also worthwhile because, by viewing the mouth as an indicator of age and gender, horr/orality can help to extend how Communication scholars have addressed the role of psychoanalysis in scholarship on horror and monstrosity. For example, Marina Levina and Diem-My Ti Bui contrast a psychoanalytical method of analysis with what they term a “representational” method. While psychoanalysis is interested in how one’s un/successful attempts to repress earlier anxieties/fixations can have consequences later in life, a representational approach interprets “the processes of repression...as a cultural

and social phenomenon” (Levina and Bui 4). That is, culture affects what is perceived and represented in mass media as monstrous, horrific, and demanding repression. Relatedly, what is considered “normal” in human development and maturation is not innately understood, as psychoanalysis attests that it is, but is prescribed and molded by culture. As such, analyzing how the oral orifice signifies age and gender identities gives scholars an opportunity to combine psychoanalysis with fields of cultural studies, such as queer studies and critical feminist age studies, that can interrogate how categories of age and gender are influenced by culture and compensate for the “blind spots” of traditional Freudian psychoanalysis.

The Queer and Feminist Implications of Orality in Horror

Queer Theory

Scholars have consistently detected how queer identity/politics have permeated the horror genre (Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, “Way Too Gay to Be Ignored”; Benshoff and Griffin; Elliott-Smith, *Queer Horror Film and Television*; Halberstam, *Skin Shows*; Scahill). Harry M. Benshoff states that “horror stories and monster movies, perhaps more than any genre, actively invoke queer readings, because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narratives formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo” (*Monsters in the Closet*, 6). Therefore, monsters on the screen are embodiments of “traditional gender roles gone awry” (Doty 15) who “present the sexually Other as fascinating and thrilling” (Benshoff and Griffin 77) to their audiences.

For this dissertation, I borrow from queer theory its recognition of how *identities are often represented through and reduced to binary systems* and how *identity is often performatively enacted*. As queer scholars have noted, identity tends to be framed in

heteronormative culture using binary categorizations. Alexander Doty explains that queerness

is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place *not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition* of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism (xv, emphasis added).

Queer scholars strive to show how these binaries are “ideological constructs” and not “naturally occurring phenomena” (Valocchi 752). Furthermore, queer scholars tend to understand that the ends of these binaries are but cultural ideals that no individual can ever perfectly achieve. For example, no one can ever perfectly “be a man” or “be a woman” because, again, masculinity and femininity are glorified cultural paradigms and do not absolutely exist in material reality. Likewise, queer theory can be paired with psychoanalysis in order to interrogate binary constructs of age upheld by the Freudian family structure—like those of the child and the adult/mother—that are also suffused with cultural ideals that are difficult, if not impossible to attain. These ideals allow little deviation from being the “perfect child, “ or more perniciously, the “perfect mother” (to be always loving, moral, mature, etc.).

I make this point because to condense queerness to non-heteronormative LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) sexuality and gender goes against queer theory’s very foundations. In her 1991 trailblazing essay “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” Teresa de Lauretis argues that the purpose of queer studies should be “not to adhere to any one of the given terms [LGBT], not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them—or at the very least problematize

them” (v). Yet other binaries of identity (beyond gender and sex) may also be transgressed, transcended, and problematized through queer theory. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, the stringent ideologies that uphold gender-sex binaries in Western culture also produce an array of other “epistemologically charged pairings” (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 72) that are established through normative cultural logics. Age, and the pairings of “young” and “old,” become another binary of identity that is ideologically reinforced and whose ends are placed in opposition toward one another.

By deploying queer theory, I assert that one’s age identity, regardless of where it may lie in this binary, is an enacted identity. Age is something that is performed and is related to the idea of the performativity of gender that has been central to queer theory. Judith Butler discusses gender as not natural, but “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble*, 45). In other words, gender is repetitiously enacted through various ritual behaviors (speech, style of dress, manner of walk, etc.) that have been socially scripted as masculine/feminine; it is not a single performance or one “bounded ‘act’” but the “reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer...” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 178). Still, Butler notes that “it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up” (*Bodies That Matter*, xix) and one can see that the performance of an unconditional and unquestionable femininity or masculinity is unfeasible since gender is a contrivance and “an imitation without an origin” (*Gender Trouble*, 188). The repeated performance/enactment of gender reveals that gender can never truly be duplicated, opening up the possibility of gender identity being re-presented and resignified differently.

The body is the crucial medium through which these enactments, and more importantly these resignifications, of identity occur. As Butler states, the “materialization [of normative identity] is never quite complete, [in] that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (*Bodies That Matter*, xii). Thus, the resignification of gender identity can be observed through the “rematerialization” of the body (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii). This rematerialization means that, although society insists on imposing particular genders on particular bodies, it becomes apparent, since gender is not an innate material quality, that the body is capable of performing (or at least attempting in vain to perform) both masculinity and femininity through how it is utilized/stylized.

These same conditions concerning the enactment/performance of gender also apply to age. Indeed, we are often told to “act our age,” and that instruction usually implies that we should modulate our behavior (like turning a dial in one direction or the other) to be either more mature or more immature, thus reinstating the young-old binary. Nevertheless, age is, like gender, far more complex than an overly simplistic binary classification. The same body that larger culture insists on categorizing as either young or old may, under certain conditions, be capable of enacting both. Through the performative enactment of age motivated by cultural scripts outlining how to “be young” or “be old,” some facets of age identity are revealed to be not entirely organic, but in many respects artificial.

That being said, I do not deny the materiality of the body as it relates to age. As we grow old, our bodies change, evolve, and do serve as physical signs of our age. However, it is important to acknowledge how our framing of the body according to age is

also (like gender) culturally assigned. That is, regardless of the actual biological age of the subject, certain bodies become culturally construed as “young” (e.g., those that present an image of being energetic or virile) and others (e.g., those that appear slower, sluggish, or more feeble) as “old.” It is not that the body becomes insignificant to the enactment of age. Instead, I am arguing that it is possible to “denaturalize[e] the body without erasing its materiality” (Reich 121). One may realize that age identity, while often reiterated through and influenced by the body, is not entirely a product of nature but is also influenced by cultural mechanisms.

By putting emphasis on queerness as laying bare the truth behind the performative aspects of age identity, I also motion to how the word “queer” may denote an action taking place: “to queer” is to perform, to act, to *do* something. This thinking is appropriated from the work of Janet R. Jakobsen, specifically her essay “Queer Is? Queer Does?” Jakobsen states that, along with seeing “queer” as a noun (the subject) and as an adjective (modifying the subject into “a queer subject”), it is also important to recognize the act of “queering” as “acting in relation, opposition, or resistance to the norm” (517). Therefore, throughout this dissertation, while I am still interested in how horror represents identities that we might describe as *being* queer, I also want to examine how monstrous figures also question, unsettle, and *queer* (verb) binary identities, including binaries of age and gender.⁶

In horr/orality, what is being queered and resisted is the heteronormative family system and age-gender identities constituted by it. J. Halberstam expresses concern over

⁶As David M. Halperin claims, one of the purposes of queer theory has been “*to queer* theory” and to, as a verb, “call attention to everything that is perverse about the project of theorizing sexual desire and sexual pleasure” (340, emphasis added).

popular media's reverence toward the hetero-nuclear family. Halberstam claims that conventional understandings of family have been too influenced by psychoanalysis and that its "familial metaphors snuff out the potential future of new knowledge formations" about the family and what other forms the family might take (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 124). This heteronormative family is the same family that, for instance, produces the culturally sanctioned identity of the "maternal." This identity can plague women both within the family (e.g., the guilt of the mother who deals with unrealistic standards that make her feel she is not a good enough mother or is *not maternal enough*) and outside of it (e.g., the myth that all woman inherently possess "maternal instincts" that should affect their decision-making). Even when the lives of older men or fathers in the heterosexual parental duo are restricted by *paternal* identity/ideals, it is not nearly restrictive in the same capacity. Meanwhile, the child is given license to be reckless, wild, and a drain on his parents (but especially his mother) because, as the all-forgiving maternal parent will say, "that's just the way kids are." Such a system, though, can only work if there are specific bodies that can be clearly distinguished and marked based on gender and age (e.g., the maternal body as older and female). What horr/orality welcomes are representations of the body that cannot be simplistically pegged according to age and gender. As I have said previously, the mouth can be used to perform familial age-gender identities that shift between old/mature (the maternal) and young/immature. Horr/orality does not eliminate the family or the maternal for they are, like gender, cultural ideals that will not dissipate. What the mouth in horr/orality does do is perform and enact a multiplicity of ages and genders, therein queering and mocking the family and familial

roles (like the maternal) that heteronormative culture has used to try to frame age and gender as essential identities.

The Uncanny Queering of Age in Horror

Numerous scholars have been interested in horror's enduring portrayal of children as pint-sized terrors, as evidenced by films such as *Children of the Corn* (1984), *The Omen* (1976), and *The Ring* (2002) (Kord; Lennard; Ed. Renner.; Scahill). Andrew Scahill, though, points specifically to the monstrous child as a model of queer horror, and finds himself embroiled in longstanding debates concerning the value of the child amongst queer theorists. Most renowned in this debate is Lee Edelman. Edelman argues that the child is antithetical to queer politicizing, writing that the child "marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity" and represents what he calls a "reproductive futurism" based on a heterocentric culture's desire to reify itself and its values for posterity (21). In contrast to Edelman, Kathryn Bond Stockton reconsiders the child as emblematic of queer identity. Stockton characterizes the archetypical child as "growing sideways" in "arrested development" (22), and not accustomed to adopting the demands that society places upon its citizens.⁷

Scahill seems to side with Stockton,⁸ directing readers to what he christens the "revolting child" in horror. The revolting child—examples of which might include the

⁷The figure of the child continues to fascinate queer scholars. In 2016, *GLQ*, one of the premiere queer studies journals, published a special issue on "The Child Now" (22.4). In the introduction, editors Julian Gill-Peterson, Rebekah Sheldon, and Kathryn Bond Stockton bemoan the fact that most studies of the child in queer theory have relied heavily on psychoanalytic theory. While Gill-Peterson, Sheldon, and Stockton state that they are more interested in "the many the child has yet to be taken up, is only beginning to be theorized, or might challenge ongoing conversations in queer studies" beyond that of psychoanalysis, I believe that psychoanalysis can still provide new insights on childhood in relationship to queer identity if it is expanded outside of analyzing strictly gender and sex identity, hence why I am bringing age as another marker of identity into this discussion.

⁸Scahill argues that "we also must consider, where Edelman does not, that childhood holds a rhetorical charge in the form of youthful rebellion" (29) instead of simply being a synecdoche for the ideology of reproductive futurism.

demon possessed head-spinning Regan in *The Exorcist* (1973) or the mutant infant of *It's Alive* (1974)—is, to Scahill, “a grotesque exaggeration of normative childhood” (23). The reason for its being dubbed “revolting” is twofold: its body can be perceived as disgusting and “repellant,” and it seems to “rebel” against what society thinks to be normal and respectable standards of behavior and decency (Scahill 5). Moreover, according to Scahill, “[T]he revolting child represents the failure of the developmental narrative, in which children successfully sublimate infantile desires and drives into the proper outlets to enter a nascent adulthood” (26). These desires/drives for the child are experienced through the body and, as Freud maintained, are initially situated in the mouth. Therefore, to take control of these childish desires and drives is to put restrictions on the body and bodily functions, including those of the oral orifice. But the revolting child refuses to do so and the body remains out of control and monstrous, such as the mouth of Regan in *The Exorcist* that spews green bile in protest. Scahill draws parallels between queer identity and the revolting child, writing,

If queerness is seen as a threat to the social fabric because queers represent the horror of incomplete narratives by their refusal to enter the social contract that marks them as “adult,” then the revolting child and the queer subject share a terrible terrain in their complete incompleteness (26).

In all, queerness and the revolting child are synonymous to Scahill because of their shared “immaturity” (148) and unwillingness to abide by adult expectations of them. However, I want to expand upon Scahill’s work and suggest that it may be too myopic to isolate queerness solely with the purview of the child and the childish body, completely separate from that of the adult.

Specifically in regard to the mouth, the oral orifice's uncanny nature and its power to fluctuate between representing childlike and adultlike states is itself a rather queer curiosity that challenges binary categorical divisions. I am not concerned with positing (as Scahill and Stockton do) that childhood is an inherently queer stage, or that adulthood (and the maternal disciplining of the body) is therefore "queer-less." What is queer about the uncanny mouth (including the monstrous mouths of horr/orality) is how it can pivot between socialized and unsocialized, civilized and uncivilized, and mature and immature displays of orality, each entrenched in respective aged constructs of the adult and the child.

The mouth does not participate in a queer project of trying to eliminate the young-old/child-adult binary of age, nor does it anoint one end of the binary as *the* site of queer identity. The uncanny mouth sustains this binary of age but also queers and undermines it by moving between both extreme ends of it with ease. It exploits this binary in order to, paradoxically, also expose its arbitrariness and confirm how tenuous the borderline between adulthood and childhood can be. Afterall, as Scahill notes, the developmental stage that we now know as childhood did not even exist until the Victorian period (13-14), and prior to it children and adults (with some obvious exception) existed alongside one another as if children were themselves but smaller adults.

Additionally, by undermining the young-old binary, the uncanny mouth makes it possible to also undermine the concept of the heteronormative family, an institution in which this binary is fostered and corresponding gender identities like the maternal are also enforced. While psychoanalysis may be largely essentialist in its attitudes toward the family and age-gender identity, the uncanny can be used to stake some common

theoretical ground between psychoanalysis and queer theory. Furthermore, through queer theory, the uncanny mouth can be given precise names for what exactly it is doing when it makes familial age-gender identities seem so un/familiar (it is *performing* and it is *queering* them).

My view of the monstrous mouth's uncanny queering of age differs tremendously from how age has been approached by past queer scholars. For example, Halberstam argues, "For queers, the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold" (*In a Queer Time and Place*, 174), especially since adulthood in Western American culture is often defined by rather heteronormative milestones (getting married, having children, earning a "decent living," etc.). Therefore, Halberstam likens queer identity to "a stretched-out adolescence" falling somewhere in the middle (*In a Queer Time and Place*, 153). However, one flaw with this strategy for defining queer age as a "third point" between these binary poles is that it does not negate the fact that those separate binary poles and the cultural ideals they epitomize still very much exist. Instead, this dissertation presents queer age as being represented through an oral body in horror that shifts back and forth in the child-adult binary, refusing to pick one side over the other or stay planted in the middle.

Halberstam also argues that the monsters that come to populate horror during and after the emergence of postmodernism remove the boundaries between binary identity categories. For example, in regard to gender, Halberstam sees postmodern monsters as queer in that they are not distinctly masculine or feminine but an amalgamation of both. Halberstam states, "The queer tendency of horror film...lies in its ability to reconfigure gender not simply through inversion but by literally creating new categories" (*Skin*

Shows, 139). That is, monstrous gender identities are “always stitched [and] sutured” together (Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 144).⁹ Because the postmodern monster, Halberstam claims, distorts normative identity constructs upon which psychoanalysis is heavily reliant, he states that “psychoanalytic tools are simply not calibrated finely enough for the intricacies of body horror” (*Skin Shows*, 154). But as it was with Halberstam’s take on queerness as an adolescence without adherence to binaries of age, to represent the monster as not conventionally gendered does nothing to abolish the conventional gender binary that is still alive and well. From my standpoint, a monstrous body is not queer because it miraculously combines masculinity and femininity; it does not and cannot. Rather, the gender of the monstrous body is queer in that this body (based on how it acts, is decorated, follows implicit and explicit gender rubrics, etc.) is capable of both performing and oscillating between masculinity and femininity.

The monstrous body that can oscillate between binary gender registers also mirrors the oral body that oscillates between registers of age. While Halberstam sees little utility in psychoanalysis in the study of queerness, this oscillating body—which can sometimes be coded as youthful/childish and other times as older/adultlike/maternal—magnifies the uncanny effects of age, gender, and orality that I have outlined thus far. Throughout this dissertation, I will continue to use this language of *shifting* and *oscillating* identities. In doing so, I mean for these terms to always refer back to the idea of *queering as making identities uncanny* (i.e., moving between familiar binaries of identity and making them unfamiliar) in the monstrous mouths that I analyze.

⁹Perhaps not surprisingly, this argument requires Halberstam to dismiss Butler’s work, as he does in *Skin Shows*.

Critical Feminism and the Culture of Aging

In addition to drawing bridges between psychoanalysis and queer theory in my exploration of contemporary horr/orality, my study is also informed by critical feminist age studies (Calasanti, Slevin, and King; Ed. Calasanti and Slevin; Calasanti and Slevin; Cruikshank; Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*; Gullette, *Aged by Culture, Declining to Decline*; Segal; Sontag; Twigg, Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*, “Performing Age, Performing Gender”). The mission of feminist age scholarship has been to promote awareness of issues surrounding ageism and to combat “aged-based oppression” (Calasanti and Slevin 1).¹⁰ In particular, feminist age scholars have addressed the glorification of youth, especially female youth, in Western American culture. Lynne Segal writes, “We live in an atmosphere where youth, fitness, speed, glamour are so prized that somehow, even as we age, we must still try to remain forever youth, but women, in particular, must struggle vainly to retain their youthful allure” (13). Likewise, in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*, a foundational text in critical age studies, the author builds off earlier observations from her classic *The Second Sex* and argues that individuals perceived as “old” are treated as “Other” in society, similar to the manner in which women are also “Other-ed” in patriarchal culture. The cultural influences of aging are critical to de Beauvoir and the many who follow in her footsteps because, in her words, “old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact” (13). I would add that youth, too, is culturally constructed and defined, and almost always in opposition to that which is constructed as old.

¹⁰Critical feminist age studies is an extension of critical gerontology studies (Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*), with greater attention to how age and gender intersect with one another.

One example of how Western culture shapes aging and gender is in its tendency to equate aging with states of “decline.” Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that we are “aged by culture,” and that Western cultural norms dictate that growing old is to be seen as experiencing declines in health (physical, but also emotional and social), happiness, and well-being. One group of people remarkably affected by the ideology of age-as-decline is women, and more specifically, mothers. Gullette notes how the reproduction and raising of children become represented, in art and literature, as burdens foisted upon women that mark them as no longer young. As Gullette states, through motherhood, women “are being ‘punished’ discursively, sexually, and economically for aging-past-youth” (*Aged by Culture*, 70). Obviously, the child is not actually a punishment, and as Gullette writes, “[t]he birth of a baby, the rearing of a toddler, the development of an adolescent child—or mere apprehension about these events—can be confused with floating unnamed fears and oppressive experiences that have nothing to do with children” (*Aged by Culture*, 70). Therefore, what age culture encourages women to fear is age itself, and the child simply becomes an instrument to penalize these women for crossing the invisible and dubious threshold from young to old. Normative age culture, Gullette claims, influences many of these women to see their lives as being on a steady decline once they have children because their maternal identity (mature, responsible, and self-sacrificing) is required to take precedence over any leftover remnants of their carefree, younger, and more immature past.

Meanwhile, Gullette is adamant that “age theory must include children to be able to emphasize that they too are laden with culture” (*Aged by Culture*, 108). The child is positioned as a foil to the maternal adult, with the latter aged according to decline and the

former aged according to vitality. Youthfulness (regardless of gender) is taken to be active and full of life, while any trace of advanced (maternal) age in women culturally brands them as diminished and figuratively devoid of life, at least the life they once lived before motherhood supposedly robbed them of it.

Another outcome of patriarchal Western age culture is that youth is allowed greater visibility than that of older age. While scholars such as Laura Mulvey and John Berger note that women are often objectified by a powerful and pervasive male gaze, those subjected to the gaze are more often individuals occupying youthful-looking bodies. Older individuals residing in older bodies, especially older women, are deemed (at best) unattractive and (at worst) socially irrelevant, and become overlooked by society. Kathleen Woodward, one of the pioneers of critical feminist age studies, recognizes how this problem of ignoring advanced aged persists in modern times, even as older populations survive past former life expectancies (“Youthfulness as a Masquerade,” 161). Woodward concludes, “Youth is thus understood as giving one the right to be seen and heard” (“Youthfulness as a Masquerade,” 149) in a culture that is unapologetically youth-centered.

One tactic for overcoming this oppression by invisibility is to perform what Woodward dubs the “masquerade of youth.” In this masquerade, youth becomes an identity that can be used, through a number of means, to “costume” oneself and one’s body. Woodward explains,

Masquerade entails several strategies, among them: the addition of desired body parts (teeth, hair); the removing or covering up of unwanted parts of the body (growths, gray hair, “age spots”); the “lifting” of the face and other body in effort

to deny the weight of gravity; the molding of the body's shape (exercise, clothing) ("Youthfulness as a Masquerade," 148).

In all, the masquerade is "first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth" ("Youthfulness as a Masquerade," 148) so as to finally be visible and valued in ageist culture.

To be sure, numerous scholars, including feminist film critic Mary Ann Doane, have used the concept of the masquerade. Doane suggests that femininity is also an identity that is performed and masqueraded in order to assert some semblance of power and be recognized in a society under patriarchal rule ("Film and the Masquerade"; "Masquerade Reconsidered"). However, Woodward claims that the masquerade of youth is different because while femininity (or gender, in general) is entirely a social invention that no individual can ever fully embody, youth is an identity that everybody (and every body) has held at some point. The basis of the masquerade of youth is not just to appear as young in order to be seen and acknowledged. The masquerade of youth is also about utilizing one's body to present the illusion that one is "forging links to one's past selves" (Woodward, "Youth and the Masquerade," 157) as if stepping back in time and truly becoming young again.

These findings from Gullette and Woodward afford me (especially in my analyses of *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Let Me In*, and the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*) helpful insights into how the young-old age binary becomes fortified through the monstrous oralities of contemporary horror. First, I consider how youth/childish identity is enacted through an oral body that is vital and active (even if out-of-control and wreaking havoc) and is allowed to be visible to the gaze of the viewer and the actors in these narratives. Second,

I assess the enactment of an adult/maternal identity through narratives in which the mouth is brought under control, either by being sapped of its vitality or by being removed from the visible spotlight.

Feminist Age Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Queer Theory

Feminist age scholars should also be credited for uncovering how ageism and the privileging of youth have been ingrained in psychoanalytic theory, especially Freudian psychoanalysis. Woodward perceives psychoanalysis as “preeminently a theory of childhood” (*Aging and Its Discontents*, 26), as Freud is concerned with how the traumas and anxieties of childhood affect one’s later adult subjectivity. However, Woodward also claims that, for Freud, “Aging is associated with castration” (*Aging and Its Discontents*, 29). The fantasized mutilation of the maternal body that is supposedly interpreted by the young male subject as a form of reprimand carried out by the father, is mirrored in the “deformations” (the withering and weakening) of the aging body (Woodward, *Aging and its Discontents*, 10). Woodward states that “[t]he infirmities of old were a kind of punishment” to Freud, and a punishment on par with castration (*Aging and Its Discontents* 43). An additional consequence of Freud’s ageist outlook, Woodward argues, is that it reinforces and fosters hostilities within the age binary. As Woodward writes, “Old age and youth: the two are engaged in a power struggle. Freud unabashedly represents the relation between the generations—here divided simply into the young and old—as a conflict that is in the ‘eternal’ order of things” (*Aging and Its Discontents* 28). However, I do not share many of Woodward’s trepidations about Freudian psychoanalysis. While I accept Woodward’s reading of Freud’s latent ageism and his perception of age as a kind of castrative affliction brought upon older bodies, my use of

castration anxiety (as that which ferries individuals between childhood and adulthood) recommissions it to enact and thereby subvert the age binary that led Freud to venerate youth and disparage older age.

My view of age and the body also differs greatly from Woodward's, particularly in regard to the body's prospects for performing culturally defined age identities.

Woodward contends,

Certainly there are social and cultural norms concerning old age...Yet age is not a mere assemblage of such conventions. The effect of the very materiality of the body in age can be that at a certain point *it performs us*, reducing the latitude promised in part by the very concept of performance ("Performing Age, Performing Gender," 180, emphasis added).

For Woodward, we cannot simply impose a script for playing the part of young and old on the body. Instead, the body imposes its own limitations on us, so that it ages us rather than us aging it. I certainly do not deny the material realities that come with age, such as the bodily agility and dexterity of youth that wane with time and give way to the injuries, ailments, and decrepitude of older age. Furthermore, I do not subscribe to the doctrine of "agelessness" (Andrews) in which age is perceived as entirely bestowed upon us by culture.

Still, while I concede that age is an identity that can emerge from the body, I agree with Julia Twigg, who states, "The aging body...is not prediscursive, but fashioned within and by culture" (60). Queer theory explains that bodies matter in the sense that they are material substances (for instance, possessing specific sex organs), but bodies also matter in that they are said "to mean" something (sex organs associated with masculine or

feminine forms of gender expression) (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 7). In this manner, bodies can be, materially speaking, young or old, but the identities of young and old can also be projected onto these bodies through the enactments of the individuals who wield them. I do not dispute that some individuals, due to the material status of their bodies, may be more or less constrained and inhibited insofar as how they engage in these enactments, but that does not nullify the performative practices that nonetheless still underlie age in Western culture. To return to the specific part of the body that is the focus of this study, the mouth matters and has a physicality to it, but in representations of horr/orality we can see how the mouth also matters in terms of the age identities it displays and performs for us.

By emphasizing age as an embodied performance, I hope to align the political interests of both feminist age studies and queer theory. Just as queer theory has questioned the traditional family structure and its propagation of heteronormative age-gender roles, so too have feminist age scholars criticized the family. Many of the forerunners of feminist age studies (Macdonald, Macdonald and Rich) critiqued the institutionalization of family for being an early cause of ageism, especially ageism toward women. Barbara Macdonald claims that “ageism has its roots in the patriarchal family,” and she implores feminist theorists/activists to realize “[W]e are not your mothers, grandmothers, or aunts. We will never build a true Women’s Movement until we can *organize as equals, woman to woman, without the masks of family roles*” (156, emphasis added). In truth, these thinkers are justified in arguing that older female identity need not be inextricably tied to the maternal or to the duty of maintaining the family structure. After all, when women become “maternalized”—when an individual and an

individual body come to signify a maternal identity—they also become ensnared in a patriarchal political system whose prerogative is to police women's (especially mothers') reproductive and sexual choices (themes that I discuss in chapters 2, 3, and 4). These politics surrounding maternalization also often lead to the vilification of mother figures that makes it difficult to cultivate productive, healthy intergenerational bonds between women (as I examine in chapters 4 and 5).

However, the horror genre and its assortment of im/mature monstrous mouths still provide a representational space for undermining the aged-gendered notions of the maternal and maternalization, as well as, more broadly, the notion of age and gender as essential human characteristics. Age and gender in horror are proven, yet again, to be performed and shifting identities based on how the oral body is used in these performances. Thus, these bodies, whose identities are constantly in oscillation, have political might to them in that they rebuff any effort to have any singular gender-age identity (like the maternal) pinned to them.

Age, Gender, and the Uncanny

Despite some feminist scholars' misgivings about Freudian theory, others have endeavored to make sense of age/gender, the family, and the maternal, specifically through Freud's uncanny. Amelia DeFalco claims that the familiar/unfamiliar effect of the uncanny is often experienced by the individual who has to face the truth of her aging body (17). DeFalco writes,

In aging studies the uncanny most often describes the disconcerting newness of the old body and how the subject experiences the body as strange, at odds with the

familiarity and continuity of the psyche, termed variously the ‘core self,’ ‘ultimate self,’ ‘true self,’ and so on (10).

This “core self” is often assumed to be one’s younger self. Because aging is a slow and gradual process, one may feel that one has not aged at all and is still young-at-heart. As a result, having to cope with the fact that one *has* grown older can be a distressing experience. DeFalco writes that “[o]lder subjects often confront, or, perhaps more accurately, *are confronted by*, the nonfixity and *multiplicity of identities*” related to their age (125, first emphasis in original, second emphasis added). The reason their age identity is multiple is because dwelling within their bodies is that younger version of themselves (their so-called “core” self) as well as the older person they are today and will continue to become, a phenomenon that Segal describes as “a type of temporal vertigo [that] render[s] us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age” (4). I am intrigued by this multiplicity of ages that DeFalco relates to the uncanny, and I see it as substantiating my argument that the body (and in this dissertation, the oral body in horror) is capable of signifying and oscillating between varying ages.

Segal also explores the relationship between aging and the uncanny. In particular, she highlights their ramifications for the family, and especially for women in the patriarchal family. Segal claims that, despite feminists’ efforts to eradicate ageism in Western culture, many women have “still remained largely unprepared for the dismay, fears, anxiety, even for many the sudden horror, which the ageing woman can experience on looking into the mirror and seeing a face that she cannot accept, yet one uncannily familiar” (12).¹¹ However, Segal clarifies that, in regard to the “uncannily familiar,” the

¹¹Both Woodward (*Aging and Its Discontents*) and DeFalco make reference to the act of looking in the mirror and seeing one’s aged face as a significant moment in the discovery that one has grown older. Both authors also liken it

horrifying face that is seen in the mirror, “is frequently the face of *her own ageing mother*, from whom she had often struggled to distance herself” (12, emphasis added). Segal’s comments here resemble those of numerous feminist scholars (Faludi; Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*; Rich) who have documented many women’s inclinations toward what Adrienne Rich has called a “matrophobic” fear of becoming their mothers (*Of Woman Born*). This mother-daughter conflict is indicative of what Segal identifies as a “generational warfare” that plagues and undercuts intergenerational relationships. Using the example of the dwindling economy and the antagonisms between the Baby Boomers and the younger generation, Segal explains,

[C]ultural incitement of resentment of the young towards the old has become yet another repetitive feature of much of the media’s channeling of discontent away from any more useful attempt to grapple with the far more complicated analysis of the socially destructive effects of the deregulation of corporate finances and its impact on the policies of nation states (46).

Therefore, generational warfare encourages these rivalries and distracts individuals from investigating and scrutinizing the social-cultural circumstances that create this so-called generational divide.

However, Segal is optimistic about the possibility of abating generational warfare, stating that “despite confronting so much negativity and alarm, there have always been crevices from which countervailing voices have arisen, trying to reach across

to the “mirror stage” in Lacanian psychoanalysis (in which an infant, upon seeing her reflection, starts to realize her individual subjectivity). For the sake of maintaining cohesion, not venturing from the Freudian point-of-view for which I am advocating, and not wanting to overcomplicate the various theoretical premises I am attempting to balance in this dissertation, I will avoid making use of this particular metaphor in my analysis (despite how psychoanalytically laden it has become).

generations” (60). Segal’s insistence of the importance of seeking out alternative “voices,” another product of orality most likely being used metaphorically here, is nonetheless extremely relevant to Segal’s project of re-connecting the generations, particularly generations of women sorted into separate mother-daughter camps. In a moment of self-disclosure, the sexagenarian Segal writes, “Personally, nowadays, I continually find it strange (yet oddly, also interesting, sometimes even reassuring) to watch my mother staring back at me from the mirror, *or to hear, not my laugh, but hers*, when I am trying to please others” (22, emphasis added). In my analyses of *Scream Queens* and the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*, I will take up this challenge of examining how orality, while re-presenting contentious binaries of age, can be useful in neutralizing generational warfare between women in the family. In the *Scream Queens* chapter in particular, voice (in the form of the scream) will serve as the primary mode of orality that I, à la Segal, will evaluate for its ability to collapse generational barriers in the mother-daughter dyad.

Segal also attempts to revise Freud’s temporal framing of the uncanny to explain how it relates to age. In Freud’s writing, the uncanny is a reminder of one’s infantile past and the anxieties/fixations of that past that one has strived to repress. However, Freud also writes that “the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death” (“The Uncanny,” 148). Therefore, Segal claims that the uncanny is more accurately understood as not stemming from the past but the future. That is, the uncanny is tied to a fear that many have, but often try to deny, of that which is sure to come in the future: the fear of death. Segal states, “[A] living person can appear uncanny, and weirdly frightening, if they trigger thoughts of extinction, reminding us of our mortality, when

thoughts of death always hover somewhere in the presence of life” (21). Therefore, the face in the mirror evoking the uncanny is both (for many woman) a maternal face and a face that signals what it seems inevitably awaits them (decay, diminished livelihood, and their eventual demise).

Segal reaffirms for me that the uncanny need not be limited exclusively to states of childhood (i.e., the repressed childhood past), and second, that the maternal may also have implications for the uncanny, perhaps beyond what Freud even speculated.

However, I also differ from Segal in two ways. First, rather than see the maternal as that which promises death, and with it, the dissolution of the body, I am relating the maternal (as I have said previously) to the Freudian parental authority who labors to control, maintain, and mature the body so that it may participate in the social world order.

Second, I do not position the maternal as *the* representative of the uncanny (the uncanny future) over that of the childish. Rather, I am, once more, insisting that the mouth in contemporary horror exhibits an uncanniness of age when categories of age become both familiar and unfamiliar, and when it queers age by being, shifting between, and ultimately enacting the identities of the childish *and* the adult-maternal.

Summary

In summation, this dissertation draws upon theoretical tenets of psychoanalysis, queer theory, and critical feminist age studies. Psychoanalysis establishes the family as the template through which I conceptualize age and gender: the relationship of the (young) child and the (older-adult) mother. Psychoanalysis also explains how the mouth can be seen as important to one’s growth and maturation. Additionally, the mouth is also presented as an orifice through which identity can be made un/familiar (the uncanny) and

through which horror has portrayed violence as tied to maturation (castration anxiety as signaling entry into adulthood). Finally, psychoanalysis shows us the norms of age and gender identities that often define patriarchal Western culture. Queer theory, though, demonstrates how these normative identities are frequently and culturally organized in binary terms. Then, queer theory points to how these identities are not wholly essential but can be performed and enacted through the body. By explicating how identity can be performed and can shift across these binaries, queer theory reveals how these normative binary structures can become “queered,” distorted and undermined, and also solidifies the relationship between queerness and the uncanny. Lastly, critical feminist age studies scholars explain how gender and age intersect with one another. These scholars also note (as have queer scholars) how problematic the cultural construct of the family can be when it comes to limiting the identities of older women to that of “mothers.” In doing so, these scholars highlight the importance of looking at how bodies coded as older and feminine are also often “maternalized,” or represented as culturally legible and idealized versions of motherhood. Thus, when age and gender are performed and queered through the mouth in horror, cultural norms related to the binary separation between the child and the maternal adult can also be queered and put into question.

Overall, I find these theoretical viewpoints to be valuable for two reasons. First, as far as the aspect of orality in horr/orality, psychoanalysis can illuminate how identity constructs are normalized and how the mouth becomes a resource for reinstating these norms. Though a seemingly trivial idea, it likely resonates with many people; anyone who has ever formed a classist assumption about a person based on the quality of her dental hygiene or has made inferences about a person’s intellect based on his regional

dialect already know that the mouth is expected to transmit social norms (e.g., teeth that are white/straight, and a voice that is dialect-free), and that it is very apparent when they do not. In the case of this dissertation, though, psychoanalysis is especially fitting for explaining norms concerning age and gender identity that we also expect to be reinforced through the mouth (e.g., one who is a child can have the immature mouth of a child, and one who is an adult is supposed to use the mouth according to standards of a maternal maturity).

Second, when viewing horror through queer theory and critical feminist age studies, the monstrous mouths of the genre become a means of pushing back when psychoanalysis tries to essentialize too much. With these theories, age and gender are reconsidered as performed identities with the mouth aiding in those performances. But because age and gender are often informed by the institution of the family, about which both queer and feminist age scholars have expressed great discomfort, the de-essentializing of age and gender through the performing mouth in horror can also lead to representations in which normative assumptions about which bodies should enact particular age/gender identities in the family are disrupted. Thus, horr/orality offers media representations in which the political aspirations of queer/feminist thinkers to challenge the heteronormative family structure are imagined and represented in narrative form.

Methodology

Paratextuality

For this dissertation, I will be employing the method of *paratextual analysis*, which has increasingly come to fascinate Communication scholars. For example, in 2017,

the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication* released its special issue on the theme “Paratexts, Promos, and Publicity” (34.2), edited by Jonathan Gray. In the preface to this special issue, Gray and Robert Alan Brookey (two of the largest proponents of paratextuality in the Communication discipline) note that the breadth of research gathered for the issue indicates “a burgeoning ‘second round’ of work that moves beyond noting paratexts’ presence, and instead ‘gets on with it’ and uses paratextual analysis to advance a wide and impressive range of academic debates” (101). While I hope this dissertation can contribute to this new wave of research, I think it is important for me to backtrack and review what was unearthed in that “first round” of paratextual scholarship; that is, I need to review the major works responsible for “noting paratexts’ presence,” extrapolating on what a paratext is, and arguing its necessity in critical media studies. I anchor my methodology in Gérard Genette’s groundbreaking writing on paratextuality, and in contemporary applications of Genette’s work by Gray (*Show Sold Separately*) and Brookey in his collaborations with Robert Westerfelhaus (“Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View”).

In *Paratexts*, Genette uses the medium of the print book to define the term “paratext.” Genette states that “the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1). While the book may hold the main text itself, paratexts are what surround that main text; they might include the cover of the book, table of contents, dedications, and title page, to name a few.

However, the paratext is, for Genette, not secondary but integral to how that text is produced. Genette goes so far as to say that “a text without a paratext does not exist

and never has existed” (3). As Gray, who considers the effects of paratextuality in film and television texts, explains, “[R]ather than simply serve as *extensions* of a text, many [paratexts] are filters through which we must pass on our way to the film or program, our first and formative encounters with the text” (3, emphasis in original). I feel paratextual analysis is a worthy methodological device for this dissertation for two reasons. First, all of the case studies that I will be analyzing in this dissertation are shrouded in rich paratextual material that might influence how audiences acquire and consume them. Second, not only has paratextuality become crucial to how media is disseminated in the modern marketplace,¹² but it can also be powerful in discerning how identities are represented through mass media.

To better evaluate how paratextual contents present texts to their audiences, Genette proposes six questions that must be asked:

[D]efining a paratextual element consists of determining its location (the question *where?*); the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (the question *when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situations of communication—its sender and addressees (*from whom? to whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*) (4, emphases in original).

Many of these questions will inform how I carry out my analysis herein.

The question of *where* is asked in regard to where the paratext is located. Genette distinguishes two types of paratexts—the *peritext* and *epitext*—which differ based on

¹²Gray writes, “Paratextuality is a vital part of the media business, precisely because paratexts play the key role in determining if a text will sink or swim” (39) and that “because paratexts help us decide which texts to consume, we often know many texts only at the paratextual level” (26).

where they can be accessed in relationship to the main text (5). Peritextual paratexts are affixed to the text, like the other seemingly extraneous pages bound in the book.

Epitextual paratexts are those that exist separately from the text but which are directly linked to it and which can exert influence on how readers engage with the text, such as reviews of the text or interviews with the text's producers. The question of *what* addresses what forms a paratext takes, be it in visual images, the presentation of written materials in a certain manner,¹³ or the particular factual information about a text that is being conveyed (Genette 7).

The third question of *when* concerns when a reader encounters a paratext. Genette notes, "Some come from before a text is released, some are included with the text, and some come later" (5-6), and the timing of when an individual encounters the paratext might affect what she anticipates from a primary text before/during her reading of it, or how she understands the text in hindsight. The question of *to whom* is an inquiry into who exactly is the audience receiving this paratext, and the subsequent question of *from whom* asks about the creator(s) behind the paratext. Genette argues that "[b]y definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepted responsibility for it..." (9), meaning that something does not qualify as a paratext unless it is authored by the same individuals who also created the main text (for instance, the press release for a book is paratextual because it is likely released by the publisher who also manufactured the book). For reasons that I state below, these three questions are of less concern to my analysis. However, I do assess the sixth and final question—*to do what*—but I approach it from a different angle than Genette. Genette claims that a

¹³Genette states, "[F]or example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go in the making of a book" (7).

paratext has “illocutionary force” that can “make known the *intention* or an *interpretation* by the author and/or the publisher” that the paratext is meant to advance (11, emphases in original). However, I believe that a (para)text can profess meaning, and alter how we read a text, but without that reading necessarily being one intended by the original author.

Both Gray and Brookey & Westerfelhaus agree with much of Genette’s framing of paratexts, even stating that “since paratexts have...considerable power to amplify, reduce, ease, or add meaning, much of the textuality that exists in the world is paratext driven” (Gray 46). Still, these later scholars offer greater consideration of how paratextuality continues to influence contemporary media. For instance, Gray states, “Digital media are active in shifting the ground beneath paratextual feet...[and] allow for the proliferation of paratextuality because we can click, click, click, and get through way more than we can get through in physical space” (qtd. in Brookey and Gray 107). One major example of paratextually saturated digital media is the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) home-viewing technology which has had a tremendous effect on the film industry, including the horror genre (Bernard, *Selling the Splat Pack*).¹⁴ DVD releases of film and television series are often brimming with paratextual features, such as “menus [that] open up to yet more menus with original artwork, Easter eggs, and all of other goodies adorning the entire viewing experience” (Gray 107). Brookey and Westerfelhaus refer to the kinds of paratexts often advertised as “special features” on DVD releases of

¹⁴Mark Bernard argued, “DVD changed the ways in which viewers encountered and understood horror films. They [sic] also changed the types of horror films that studios began producing and distributing” (6, *Selling the Splat Pack*). For example, DVDs are able to accommodate materials showcasing excessive and “unrated” displays of gore or violence that films cannot include during their initial theatrical runs.

films/television programs (deleted/alternate scenes, making-of documentaries, filmmaker commentary, etc.) as “extra texts.”¹⁵ I will continue to use the term paratext in this dissertation, though, as it is more expansive and encompasses a range of peritextual and epitextual paratext forms (and not only those attached to the DVD). That being said, what I do take from Brookey and Westerfelhaus is their awareness that as consumers’ “investment in the DVD may dissipate,” scholars should begin exploring how paratextual media may continue to flourish in “other emerging media technologies” (40). For instance, along with DVD, Blu-ray technology has also become more and more present in American households, and many Blu-ray editions of films/television series include the same (and sometime even more) paratextual material.

Gray and Brookey & Westerfelhaus argue that DVD/Blu-ray paratexts function in order to feed audiences information about a media text in order to command how that text is to be read and interpreted. However, these paratexts (eclectic as they may be) often operate in unison with one another in order to endorse one very specific reading of a text, creating what Gray calls a “supportive intertextuality” of paratexts that “reinforce a text’s meaning or otherwise set up a welcoming perimeter” around it (38). Brookey and Westerfelhaus write,

DVD [and Blu-ray] technology seems to empower the consumer by making available a wider range of viewer choices [of paratexts to peruse] than were previously available on other formats. These choices, however...may include material that points to a preferred interpretation of the film. These limited

¹⁵Brookey and Westerfelhaus explain the term “extra text,” writing, “We use the word ‘extra’ because the material resides outside of, and in addition to, the cinematic text as traditionally defined by film criticism—i.e., the parameters of the theatrical release” (23).

“choices,” and the way that they are strategically arranged for success, can serve to circumvent alternative interpretations (25).

Specifically, Brookey and Westerfelhaus note that audience readings regarding sex and gender identity in film can become manipulated through DVD/Blu-ray paratexts. Using the DVD release of the film *Fight Club* (1999), Brookey and Westerfelhaus state the film’s paratextual materials are “used to deny the presence of homoeroticism, to dismiss homoerotic elements, and to divert attention away from these elements,” all of which are plentiful in the main film text itself (29). Still, other Communication scholars claim that Brookey and Westerfelhaus are perhaps too narrow in discussing paratexts as only mitigating queer readings of a text. Andre Cavalcante states that paratextual renderings of queer or LGBT identity actually do “double work,” meaning that “paratexts do more than merely discipline, exploit, or erase queer life and subjectivity. Notably, they invite wider cultural conversations about gender and sexuality...” (88). My goal in this dissertation is to veer in the opposite direction of Brookey and Westerfelhaus, and analyze how the paratexts surrounding my selected case studies might endorse readings of these texts that allow audiences to recognize their queer dimensions (i.e., the queering of age by figures of monstrous orality). Likewise, I also believe that paratexts can be utilized in order to put forth feminist critiques of a text,¹⁶ which allow (as I attempt to do through the theoretical framework of this study) the intermingling and interanimating of feminist and queer perspectives.

Scholars have determined a range of digital paratexts that might influence how audiences engage with a media text. Some of these texts are those peritextually appended

¹⁶I have argued elsewhere of the importance of using paratextual theory to advance feminist critiques of the horror genre (Christensen).

to a film/television program's DVD/Blu-ray release. Running audio commentary tracks are a common paratext accompanying films, in which "[i]ndividuals involved in the film's production are presented...as having privileged insights regarding a film's meaning and purpose and, as such, they are used to articulate a 'proper' (i.e., sanctioned) interpretation" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 23).¹⁷ Photo galleries from the production of the text are also frequently showcased on DVD/Blu-ray. Referring to the photo galleries like those in home media from the *Lord of the Ring* series, Gray writes,

While allowing the viewer to slow down the film to study its minutiae, these galleries become filmic version of art galleries....Much as an art gallery's audio tour or an art history class may, then, the DVDs [or Blu-rays] work to give us the information and teach us to appreciate the work (98).

Similar peritextual paratexts may include: interactive menus that permit users to access the main text and its supplementary features (Brown); the DVD/Blu-ray box art design which becomes "both container of [the] text and artifact in its own right" and may "complicat[e] the means by which a film's images [are] circulated in public" (Flanagan 2);¹⁸ outtakes, most often as deleted/alternate scenes, from the shooting of a film or television episode (Hanson, "Introduction: Out Takes");¹⁹ and subtitles, which in most

¹⁷For an analysis of filmmaker commentary in horror home media, see Bernard's "Text, Subtext and the Story of the Film."

¹⁸For instance, Kevin M. Flanagan notes how, in their box art, "horror films are often sold via black and red color schemes, sometimes with text that approximates the look of dripping blood" (4-5).

¹⁹Ellis Hanson applies the film outtake as an analogy for queer identity. Hanson sees the outtake as a symbol of the practice of cinema as an aestheticization of sexuality, as an effort to produce sexuality as a social construction that requires scripting, casting, editing, and a vast technology of visualization. The outtake is that part of the film that, for whatever reason, ends up on the floor in the editing room...The outtake has, like the queer subject, a certain reality...but only as that which should not be looked at ("Introduction, Out Takes," 17-18).

cases must be enabled by the home audience but which introduce “diegetic written material over diegetic space” (Chion, *Words on Screen*, 54) that might also affect how this audience reads (quite literally) and is alert to the significance of dialogue and sounds in the film/program.

Other more epitextual paratexts related to a text (in digital and non-digital forms) are also made available to the public. In her analysis of queer representation in the 2004 gay-themed horror film *Hellbent*, Communication scholar Claire Sisco King explores how the film and its ostensibly queer subject matter is promoted on its official website, astutely noting that “online extra-texts [paratexts] make arguments about what spectators should want and expect from onscreen representations of GLBT identity” (254).

Furthermore, in his study on audiences’ use of web spaces to engage in discourse surrounding LGBT content in horror cinema, Adam Scales explains that “such an online community also allows other members to validate these readings through their own subjectivities, shifting the focus from personal readings to a wider collective consciousness” (38). Thus, the online environment continues to serve as a paratextual medium affecting audiences, and affected by the interactions of audiences, in their understandings of a text.

Another example of an epitextual paratext may include a film’s official movie poster, exhibiting specific iconographies and visual cues from a film that may prime audiences for what they will witness as they watch it (Conrich, “*The Friday the 13th* Films and the Cultural Function of a Modern Grand Guignol”; Nowell). Additionally, a media text may be accompanied by the release of tie-in merchandising (Gray, Scott), and the horror genre has seen an especially large surge in dolls, action figures, and other

collectible toys in the twenty-first century. Addressing the increase in toys in the form of the villain Jason Voorhees in the *Friday the 13th* series, Ian Conrich states, “These are mainly toys for adults who presumably grew up with the *Friday the 13th* films [in the 1980s/1990s]...[a]nd as collectible models they are replacements for the Jason toys that never were” (183-4). Thus, paratextual merchandising can both reach the audience for a text and possibly affect meanings that may be attached to a text (such as toys that turn monsters into “play things”), even years after it was already first consumed by that audience. Finally, in the most innovative expansion of Genette’s paratext theory, Gray suggests that past texts of a genre can also have a paratextual impact on a current text. Gray states, “[W]hile a genre is not a paratext it can work paratextually to frame a text” (6). That is, genres may prepare audiences to encounter a new text in a particular way because of conventions that they have established in the texts that preceded it. Genre conventions may include assumptions regarding how different identities are to be handled in a text or, in horror, what kinds of monsters and monstrous bodies a text will hold.

In the remainder of this dissertation, my analysis is guided by many (though not all) of Genette’s initial questions, as well as other scholars’ qualifications of how to utilize paratextuality in contemporary media criticism. I set aside the questions of *from whom*, *to whom*, and *when* for two reasons. First, the question of *from whom* (the author of the paratext) is beyond the scope of what this study can tackle. This question, Gray explains, “relies on notions of intent” (qtd. in Brookey and Gray 103) when I am, in all actuality, not concerned with the intentions of the media creator; I am under no pretense that the makers of these texts deliberately meant to imbue them with messages pertaining to orality and age/gender in horror, and I am instead excavating what I believe to be

deeper subtext regarding these themes that are lurking beneath the surface of many of these texts. Second, the question of the audience *to whom* paratexts are delivered and *when* audiences discover paratexts would mandate a decidedly audience-centered study that, while worthwhile, falls outside the ambitions of this project.

However, I do answer the questions of *where* the paratextual elements of each of my case studies can be found, and I answer the question of *how* these paratexts take form. I do so by documenting and exploring specific peritextual paratexts—like those found on the DVD/Blu-ray discs that I accessed for many of these chapters—and epitextual paratexts—such as the intertextual weight of past films and, when applicable, auxiliary web/promotional media or merchandising—that affect representations of horr/orality, age, and gender in these texts. To be sure, paratexts do not supplant the narratives of these texts. Rather, paratexts are to be juxtaposed with the central text so as to reveal how the former might affect readings of the latter. In this regard, the question of *to do what* in paratextual analysis is also pivotal to this study. My answer to what these paratexts are “doing” emerges within each of these case studies, as I reveal how their paratextual contents complement these texts and add layers of meaning to the stories they tell and the monsters they have conjured up for us.

Criteria for Selecting Texts

The remainder of this dissertation will analyze four case studies. I used five criteria in selecting these case studies. First, each of these case studies needed to showcase figures of horror who are defined by a unique action/function performed by their mouths. Second, and relatedly, each of these figures needed to be able to articulate how gender and age can be intersectionally represented in the horror genre. From these

two criteria, I initially arrived at the figures of the vampire and the zombie. Both of these figures' fanged and biting mouths have been linked to monstrous/gendered archetypes like the *vagina dentata* (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Jones, "Porn of the Dead"), and both signify old age and its corresponding connotations of death and yet are also alive and therefore seem to defy age itself. I also arrived at the slasher horror *Final Girl* and the female avenger of rape-revenge horror, both of whom are decidedly female (though not always conventionally feminine) and whose heroic battles have been described by other scholars as a journey toward adulthood/maturation (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*). These two figures are also associated with orality either through the titles of the texts that brought them to life (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave* [1978], the inaugural rape-revenge horror film) or through their terrified voices featured in these texts.

My third criteria, so as to demonstrate how horror figures/monstrous mouths come to resurface over and over again in media, was that each of the case studies had to be based on (and in some instances, attempting to remake) a prior horror narrative for modern audiences. Fourth, each of the case studies had to include a range of paratextual media to examine, such as those digitally packaged with these texts on DVD/Blu-ray or those linked to corresponding media like web content or merchandising related to a text. Fifth, and lastly, to explore the most contemporary representations of orality in horror, each of the case studies selected needed to have been released in the second decade of the twenty-first century (2010-present). With all of these criteria considered, I will be analyzing representations of the act of spitting and the female rape avenger in the 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (chapter 2), the blood-drinking vampire in *Let Me In*

(2010) (chapter 3), the scream of the Final Girl on the FOX television series *Scream Queens* (chapter 4), and the zombie bite in the *Zombie Mouth Flashlight* (chapter 5).

Through analysis of the narratives and paratextual media of each of these texts, I hope to glean new insights into how orality, age, and gender interact and become represented in contemporary horror.

Chapter 2

Boys Will Be Punished: Spitting Images and the Reproduction of Rape Culture in *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010)

Introduction

When the rape-revenge horror classic *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi and referred to herein as *I Spit*, was released to American theaters in 1978, it was met with derision from critics who dismissed it not only for its lack of technical proficiency, but more significantly for its heinous depictions of acts of sexual and violent torture. Roger Ebert famously lambasted *I Spit* in the pages of *American Film*, describing it as “garbage—reprehensible, vile” (54) and claiming that it displayed a “sick attitude toward women” (55). These concerns about the film’s treatment of women are attributable to its heroine, Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton), who is, throughout the course of the movie’s first half, attacked, raped, and nearly killed by a band of local men before eventually enacting her own bloody vengeance against them in the film’s latter portions. When *I Spit* was remade and distributed to the public on October 8, 2010, with a new director at the helm and a new actress (Sarah Butler) in the role of Jennifer, many of these controversial sequences from the original film were re-created but with some alterations to the narrative, including newer and grislier ways of presenting its violent subject matter.

Scholars of rape-revenge horror have argued that the heroines featured in these stories—who Jacinda Read calls the “female avengers” (*The New Avengers*)—are often required to undergo a transformation into a masculine agent in order to seek their due retribution (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*; Lehman). The female rape avenger also undermines the masculinity of her assailants, as if a living version of the castration threat that has been critical to Freudian psychoanalytic theory (Creed, *The Monstrous-*

Feminine). Thus, both the figure of the female rape avenger and the men she destroys shift from masculine/feminine to its opposite end in the gender binary and experience what I (inspired by psychoanalysis and queer theory's penchant for making familiar binary identities unfamiliar) term an uncanny queering of their gender.

Scholarship on *I Spit* 2010 has been sparse, and the few texts written on it (Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge*; Mee) have tended to focus on Jennifer's torture of the men who attack her, noting its more hyper-violent nature in comparison to its predecessor. There has been little consideration, though, of how much of the torture inflicted upon the men in *I Spit* 2010 is very deliberately directed at their mouths, and more so than in the original 1978 film. Therefore, the film presents the mouth as the part of the body through which the emasculation of its male characters is achieved. The film title itself also points to orality and one specific oral act—spitting—that implies the possibility of centralizing the mouth in analyses of its narrative.

In addition to emphasizing the elements of orality in the film, I also believe that it is important to note that the controversial but fictional *I Spit* stands alongside real-life controversies surrounding rape and sexual assault in America that would arise in the years following the film's first screening. For example, in August 2012, furor erupted over Republican Senate nominee William Todd Akin's erroneous claim that women's bodies are incapable of becoming pregnant in cases of "legitimate rape" (Eligon & Schwirtz). More recently, in 2016, many were shocked when Brock Turner, a college freshman at Stanford University who had been found guilty on three counts of sexual assault of a fellow classmate, was sentenced to just six months in jail (though he would only serve three), with the judge presiding over the court case stating that a harsher

sentence would have too much of a “severe impact” on the scrawny, baby-faced, and boyish Turner (Stack). While neither of these events—Akin’s remarks or the lax sentencing of Turner—seem to be directly tied to the 2010 remake of *I Spit*, I highlight them for two reasons. First, these two moments suggest important themes surrounding sexual assault (the female reproductive body and the protection of young male perpetrators) that have circulated in contemporary social-political discourses and have contributed to what has been called a “rape culture” in America (Eds. Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth.; Harding; Herman). Second, and relatedly, these themes are tackled in *I Spit 2010*, particularly in how gender/sexuality (including procreation) and also age (including masculine youth and feminine maternity) come to be represented and queered through the mouth.

In this chapter, I remain committed to the larger questions of this dissertation, while aiming to answer two questions specific to this chapter: first, (how) does the mouth serve as the site through which the female rape avenger in *I Spit 2010* participates in castrative violence?; and second, (how) does the violence directed to the mouth in *I Spit 2010* queer the binary genders and ages being represented by the perpetrator and the recipients of this violence? In answering these questions, I argue that Jennifer, in the revenge she takes on the men in the story, performs a female avenger identity defined not merely by masculinity, but by *boyishness*, in which her masculine youthfulness absolves her of any responsibility for her violent actions, including her freedom to enact oral violence through the mouths of her rapists. Meanwhile, the men in the story must endure their oral bodies shifting in gender/age and being made *maternal*, entrenched in masculine anxiety over *entry into* their bodies and an equally intense anxiety regarding

the birthing process and that which *exits from* the body. Therefore, for these male characters, the mouth becomes the place through which the men's bodies are both invaded by their masculine counterpart, Jennifer, and also the place from which the projection of saliva symbolizes the maternal act of childbirth as the mouth becomes a stand-in for the womb.

This analysis of *I Spit 2010* is valuable because it exposes the binary divisions between young-old and male-female, and the privileges (not) granted to each in rape culture. Second, as noted above, this research puts greater focus on male bodily anxieties by complementing well-documented culture fears of male bodily entry (which I will review later in this chapter) with the consideration of how male bodily exiting may also intensify these anxieties. Third, and lastly, it articulates how these anxieties are embedded within both rape culture *and* psychoanalytic theory. As a result, I provide a rebuttal to Read's critique that psychoanalysis, which is often used in analyses of these films, is "unable to adequately account for historical change, [and] for either the endurance or the mutability of the rape-revenge story" over time (11). In this chapter, I use psychoanalysis to show how *I Spit 2010* reflects enduring cultural ideologies surrounding age and gender that rape culture perpetuates.

The remainder of this chapter consists of three sections. First, I review how scholars have employed psychoanalysis to examine representations of gender, reproduction, and orality in the *I Spit* films and the horror genre. Second, I turn to Margaret Morganroth Gullette's theory of being "aged by culture" and its influence on cultural perceptions of the maternal, youth, and masculinity in rape culture; furthermore, I connect cultural condemnations of the maternal to the uncanny fear of the womb

discussed by Freud and feminist psychoanalytic scholars (Creed, *Phallic Panic*; Horney). Third, and finally, I critically examine both the primary narrative of *I Spit* 2010 and its DVD/Blu-ray paratextual materials, especially in comparison to the original 1978 version of the film.

Gender in *I Spit* and Rape-Revenge Horror

The rape-revenge subsect of the horror genre¹ initially arose in the 1970s and 1980s, and, with its female avenger at the center of it, followed a very specific formula. Peter Lehman outlines this formula, writing, “In these films, a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her,” with this rape scene usually having taken place in the film’s opening act, “and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man’s agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do” (103). *I Spit* 1978 is one example of a film that very closely follows this formula.

I Spit 1978 introduces viewers to writer Jennifer Hills who has rented a cabin in a rural community to work on her first novel. As she arrives in town, she stops in at a local gas station where she first meets Johnny (Eron Tabor), who works at the station, along with his friends Stanley (Anthony Nichols) and Andy (Gunter Kleemann). Once she reaches her cabin, Jennifer has groceries delivered to her by a mentally challenged man named Matthew (Richard Pace). Unbeknownst to Jennifer, Matthew is close friends with the other men, and all four of them become obsessed with her. One day, while sunbathing in a canoe on a nearby lake, the four men ride in on a motor boat and attack her. Jennifer is pulled to shore, where her clothing is removed and she is vaginally raped by Johnny.

¹Read makes the persuasive argument that rape-revenge need not be seen as strictly a brand of horror and can be seen in a variety of domestic/erotic thrillers and femme fatale narratives. Though I am in agreement with her, for the purposes of this chapter and so as to fit within the larger scope of this dissertation, I will address the rape-revenge tale strictly within the confines of horror.

Minutes later, after a failed attempt to get away from the men, she is then anally raped by Stanley. Bruised and battered, Jennifer slowly wanders back to her cabin only to find the four men waiting there for her. After being pressured by his cohorts, Matthew also participates in raping Jennifer, after which Andy shoves a bottle into Jennifer's vagina and yells "Suck it, bitch!" as he forces her to perform oral sex on him. Despite being left for dead, Jennifer survives and, after weeks of recovery, plots her revenge.

One-by-one, Jennifer seeks out her assailants. Jennifer orders additional food from the grocery store, and when Matthew arrives Jennifer seduces him and has sex with him by the lake. As Matthew reaches sexual climax, she places a hidden noose around his neck and hangs him from a tree. The next day, Jennifer finds Johnny at the gas station and invites him back to her cabin. While having a sensual bath, during which Jennifer caresses Johnny's genitals, Jennifer retrieves a butcher knife from underneath the bathmat and slices off Johnny's penis. She locks Johnny in the bathroom and leaves him to bleed to death. Finally, suspicious about the disappearances of Matthew and Johnny, Stanley and Andy journey to Jennifer's cabin on their motor boat. While Stanley steps on shore and begins investigating the premises, Jennifer emerges from the waters of the lake wearing a revealing bikini, coyly flirts with Andy, and pushes him from the boat. Stanley dives into the lake in order to rescue Andy, and Jennifer cuts his torso open with an axe. Andy swims toward the boat, begging her for mercy. Jennifer responds, "Suck it, bitch," and uses the blade of the boat motor to eviscerate him before riding away as credits roll.

Carol J. Clover, and later Read, claim that the rape-revenge female avenger (like Jennifer), and the male characters that she decimates, have been used to "repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics" (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 151) and

to consider “the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place” (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 144). Likewise, along with emphasizing the female avenger as a figure inviting feminist critique, Read claims that this character helps in analyzing how “heterosexual femininity” is also represented in connection to retaliatory violence (50). However, as many scholars have indicated, the respective masculinity and femininity of the assailants and avenging heroines in rape-revenge horror stories are not so clear-cut. Lehman explains, “Men in these films are positioned in places traditionally reserved for women” (106) when they are made the objects of violence. To the extent that the gender of male characters has been discussed in scholarship on contemporary rape-revenge horror, including the few analyses of the 2010 remake of *I Spit*, it has been in assessing how these male characters (who audiences watch rape an innocent woman half an hour earlier) are made victims by the film’s end. For example, in her study of the politics of contemporary “revisionist” rape-revenge films like *I Spit* remake, Claire Henry writes, “The portrayal of rapists as also victims...is a common ethical complication of the revisionist genre” (*Revisionist Rape-Revenge*, 17) as audience may to start to sympathize with these practitioners of sexual violence.

Nevertheless, much of the scholarship on *I Spit* 2010, though not oblivious to the variable of gender at the play in the film, are more concerned with the extreme torturous violence in the film, and specifically the violence that Jennifer performs during the revenge section. Scholars have argued that this violence may be on trend with the recent “torture porn” phase of horror (evidenced by the success of such franchises as *Hostel* and *Saw*)² and the increasing use of torture in American interrogation tactics in the post-9/11

²David Edelstein is credited with coining the term “torture porn” in the pages of *New York Magazine*.

era (Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge*; Mee). Although I do not deny the brutality of the violent torture sequences in *I Spit* 2010 and modern rape-revenge, the gendered aspects of this violence should not be relegated to the margins of scholarship on this genre.

Castration and the Oral Womb in Horror

While the male assailants of rape-revenge horror become violently feminized within these films, the avenging heroines also partake in their own gendered metamorphosis. Sarah Projansky notes that, because the female avenger of the rape-revenge genre ultimately learns to become strong, assertive, and tough (conventionally masculine traits) following her rape, these films may even “represent rape as a painful but ultimately *positive* event, one that enables the emergence of a woman’s latent independent identity” (100, emphasis in original).³ However, Projansky adds that this identity is one of “an independent masculine subject” (102) who is in opposition to the men that she succeeds in feminizing. Not only, then, is rape-revenge horror inclined to upholding patriarchal and androcentric values, but it puts further blame on the woman in the story who “fails to get tough” (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 143). To “get tough” in these films is, of course, synonymous with *getting masculine* and *getting violent*. However, the presence of violence centered on genital castration—both figuratively and, as with Johnny in *I Spit* 1978, literally—complicates whether the rape-revenge avenger is really motivated by phallic masculinity, or if she, as feminist psychoanalytic interpretations of the genre have argued, instead threatens to extinguish it and *cut* herself off from it entirely.

³This argument has been echoed by others (see Oliver, *Hunting Girls*).

In chapter 1, I referenced Creed's groundbreaking work on the *femme castratrice*, an archetype she introduces in an effort to re-read how Freud conceptualizes castration anxiety and the maternal. Freud, as I previously explained, hypothesizes that male children will often, at some point in their upbringing, catch sight of their mothers' genitals. Realizing that the mother does not possess a penis, boys will assume that the mother has been castrated by the father. However, Creed proposes that perhaps, in a misogynistic society that has chronically feared women's "different" bodies, it is the mother who is depicted as the *enforcer* of castrating violence. Thus, the *femme castratrice* stands for this reinterpretation of the mother figure in the drama of male castration anxiety; she is a representation of "the mother who is terrifying *not* because she is castrated but because she castrates" (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 103, emphasis in original). The *femme castratrice* is especially common in the role of the female rape avenger in rape-revenge horror, but unlike those scholars who argue that the avengers of these films must masculinize themselves in order to prevail, Creed alleges that the *femme castratrice* is unequivocally feminine and, because of her insistence on castrating the men who have wronged her, is actually bent on destroying men and the male body.

Still, castration in rape-revenge is not always literal, but can simply be a metaphorical condition of a male body that has been defeated, degraded, and therefore, made *feminine*. Creed states, "When male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies" (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 19), including becoming a body devoid of penile and/or phallic masculinity. For Freud, to be feminine/female is a dreaded condition, but to be masculine/male is enviable. For the female child, according to Freud, it results in "penis envy" that, at first, prompts the

female child to reject her femininity, before eventually filling that penile void with a male partner and/or a child.

However, in her own Freudian revisionist reflections on Freud's castration theory, Karen Horney provocatively suggests that the *male* child may also envy the female body and its procreative capabilities that his own body does not have, what Horney dubs "womb envy." Horney writes, "The only thing in which she [woman] ultimately has the advantage over the man is the, surely very questionable, pleasure in the act of birth" (60).⁴ Horney claims that the male child finds his body inadequate in that he cannot become pregnant, have a fetus gestate inside of him, birth an infant into the world, and then care for it (through such acts of breastfeeding) as the female body can. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak adds that psychoanalysts' honest consideration of womb envy might counter what has long been "a nonconfrontation of the idea of the womb as a workshop" and "a tangible place of production" (58). These parallels between the womb and production—and moreover, *reproduction*—are paramount to how womb envy works. As Horney writes, it is not merely envy for the womb but is instead "the boys' intense envy of motherhood" (60) and the possibility of being a reproductive mother that is patently impossible through the cismale body.

Nonetheless, boys/men learn to deny any envy of the womb and become invested in the "superiority" of their own penile bodies, a superiority that is afforded by a

⁴The "pleasure" of giving birth might be questionable to Horney because of the extreme pain that accompanies this act. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns against using this concept of womb envy to "sentimentalize the pain of childbirth" (58). Such a sentimentalizing has been explored by Adrienne Rich, who states, "Patriarchy has told the woman in labor that her suffering was purposive—was *the* purpose of her existence...and that her own value depended on bringing it [her offspring] forth" (159, emphasis in original) regardless of the pain it inflicts upon her. Other feminist writers have also sought to combat such glorification of birthing. Ellen Willis explains that "childbearing has unpredictable consequences; it always entails some risk of injury or death" (77). Meanwhile, Shulamith Firestone famously describes pregnancy as "barbaric" and likens giving birth to the feeling of "shitting a pumpkin" (198-9).

patriarchal society where men and the male body are elevated above women and the female body. Creed notes how, on one hand, horror has showcased male characters who affirm womb envy and who long to take complete control over reproduction and create life on their own, the ultimate example being *Frankenstein* (1931).⁵ Creed claims the male protagonist in such a story “desires to assume the procreative role of woman, which the symbolic order defiles, in order to enable him to feel whole” (*Phallic Panic*, 67). On the other hand, horror has also featured scenes in which the male body is forcibly transformed into the womb against the will of its owner. One major example cited by Creed is Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), featuring extra-terrestrial creatures who use human bodies for breeding by planting their seeds through the mouths of their human hosts. One of the film’s most famous scenes, in which an alien is “birthed” from the stomach of the character Kane (John Hurt) is evaluated by Creed:

The birth of the alien from Kane’s stomach recalls Freud’s description of a common misunderstanding that many children have about birth, that is, that the mother is somehow ‘impregnated’ through the mouth—she may eat a special food—and the baby grows in her stomach, from which it is also born (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 19).

Therefore, the mouth in this fictional fantasy serves as the reproductive entryway into the body that, in reality, is assumed by the vagina.⁶

⁵Brian Luke claims that appropriation is a tactic used by men for overcoming feelings of womb envy, as evolutions in medical science have permitted men to “tak[e] the inherently valuable functions associated with women’s reproductive lives and tur[n] them into male activities” (113).

⁶Female reproduction has been frequently explored in horror cinema. Kelly Oliver states, “Perhaps more than any other genre, pregnant horror manifests anxieties over women’s reproductive powers” (149). Films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Seventh Sign* (1988), and *The Astronaut’s Wife* (1999) each offer an “utterance of women’s private experiences of pregnancy” (Fischer 76) and the havoc it can wreak on women’s bodies (changing, transforming, becoming unrecognizable, etc.) and their lives (hormonal spikes in emotion, second guessing one’s

Still, through its titular reference to the act of expectoration—and the projection of saliva or other substances from the mouth—*I Spit on Your Grave* implies that the mouth in horror can become an orifice not only through which the body is entered, but from which the body is exited. Spitting is an act in which one “inflict[s] part of your inside on the world’s outside” (Trotter 26). In this way, the mouth can take on traits more closely related to the womb, as that which is spat is being figuratively “birthed” before us. Spitting entails a materiality which is, like the infant, trying to escape the body; as Brandon LaBelle puts it, “*There is something trying to get out; it impels the body, throttles it with hidden energy and [is] released in choking, gagging, and coughing*” (43, emphasis in original), and quite obviously, spitting, too. Spitting also has strong reproductive connotations. Because of its fluidity and its having existed inside the body, spitting might remind one of the womb and the “primal connection with the warmth and dampness of that in utero existence...” (Lembcke 130). Finally, the oft-remarked comment that a child is the “spitting image” of his mother/father correlates spitting with reproduction, as if the child was (rather than vaginally born) produced and birthed from the parent’s mouth.

I make these observations because they provide an alternative reading of what Jennifer is actually doing when she attacks the mouths of her male antagonists in *I Spit* 2010. Jennifer is not simply castrating them as Creed claims is the objective of the usual *femme castratrice*/female rape avenger. Instead, as the mouths of these men are depicted as spitting, spattering, and regurgitating in the midst of Jennifer’s torturing them, they

everyday decisions for how they might affect the fetus, feeling one’s body put under control of others, like that of doctors or the fetus itself, etc.).

take on characteristics of a “spitting” womb. In other words, Jennifer is not merely castrating these men and robbing them of their penile and/or phallic masculinity, but she is transforming and feminizing their bodies to resemble that of a mother, what I call a “maternalization” of these men.

To be sure, although scholars such as Creed have analyzed the rape-revenge genre through the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, others have expressed concern with how psychoanalysis lacks considerations of the cultural-historical context that can also influence how a film might be interpreted (Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge*; Read). Therefore, Henry writes that the tension “between contextual and psychoanalytic readings of these films” may expose how “such tensions are operating at the heart of these films themselves and consequently need further interrogation and an interdisciplinary approach” (*Revisionist Rape-Revenge*, 8) that can accommodate both perspectives. I maintain past scholars’ interest in gender identity and psychoanalysis in rape-revenge horror, but I also aim to address how the culture in which a film is created—in regard to both age and rape culture—can also affect how identity is represented in the genre.

Motherhood, Boyhood, and Being Aged by (Rape) Culture

Many feminist activists have written about rape culture and how gender is shaped within it (Eds. Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth, eds.; Eds. Friedman & Valenti.; Harding; Herman). Dianne F. Herman states, “Our society is a rape culture because it fosters and encourages rape by teaching males and females that it is natural and normal for sexual relations to involve aggressive behaviors on the part of males” (39). However, not only are individuals gendered by rape culture, but they are (borrowing from Margaret

Morganroth Gullette) gendered *and aged* by rape culture. By this, I mean that rape culture assigns categories of age to men and women (specifically, as I discuss above, that of the older female “mother” or the younger male “boy”) that either victimize them or absolve them of blame for their involvement in acts of sexual violence.

Feminist critics have argued that scholars must be cognizant of cultural influences on age in order to have a more accurate picture of how age is socially defined. When Gullette proposes the concept of being “aged by culture,” she is arguing that age serves as an ideological apparatus through which the identities and actions of citizens (and Gullette is mainly focused on age in American culture) are determined and disciplined. Because many feminist age scholars are concerned with issues of gerontology and ageism as they compound with sexism, the aspect of Gullette’s work that has most resonated with age theorists is her consternation with how the accumulation of age is often linked to states of decline, or rather, how advanced age becomes equated with states of deterioration and loss. According to Gullette, normative age culture increasingly contributes to feelings of decline settling in sooner and sooner, so that the state of feeling “vital” in one’s age is finite and ever-shrinking as the years go by.

Often this well-accepted formulation of aging-as-decline is presumed to be wholly natural, which, as Gullette explains, might have “the effect of overriding any counterpossibility that age/aging is constructed by culture” (*Aged by Culture*, 13); Gullette states,

When unopposed, age ideology can make us experience aging as if decline were, at one and the same time, (1) the *only* process of time, (2) a merely *personal* process (an effect that ignores both the universalizing features of the master

narrative and its supple constructions of difference), and (3) a *universal* biological process... (*Aged by Culture*, 134, emphases in original).

While not blind to the biological-material realities of the (aged) body, Gullette is still adamant about the need to acknowledge how one's understanding of the body is shaded by age culture. For example, as I outlined in chapter 1, Gullette discusses how biological reproduction and the creation of the child marks women as *mothers*—and therein, as *older*—with the added burden of the child, as it has been presented in much fictional literature, causing women to feel “that they are being ‘punished,’ discursively...for aging-past-youth” (*Aged by Culture*, 70).

Reproduction and motherhood are also imperative to conversations about rape culture. Scholars have addressed the complicated social implications of pregnancy produced in acts of rape, specifically in terms of rape culture's perception of women's maternalization through pregnancy. Caroline Rebecca Lunquist summarizes one of the core conservative beliefs engrained in rape culture, stating, “A pregnant rape victim, by virtue of being pregnant, is also already a ‘mother,’ and so ought to think and act like one” including accepting her “moral obligation or destiny: to give life to the/her child” (408). Rape culture then creates a system in which victims of rape are required, or at least shamed into, carrying a fetus to full term in order to achieve their maternal “destiny.”⁷

Rape culture, in effect, punishes female rape victims for becoming pregnant; specifically,

⁷Feminist activists, such as Kate Harding, have rallied against the enforcement of pregnancy as obligation for the rape victim, writing, “Women who are [raped] don't deserve to be punished with forty weeks of incubating the product of that assault, followed by the most physically painful experience known to human beings, which also happens to kill several hundred women a year in the United States and causes severe, life-threatening complications in over fifty thousand more” (128). Meanwhile, legal scholars (Kraft) have argued for the recognition of pregnancy as an injury brought about through rape for which there should be legal restitutions.

it punishes them by forcing them to accept, and thereby aging them into, a maternal identity.

Several critics have addressed how masculinity is also constructed in rape culture (Katz, *The Macho Paradox*; Kimmel, *Guyland*, “Men, Masculinity, and Rape Culture; Perry). Jackson Katz states, “There is no getting around the fact that violent boys and men are products of our culture, and as such are influenced by cultural ideas about manhood that teach individual males what is expected of them—in and out of relationships with women” (28). Thus, many critics propose that combatting rape culture begins with changing cultural ideals of masculinity themselves because, as Michael Kimmel writes, “To ignore men, to believe that women alone will transform a rape culture, freezes men in a posture of defensiveness, defiance, and immobility” (“Men, Masculinity, and the Rape Culture,” 156), as if men have no capacity to change rape culture, too.

Masculinity, though, is implicated in both rape culture and *age* culture. Gullette claims that the traditional perception of “aging” as something that occurs only in older individuals is largely false. In fact, Gullette argues that “age theory must include children to be able to emphasize that they too are laden with culture” (*Aged by Culture*, 108) as culture affects the aging of young and old in tandem. Relatedly, some individuals suggest that, in order to refigure masculinity in rape culture, it must begin in childhood because “the struggle to end rape...will not succeed without corresponding shifts in how *boys* are taught to experience sexuality and gender” (Perry 198, emphasis added). As Kate Harding more succinctly puts it, “[W]e live in a rape-supportive culture, and boys have to grow up here, too” (37). To use one well-known case: in 1989, the town of Glen Ridge,

New Jersey received national attention after an incident involving the “gang rape” of a handicapped young woman by several male high school students. In his book-length account of the scandal, these students are characterized by Bernard Lefkowitz as all-American athletes who “looked like a bunch of carefree *kids* who had just wrapped up high school and were heading off to the shore for some fun before they started college” (7, emphasis added). During the court case that followed, the attorney representing the accused was noted as having said, as part of his defense, “Boys will be boys. Pranksters. Foolarounds. Do crazy things. Experiment with life and disregard their parents. *Boys will be boys*” (qtd. in Lipsyte, emphasis added).

This motto of “boys will be boys” is not an altogether new expression as it has often been cited as a way of excusing excessive and immoral male behavior, and especially male sexual violence (Miedzian). But its underlining rhetoric is both convenient and disconcerting. Jill Filipovic writes that “the ‘boys will be boys’ sexual stereotype makes it much easier for...rapists to victimize women and simply argue that they didn’t *know* they were raping someone...” (20, emphasis in original); that is, these men can feign inculpability (“We were just doing what guys do”) and evade any blame for their actions. Similarly, Katz writes that “‘boys will be boys’ actually carries the profoundly anti-male implication that...they are somehow not capable of acting appropriately, or treating girls and women with respect” (*The Macho Paradox*, 86). Moreover, and perhaps more problematically, the excuses afforded to “boys” then become the same excuses adopted by the adults they grow into. As Sharon R. Bird writes, “[I]t is assumed that ‘boys will be boys’ and will just naturally do ‘boy things.’ By the same token, ‘men will be men’ and will continue to do ‘men things’” (125), even if those

“men things” include the assault and violation of women. Thus, within rape culture, a major tenet of boyhood is that boys (ranging from the Glenn Ridge school boys to Brock Turner) are freely permitted *to enter the bodies of others* without facing any social or legal consequences.

In contrast to Gullette, who suggests that American culture frequently convinces a public into believing that it is approaching states of aging decline sooner and sooner, rape culture allows states of boyhood to extend further and further, so that even adult men can benefit from advantages of the “boys-will-be-boys” sensibility. While conventional thinking of age places childhood and adulthood on separate planes from one another, Kimmel notes that boys’ maturation and progression into manhood, especially in the twenty-first century, is often unsteady and delayed in an intermediary zone that “lies between the dependency and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood” (*Guyland*, 6). Thus, men of advanced age can still act like boys, and consequently, can still claim the creed of “boys will be boys” as their own.

In order to accept the cultural script for those aged as boys in rape culture—that boys are given the freedom to enter the bodies of others at their leisure—it requires that boys also come to deny that their own bodies are just as susceptible to being entered. Traditional, patriarchal assumptions about the functions of the male and female bodies are encapsulated in what Catherine Waldby refers to as “the rape model of intercourse” (269). Explaining how this rape model is reified through the body, Waldby writes, “The male body is understood as phallic and impenetrable, as a war-body, simultaneously armed and armored, equipped for victory. The female body is its opposite, permeable and receptive, able to absorb all this violence” (267-8). In her well-known feminist treatise

on the history of rape, Susan Brownmiller writes, “Body contact and physical intrusion are the purpose of the crime” (384), but the intruded/penetrated body is obviously one that is culturally constructed as feminine.

For the male body to be penetrated and “opened up” is, as Leo Bersani famously claims, “to abdicate power” by putting itself in the position of “being a woman” (212). Most scholars, especially queer scholars, have used the metaphor of the anus to discuss this opening up of the male body that normative masculinity refutes.⁸ The anal orifice gestures to a male anxiety over the body being a *site of bodily entry*, which opposes what men/boys in a rape culture are taught to do with their bodies: to enter others, especially other women, but never have oneself entered in return.⁹ However, some cultural critics have suggested that the normative masculine imperative to fight against this feminizing of the body can be transposed from the anal onto other potential bodily openings. For example, Brian Pronger emphasizes the anal *and* the oral as sectors of the male body that masculinity has a fervent interest in securing, stating, “Masculine desire protects its own phallic production by closing orifices, both anus and mouth, to the phallic expansion of others” (“On Your Knees,” 72).¹⁰ Therefore, in a rape culture in which “boys” of all ages are socialized to enter bodies indiscriminately for their violent-erotic thrill, not only the

⁸For more discussion of Bersani and the anal in depictions of rape in avant-garde cinema, see Brinkema, “Rape and the Rectum: Bersani, Deleuze, Noé.”

⁹This fact may be a reason why, if male anal sexuality has been historically depicted in mainstream film, it has often been in the context of rape, as in the occasional male rape-revenge films like *Deliverance* (1972) or *Sleepers* (1996) (Wlodarz).

¹⁰To be sure, the male apprehension over anal entry is also, at least partially, a by-product of homophobia, which itself is normalized in rape culture so as to deny the homoeroticism that buttresses male homosociality (Sedgwick, *Between Men*), including male gang rape. For example, in her study of gang rapes in male fraternity settings, Peggy Reeves Sanday states that female victims become the conduits through men may “extrude forbidden sexual feelings from the group” (39); put differently, “by sharing the same sexual objects, the brothers are having sex with each other as well” (110) even if that homoerotic desire remains unspoken.

anus but also the mouth are those bodily orifices that can exacerbate anxieties about having one's own body entered.¹¹ For the male, to be entered risks having their gender and gendered body queered when discrete binary separations (male-versus-female, entered body-versus-impervious body) are no longer honored.

Still, as I have argued above, the mouth, as an orifice (like the anus) through which the body can be not only entered but *exited*, can also queer/feminize these bodies and spark anxiety in the male subject. These anxieties surrounding the oral body are ignited by rape culture and horror, especially as they summon that long-standing (and stigmatized) figure of age culture: the older mother. The male mouth in *I Spit 2010*, upon becoming an exiting orifice through the oral act of spitting, also becomes a harbinger of the womb, maternalizing its male carrier, and marking him both *older* and *feminine* and no longer the *young* (boyish) *masculine* subject glorified by rape culture. While Freud describes the womb as uncanny in that it reminds men of their childhood and their “old home” (“The Uncanny,” 151), the male mouth-turned-womb in *Spit 2010* is uncanny in that it brings about the un/familiarizing of age and gender and the queer shifting of age-gender from childhood/boyhood to adulthood/motherhood in the film. Thus, the mouth allows examination of both *age-rape culture*, and *psychoanalysis*, and how both expose the male impulse toward having, and being afraid of having, the womb.

The remainder of this chapter will be analyzing the 2010 *I Spit* remake, including its principle narrative, as well as other paratextual contents included on the film's DVD/Blu-ray disc release. These other contents include cover art for the film and its

¹¹Pronger is, like many, concerned that the normative masculine prerogative to claim entitlement to enter the openings of other bodies is tantamount to that of a “rapist [who] takes the vulnerable space of another” for his own (“Outta My Endzone, 386).

interactive menus, which I have chosen because I argue that they visually complement key points in the film that contain themes of orality and reproduction. I have also chosen to bring an audio commentary track with the film's director (Steven R. Monroe) and producer (Lisa Hansen) into my analysis, as it provides some grounding for Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus's claim that "Individuals involved in the film's production are presented...as having privileged insights regarding a film's meaning and purpose, and as such, they are used to articulate a 'proper' (i.e., sanctioned) interpretation" (23) of a film, which affects how the film may come to be seen by those who access this material.

Despite its title, orality—that is, representation of the functions of the mouth—is not pivotal to the 1978 version of *I Spit*; indeed, the act of spitting does not even occur in the film, and one would likely interpret the title to simply signify Jennifer's violent contempt for her assailants. In contrast, orality, and especially oral torture and the spitting that results from it, is persistently present in the *I Spit* 2010. While Creed has argued that Jennifer in *I Spit* 1978 is the monstrous-but-still-feminine *femme castratrice*, I agree with other scholars who see the female rape avenger as a masculinized figure. However, for Jennifer in *I Spit* 2010, she performs specifically a boyish form of masculinity that is propagated by rape culture, affording her uninhibited access to others' bodies, achieved in this film through the mouth. Finally, as I have stated above, the men who are subjected to Jennifer's oral torture become not figures of castrated futility, but bodies and mouths that are violently entered and are then reconstructed into figurative wombs that (in their acts of spitting) must also be violently exited.

Orality and Reproduction in *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010)

Orality in the Rape of Jennifer Hills

The rape culture that cultivates the attitude of “boys will be boys” is glaringly evident in the characterization of the gang of rapists found in *I Spit* 2010—including, as lifted from the original film, the ringleader Johnny (Jeff Branson), his loyal followers Stanley (Daniel Franzese) and Andy (Rodney Eastman), and their mentally challenged lackey Matthew (Chad Lindberg)—who consistently behave like immature, overgrown children. Stanley, an amateur videographer, and Andy, a harmonica enthusiast, are apparently unemployed and spend their days loitering outside the gas station where Johnny works. While Johnny and Matthew have jobs (Matthew’s occupation is changed to plumber), they do not display any ambition or drive to advance in their careers or mature into adult members of society. Instead, the men are often seen fishing, drinking heavily, giggling and teasing each another like children on the playground (such as flicking bottle caps and lit matches at one another).

Representations of orality are abundantly present in the film, especially in some of its more violent moments: the torment of Jennifer Hills (Sarah Butler) prior to her rape, and (as I will return to later) Jennifer’s own torture of the men. It is Jennifer’s oral actions that are actually blamed for her attack; the men treat Jennifer as if she is “asking for” what they do to her because of her seeming flirtatious nature, specifically after she kisses Matthew on the cheek for fixing her broken toilet at the beginning of the film. But *I Spit* 2010 also gives its audience a unique reversal of how violent orality has typically appeared in rape-revenge horror remakes. For example, the 1972 rape-revenge forerunner *The Last House on the Left* contains a notorious scene in which one of its avenging

heroes, under the guise of performing oral sex, viciously bites off a man's penis.

However, its 2009 remake converts it into a stabbing scene that is all too trite for the horror genre. Thus, *I Spit* 2010 is an anomaly in that orality is actually accentuated in its re-telling of the story.

Past scholars of the remake have noted how the torment of Jennifer prior to her rape is perhaps where the horrors that Jennifer withstands are most palpable. Laura Mee explains, "The rape scenes, although brutal, are less protracted [than in *I Spit* 1978], placing more emphasis on Jennifer's degradation and mental torture than any explicitly sexual act" (77). This scene is also given great weight by the filmmakers themselves, as demonstrated by the testimony of producer Lisa Hansen on the film's DVD/Blu-ray audio commentary track:

One of the things, one of the challenges, in making this movie was, you know, there's certain things from the original film that we didn't feel like we could do today. You know, we wanted to reflect this crime, which is really about a psychological—It's, you know, rape is absolutely a physical crime but it's a psychological [crime]. [...] And so, the torment that they give this woman prior to raping her is unbearable. Some people have come back to me and said they think it's actually worse than the rape in the original. And we designed that intentionally.

Thus, the filmmakers' own words in this paratextual material suggest that audiences, too, might put greater weight on the men's abuse of Jennifer prior to the rape in the remake than they may have in the original.

Again, depictions of orality are pervasive in this scene. It begins late at night, as Jennifer procrastinates from working on her novel. Jennifer sits at her laptop and applies lip gloss to herself, with a close-up shot of her face as she brings the applicator to her lips. Then, Jennifer smokes marijuana, bringing a rolled joint to her mouth and blowing smoke into the air. Jennifer falls asleep on her couch and awakens hours later, with a very tight close-up on her face that allows viewers to see the slick gloss across her lips.

Soon thereafter, Johnny breaks into her house, followed by the other men. Despite her fearful pleas that they leave, the men remain and demand that Jennifer “have a drink” with them. Jennifer reluctantly takes swigs from a bottle of vodka, as Johnny directs, “I know you can do better than that. [...] I said drink that shit!” Then, Johnny declares, “I wanna see your teeth.” He presses a baseball bat against Jennifer’s jaw while having her pull her cheeks apart in order to make her teeth visible to them, before grabbing her two front teeth and tugging at them. Eventually, Johnny pulls out a handgun. He comments, “Since you ain’t got no boyfriend...I figure this would be your man tonight,” as thrusts it into her mouth and makes her perform fellatio on it. Andy also participates, bringing Jennifer to her knees and holding the vodka bottle in front of his crotch, gyrating it toward her and instructing (as he did in the original) “Suck it, bitch.” Jennifer is also commanded to “whinny” like a “show horse,” as Johnny calls her, and has her head repeatedly dunked in a puddle of water by Stanley and Andy.

In all, this extended episode of torture links the crime of rape with the mouth. While Jennifer will also come to be genitally raped by the men, the act can only be strongly suggested, as genital-to-genital interaction will (for good reason) never actually be visualized. Instead, the visual image that viewers are given for how the “boys” of rape

culture are expected to colonize the female body is through taking over her mouth. The paratextual contents of the *I Spit* 2010 DVD/Blu-ray release also mandate that audiences acknowledge the violent orality of the film. The main menu screen is fashioned as if it were the screen of Stanley's camera (for example, with a fake battery bar and touch-screen mechanism), with isolated moments that Stanley captured in the film playing as if viewers were watching it directly from his camera. While there is some footage of his prior spying on Jennifer, most of it is of the men's torment of her, such as her "whinnying" or Johnny clutching her teeth (Figure 3). Therefore, this menu, which is essentially home audiences' first introduction to the film (before they even select "Play"), makes the only preliminary context they have for the film that of oral sadism.

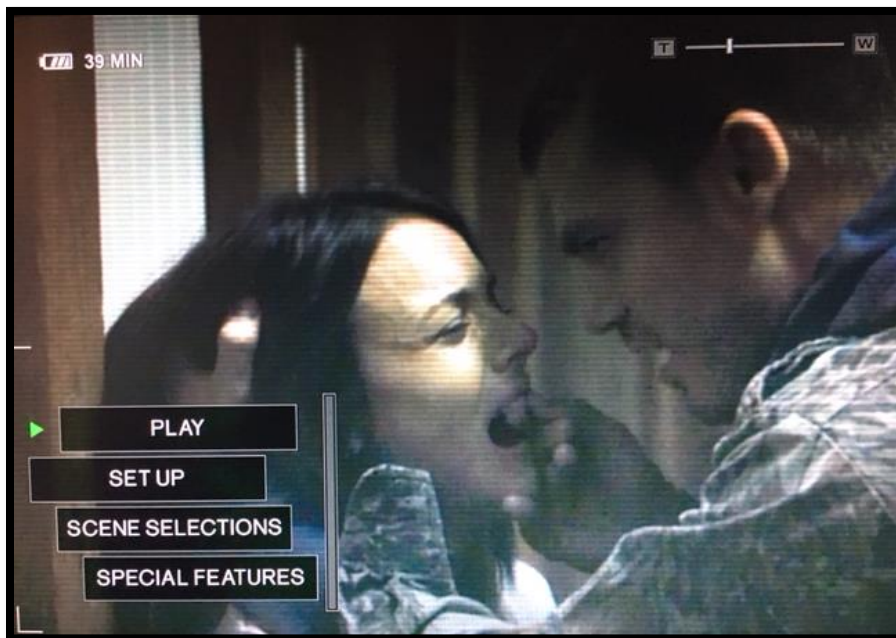


Figure 3: Johnny grabs Jennifer's teeth, as seen on *I Spit* 2010's DVD/Blu-ray home menu screen (image captured by author)

Orality, Anality, and Spitting-Shitting

However, the film complements these representations of violence and orality with an equally noteworthy interest in representations of *anality*. When Sarah pulls into

Johnny's gas station after she first drives into town, he attempts unsuccessfully to impress her with his prowess around vehicles but the results are embarrassing; he reaches for her car and Sarah, caught off guard, accidentally presses the panic button on her keys. The alarm sounds, and Johnny flies backward. Onlookers Stanley and Andy cackle at Johnny from a distance, and Andy hollers, "Better check your underwear, Johnny!"

The anal implications of Andy's statement—that Johnny has evacuated his bowels after being startled—carry over into a conversation amongst the men a few days later while they are fishing. Stanley, who has been spying on Jennifer at her cabin, shows the group footage that he has captured of her on his camcorder. The men huddle around the camcorder, and watch a moment that viewers saw earlier in the film in which Jennifer, after accidentally spilling wine on herself, changes her clothing in her kitchen. The original scene, shown from the point of view of Stanley's camera, begins as a longshot before zooming on specific parts of Jennifer's body, unbeknownst to her. However, in this later scene between the men, the footage from Stanley's camera that the men all watch together begins immediately at the point when Stanley has already begun shooting one particular section of Jennifer's body: her buttocks (Figure 4). After watching the footage, Johnny declares, "I can tame that ass if I want to...I'll tell you something. I had that girl creaming her panties." Andy quickly retorts, "Yeah, and she had you shitting in yours," provoking laughter from the rest of the group.



Figure 4: The men watch the footage of Jennifer from Stanley's camera in *I Spit* 2010 (image captured by author)

A similar fishing outing also occurs among the men in *I Spit* 1978, and anality is also brought into their exchange. In this earlier version, Andy remarks, “You know, sometimes I look at these glorious-looking chicks—I mean, the ones that look like real knockouts, sexy and all—and I wonder, I wonder if they gotta take a shit, too.” Stanley replies, “Hey, all woman shit, Women are full of shit.” Brinkema analyzes this scene with keen attention to its oral dimensions. Brinkema states that “the mouth evokes language and speech as its first function” (“The Lady Van[qu]ishes,” 48) and that the men in this scene—not understanding that they are speaking about “shit” in entirely different contexts—are represented as children who fail to have a grasp of language that would allow them to thrive in the what I explained in chapter 1 is the adult Symbolic/social order. Though not indicated by Brinkema, I would add that such an inefficiency in language skills that locks them out of the Symbolic realm also codes them as uncultured and childish, and as such, boyish. Still, Brinkema’s exclusive focus on linguistic orality ignores how anality also abounds in the content of the men’s banter.

In the 2010 remake, this scene between the men becomes more crucial and more infused with the anal. First, this scene (presented less humorously and more as a dramatic turning point in the story) is made more significant by becoming, through a change in narrative sequence in the remake, the final one before the assault on Jennifer. Second, it is the scene that, in addition to augmenting the theme of anality introduced at the gas station, frames a masculine conflict surrounding anality. On one hand, there is a desire to control the female body that in this instance becomes consolidated to the buttocks (“I can tame that ass if I want to”). On the other hand, there is male anxiety and feelings of impotence in maintaining control over one’s own body and what can exit from it, conveyed through the anal language of the scene (i.e., Johnny’s “shitting” himself).

In the rape scene, orality and anality both interanimate one another. For instance, Jennifer slowly attempts to walk away from the men, limping and clearly traumatized. Director Steven R. Monroe, joining Hansen on the film’s audio commentary track, encourages audiences to draw comparisons between Sarah Butler’s portrayal of Jennifer in the remake and that of actress Camille Keaton from *I Spit* 1978, stating, “And Sarah actually incorporated some of Camille’s movement from the original in here. The twitching arm and the ways she was stumbling.” However, in welcoming these comparisons, one is also compelled to notice the subtle visual differences in the scene. In *I Spit* 1978, viewers watch Jennifer walking away as shot generally from the front, the camera bringing her genitals and pubic hair in the shot. In *I Spit* 2010, Jennifer is mainly seen walking in a Steadicam shot from behind, thereby emphasizing her buttocks unlike the original. *I Spit* 2010 also makes the act of anal rape more pronounced in the film. Though it is implied that Jennifer is sodomized by Stanley in the original film, it is more

explicitly handled in the remake. As Jennifer lies down facing the ground, Storch (Andrew Howard), a new member of the gang of men, mounts himself over her and announces, “Don’t worry now, sweetheart. I’m an ass man,” his candor making the incident all the more disturbing. As Storch rapes Jennifer, Johnny stands in front of her, unzipping his pants and saying, “No teeth, show horse,” thus implying that the two men intend to invade her body both orally and anally.

However, male bodily anxiety tied to orality and anality are also present in this scene and the film’s other paratextual media. While Matthew participates in raping Jennifer, he becomes immediately sickened afterward and vomits on the floor. Later, when the men attempt to cover their crime by burning evidence in a waste can, Stanley informs the group that the fire is making him hungry, most likely reminding him of roasting hot dogs over a campfire, a boyhood pastime. Johnny, unnerved by Stanley’s lack of commitment to the mission at hand and worried about what will happen if they get caught, responds, “We gotta finish this shit. [...] Then you can stuff your face until you puke.” Thus, their attempts to “prove” their masculinity by forcefully entering Jennifer’s body are undercut by their inability to keep in control their own oral bodies, as in Matthew’s vomiting and Johnny panicked inciting of “puking.”

Additionally, the cover art for the *I Spit* 2010 DVD/Blu-ray displays the film’s official poster and uses imagery that, in comparison to the *I Spit* 1978 poster, recalls male anxiety over anal-oral entry that is often fostered by patriarchal rape culture. In the poster for *I Spit* 1978 (Figure 5), its text has been positioned at the top and side. Above is the title of the film. On the side is the tagline for the film, which reads, “This woman has just cut, chopped, broken, and burned five men beyond recognition...but no jury in America

would ever convict her!” This text is purposefully placed in these spots in order to avoid covering the image of Jennifer on the poster, though it does detach her head from her body. Jennifer is shown from behind, her clothing torn and her backside exposed. In her right hand, she holds a knife, but the blade of the knife is pointed away from her body as if stabbing into the air around her. This image contrasts with the *I Spit* 2010 DVD/Blu-ray cover (Figure 6). On the cover, Jennifer appears again from behind, in tattered clothes with her backside visible. However, her head is now intact and turned to the side so that her mouth is also easily visible. Furthermore, her buttocks in her lower body are more exposed. Jennifer again holds a knife in her right hand. However, the blade of the knife is pointed toward Jennifer. Specifically, it hovers over Jennifer’s buttocks and casts an ominous shadow on them. The knife also has a trail of blood running down it, unlike the clean blade found on the *I Spit* 1978 poster.

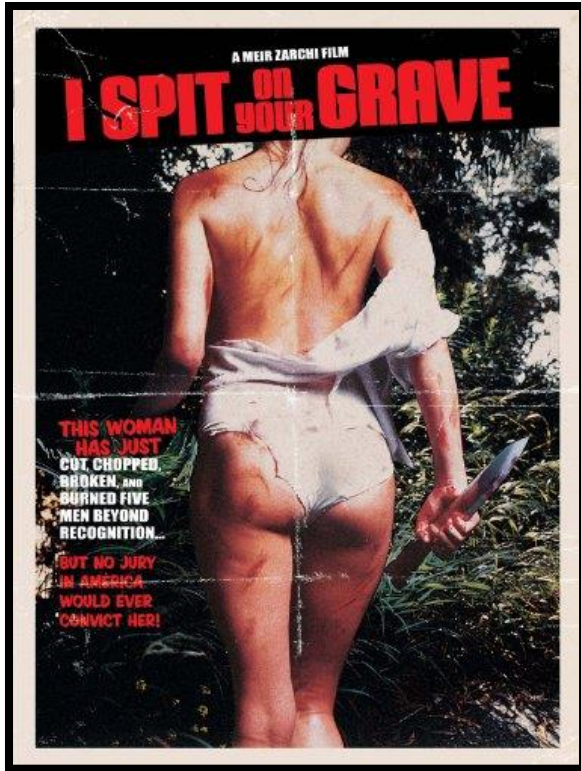


Figure 5: The official movie poster for *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) (image courtesy of the Internet Movie Database)



Figure 6: The DVD/Blu-ray cover for *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) (image captured by author)

This cover design for *I Spit* 2010 suggests two major points which must be addressed separately. First, this image of Jennifer, despite her body being made a spectacle for the male gaze, masculinizes her through familiar corporeal iconography, such as the phallic (penile) shape of the weapon and also the sign of blood (missing from the 1978 poster) that can be read as spermatic-ejaculatory. Instead of the Jennifer of *I Spit* 1978, which Creed discusses as a model of castrating femininity, the Jennifer of *I Spit* 2010 becomes an avenger who is masculine and whose masculinity is influenced by rape culture's embrace of boyhood masculinity and its entry into others' non-consenting (and oral) bodies.

Second, the juxtaposition of the dangerous knife with both the mouth and the buttocks (though they are in fact Jennifer's) conjures masculine fears of oral-anal attack that become paramount to future scenes in the film. Specifically, as I will explore below, the film proposes connections between orality, anality, and *reproduction*. These connections expand how Freudian psychoanalysis can be applied to the film. As Creed alludes to in her analysis of the birthing scene from *Alien*, Freud suggests that children believe that babies are created, first, through the act of eating. However, what Creed does not explicate is that the anus is then the orifice, Freud claims, from which the children often believe babies are excreted. As a result, Freud claims that "faeces take on the meaning of a *baby*" ("Anal Eroticism and the Castration Complex, 82, emphasis in original), and for the male children, because he correlates excrement and defecation with delivery, it is the baby that he is miraculously able to birth all by himself.¹² The act of

¹²Freud's claims that the "primal scene," or the child's witnessing of copulation between his parents, may cause confusion for the child, particularly if the child sees his parents engaged in intercourse with the father penetrating the mother "from behind"; in these moments, the child may come to see anal entry (at least what he thinks is the

“shitting,” it would seem, possesses many of the same reproduction qualities as the act of spitting, with both potentially implying the reproductive maternalization of those doing the spitting-shitting.¹³ To be sure, I still remain primarily concerned with orality in *I Spit* 2010. However, I also see *I Spit* 2010 as presenting the mouth so as to signify a relationship between the oral and anal, both of which have been reimagined as reproductive orifices in psychoanalytic literature. This relationship reinforces how the mouth queers both gender and age in the film, especially as an exit point on the body that maternalizes its male characters.

Becoming a Boy and a Mother in I Spit 2010

One monumental change made in the 2010 remake of *I Spit* from the 1978 original is the manner in which Jennifer hunts down the men in order to commit her revenge. In particular, in *I Spit* 1978, Jennifer seduces each of the men, even having sex with at least one of them, before killing them. In *I Spit* 2010, Jennifer’s revenge is not deliberately eroticized, aside from one brief moment where Jennifer poses as a customer at the gas station, wearing tight and skimpy shorts to distract Johnny (who is transfixed, of course, by her rear end). Otherwise, Jennifer’s sexuality has no place in her retribution. As producer of the film, Hansen finds this change meaningful and discusses her rationale for making this revision to Jennifer’s character:

One of the big changes that we made in this revenge sequence, and we did it on the script stage was: in the original, Jennifer seduces each one of her tormentors,

father anally entering the mother) as the origins of human reproduction (“From the History of an Infantile Neurosis [‘Wolf Man’]”).

¹³On these grounds, one might argue against Lee Edelman who claims that the wastefulness of the anal body distinguishes it from the reproductive, life-creating terrain of the genital body (“*Rear Window*’s Glasshole”).

and we felt—I felt strongly that a woman wouldn't do that in today's environment. You wouldn't go through what she went through, and then come back, and take your clothes off and sleep with them again. You would figure out other ways to get even.

Since the film does not permit the men to, once more, seek sexual entry into Jennifer's body, in a genre that defines femininity based on corporeal openness, it is difficult to argue that she is a traditional feminine avenger in the *I Spit* remake. It would be too limited, though, to say that Jennifer is also just masculine or masculinized. Hansen's remarks seem to indicate the filmmakers' desire to accurately reflect rape culture as we witness it in "today's environment" and the effects it has on actual human lives, which would also seem to imply that the masculinity that Jennifer performs in *I Spit* 2010 is that brand of masculinity that rape culture most allows to subsist: boyish masculinity. Jennifer does not only become masculine; she becomes like "one of the boys."

Scholars have recognized how similar Jennifer's revenge on the men in *I Spit* 2010 is to her earlier assault. As Mee writes, the remake often involves "turning each of the attackers' own perversions back on them during Jennifer's revenge" (80). Not only, though, does Jennifer turn their perversions back on them, she turns their whole persona of boyishness back on them, acting just like the "boys" had with her previously.

After Jennifer delivers a blow to his head with a baseball bat, Stanley wakes up to find himself tied to a tree. Jennifer's perches in front of him, now holding his camera and collecting footage of him in his disempowered state. Jennifer comments, "Smile real pretty for the camera... You like the show so far?" She sets the camera down and pulls out a knife. Stanley answers, "What are you doing?" Jennifer, as she uses the knife to

slice open a bass fish answers, “Some fishing, I know how you guys like to fish.”

Jennifer then positions the screen of the camera so that Stanley can see himself as she smears the fish guts on his face. What Jennifer is doing is using Stanley’s own childish pursuits—voyeurism and fishing—as a means of punishing him.

Sometimes, Jennifer even repeats back exact lines of dialogue previously spoken by the men. After kidnapping Andy, he begs, “Please” in the hope that she will take pity on him. Jennifer submerges his head in water (as he had done to her) and replies, “I said ‘please.’ You said, ‘Suck it, bitch.’ Does that ring any bells? Suck...it...bitch!” Later, when Jennifer also kidnaps Johnny, she retrieves his gun and states, “Look who’s here. It’s my boyfriend. Why don’t you give him a little?” In another parallel to prior events in the film, Jennifer examines Johnny’s mouth and says, “Maybe you should show me your teeth. [...] You still have some teeth left. I’m gonna have to take care of that.” In essence, Jennifer not only imitates their behaviors, but also their manner of oral speech; that is, she can *talk the talk* of being a boy just as much as she can walk the walk.

Jennifer also uses the men’s “toys” against them. Jennifer handles Johnny’s gun, taunting him with it much like did with her, and makes Stanley the object of the gaze of his own camera after hitting him with the men’s baseball bat. She also steals Andy’s prized harmonica and uses the sound of it to lure him into the forest where she takes him prisoner. These items facilitate her transformation into the role of the boy so that she can “play” with the men before annihilating them. These items, though, all somehow become steeped in orality. The oral utility of the harmonica is obvious, and (as poetic justice) Jennifer shoves Johnny’s gun into his mouth in another recreation of violent oral sex. Jennifer also inexplicably zooms Stanley’s camera in on his mouth as he comes to from

his stupor (Figure 7). Not only does this odd framing of the image of Stanley direct viewers' attention to the oral orifice, which will remain ubiquitous through the rest of her torture of the men, but her close-up shot on Stanley's mouth is comparable to his zooming in on her buttocks as he had spied on her at the beginning of the film, visually bridging the oral and the anal through the mouth.



Figure 7: The point-of-view shot from Stanley's camera as Jennifer zooms in on the image of his mouth (image captured by author)

In line with male anxiety over bodily entry, Jennifer utilizes the mouths of her assailants to penetrate them. Jennifer fills a bathtub with lye and Andy is made to swallow it, while Stanley is forced to ingest the carcass of a dead rat. After using the gun on Johnny and then removing some of his teeth with a pair of pliers, Jennifer cuts off Johnny's penis as she does in *I Spit* 1978. While the same castration of Johnny by Jennifer that occurred in the original is duplicated here, it would be shortsighted to deem this version of Jennifer as just another take on Creed's *femme castratrice*. In an added twist on the original film, Jennifer in *I Spit* 2010 then crams the severed penis into Johnny's mouth. The film gives Jennifer the power to enter these oral bodies so that she is closer to resembling the "boys" who are anointed by rape culture, for whom entry into

others' bodies comes with no repercussions, than she is in resembling a castrating maternal figure. She will escape and live on, while the men's lives will be forever altered (albeit, in this case, not just altered but terminated) like the victims of rape culture.

With the men's responses to this oral terrorizing from Jenifer comes the realization of the film's title: they spit. Andy spits up white foam from lye poisoning, Stanley spits out the dead rat and then vomits on himself, and Johnny spits out his castrated member. As stated above, the act of spitting can take on connotations of birthing, which seems quite true for Johnny and Stanley in particular. Johnny spits out his penis, and it becomes as if his projecting his "little guy" from his mouth is equivalent to him "spitting out" a tiny version of himself. The scene is punctuated by blood that begins rushing from Johnny's castrated body. Viewers see the blood fall from between his legs, as if resembling a splattering of afterbirth (Figure 8). Though this wound on Johnny is never seen, viewers receive a close-up shot of Johnny's lifeless face at the end of the scene, a line of bloody saliva falling slowly from this "postpartum" mouth.



Figure 8: The blood flows from between Johnny's legs in *I Spit* 2010 (image captured by author)

For Stanley, his engagement in the oral act of vomiting not only implies maternity (the exiting of his body), but also hints at the specter of anality. Monroe, on the audio commentary track, claims that the idea to have Stanley vomit came from actor Daniel Franzese himself:

When we were shooting this... we had him strapped in, and he goes, 'Steven, I feel like I want to throw up' [in the scene]. So, I yelled at the prop department, "Get me some banana and water, and mix them together."

Knowing Franzese's participation in bringing this detail to the scene, as well as the concoction creating the vomit effect, only adds to the sense of the scene's both oral-maternalizing and anal aspects. First, the physical build of Franzese, a heavy-set actor whose weight is repeatedly belittled in the film, might inspire an imagining of the actor's large stomach as that of a pregnant belly. Second, and relatedly, the blending of banana and water is reminiscent of baby food, the kind of sustenance that a mother may try patiently to feed her child only to have him spit it back up.

Third, the notion of the banana and water coming out of the body in such an unrecognizable form is comparable to the uncanny outcomes of the digestive system and the refashioning of familiar food into unfamiliar fecal waste. The final shot of Stanley is, like Johnny, a close-up on his face, in which viewers see that his eyes have been pecked out by birds (no doubt attracted to the fish guts that he was lathered in by Jennifer) (Figure 9). Of course, the display of missing eyes is also one of Freud's quintessential symbols for the uncanny, in which the horror of having one's eyes removed becomes "a substitute for the fear of castration" ("The Uncanny," 139) and a reminder of the maternal womb. Beyond being a reproductive signifier, though, Stanley's face is being presented

quite some time after his death, as the blood on his face from the bird attack has already dried and turned brown. The same face that had, through Stanley's spitting mouth, served as a metaphor for the birthing womb has now, from the brownish color of the coagulated blood coating it, become closer to resembling what one might describe as "shit-faced."



Figure 9: Stanley's dead face in *I Spit* 2010 (image captured by author)

As already noted, Jennifer will not pay for her crime. She embodies the persona of a boy who can torture others, who can maneuver as she pleases into the bodies of others (here, into their mouths), and in the end (to harken back to the tagline for the original *I Spit*) "there's no a jury that will convict her" because, as age-rape culture would have it, boys will be boys. Conversely, the characters Johnny, Stanley, and Andy have their bodies both entered and exited, with their mouths and their propensity for spitting contributing to these depictions of their bodies. Each of their deaths configures interlocking associations between orality and anality, as well as maternal reproduction. When they spit-shit, it is not simply in disgust to the various objects that Jennifer has forced into their mouths, but in revulsion to Jennifer forcing them to confront everything that disturbs them: first, their sense of boyhood entitlement that Jennifer parodies for them; second, the horror of having their masculine bodies (orally-anally) invaded; third,

the additional horror of being aged and gendered into an older maternal identity as Jennifer penetrates and “inseminates” their mouths; and fourth, the experience of possessing the womb that, as has been the case for many pregnant women in rape culture, puts their bodies under the control and at the mercy of others.

Reproducing Oral-Anal Anxiety in I Spit 2010

The 2010 remake of *I Spit* saw the inclusion of a new character, Storch, the town sheriff who joins the other men in their assault on Jennifer. Storch was added by the filmmakers in an effort to account for how their crime would go unnoticed and uninvestigated by police. Balding and middle-aged, Storch is older than the other men, which makes him both a father figure, of sorts, to them and a fitting proponent of the permissive paternalism toward young men that allows rape culture to thrive. Jennifer runs across Storch after escaping from Johnny and his posse and brings him to her cabin to arrest the men, but he disregards Jennifer’s story, stating, “Ma’am, you’ve been drinking, smoking marijuana cigarettes. You got enough booze in here to put the whole town three sheets to the wind [...] You’re making serious accusations about boys I’ve known since they was kids.” In addition to doling out some of the common tactics employed by law enforcement officials like Storch for dismissing the accusations of sexual assault victims (blaming her substance use, for instance), his referring to the men as “boys” speaks to his unwillingness to see them as anything but children who cannot be held accountable for their actions.

At the same time, though, Storch often joins the other men in acting like a proverbial boy himself. As the other men rape Jennifer, he cheers them on like a rowdy youngster at a football game, shouting, “Deep! Get in deep! Deep! Deep!” Later, before

he attempts unsuccessfully to kill Jennifer with his shotgun, Storch matter-of-factly remarks, “Well, it was fun while it lasted, Ms. Hills.” For Storch, his participation in the attack with the other, younger men allows *him* to be young again, a boy for whom everything (even sexual assault) is “fun” and games. The filmmaker commentary adds to the boyishness of Storch as they discuss Andrew Howard, the Welsh actor portraying him.

Lisa Hansen: He’s such a nice British boy. (*laughter*)

Steven R. Monroe: He’s a nice Welsh family man.

Lisa Hansen: So, it was a little shocking for me, just knowing him personally, and then seeing him in this role was like-holy cow!

Their characterization of Howard, as simultaneously both “boy” and “family man,” sheds some light on the dual-identities also inhabited by Storch in the film. In addition to his relationship with the other men, Storch is differentiated from them in that he has another life, and a life in which he is not stunted in his growth like the boys with whom he consorts. Storch is a father to a young elementary-school-aged daughter and a husband to his wife who is in her third trimester of pregnancy. Mrs. Storch’s pregnancy, as those listening to Monroe and Hansen’s conversation learn, was not intentional but came about organically when filmmakers discovered that the actress cast in the part (Mollie Milligan) was expecting.

Steven R. Monroe: I cast her off a demo reel... We booked her, and then her agent told us that she was pregnant. I got really mad at first...but it’s actually perfect for the role. So, we just went with it. [...]

Lisa Hansen: Yeah, honestly, it was one of those happy accidents, where you're thrilled that she was. It makes him—

Hansen does not finish her statement and this unfinished thought may cause one to wonder, how might Mrs. Storch pregnancy affect audience readings of Storch? What/who does Mrs. Storch “make him” into as a result of her happening to be pregnant?

Truth be told, Mrs. Storch is a fairly inconsequential character, with only three short scenes in the entire film. Toward his wife, Storch is deceitful, leaving her entirely oblivious to his evil deeds, and also neglectful, alienating her at home while he ventures into the world to commit his crimes. However, what makes her “perfect for the role” is that she contributes to the film's larger themes of reproduction, and indicts Storch within them. The same karmic fate that the other men meet, in that the specific abuses that they heap upon Jennifer come back to haunt them, awaits Storch due to his emotionally abusive treatment of Mrs. Storch. Storch tries to distance himself from the womb by placing his wife in her separate domestic sphere, but by the end of the film, Storch, too, becomes “made into” a bearer of the womb, a womb that is signified in the film through the exiting (oral-anal) mouth.

Storch's own fixations on the oral and the anal, and the maternalizing influences they have over him, begin to emerge in the film's second act, when a mysterious tape arrives at the Storch residence. Storch, realizing that the tape is a recording of Jennifer's rape from Stanley's camera, quickly intervenes to keep his wife from watching it and drives off in search of Stanley and the others. Storch finds Stanley and Andy congregating with Johnny outside his home, and approaches them enraged over the fact that the incriminating tape had not been destroyed. It is a peek into what viewers will

later come to know as the full psychotic extent of Storch's wrath. For example, in another scene, audiences witness Storch murder a local man who was the last person to see Jennifer alive, coldly telling the man that he is "tying up loose ends" before shooting him in the head.

Storch shoves the tape angrily into Stanley's mouth, yelling, "Eat that tape, fat boy!" Johnny, attempting to mediate their conflict, convinces Storch that Matthew, who has been missing for several days, has had a nervous breakdown and sent the tape to Storch's home. Accepting this theory, but still infuriated at Stanley, Storch tells him, "I'm gonna cut his [Matthew] retard pecker off and use it as a goddam hood ornament. That's before I'm done shoving it up your dirt hole."

Storch's promise to "cut off" Matthew's "pecker" aside (even with its possible application to Creed's monstrous maternal castrator), his unusual interest in the orifices of the other men is also rich with maternalizing connotations. In addition to his mention of Stanley's anal "dirt hole," Storch tries to intimidate Stanley by pointing his gun at him and not allowing him to remove the tape from his mouth, even making him reinsert the tape into his mouth after he attempts to spit it out (Figure 10). Storch becomes like an authoritative mother who dominates Stanley's mouth and the retention-release of its contents. As I cited in chapter 1, Kristeva claims that "[m]aternal authority is the trustee of...[the] mapping of the self's clean and proper body..." (72), and one of the earliest "mappings" of the body comes through the mother-child experience of "sphincteral training" (71). Through Storch's asserting control over Stanley's mouth and what he will or will not allow him to withhold orally, viewers see Storch as a displaced maternal entity

imposing her power over her “boy’s” orifice and what will be evacuated (spat or shat) from it.



Figure 10: Storch forces Stanley to hold the tape in his mouth in *I Spit* 2010 (image captured by author)

Nonetheless, even though Storch might be viewed as a maternal figure here, he has not yet become emblematic of the reproductive/womb-bearing mother, remaining very much in control over his own body and what does (not) enter/exit from it and making sure his “loose ends” all stay “tied up.” It is when Storch is finally captured by Jennifer, in the film’s harrowing climax, that (like the other men) his oral body is maternalized into a womblike opening. Storch finds himself bound and his body stretched out across a table, his stomach touching the tabletop. Behind him, Storch’s shotgun is propped up on a chair with, as implied through an overhead shot, the tip of the shotgun inserted into his anus. Once more, Jennifer appears and begins performing the part of the raping boy, including using another one of the “boy’s” playthings, his own weapon, against him. As she repeatedly rams the shotgun into Storch, she also talks the part again and re-uses some of her rapists’ own language; for instance, Jennifer asks, “Does that hurt, Sheriff? Come on, I thought you were an ass man,” and screams, “Deep! Deep!

Deep!” with each violent thrust. Storch tearfully beseeches Jennifer, “I got a baby coming, please.” While he is obviously referring to the baby waiting in Mrs. Storch’s uterus, Storch’s statement could almost be misinterpreted as him implying that he himself *has a baby coming*, or that a baby is soon to arrive from out of his body, a fulfillment of the Freudian male child’s wish for a birthing body all his own.

Unfazed by Storch’s pathos, Jennifer reveals her ultimate plan. Storch soon realizes that Matthew, having also been abducted by Jennifer, sits unconscious in front of him. Jennifer loops the end of a thin cord around Matthew’s wrist, with the other end wrapped around the trigger on the shotgun protruding from Storch (Figure 11). If Matthew stirs at all, even inadvertently, the trigger will be pulled on the shotgun and a bullet will be fired, entering Storch’s anus and exiting through his mouth. Matthew’s seeming blamelessness and noncompliance in possibly killing the sheriff is reflective of the efforts of the filmmakers in framing, for the audience, the character of Matthew as an accomplice in the rape and yet somewhat more righteous than the other men. On one hand, producer Lisa Hansen states, “We didn’t want people to feel too sorry for him [Matthew]. He’s as bad as the rest of the guys to a certain extent.” On the other hand, Monroe and Hansen both seem to excuse Matthew’s involvement in the rape. Monroe claims that Matthew decides to rape Jennifer simply because “he just wants to get it over with” and stop having to deal with the other men’s coercion. Hansen adds, “And probably in some way he feels like it will actually be better than what they’re doing—that he’s going along with it because it will be better, it will be easier for her—in his tormented mind.” Matthew is also the only one of the men who is at all remorseful in the film about what they have done, withdrawing himself from them out of guilt. Because of these ideas

that Matthew is somehow exceptional from Storch and the rest of the group, Hansen states, “[W]e had a lot of debate about whether to let Matthew live or not. There were people that really felt that we should let him live. [...] [I]t was something that was definitely up for discussion.” Matthew, it would seem, becomes the last male character in the film that could be perceived as even remotely innocent.



Figure 11: A cord connects Matthew to Storch in *I Spit* 2010 (image captured by author)

Consequently, the cord connecting the “innocent” Matthew—innocent, indeed, like all “good boys” in rape culture—and the now maternal Storch takes on umbilical features. Not only does the cord connect them like mother and fetus, but it also illustrates the binary tug-of-war of age-rape culture that can be seen in *I Spit*: one is either someone *masculine* and *young* who can reap the rewards of boyhood, or someone *feminine* (the target of boys’ violence) and who, because of the reproductive prospects of her body, also becomes coded as *older* (i.e., *maternal*). Although Matthew does eventually awaken, thereby accidentally firing the shotgun and killing himself by sending a bullet flying (from Storch’s body) into his own chest, Matthew still dies a “boy” and his oral orifice is

never turned into a ghastly womb like his compatriots. Meanwhile, the “expecting” Storch gives viewers an inversion of the Freudian myth of anal birth; rather than *shitting out* the child that Jennifer (and her new shotgun) have put into him, Storch has (just as Stanley, Andy, and Johnny before him) *spit it out* instead; the final shot of Storch is of his bloody face, and in particular, his mangled mouth. It is a fitting irony for the character. Storch would rather dissociate himself from the womb (his wife) so that he can remain a boy and continue playing (i.e., raping) with his friends, and Storch would also rather hold the authority to dictate the entering/exiting of others’ bodies than have the same happen to his own. In the end, though, Storch loses his status as a “boy” and becomes another representation of the monstrous male corporeal womb in *I Spit 2010*, without any semblance of authority over his bodily cavities and what goes in, and more importantly, *comes out* of them.

Conclusion

The final shot of the 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* is a close-up on Jennifer’s face just seconds after Storch has died. At first, she appears aloof and her energy depleted from the events of the film. However, after the blast of the shotgun that kills both Storch and Matthew, a small smirk forms across her lips. Her smugness is warranted because, as is learned in the 2015 sequel *I Spit on Your Grave III: Vengeance is Mine*, Jennifer will get away with their deaths, though not without significant psychological trauma.

As the female rape avenger of *I Spit 2010*, Jennifer has become like many of the “boys” of rape culture. These “boys” are the ones who commit unspeakable acts of sexual violence, and whose gender but also youthfulness frees them from being held liable for

their actions. Utilizing psychoanalysis and Gullette's theory of being "aged by culture," I have argued in this chapter that as Jennifer enacts revenge she also enacts a masculine-boyish identity defined by rape culture. This identity affords her the privilege of entering and eviscerating the bodies of others. However, the same cannot be said of the film's lineup of male characters. The bodies of Andy, Matthew, Stanley, and Storch are made vulnerable to entry by Jennifer, especially their mouths. Nonetheless, as they spit up of blood, vomit, figurative shit, and other bodily wastes, the gender and age identities of these men begin shifting. When these men spit and are compelled to let their bodies be exited, their mouths take on attributes like that of the birthing womb. Therefore, through their mouths, these men uncannily and queerly oscillate from carefree boyhood into the performance of a maternal-reproductive identity.

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate how psychoanalysis, which has been predominant in scholarship on the rape-revenge horror genre, might be combined with scholarship on age culture to better understand how gender and age are performed through the figure of the female rape avenger and through the horr/orality of spitting mouth in *I Spit* 2010. This narrative can be used to discuss the realities of rape culture. Specifically, it can show how, in a patriarchal society, reproduction and the crime of rape exist on the spectrum in that both become occasions in which women's bodies are controlled and persecuted. My analysis makes two major contributions to the future examinations of orality and rape-revenge horror. First, this study proposes that scholars remain aware of how monstrous maternal archetypes may continue to persist within this genre, but without limiting the maternal to only that of a castrating role. Even as Jennifer does castrate her assailants, the misogynistic horror of *I Spit* 2010 is not just the maiming

of the male body but the imposition of the maternal female body (in this case, the womb) upon the male subject.

Second, this study underscores the value of fantasy in representations of gender/age identity in rape-revenge horror. In a recent editorial for *The Guardian*, Anne Billson states, “In the light of the #MeToo movement encouraging women to take a stand against sexual abuse...there are few sub-genres more problematic and paradoxical than the rape-revenge thriller” (“How the ‘Rape-Revenge Movie’ Became a Feminist Weapon for the #MeToo Generation”). Part of what Billson finds so problematic about these films (including *I Spit* 1978 and 2010) is their insistence on presenting (and therefore seeming to savor) sexual violence through an aesthetic of stark, gritty, and unrelenting realism. And yet, even in the gory realism of the deaths of the men of *I Spit* 2010, there is room for fantasy still in the genre. It is a fantasy of seeing the “immature” male perpetrators of sexual assault being made to endure and come to grips with the hardships that many female survivors of rape must face. It is the fantasy of, first, having *their* bodies violated; and second, having those bodies and *their* very lives unavoidably “matured” into the role of parent (or least, an incubating parental womb). It is the fantasy, in other words, of them being punished. They are punished like women are in an ageist culture that reprimands those who eventually age into motherhood. And they are punished like women are in a conservative rape culture for whom, in the case of pregnancy via rape, a maternal identity they never wanted becomes a heartbreaking circumstance they never chose for themselves.

Chapter 3

Consummating Consumptions: Drinking in Blood and Images of Sexual Initiation in *Let Me In* (2010)

Introduction

Numerous scholars have described the vampire—a creature of the night that is somehow both living and dead, human and monster, and feeds off the blood of others in order to survive—as a queer monster (Benshoff; Dhaenens; Dyer; Halberstam, *Skin Shows*; Kane; Schoop).¹ As Kathryn Kane writes, “[T]he vampire is a queer figure because it is disruptive; the vampire breaks down categories, transgresses boundaries, and upsets the very premises upon which systems of normality are structured” (103). One recent example of the vampire in contemporary film is Matt Reeves’s *Let Me In*, which was released in 2010 to critical praise but disappointing box office returns. Despite its lack of financial success, the film was lauded by the horror community and ultimately received the Saturn Award for Best Horror Film from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films.

Let Me In follows the relationship of its two young protagonists, Owen (Kodi Smit-McPhee) and Abby (Chloë Grace Moretz in the role that won her the Saturn Award for Best Performance by a Younger Actor). Owen, an introverted boy living with his single mother in Los Alamos, New Mexico, is initially drawn to his pre-teen neighbor after she moves into his apartment building late one night. However, Owen eventually learns that not only is Abby a vampire, but that her seeming youthfulness is a deception; after being turned into a vampire as a girl, Abby seems to have never physically aged even though she has roamed the earth for centuries. Therefore, *Let Me In* seems poised to

¹For a detailed history of the vampire, see the works of Nina Auerbach, Brian Frost, and Ken Gelder.

offer insights into how the figure of the vampire, and particularly the female vampire, can queer age by conflating the familiar binary categories of young and old and making them unfamiliar and uncanny.

While several queer scholars have been fascinated by the figure of the female vampire (Case; Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Hanson, “Lesbians Who Bite”; Zimmerman), Sue-Ellen Case claims that the queerness of the female vampire is most realized in those moments when this figure becomes *invisible* within the narrative. For instance, Case argues that the lesbian vampire—a staple of horror in films like *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), *The Hunger* (1983), *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), and *Vampyres* (1974)—represents a transgression that heteronormative society seeks to make invisible. Therefore, Case points to the vampire’s ability to be both visible and more often invisible—such as not being seen in looking glasses, during daytime, or in one’s home unless they have been invited inside—as one indicator of her queer identity. Case, though, finds merit in “celebrating the fact that she cannot see herself in the mirror and remains outside that door...[so that] her proximate vanishing appears as a political strategy” (395) for resisting homophobic Western society.²

Female vampiric invisibility, though, can also be a means of critiquing ageism and sexism in Western culture. To be invisible permits the female vampire to exist outside of what Julia Twigg has called “the gaze of youth” (65). This youthful gaze acts in tandem with Laura Mulvey’s famous concept of the “male gaze” by assuming that the only female body worth visibly objectifying is a *young* female body. Most

²In contrast, Ellis Hanson (in “Lesbians Who Bite”) argues that the lesbian vampire is not at all invisible in film, but as that which is seen and which erotically lures viewers, and which, as Bonnie Zimmerman states, “shows lesbianism as attractive and heterosexuality as abnormal and ineffectual” (386).

representations of the vampire frame it, like Abby in *Let Me In*, as an ageless entity that is both young and old at the same time. Therefore, the vampire is a figure of horror that is exceptionally capable of performing and queering/oscillating between these binaries of age. That is, the female vampire can oscillate between signifying younger and older identities based on whether or not its body is made publicly visible (when coded as younger) or invisible (when coded as older).

Moreover, as I explain below, the invisibility and age of the female vampire is also, in *Let Me In*, connected to her orality and its sexual connotations. Robert Latham writes, “The vampire’s pleasure derives from *biting* and *drinking*—in other words, from acquiring and consuming—an activity that has replaced the libidinal charge of conventional sexuality” (97, emphases added). Most scholars have focused exclusively on the biting function of the vampiric mouth (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*; Dyer; Gohr; Phillips, *Dark Directions*). Most notably, Creed relates vampiric biting to the act of female virginity loss, stating, “The vampire is the sexual initiator *par excellence*” (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 65, emphasis in original) because of how its bite mimics penile entry into others’ vulnerable and until then uninvaded bodies.

However, the vampire’s penchant for *drinking*—more specifically, drinking blood—is also a particularly potent symbol of sexuality. As Marina Levina explains, “[V]ampires’ sexuality is drenched in blood and the desire for blood turns vampires into monsters” (*Pandemics in the Media*, 66). Meanwhile, Amanda Hobson notes ties between vampiric drinking and female sexuality. Hobson states that “fear of women’s sexuality particularly centers on women who embrace their sexual hungers and who act as agent of their own desires, and the female vampire embodies those cultural concerns”

(10) and the cultural anxieties surrounding the excesses of drinking and female sexuality alike. Furthermore, because drinking blood involves the entry of fluids into one's own body, as opposed to biting which entails entering another's body, it is evident that drinking has more feminine connotations. The act of drinking offers representations of the oral body as feminine/penetrated (as opposed to the act of biting and its masculine/penetrating functions).

When enacted through the girlish vampire like Abby in *Let Me In*, the sexualized act of drinking also taps into patriarchal fears regarding girls' and young women's initiation into their sexual identities. Cultural understandings of female sexual initiation are often informed by constructs of age. As Hanne Blank writes,

Throughout history, losing one's virginity has been viewed as a ritual of transformation. Not merely the transformation from being one of the people who hasn't slept with anybody to being one of the ones who has, but a ritual that transforms a boy into a man, a girl into a woman, a child into an adult (97).

Thus, to lose one's virginity is to grow up, mature, and at last, venture into the adult world. In particular, traditional ideals regarding women's sexuality insist that sexual initiation should occur as part of the reproduction of the family; that is, young women engage in sex, according to these beliefs, so as to move from virginal girlhood into de-virginized *motherhood*.

On one hand, the image of the vampire bloody mouth would seem to suggest childlike innocence, like an infant who consumes food and drink with such voracity and lack of etiquette that she herself becomes covered in it. On the other hand, it also signifies innocence and immaturity lost, represented in the figure of the young female vampire

(like Abby in *Let Me In*) who has partaken in the sexualized ritual of drinking, the bloody evidence of her oral defloration on display to the viewers. Vampiric blood *consumption*, therefore, becomes tantamount to sexual *consummation* and the “maturation”—and therefore, the maternalization—of the vampire.

In light of these observations, I am asking two particular questions in this chapter: first, (how) might the depiction of female vampire blood drinking relate to representations of sexual initiation and maturation in *Let Me In*?; and second, (how) does drinking and age in *Let Me In* influence the visual depiction of the female vampire? Ultimately, I argue that each instance of Abby drinking and allowing blood to enter her body in *Let Me In* works to symbolically de-virginize and maternalize her (that is, turn her into a mother figure), and that, once maternalized, Abby is able (through camera angles, lighting, and positioning of the film’s actors) to be figuratively invisible, escape the gaze of other men in the film, and even deny viewers the possibility of gazing at her bloody body—or more specifically, her bloody mouth—by the film’s end. Consequently, Abby queers age in how she can exist in states of both visible girlhood and invisible motherhood. Because Abby’s drinking allows her to become an invisible force within the film, what is being castrated in *Let Me In* is not the female body, but the phallic male gaze itself.

This reading of *Let Me In* is important to emphasize because the few scholarly critiques of *Let Me In* that exist (Bacon, “The Right One or the Wrong One?”; Troy) have claimed rather shortsightedly that the film frames the relationship of Owen and Abby in heteronormative terms while overlooking other possibilities for queer representation that are to be found within this story and within, of course, how age itself becomes queered

through the mouth of the vampire.³ Furthermore, this argument is important to advance because it demonstrates how *Let Me In* challenges what Communication scholar Benny LeMaster has identified as the rise of vampire narratives in the twenty-first century that “overwhelmingly highlight, praise, and reward heteronormativity” (104-5) and traditional sexual values. For instance, one wildly heteronormative, but also wildly profitable, take on the vampire came in the *Twilight* book and film series that achieved popularity with American audiences from 2005-2012. In his book *Abstinence Cinema*, Casey Ryan Kelly notes that *Twilight* is one example of the increase of representations of abstinence and a “no-sex-before-marriage” morality, all rooted in the conservative preservation of the traditional-heteronormative nuclear family, that was common in film during and immediately following the presidency of George W. Bush.⁴ J.M. Tyree groups together modern-day, male vampires like the brooding but sexually reluctant Edward Cullen of *Twilight* (Robert Pattinson) and Bill Compton of the HBO horror series *True Blood* (Stephen Moyer), both of whom exhibit a longing (with varying outcomes) to protect the sexual “purity” of their partners (the virginal Bella and Sookie, respectively). While Tyree does note that these characters have to fight off urges to consume the blood of their lovers (37), he also states that they “remain willing to ‘wait for the right moment’ rather than forcing the issue of sexual congress” (32). Thus, Edward and Bill become unorthodox champions of sexual chastity. Even a title like *Let Me In* would imply that there is not just a “right moment” for sexual consummation in the film, as Tyree

³For instance, Bacon (“The Right One or the Wrong One?”) claims that *Let Me In* employs allusions to famous hetero-romantic courtships (e.g., Abby shows intrigue with Owen’s having to read *Romeo and Juliet* for school) in order to suggest that such couplings are models for Abby and Owen’s own relationship.

⁴That *Let Me In* takes place during America in the 1980s, a decade marked by the reign of Bush’s conservative Presidential forerunner Ronald Reagan, is not without significance.

proclaims, but more specifically, the right moment to finally be “let in” (inside of one’s home, but maybe also inside of one’s body).

However, *Let Me In* offers a much-needed depiction of sexuality that subverts these traditional sexual mores and the policing of female sexuality and sexual initiation. *Let Me In* also differs from these other media texts in that it explores its themes of gender, sexuality, orality through, first, a female vampire, and second, the act of drinking blood. To be sure, other Communication scholars have addressed representations of female monsters in relationship to themes of sexual initiation. For instance, Kelly examines the 2007 independent horror film *Teeth*, the story of a virginal teenage girl who, upon initial sexual activity, learns that her vagina is capable of biting off the penises of her partners. Aware of the fact that *Teeth* was created in the early twenty-first century, a period during which the abstinence movement and its shaming of young women’s exertions of their sexuality were spreading rampantly across the United States, Kelly argues that there may be feminist sensibilities to *Teeth*; Kelly writes that “recent feminist appropriations of the *femme castratrice* illustrate the subversive potential of feminist horror films, particularly at a moment in public culture during which women’s sexual and reproductive freedom are constructed in monstrous terms” (“Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence,” 88, emphasis added). The toothed vagina, or what Creed calls the *vagina dentata* (*The Monstrous-Feminine*), has also been reinterpreted through the vampire.⁵ As Michelle Ashley Gohr states, “The importance of the vampire imagery is that the *vagina dentata* is literally transposed onto the unique fanged mouths so that the upper mouth becomes the lower mouth” (37, emphasis added); in other words,

⁵Martin Fradley even describes the *vagina dentata* of the main character in *Teeth* as “vampiric” in nature (214).

through the vampire, the figurative (vaginal) monstrous mouth becomes a literal (oral) one.⁶

However, although Kelly and Gohr's considerations of the monstrous connotations surrounding female sexuality in horror is valuable, the emphasis placed on the figure of the *vagina dentata* leads, once more, to an exclusive preoccupation with the act of biting. It ignores what, in the vampire, is its equally important propensity for *drinking*. For instance, one image repeatedly showcased in *Let Me In* is that of Abby after she has fed from one of her human casualties, with gobs of blood forming a thick ring of red around her lips (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Abby appears with her lips coated in blood in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

While other horror scholars have shown the connection between biting and castration in this genre, *Let Me In* illustrates how drinking and castration may also

⁶Likewise, Kendall R. Phillips also states that past psychoanalytic thinkers have looked at vampires like the title character of the film *Dracula* (1931) and have seen “Dracula’s penetrating kiss [as] approximating the *vagina dentata*” (*Projected Fears*, 29), though this “kiss” is obviously more accurately characterized as the vaginal bite.

coincide. As noted above, when Abby drinks blood in the film, she sexually “matures” into a state of invisibility, which I interpret as her castrating the filmic gaze. In “The Uncanny,” Freud writes about “the fear of going blind” as “a substitute for the fear of castration” (139). Along similar lines, Kaja Silverman states that, like the male subject of psychoanalysis who seeks to repress his fear of castration, the film-viewing subject is compelled to ward off the fear that one’s gaze is being restricted. Silverman builds off the work of Jean-Pierre Oudart, who states, “Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field” based on what the camera is *not* capturing for its viewers (36). One method of compensating for this absence is through what Oudart calls “suture.” In suturing, the use of a reverse shot is coupled with its preceding shot and brings what was once absent (what could not be seen in the first shot) into the visual arena. Silverman explains that, without the reverse shot, the viewing subject finds his point of view “lacking” complete visual mastery over the film diegesis. Therefore, Silverman claims, “Suture can be understood as the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject’s position is exposed in order to facilitate...new insertions [of images]...to make good that lack” (“Suture,” 231).⁷ Without the suture, there is the possibility for castrative threat to this all-powerful gaze. However, this threat extends beyond just what the camera and the viewer can(not) see. As Mulvey notes, the filmic gaze, which is often an expression of a masculine-patriarchal power in its ability to objectify women on screen, affects not only the way the camera/audience see but also the (male) characters within the film (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”). Therefore, it reasons that when these characters also face sudden

⁷For past queer scholarship on the use of suture in film, see Halberstam, “The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don’t Cry*.”

limitations placed on what the film allows them to see that their gaze, too, has become castrated.

I highlight this theme of castration in *Let Me In* because of how it appeared in the film's source material, the 2008 Swedish horror film *Let the Right One In* (herein *Right One*) that inspired it. One notorious sequence from *Right One* that has prompted much of the scholarship about this film (Bruhn, Gjelsvik, and Thune; Calhoun; LeMaster; Nevarez; Troy; Tyree; Wright, "Vampire in the Stockholm Suburbs") involves Owen and Abby, who are renamed Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant), and Eli (Linda Leandersson), and a disturbing detail about Eli's past that becomes divulged as Oskar peeks through the door to a room where Eli is changing her clothes. Through a reverse camera shot from Oskar's point of view, a close-up of Eli's lower body region reveals that Eli is without female genitals and has only an unsightly scar across her pubic mound. Though the reason for this scar remains a mystery in the film, the 2004 John Ajvide Lindqvist novel from which *Right One* is adapted explains that Eli was born a boy and, as part of the transformation into a vampire, had his genital forcibly removed. Eli is a girl merely in outward appearance, the androgyny of "her" name being the only hint of her prior boyhood.⁸ LeMaster states that the blurring of lines between gender that is typical of some queer representation is taken one step further in *Right One* because as "Oskar acknowledges Eli's gender ambiguity, he also acknowledges Eli's non/human vampire status. As such, gender ambiguity parallels vampirism/non/humanism" (113).

⁸For the purposes of clarity, this chapter will continue to refer to Eli, as well as Abby in *Let Me In*, by female gender pronouns, though scholars (LeMaster) have noted that the original *Right One* switches to male pronouns once the secret of her castration is revealed.

Instead of equating queerness to posthumanism or gender ambiguity as LeMaster does, I see *Let Me In*'s presentation of Abby's acquirement of sexual experience and carnal knowledge (again, through the mouth) as exemplifying a queering of age-gender as she shifts from stages of virginal girlhood to sexually mature motherhood. This shift, again, is tied specifically to the visual representation of Abby in the film and how Abby moves from states of visibility to invisibility after each occasion in which she gives in to her desires and drinks.⁹ To use one noteworthy example of how the invisibility of Abby is exploited in *Let Me In*, the film includes the same scene from *Right One* of Owen spying on Abby as she changes clothes, but while audiences are privy to a shot of his looking at her, there is no reverse shot of Abby's genitals (castrated or not) as there was in the Swedish version. Therefore, *Let Me In* eliminates *Right One*'s castration subplot so that, while Abby is a vampire, she is also (like her new feminine name) unequivocally a girl. Though director Matt Reeves claims that this choice was deliberate so as to avoid having the castration of the female lead "overpower" the rest of the film, it is also indicative of how *Let Me In* seeks to undermine the filmic gaze when Abby, at strategic moments, remains completely unseen.¹⁰

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I provide a review of previous scholarly literature on drinking and the sexuality in the vampire. Second, I explain how the interlocking themes of the family, gender, and age inform vampire mythos, situated primarily in Kathleen Woodward's theory of the "masquerade"

⁹Though many narratives represent the vampire as a creature who can both drink blood and achieve intermittent invisibility, *Let Me In* is perhaps the first to suggest that the former is the cause of the latter.

¹⁰This chapter is not seeking to compare the 2010 remake to the *Right One* novel because, as Simon Bacon states, "Reeves' film is more of an interpretation of Alfredson's movie" ("The Right One of the Wrong One?", 26) than it is an adaptation of the novel.

of youth. Third, and lastly, this chapter I critically analyze the main narrative of *Let Me In* (as it compares to that of *Right One*), as well as select paratextual materials from the film's DVD/Blu-ray release, with an aim to excavate how age-gender and the orality of the vampire intermingle within the film.

Orality, Gender, and the Vampire

When Abby first graces the screen in *Let Me In*, she is moving into town on a cold, winter night. She is joined by an older man named simply "The Father" (Richard Jenkins), though this character bore the name Håkan in the original *Right One* (Per Ragnar). Audiences eventually learn that the Father is not actually Abby's paternal guardian and has instead been her friend since his childhood. He does take care of Abby, though, by hunting down humans in order to supply her with the blood she needs. After a botched attempt to bring her more to drink, the Father feeds the girl from himself and commits suicide. Abby then turns to Owen, and the two children form an intimate bond with one another. Owen is faced with the dilemma of whether to look out for Abby, and even aid her in her blood cravings as the Father did. He must also deal with the unremitting physical and verbal assaults he receives from a gang of bullies on a daily basis at school, despite Abby's attempts to get him to fight back against them.¹¹

While *Let Me In* is, as it was in *Right One*, a "twist on the ways young people negotiate their interpersonal and social roles" in a world that can be so cruel and perilous to children (Wright, "Vampire in the Stockholm Suburbs," 67), it is also about the receding of childhood, the emergence of adulthood, and their meeting point in the vampire and its monstrous orality. Surprisingly, few scholars have made the mouth the

¹¹For more on how bullying is addressed in *Right One*, see Crofts and van Rijswijk.

fundamental core of their analyses of vampire narratives. One exception is Christopher Craft in his essay on gender and sexuality in Bram Stoker's classic novel, *Dracula* (1897). Craft writes, "As the primary site of erotic experience in *Dracula*, this mouth equivocates, giving the lie to the easy separation of the masculine and the feminine," particularly as this mouth that both bites and drinks muddles "the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive" (169).

As I have already noted, the "receptivity" of drinking, in which substances are brought into one's open body, implies that drinking is a feminine/feminizing activity for the vampire. Still, Craft barely explores this component to the vampire's monstrous orality when discussing the female vampires that *Dracula* spawns. Instead, according to Craft, while vampirism sexually invigorates women in the novel, it also "usurps the function of penetration" and thwarts what a normative "taxonomy of gender reserves for males" (180). Of course, this argument fits within Craft's larger critique of how female vampires, despite their sexed bodies, may come to adopt male bodily functions and destabilize conventional, binary understandings of gender. Nonetheless, to underscore how the female vampiric mouth may take on a more active/"penetrative" role should not discount its potentially passive, consuming, and overall feminine attributes.

Furthermore, the blood being drunk by the vampire can comprise a multitude of meanings, what some have referred to as a complex map of "haematophilic semiotics" (Reyes, "'Who Ordered the Hamburger with AIDS?'"), including the semiotics of age. On one hand, the plentitude of blood in the vampire narrative can imply a childlike fascination with the body. For example, Rochelle Wright states that scenes such as one in *Right One* (and duplicated in *Let Me In*) in which Oskar/Owen attempts to form a "blood

pact” with Eli/Abby remains without any adult sexual subtext. Wright claims that Oskar/Owen’s proposal that he and Eli/Abby cement their companionship by mixing blood could be construed as a “stand-in for the merging of other bodily fluids—that is, for sex—but the symbolic gesture itself is generally associated with vows of undying friendship between pre-adolescent boys” (61) without the adult qualms concerning contamination and the transmission of disease through the blood.

However, the blood that is put into the body of the vampire, by the mouth or by other passageways, has also been read as a means through which parental, and oftentimes patriarchal, order is maintained. For example, Nicola Nixon nods to the 1987 American vampire film *Near Dark*, in which a father is forced to give his child a blood transfusion, using his own blood, in order to turn his child from vampire back into human. Nixon explains that the child “is saved by a resurgence of good, paternal blood” that counters the vampiric blood that has overtaken him (126). Conversely, though, vampires themselves can be parental and can use their blood to preserve their familial lines. J. Halberstam notes that, in Stoker’s *Dracula*, the vampire is able to “reproduce” his offspring by requiring them to “drin[k] blood from the bosom of the King Vampire himself...” (*Skin Shows*, 101). Xavier Aldana Reyes adds that later vampire narratives, like *True Blood*, have appropriated this procedure by which “the feeding of blood to the victim...implies the acceptance of a parental role” (“Who Ordered the Hamburger with AIDS?,” 61), as in Bill’s turning teenager Jessica (Deborah Ann Woll) into a vampire that he must now train and “parent” into maturity.

Related to its patriarchal undertones, scholars have suggested that blood can be seen as a masculine fluid. In her writing on blood and zombie outbreak films, Levina

states, “Much as a bite penetrates and breaks the boundary of the body, *blood penetrates* and affects the boundaries of group and national identities” (79, “Cultural Narratives of Blood,” emphasis added). To extrapolate from this observation, though, and move it into the territory of the vampire, I consider the blood that the vampire consumes as also penetrating—as in, penetrating the *lips* of those who sip it. This view differs from other scholarly readings of the vampire’s hankering for blood. For example, in her work on vampire tales as representations of female sexual initiation, Creed states, “It is possible to interpret the vampire myth as a story about defloration. The vampire bites the woman, the teeth penetrate her neck, blood flows” (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 66). Of course, the blood that slathers the vampire’s voracious lips could easily amount to “the suggestion of a bleeding vagina” (Craft 186) and the vampire’s destruction of his victim’s (hymenal) body.¹² This configuration, though, is too narrow, in that it assumes that the vampire is a male entity and that the bleeding he causes is synonymous to the rupture of the hymen and the mild release of blood that occurs during many women’s first (hetero)sexual experience. In contrast, Ernest Jones argues that the mouth of the vampire might be an alternate vagina and the blood that this vaginal mouth drinks is “an equivalent for semen...” (59). Once more, it is the blood with all its masculine-patriarchal properties that, via drinking, is being incorporated into the supposedly feminine mouth of the vampire.

Along with these connections between blood consumption and the maintenance of paternal authority, Sigmund Freud correlates blood with the *maternal* in his study of rituals of virginity loss in so-called “primitive” cultures. Freud claims that these cultures

¹²Ironically, sociologist Laura M. Carpenter finds that oral sex is often common among adolescents who see it as “an activity compatible with retaining (technical) virginity” (41).

see virginity as a taboo, because of the appearance of blood found in many young women's "deflowering" (the "spilling" of blood during sex being seen as opposing societal prohibitions against violence) ("The Taboo of Virginity," 196-7). Additionally, Freud argues that witnessing female virginity loss is also taboo because it simulates another encounter with the uncanny ("The Taboo of Virginity," 197). As stated in chapter 1, the un/familiar uncanny is often likened to a remembrance of one's original but forgotten "home": the womb. That is, the first fear of the sight of blood in virginity loss leads to subsequent fears about the maternal female body. In the vampiric act of drinking, as the blood being drunk is given entry into the female body, it represents the virginal body being coopted, which by patriarchal standards means that she is being prepared to become a wife and, more significantly, a future mother. But as explained in the next section, this brand of maternal womanhood into which she is aged/sexually initiated provokes an even greater fear: not the fear of seeing the maternal (womb), but the fear of *not* being able to hold her in one's sight at all.

Age, Invisibility and the Vampire

The most famous line cited from Nina Auerbach's well-known cultural history of the vampire is that "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (145). To reframe this statement, one could also say that the vampire embraces every age; it can be thousands of years old but never succumb to the same death and deterioration (or even the occasional wrinkles) that human beings do as they grow older. Sally Chivers claims that "the fascination with vampire narratives is always in part a fascination with immortality and youth" (91), which is all the more true in the case of the vampire child. The infinite youthfulness of the vampire child does prove enticing when (as stated in chapter 1)

advanced aging is culturally perceived as a form of decline. However, what the vampire child does is disturb the divisions between states of childhood and adulthood. Jean R. Hillabond writes, “A vampire who never ages on the outside can acquire valuable adult knowledge without settling for a life of social conformity” (79) that adult society demands of them.¹³

One attempt to repress the child (including the vampire child) and force her to conform is to integrate her within the normative family unit, which for the vampire girl like Abby in *Let Me In* amounts to constraining her within a decidedly maternal role. But as previously stated, it is the sexuality of the vampire girl that is seen as particularly in need of being constrained. Robin Wood explains that Western culture often seeks to repress sexuality when it is not in the service of procreation and contributing to the family line; Wood states, “The ‘ideal’ inhabitant of our culture will be the individual whose sexuality is sufficiently fulfilled by the monogamous heterosexual union necessary for the reproduction of future ideal inhabitants...” (8). However, Wood also notes that cultural repression, including sexual repression, is especially enforced for women and children (9-10, 11). Thus, the familial structure also brings with it expectations and repressive standards regarding the part that sexuality, and especially women’s sexuality as it blooms during adolescence, should play in in the maintenance of the family.

Though some twentieth-century vampire cinema like Neil Jordan’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) would deviate from traditional notions of family (Benefiel), more contemporary iterations of the vampire, such as *Twilight* (2008) and its four sequels, have depicted girls and women as finding comfort and security within the family. For example,

¹³As Bacon puts it, the vampire child “stands between the stricture of society [imposed by the adult world] and the pleasure of unrestrained self-indulgence [of childhood]” (“Lost Boys,” 152-3).

in *Twilight*, a teenage girl, Bella (Kristen Stewart), falls in love with the vampire Edward, and is informed that she will die if she has sex with him before marriage; they do abstain from sex until their honeymoon night after which she very quickly becomes pregnant and has to be turned into a vampire, and join Edward's bloodsucking clan, in order to avoid dying during a difficult labor. In her evaluation of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* book series (from which the films were adapted), Anna Silver states, "Meyer proposes that marriage and motherhood provide women with equality that they do not possess as single women. Motherhood becomes a location not only of pleasure and satisfaction but also of power" (123). Thus, not only is family held in high regard by these new-age vampires, but motherhood is also made a desirable goal for the female child to achieve.¹⁴

A film like *Twilight*, though, cannot be separated from its moral agenda and its espousal of the supposed dangers of virginity loss for girls and young women. Feminist writers have noted the flagrant age politics that encourage female abstinence. Jessica Valenti claims that virginity is celebrated by abstinence crusaders because it "isn't just about not having sex, it's about not being a woman—and instead being in a state of perpetual girlhood..." (30). As a result, Blank explains, "Virginity loss gets enacted... as a rite of passage that marks the borderland of adulthood..." (101). One's virginity is assumed to protect one's youth and status as a girl, with the conversion from girlhood to adult womanhood brought about through eventual sexual initiation. This experience, though, becomes filtered through cultural discourses that equate womanhood to maternity; Blank writes,

¹⁴In his study of the vampire as a model of queer sexuality, Harry M. Benshoff states that many films, particularly those following the rise of conservatism in the American 1980s, frame vampires as "violent homosexuals...[who] are destroyed at the end of the film while the 'normal' family survives" (*Monsters in the Closet*, 255), as evidenced in entries to the horror genre such as *Near Dark* and *The Lost Boys* (1987).

Children's sexual curiosity and adult sexuality are different in many ways.

Perhaps the most important difference is that adult (hetero)sexuality has the potential of producing pregnancies, which in turn tends to lead to the assumption of that most adult of responsibilities, the rearing of the next generation (97).

While this chapter is not entirely concerned with the procreative aspects of motherhood that were addressed in the last chapter's analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*, the point to be made here is that sexual initiation has been believed as causing the onset of a womanhood in which maternity is endorsed as its principal purpose. As Ken Gelder contends, "[A]ll women, even vampire women, are potential mothers" (104). When Kelly states, on the topic of the *Twilight* films, that "[i]n this world, abstinence...is preparation for a domestic life in which women's sexual desires and personal autonomy are confined within the structure of the neotraditional family" (*Abstinence Cinema*, 27), it is, above all, motherhood as the domestic-familial identity that awaits the women of these contemporary vampire chronicles.

By extension, adulthood may be an inevitable fate for the men of these narratives, too. On the night that the Father departs for what will be his last kill before his untimely death in *Let Me In*, he looks back to see Owen, curious about his enigmatic neighbor, staring at him as he leaves. Simon Bacon argues that in this scene "the two characters lock eyes, almost realizing even then that each will replace the other—the past seeing its future and vice versa" ("The Right One or the Wrong One?," 32). It is the gaze of these male characters that affirms that Owen is poised to shift from boyhood to adult masculinity, and perhaps even take over the Father's parental responsibilities for Abby.

Although the gaze is imperative to how age and gender operate in *Let Me In*, I want to briefly return to the topic of female sexual initiation and the psychoanalytic foundations of this dissertation in order to make a final qualification about Freud's writing on the taboos of virginity loss. Freud claims that one more reason why virginity loss may be regarded as taboo is because it promises to disempower men. Not only does sex lead to male flaccidness ("The Taboo of Virginity," 198-9), but Freud observes a tendency for women to harbor feelings of resentment toward the men that "take" their virginity, with the individual woman seeking "vengeance for her defloration" ("The Taboo of Virginity," 206). Freud even introduces one case study of a newlywed woman whose violent dreams seemed to suggest "the woman's wish to castrate her young husband and to keep his penis for herself" ("The Taboo of Virginity," 205). Therefore, even though the male subject aspires to retain some modicum of phallic power—which, for Owen and the Father, is paternalistic power centered on the gaze—the perceived threat of castration to that power still lingers, whether from his avenging bride or from his discomfort in seeing the images of blood and female sex organs that remind him too much of the maternal womb/body (and the targeting of his precious genitalia).

There is a fascinating contradiction, though, in that even as it is the sight of the female body—and, more specifically, the maternal body—that terrifies the male subject, the aged female body is often outright excluded, in film and other media, from being the object of the gaze. Youth in general is prized in mass media. As Twigg states, "Consumer culture is quintessentially youth culture in that it presents and promotes youthfulness as the ideal" (64). Vampire stories are no exception to this idolization of youth because the

“emphasis on the fact that vampires have human bodies that do not age resonates with the dominant discourse of aging and ageism” (Chivers 91) in American society.

Established theory on gender and the gaze in film, such as that of Mulvey, insists, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (62-3) because of their “difference” from the male body. As I explained above, this gaze, what Mulvey calls the “male gaze,” manifests not only in male characters in how they look at female characters in film, but also in the gaze of the camera as it records its female stars and in the gaze of the audience watching the film. While the ideal filmic spectator, according to Mulvey, is thought to be male, he is also classified as a young spectator. In other words, those afforded the right to gaze certainly benefit from gender-based privilege, but that is not to mitigate their mutual age-based privileges centered on what Kathleen Woodward calls “the youthful structure of the look” (“Performing Age, Performing Gender,” 166). The sexism that favors the male point-of-view thrives in collaboration with the ageism that glorifies how the young see the world.

Relatedly, Woodward claims that those who are made a spectacle of the gaze are also determined by gender and by age. Woodward declares, “Youth is...understood as giving one the right to be seen and heard” (“Youth and the Masquerade,” 149). Consequently, much like the female body may be erotically decorated and exhibited for the approval of the male gaze, it may also don what Woodward calls a “masquerade” of younger age.¹⁵ Woodward explains, “In a culture which so devalues age, masquerade

¹⁵Film scholars like Mary Ann Doane have used the language of the masquerade to address the performative aspects of gender and how it can be utilized for “flaunting femininity” so as to parody it and “hol[d] it as a distance” from oneself (“Film and the Masquerade,” 138). The difference, though, as Woodward alleges (and as I wrote in Chapter 1), is that while the masquerade of femininity is about bringing to light the absurdity of a prescriptive gender

with respect to the aging body is first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth” (“Youth and the Masquerade,” 148). Youthful femininity, as such, is performed in order to remain visible, whereas older age can make one invisible and outside of the interests of the objectifying gaze.

Creed would seem to complement Woodward when she discusses “those moments in horror when the spectator, unable to stand the images of horror unfolding before his/her eyes, is forced to look away, to not-look, to look anywhere but at the screen...” (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 28). What Creed claims that spectators cannot bear to look at are those monstrous images that conjure the abject and which, as expressed in chapter 1, are often correlated with the maternal. Therefore, what is critical is that it is not just the female body that is presumably unseen by the spectator because of the horror it provokes, but a body that is also indisputably *older as well as maternal*.

Of course, it is not that the older female body is *never* recognized by the young male gaze. In fact, as Woodward argues, the subject who gazes can only be deemed “young” if there is an object that can be seen as “old” from which he can differentiate himself. However, like the experience of the horror film viewer, or of the male subject who happens to catch sight of the female (de-virginized, and therein maternalized) genitals, seeing the abject-older-maternal object of horror is but a prerequisite to eventually striving to not see it at all—to close one’s eyes, turn one’s head away, and

construct that no person could ever truly and completely embody, the masquerade of age is an attempt regain what one in fact did embody and has since lost: one’s youth.

overall, make *invisible* that which comes across the screen that is just too much to handle.¹⁶

Still, should being consigned to invisibility, even in spite of the ageist principles contributing to it, automatically be taken as a disempowered position? Might invisibility to the male gaze even be a preferred and chosen fate? The vampire is one figure of horror well-equipped to exploit the masquerade of age, as it can appear young, and thus, visually appealing to a youthful gaze while masking how old is truly is. However, because of the vampire's agelessness and the fact that it can signify both a youthful and an older identity, as well as the cultural construction of female age with states of in/visibility, the female vampire can become both visible and invisible within the same body. Abby in *Let Me In* is no exception, conveying both youth and maturity as she rotates between being within and outside of the gazes of the film. The invisibility of Abby is not tangential to her orality, though, but is directly caused by it. As hypothesized above, the young female vampire who drinks is engaging in an act analogous to sexual initiation and giving consent for another body (at least its fluids) to enter her own. The film visibly highlights Abby's mouth, coated with blood after her coital consumptions. The bloody mouth signifies a de-virginization that, in combination with the care and compassion she shows toward Owen, is indicative of her sexual maternalization. Prior to each act of drinking, Abby puts on the masquerade of youthful femininity, and she is a visible object of the

¹⁶Some challenges to these claims of the male-youthful gaze do exist, as scholars have attempted to theorize a gaze that is directed by the female eye. For example, Diana Fuss applies the metaphor of vampirism to her work on women as the target audience for images of female models that are commonly depicted in fashion photography. Fuss states that "it is women themselves who are invited to actively consume the image—female spectators who are constrained to assume the position of lesbian vampires" ("Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," 729). Fuss even interprets, from a psychoanalytic vantage point, that this consumption of the female form is a recovery of the maternal presence from which these women have become alienated, thereby making the mother the unusually "older" object of the gaze.

gaze (a little girl) to the world. However, after she drinks, Abby is aged into an older maternal identity, in which her body (including her mouth) become increasingly invisible to not only the male characters in the film, but eventually the camera and the film viewers.

In a similar sense as Freud's supposition that virginity loss evokes with the maternal body and its disarming of phallic masculinity, Abby renders the phallic male gaze futile and impotent when it is unable to confine her (mouth) within its visual parameters. Abby sustains the castrative potential of her own newly maternalized oral body by, in effect, castrating the gaze. That is, her maternal body and her blood-guzzling vampire mouth become so horrifying so that one is simply not strong enough (not endowed enough?) to hold it in one's gaze.

To be sure, these explanations for the meanings behind female vampiric drinking run the risk of being heteronormative and reconstituting the consuming female body into a feminine, sexually passive role.¹⁷ This point should not be taken lightly because, as Levina explains, "Vampires' feeding has historically been viewed as a sexual act, which in recent decades, increasingly has been seen as homoerotic" (*Pandemics in the Media*, 66), especially in encounters between, and in the oral penetration of, same-sex bodies.¹⁸ However, as this dissertation is claiming, the queerness of the vampire need not be limited to just a queering of sexuality, but also a queering of age as it becomes intermixed with the gender and orality of the vampire. In this chapter, that queerness is achieved by

¹⁷This characterization of female vampires as sexual and as possessing bodies that are entered, though, is consistent with how the violence done to them has often been depicted; Elizabeth McCarthy states that the "literary and cinematic female vampire is almost exclusively dispatched by the stake, her overtly sexualized nature punished through a fatal penetrating blow" (99).

¹⁸For more on homoeroticism in vampire narratives, see the work of Andrew Schoop and Richard Dyer.

drawing upon the binaries of young/old and in/visible, and using the male gaze's aversions to seeing women of a certain age against itself. The female vampire revels in the paradox of the filmic gaze that cannot *drink in* those images of the female body when it becomes defined, first, by maternity (i.e., older age), and relatedly, by *drinking* itself.

Thus, this chapter is interested in examining these varied themes of vampirism, orality, age/maternity, and invisibility that exist in *Let Me In*, often to a greater extent than they did in *Right One*. Like the previous chapter on *I Spit on Your Grave*, this chapter also calls upon the *Let Me In* DVD/Blu-ray audio commentary track (featuring the testimony of director Matt Reeves), its cover design, and its interactive menus as paratextual support for how these themes are packaged for its audiences. This chapter, though, also expounds upon other materials found on the *Let Me In* DVD/Blu-ray—including a deleted scene between Abby and Owen, and a behind-the-scenes photo still gallery—in order to reap further paratextual insights from them.

The Drinking Mother and the Invisible Vampire in *Let Me In*

Maternity and the Gaze in Let Me In

Before inspecting how orality, specifically vampiric drinking, is represented in *Let Me In*, it is necessary to see how Owen becomes associated with the youthful male gaze in the film, and Abby with the maternal in her relationship to Owen. Matt Reeves, director of *Let Me In*, admits that his intent was to differentiate this version of the story of Owen and Abby (Oskar and Eli in *Right One*) by presenting the film largely through the perspective of Owen. Reeves, in his audio commentary, states,

I really wanted this [film] to be as much as possible...in Owen's point of view.

And so, the idea, that doesn't occur this way in the book or the Swedish film...[is

that] I tried as much as possible to use a kind of more classical point-of-view filmmaking and a lot of sort of watching Kodi [Kodi Smit-McPhee, the actor portraying the role of Owen] watch something and see something the way he sees it...

Some scholars have also noted this technique, such as Maria Holmgren Troy who claims that Owen is positioned as an “observer” throughout the film (34). Furthermore, a behind-the-scenes photo from the film’s DVD/Blu-ray disc also contains an image of Smit-McPhee from the set; in this image, the actor can be seen standing behind the film camera and looking through the lens as if taking the place of the filmmaker (Figure 13), creating links between the actor, his character, and the filmic male gaze.



Figure 13: Actor Kodi Smit-McPhee looks through the camera in a behind-the-scenes photo from *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Owen’s predilection for watching others is also apparent in his earliest scenes in the film. Unlike Oskar in *Right One*, Owen’s room in *Let Me In* is equipped with a telescope that he uses to spy on his neighbors. It is this telescope that allows him, for instance, to watch Abby and the Father move into the building in the middle of the night. However, the first time viewers are shown Owen using his telescope, Owen is seen

peeping on a heterosexual couple in another apartment while they engage in sexual foreplay. Owen stares longingly as the man kisses the woman's neck and fondles her breasts. However, the woman spots Owen and angrily closes the blinds to block his view of them. What is indicated in this scene, then, is that Owen is a boy who is attempting to wield the gaze that is promised to him because of his youth and masculinity, but whose gaze has limitations imposed on it and cannot be as all-powerful as he would hope.

Let Me In emphasizes the gaze of its other male characters, as well. Bacon, as previously cited, writes that an exchange of glances between Owen and the Father, the double for Håkan from *Right One*, forges a bond defined by a visual connection and a shared tendency to constantly monitor their environments and the people in them. When the Father pursues humans to feed to Abby, he wears a black plastic mask in which the only visible part of his face, as shown in several close-up shots, is his eyes (Figure 14). In fact, Reeves admits that he hired Richard Jenkins, the actor portraying the Father, partially because of his eyes and how he felt that they would photograph on screen.



Figure 14: The eyes of the Father peer through his mask in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Interestingly, Owen is also prone to wearing a mask in the film in scenes when he fantasizes in his bedroom about being a serial killer.¹⁹ In *Let Me In*, Owen is taunted by bullies at school who call Owen a “little girl” as they antagonize him. Owen sports his mask and stalks around his room like a maniac before going outside and impersonating his bullies, asking “Are you scared, little girl?”, while stabbing a tree with a knife. Thus, with this minor change in the story from *Right One* (in which neither Oskar nor Håkan ever masked themselves in these scenes), *Let Me In* defines a universe in which it is men who enact the gaze (sometimes violently so toward female bodies) and who, because of the identical costumes they put on to do so (like boys dressing up as superheroes), appear to be the prototypical youthful male gazers that proliferate in cinema.

Additionally, the language of Owen’s bullies that he adopts in his violent fantasies is different from Oskar in *Right One*, in which Oskar (and the tree that he imagines as his prey) is prompted to “squeal like a pig” as he is tortured. Troy writes that although the bullies “calling him [Oskar] a pig calls his humanity and personhood into question, policing gender and sexual boundaries is not a part of the Swedish bullies’ humiliation of Oskar” (36). Therefore, the gendered alteration of Owen’s bullying in *Let Me In* would at first seem to imply that the film is preoccupied with regulating gender, one aspect of which is putting male characters in the role of proprietors of the gaze.

Another aspect of how the film tries to regulate gender is in its endeavors to fix Abby within an appropriate feminine identity as the youthful object of the gaze. Still, Abby’s complex age confounds this simple arrangement. Indeed, despite masquerading as a young girl, Abby is also framed as elder to Owen. In a line lifted from Eli in *Right*

¹⁹Owen’s mask, though, as Reeves explains in his audio commentary, is actually made from a mold of Jenkins’s face that was used for preparing special make-up prosthetics for the film.

One, Abby asks Owen, “Would you still like me even if I wasn’t a girl?” The presumption is that Abby is asking how Owen would feel if she were not a human but a monster (and in *Right One*, how Oskar would feel if he knew Eli had actually been born male), but perhaps it can be argued that Abby is concerned with how Owen might react if he were to know that (as far as her years alive) she is not a girl but a (very old) woman.

Nonetheless, apart from their identities as perpetual children in young-looking bodies, Abby and Eli also possess an older and more maternal identity that both films convey in nearly matching scenes involving the girls and Owen/Oskar. In *Let Me In* (as it was in *Right One*), Abby encourages Owen to defend himself against his bullies.

Abby: Owen, listen. [...] You have to hit back. You have to hit back hard.

Owen: I can’t. There’s three of them.

Abby: Then you hit back even harder. Hit them harder than you dare and then they’ll stop.

Owen: What if they hit me back?

Abby: You have a knife.

Owen: Yeah, and what if that doesn’t stop ’em?

Abby: Then I’ll help you.

Owen: But you’re a girl.

Abby: I’m a lot stronger than you think I am.

Not only does Abby offer Owen help and assistance like a good protective mother, but she also makes it clear that she is not just a girl, but rather, someone who is much “stronger” and has a maternal strength that will cause her to stop at nothing to be there for her “son.”

Moreover, Abby at the beginning of the film seems to not merely be infantilizing Owen, but guiding him into a patriarchal masculine identity. Owen is baffled when he loans Abby his Rubik's Cube puzzle and she solves it in one night, but Abby sits down with him the next night and instructs him in how she did it. That is, like a parent, Abby is using this childish prop to aid Owen in developing the spatial reasoning skills necessary to complete this desired task. To be sure, the sexual implications of these scenes between them are also abundant. Along with prodding Owen to participate in masculine violence—including knifing (and thus, penetrating) his enemies, which Eli does not implore Oskar to do in *Right One*—Abby is also willingly teaching Owen how to unlock her “box” for his own amusement. Additionally, it is after Abby first starts playing with the cube herself that she grasps her stomach out of hunger pain. The sudden arrival of this pain is like a recreation of maternal labor pain, but it can also be said that there is significance in that it is with this childish “experimenting” with “the box” that an appetite for blood is *aroused* within Abby.

Early on, of course, Abby is both girl and woman, and this dichotomy is woven into other dialogue from the film that is also borrowed from *Right One*. Owen asks how old she is, to which she responds, “I’m 12, more or less.” Later in the film, once Owen learns of her vampirism, Abby clarifies: “I’m 12, but I’ve been 12 for a very long time.” This duality to Abby and her young-old age is also reinforced through some of the film’s visual paratextual content, such as the image that accompanies the Deleted Scenes menu of the film’s DVD/Blu-ray disc. On the menu screen, Abby is displayed looking out a window, her reflection creating a split screen effect that hints at two sides to Abby within

this one character. Quite conspicuously, one of these images, perhaps Abby's older side, with a flash of light, in lieu of a splash of blood, approximate to her mouth (Figure 15).



Figure 15: The dual image of Abby on the DVD/Blu-ray release of *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Maternal drinking, however, is depicted in *Let Me In* as an act that either cannot be seen or that makes invisible the bodies of those who choose to drink, as demonstrated not just through Abby but through Owen's actual mother. Although Oskar's mother in *Right One* (Karin Berquist) is unable to give her son the kind of help he needs (for example, she is presumably ignorant of just how much he is being mercilessly bullied at school), she is at least visibly present in the film and even shares special mother-son rituals with him, such as when the two brush their teeth together at night, laughing and smiling as they look at one another (Figure 16). In *Let Me In*, Owen's mother (Cara Buono) is emotionally distant and is more invested in arguing with her soon-to-be ex-husband, Owen's father, than in caring for Owen. To underscore this point, Owen's mother's face is obscured throughout the entire film. In directing Cara Buono, the actress in the role of Owen's mother, director Matt Reeves states,

I said... “[Y]ou don’t really see her face.” And I said, “[Y]ou know, the idea here is that you are going to be sort of represented in a way that [Owen] sort of is relating to you, which is that you’re so sort of drawn up into all of the difficulty with what’s going on in your divorce that he feels kind of isolated and he kind of can’t even see your face, if that makes sense, emotionally.”

During a dinner scene, the shot of Owen’s mother is intentionally out of focus, with the only item just barely in focus being a carafe filled with wine in front of her (Figure 17). When she receives a phone call, Owen’s mother steps away from the table and the camera frames her from her shoulders down, accentuating the glass of wine she is carrying in her hand. Whenever Owen’s mother is seen in many of the scenes that follow, she is deep asleep (her face buried in a pillow or couch cushion away from the camera) and surrounded by empty glasses and bottles, broadcasting her alcoholism to the audience. The oral crux of this mother-son relationship is moved from one of dental hygiene in *Right One* to drinking and addiction in *Let Me In*, placing a barrier between them that makes her practically invisible to him.



Figure 16: Oskar brushes his teeth with his mother in *Let the Right One In* (2008) (image captured by author)



Figure 17: Owen's drinking mother is kept out of focus and unseen in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Without a doubt, there are certainly hints of alcoholism in *Right One*, too. For example, one of Oskar's weekend visits with his father is interrupted when a friend brings over a six-pack of beer and his father cannot resist indulging, leading him to pal around with his buddy rather than spend quality time with his son. Nonetheless, considering, as this chapter has so far, the vaginal metaphor of the vampire mouth—and more importantly, the symbolism of the female vampire becoming maternal once she allows the sexual entry of blood into her mouth—the relative invisibility of Owen's drinking mother may prime audiences for what is to come, as Abby's own compulsive drinking will also move her outside the gaze of others, including Owen's, as the plot unfolds.

The after effects of Abby's oral activities are what mark her as monstrous throughout the film, such as when she unexpectedly vomits after Owen shares some of his favorite candy with her (as she is presumably allergic to human food). Like Owen's mother, Abby is also seen periodically drinking in what are truly the film's most gruesome scenes. Abby fools a local man by pretending to be injured, whimpering in the middle of a dark and wet above-ground tunnel. When the man picks her up in an effort to rescue her, Abby pounces. Abby knocks him down, bites into him, and drinks vigorously.

She looks up toward the camera, her eyes glowing amber and blood gushing from her mouth. Abby breaks his man's neck and immediately runs away, the camera not trailing behind her but remaining stuck in the tunnel with the dead body.²⁰

Two elements of this scene demand extrapolation. First, the setting itself has significance, as Reeves explains:

This was a very strange tunnel that we found in Los Alamos, and I was really drawn to it because I thought it looked like, I don't know what, a birth canal or an esophagus. I don't know, but I felt there was something disturbing about just walking in the space.

By Reeves's own confession, and through his description of the tunnel as both esophageal and intrauterine, the *mise-en-scène* contributes to the construction of the consuming body and maternal body as one in the same.

Second, Abby's freakish non-human eyes (in comparison to those of Owen and the Father), and the decision to have the camera not track her after her drunken binge, both belittles the gaze and allude to its limitations. It is as if after the blood has been taken into her mouth that Abby, "penetrated" by the substance, is no longer the youthful-innocent girl with whom the audience may have sympathized. When Abby drops the masquerade of being a young and helpless child, she becomes the abject-maternal creature whose ferocity (and age) will not be contained within the look of the camera. The cover of the *Let Me In* DVD release, which features Abby's face as her eyes emit an ominous shade of red, further juxtaposes blood and the gaze, the former being an affront to the latter (Figure 18).

²⁰In *Right One*, after killing this man, Eli remains on the screen within the visual purview of the camera, and remorsefully sobs over what she has done.

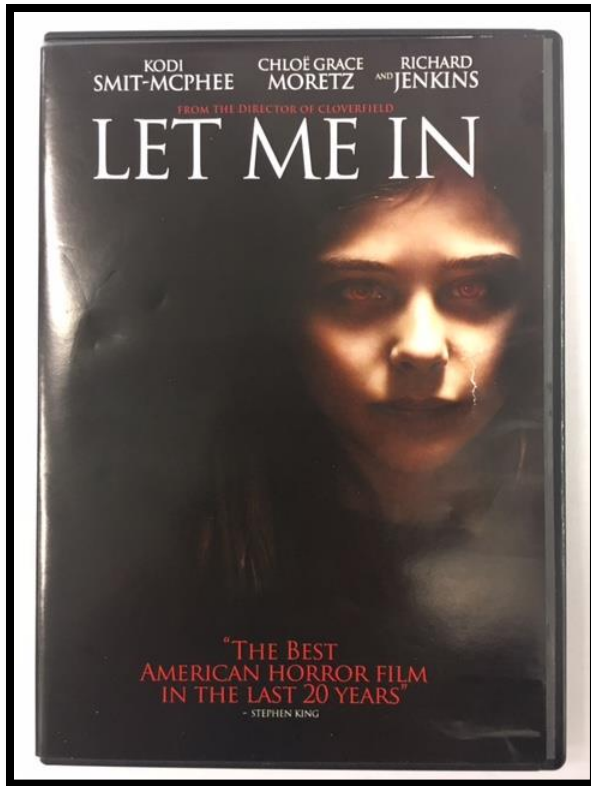


Figure 18: Abby’s deep red eyes are displayed on the DVD cover of *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Later scenes, though, impede the gaze not only of the camera, but of the other male characters and of the viewers themselves. Three moments of this type, all of which are death scenes marked by vampiric drinking—the death of the Father, the death of a detective investigating the Father’s killing spree, and the death of Owen’s bullies—will be explored in the remaining pages of this analysis. Each of these moments involve seeing Abby *lose it*—the purity of her mouth, her civilized demeanor, and any pretense of “virtuous” girlhood—again and again.²¹ Yet it is the reassurance of the familiar male gaze that is lost, as well.

²¹As Andrea Dworkin explains in her writing on the virginal girl-turned-vampire in *Dracula*, “A literal virgin...she knows nothing and will know nothing until after she...become[s] a sexual predator: then she has an appetite for blood, an appetite for life, *never mediated or more than temporarily sated*” (*Intercourse*, 144, emphasis added). Because, Dworkin claims, the female vampire’s hungers are met with only temporary relief, it requires repeated feedings, repeated drawings of blood, and repeated bloody displays along the mouth of the vampire.

The Death of the Father and the Detective

On his last night alive, Håkan in *Right One* treks into the town in order to find a new person whose blood he can drain and bring to Eli. Unfortunately, after his plans go awry and his would-be victim attracts witnesses to the scene of the crime, Håkan pours acid over his face so that he will not be recognized. Håkan is rushed to the hospital but refuses to speak to the doctors and nurses out of worry that it will lead to their discovery of Eli. When she hears the news, Eli comes to the hospital and, after posing as Håkan's daughter, inquires as to which floor of the hospital he is being detained. Eli scales the exterior of the hospital before finding Håkan's room and tapping at his window. Håkan opens the window and, in a last moment of tenderness between the two, he allows Eli to bite his neck and drink from him. After his noble act of sacrifice, Håkan tumbles to the hard ground below. The camera cuts back from a shot of Håkan's lifeless body to show viewers Eli, her countenance solemn and her mouth now bloodied.

Let Me In recounts these same events, but in two separate sequences. The film opens in the hospital after the Father has already disfigured himself. A detective (Elias Koteas) who has been trying to find the culprit behind the bizarre deaths in Los Alamos enters the Father's room and, in direct address facing the camera, interrogates him to no avail. The detective is pulled out of the room when he receives a call informing him that a young girl has come to the hospital claiming, like Eli, to be the mysterious burnt man's daughter. The detective returns to the Father's room to find its inhabitant missing and the window wide open. This opening serves as foreshadowing for the full scene that will occur later.

Comparable to *Right One*, Abby does go to the Father's window and drink from him. However, rather than immediately display the image of the bereaving and freshly drunken Abby after he plummets to his death, the film cuts to the detective as he receives the call about Abby and frenziedly re-enters the hospital room. The detective runs to the window and cranes his neck outside. He looks out longingly into the night, trying to see the dead body, but maybe also desperately searching for the "daughter" who he surmises may be responsible for this tragedy (Figure 19). The detective ducks back into the room, and Abby is seen perched on the ledge right next to where the oblivious detective had been looking for her (Figure 20). Despite her grotesque appearance, the blood of the deceased smeared on her mouth, the sadness sprawled across her face is also undeniable.



Figure 19: The detective seeks out Abby in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)



Figure 20: Abby appears outside of the detective's gaze in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

While *Right One* presents the entire aftermath of Håkan's death from Eli's perspective, *Let Me In* interjects with the detective's point of view and his frantic attempts to spot the strange girl so that he can bring her in for questioning. However, he cannot see her and not just because she is shrouded in darkness. With the drinking of the Father's blood and his subsequent demise, Abby is no longer a vulnerable child dependent on him, but is now on her own. The blood upon her mouth does not motion exclusively to virginity loss in this instance, but rather, the loss of the only parent (albeit a surrogate one) on whom she could ever rely. What the audience perhaps knows is what the detective does not: that Abby is no ordinary girl and will not naively allow herself to be brought into his gaze. Abby is now forced to become an independent *woman* and fend for herself, including keeping herself out of the detective's eyesight.

Nonetheless, this newfound adulthood is only momentary. Shortly thereafter, Abby goes to Owen and, in time, lets him know the truth about what she is. Confident that Owen will shelter her and prevent others from harming her, it is a reversal of roles for the characters: his is now father to her child. Owen listens to her patiently as Abby discusses her past, gives her clean clothing, and even watches over her as she sleeps.

Eventually, though, Abby must drink again. When she does, as part of the death of the detective, Abby finds in him a meal but also a pseudo-sexual partner and a new paternal counterpart whose bloody penetration of her oral body brings another scene of sexual initiation that re-maternalizes her once more. Reeves encourages the film audience to perceive the detective character as a paternal figure by disclosing on his audio commentary track that he cast the same actor in the role of Owen's father, who is in the

film only as a voice in a phone call with his son. Reeves was inspired to do so after noticing the chemistry between actors Elias Koteas and Kodi Smit-McPhee, stating,

[O]ne of the first scenes in the movie that we shot...was this one that Elias did [with Smit-McPhee]...and they immediately hit it off. And I was looking for someone to play the father on the phone, and after seeing the way they related in the scene, I asked Elias actually, even though he was the policeman, if he would also play that part so that Kodi would have someone to play off of.

When Owen calls his father, he is distraught after finding out that Abby is a vampire and is trapped in an ethical quandary over how/if he should help her. Alas, Owen cannot talk to his mother since she is once again inebriated and unresponsive. The conversation between Owen and his father, though, mostly highlights the antipathy between Owen's parents, especially Owen's father's contempt for his mother.

Owen: Dad...do you think there's such a thing as evil? [...]

Owen's father: Where are you getting all of this stuff? Is this from your mother...? [...] You know what, Owen? Listen, listen. Put your mother on the phone, OK? I want to talk to her.

Owen: She's—she's not here.

Owen's father: Alright, she's not—OK, well please, tell her to call. Just tell her to call me when she gets back, alright? [...] Your mother, she...look, she has problem. And I'm gonna talk to her.

As he speaks, Owen's father implies a seething disdain toward his ex-wife. He sounds skeptical of Owen's lie that she is not home (she is, but is far too drunk to converse with him) and openly tells Owen that he knows about her "problems." That it is the same actor

portraying the detective delivering these lines is meaningful in that it creates a parallel between these open hostilities from Owen's father and mother and the adversarial relationship between the detective and Abby, who has become like a new mother to Owen.

The detective eventually learns the address where Abby and the Father were living, and he comes to the apartment believing that Abby is hiding there. The detective surveys the premises and finds Abby asleep in the bathroom, it seemingly being the room where she can best block out the sunlight that is poisonous to her. Owen, who has also been staying at Abby's apartment, calls out to distract the detective. As the detective turns around to confront Owen, Abby awakens from her slumber and jumps onto the detective's back. The detective flings about the room before being pulled to the ground, where Abby bites him and blood sprays across the floor.

Though this scene also takes place in *Right One*, involving a similar assault by Eli on a neighborhood man who comes to the apartment seeking retribution for the death of his partner, there are some marked discrepancies in how Oskar/Owen react to this violence. Oskar in *Right One*, while surely not happy to see the man being killed in front of him, maintains a surprisingly stoic expression and he simply walks away. Oskar leaves the bathroom door open so that viewers can catch a glimpse of what Eli is doing to the man, and a shot of the man's bloody hand reaching for the immaculate, white doorframe and staining it a deep red seems to support the notion of the de-virginizing impact of Eli's mouth. When Eli emerges from the bathroom minutes later, she walks up behind Oskar and hugs him. Oskar turns his head, almost pressing his cheek up against hers just inches

from the blood that now traces her lips. Their relationship has been strengthened through her monstrous thirst and his complicity in quenching it.

In *Let Me In*, Owen initially seems a bit more alarmed after Abby starts drinking from the detective. Owen nervously looks into the bathroom and briefly watches as Abby's mouth, pressed against the detective's neck, slowly drains him. Owen appears somber and remorseful, especially as the detective feebly, as if also being depleted of all virility, reaches his hand for Owen. Owen, though, cannot stand to witness this violence and, unlike Oskar, deliberately closes the bathroom door, as if giving the two some much needed privacy to do the (oral and implicitly sexual) deed.

Owen and his gaze cannot endure seeing the once sheepish, young girl he admired becoming, through union with the penetrating blood of this symbolic father, the monstrous mother before him, and hence, he does not have the courage to look any more. He peers away, and even when Abby comes to hug him as Eli did to Oskar in *Right One*, Owen will not look at her or even attempt to turn in her direction (Figure 21). Abby is like his birth mother, who Owen cannot and will not see because of her "problems" with drinking. Abby is also wearing one of Owen's mother's dresses, a white dress (akin to a virginal wedding dress) that he has given her. However, in line with the moody cinematography and bleak atmosphere of Abby's apartment, the dress is rather dingy, even antique-looking, and is also covered in blood, befitting the latest moment of oral-sexual maturation Abby has undergone and leaving her without the kind of youthful-virginal ornamentation and apparel that would otherwise let her masquerade as the object of the youthful gaze.



Figure 21: Owen is unable to face the re-maternalized Abby in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

Even before the killing of the detective, *Let Me In* uses other moments of visual representation of Abby, blood, and orality to challenge Owen's gaze. After the death of the Father, Abby goes to Owen's bedroom and lies in bed with him, but tells him, "Don't look at me" so that he will not see the blood plastered on her mouth, an order to which he obliges. Later, in another scene taken from *Right One*, Owen slices open his hand with his knife. When droplets of his blood hit the floor, Abby starts licking them up. She commands, "Go away!" and then wildly flees before Owen can see any more of her feasting.

Finally, in a deleted scene found on the *Let Me In* DVD/Blu-ray ("Be Me"), Abby magically invites Owen into a flashback to the night she became a vampire so that he can better understand her origins. However, the scene, almost resembling a rape as Abby is viciously brutalized by another anonymous vampire against her will, becomes too intense for Owen. Abby screams and fights for her life, as seen from both an omniscient third-person perspective but also from the first-person perspective of her attacker as s/he looms over her body. Once orality comes into the picture as Abby is bitten and blood begins to be taken from her, Owen tearfully yells "Stop!" and the scene returns to the present setting.

What is unique about this scene, which Reeves admits was only excised because it slowed the pace of the film, is that it does not just give evidence that the power of Owen's gaze is severely qualified; the scene also, due to its use of first-person perspective that has the illusion of including the viewer in the narrative, indicates that it is the audience's own gaze that can be limited. When Owen stops the flashback because he is too sensitive to see any more, his and the audience's gaze are mutually neutered in the process. The gaze of the audience (when it is, like Owen, confronted with the horrors of bloody orality and the maternalized female vampire) is further undercut in the third act of the film, and the dispatching of Owen's bullies.

The Death of the Bullies

When Owen begins participating in an after-school weight-lifting and training class, he believes that it will prepare him to physically combat his bullies. On his final day of the class, Owen is accosted by lead bully Kenny (Dylan Minnette), his big brother (Brett DelBuono), and the rest of his cronies. Owen pulls out his knife but, when it intimidates none of the boys, they grab Owen and drag him to the school swimming pool.

Owen is tossed into the pool, and Kenny's brother leans over the edge of the pool to talk to him. As he brother twirls Owen's knife in front of him, he explains, "We're gonna have a little contest, OK? You stay underwater for three minutes. If you can do it, I'll just give you a little nick on your cheek. But if you can't, I'm gonna poke out one of your eyes. Got it?" With the other bullies as onlookers, Kenny's brother clutches Owen by his head and dunks him into the water.

The brother is yet another character who is presented as a perverse father figure in the film. As an older male family member of Kenny, the fatherly associations are not

implausible. Furthermore, his threat to remove Owen's eyes is (as discussed in chapter 1) not unlike the Freudian father's promise for castration that, as in Freud's "The Uncanny," is directed toward the eyes. Lastly, when Kenny's brother speaks to Owen, he is shown in direct address to the camera, blatantly likening him to how other paternal characters, like the detective in his visit to question the Father in the hospital, have also been shown in the film.²²

While the camera provides a close-up shot of the brother's face as he torments Owen, it also presents reverse shots with reactions from Owen before he is forced beneath the surface of the pool. This shot/reserve shot set-up (or rather, the "suturing" technique that I previously mentioned) is also critical to the concluding scene with the bullies in *Right One*. As in *Let Me In*, Oskar is held underwater in the school swimming pool. Oskar closes his eyes and, unbeknownst to him, viewers see body parts suddenly appear in the water around him, such as a child's tiny legs kicking and a floating severed arm, implying that the bullies are being attacked and decimated above. A hand reaches down and pulls Oskar upward. His head above water, Oskar opens his eyes and smiles when he sees, in a reverse shot, the face of Eli. However, in this shot, a tight close-up, Eli is framed only from her nose up (Figure 22). Though there are tiny specks of red around her eyes and forehead that are quite clearly the blood that she has seized from the bullies, her mouth is purposefully kept outside of the frame.

²²Reeves admits on the audio commentary track that he purposefully used the direct address for both the detective and Kenny's brother so as to provide a visual "bookend" for the film.



Figure 22: The reverse shot of the upper-half of Eli's face is included in the swimming pool scene in *Let the Right One In* (2008) (image captured by author)

This last image of Eli, and its concealment of the oral orifice, is the perfect illustration of age as it applies to the female vampire in *Right One*. Without the mouth as a visual reference point for the viewer, one cannot tell, with absolutely certainty, whether what is seen by Oskar is a “normal” mouth that one would see on any “normal” girl (the usual youthful object of the gaze), or the monstrous bloody mouth denoting sexual initiation and the ascendance into motherhood (the figure of older femininity usually disregarded by the gaze). The ambiguity of Eli's orality attests to the related queer ambiguity of Eli's age as both girl *and* mother in the film.

In the swimming pool scene of *Let Me In*, the suturing that had joined shots and images for heightened visibility in *Right One* is discarded completely. As Owen waits in the water, bodies and dismembered limbs begin popping up around him, and the pool starts filling with blood. Owen escapes from the pool and struggles to get air into his lungs. As he coughs up water, a pair of small, bare feet steps before him (Figure 23). Because Abby is often shown barefoot in the film, these feet, with lines of blood cascading down onto them as if an exaggerated release of post-coital hymenal flow, obviously belong to her. Abby's hand comes into the frame and gently lifts Owen's head. In a close-up shot, Owen looks upward toward Abby, his gaze steady and unflinching

(Figure 24). However, the moment is without a corresponding reverse shot. Much of Abby's body remains invisible, including her mouth that has just eviscerated the bullies and devoured their blood. Although Owen may be looking at her, he is not permitted to display her before the filmic gaze, and as a result, the viewer is not entitled to see what it is that he is seeing.²³



Figure 23: A pair of bloody feet stands before Owen in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)



Figure 24: Owen looks up at Abby in *Let Me In* (2010) (image captured by author)

With the reverse shot of Eli in *Right One*, the film could both locate her within the youthful structure of the gaze while also making invisible her vampiric lips (which had

²³Francisco Javier Gómez Tarin, Iván Bort Gual, and Shaila García Catalán argue that *Let Me In*, in excising the shot-reverse shot format from the swimming pool scene, is “eliminating romanticism” that may be implied in the meeting of Eli and Oskar’s eyes in *Right One* (131).

presumably been entered by the paternal blood of the bullies as they had with Håkan and the other men) so as to position her as still performing the masquerade of youth but somehow as also older and maternal. Without this same reverse shot in *Let Me In*, and with Abby made almost totally invisible, the film declares that the blood that has come into her mouth and symbolically de-virginized her has aged/maternalized her so that she has also entirely “aged out” of being objectified by the gaze. Abby is still the castrating mother of horror, but what is being castrated is not the anatomy of the male-identified spectators of the viewing audience, but their gaze as they become incapable of looking upon her or her bloody, vaginal mouth.

Conclusion

The final scene of *Let Me In*, directly after Abby rescues Owen at the pool, shows Owen riding a train to an unknown destination. He is alone in his passenger car, but a larger wooden trunk sits beside him with Abby inside it (a safeguard against the sunlight). Though unseen, her presence is made known as she and Owen begin tapping on the trunk, communicating in Morse code with each other. Before credits roll, Owen stares out of the window and hums to himself a familiar 80s commercial jingle for Now and Later candy, the same candy that had earlier brought about a nauseating response from Abby.

In his commentary track, director Matt Reeves likens this scene to the ending of *The Graduate*. Film aficionados will immediately recognize this reference and will recall the classic 1967 Mike Nichols comedy: the story of Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman), an aimless young man who begins having an affair with an older friend of his family, the infamous Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), before pursuing her daughter, Elaine

(Katherine Ross). In the film's iconic finale, Benjamin whisks Elaine away on her wedding day and the two, with her still in her wedding dress, are transported away on a bus to a new life. Applying *The Graduate* to *Let Me In*, Reeves states,

“[E]ven as they [Owen and Abby] are together here, he's leaving his home, he's leaving his mother, and there's something very sad about all of this. And...you know in *The Graduate*, of course he's [Benjamin] running after Elaine and he gets her, and they're on the bus together and there's this exhilaration—they've gotten away, and they're there together. And the camera just holds, and you get this sense that the question is [...] they're together, but now what? And I kind of feel like that's sort of the message of this ending.

Of course, there is also the question of “now what?” for Owen and Abby, too, although audiences will likely know what is in store for them: Owen will become the next “father” to Abby, bringing her the blood she needs in exchange for her love and camaraderie. However, there are other similarities between *The Graduate* and *Let Me In* that encapsulate the themes that have been discussed in this chapter. Owen is a double for the romantic, but misguided Benjamin, himself on the uncomfortable precipice of adulthood. Meanwhile, Abby is the object of his affection. She is Elaine: she is young, innocent, and, because Benjamin has disrupted the wedding-day vows, virginal. However, she is also Mrs. Robinson: she is older, more mature, more sexually experienced, maternal, and like the abject mothers of horror, nowhere to be seen, locked away in the trunk and completely out of sight. Finally, the ending is punctuated by a call back to orality in the film, through Owen's humming and its reminder of the sweet treat that Abby had ingested for him.

As in chapter 2 and its examination of *I Spit on Your Grave*, horr/orality frames age in *Let Me In*, but in a different manner. In *I Spit on Your Grave*, the film centered on male bodily anxiety, and specifically, the oral body as a site in which one may be both entered *and* exited against one's will. In this chapter and its analysis of *Let Me In*, oral entry, this time in regard to the female body, becomes the sole fixation. However, this chapter finds *Let Me In* is driven by patriarchal fears of the young female body that actually desires being sexually entered. Such entry, especially the entry of blood when carried out through the drinking mouth of the female vampire, becomes a metaphor for sexual initiation. Still, because of her oral-sexual maturation, Abby in *Let Me In* undergoes a maternal transformation in which her body evades the youthful male gaze after she drinks her fill.

Nonetheless, Abby does not disappear forever. She always returns, with the same childlike demeanor and the same thirsts as before. In this sense, one of the larger implications of the representation of age in *Let Me In* is that it confronts the revalorization of abstinence in twenty-first century media and the belief in virginity loss as a special, beautiful, one-in-a-lifetime moment. Instead, because Abby in *Let Me In* queers age and continuously/uncannily shifts between the roles of thirsty child and sexually sated mother, the film rewrites virginity loss as not a one-time occurrence, but a cyclical event enacted over and over, and one that can be very scary and not always nearly as beautiful as it is thought to be.²⁴ Furthermore, the film pushes its audience to consider how sexual initiation may not actually bring about a state of "loss" at all. Aside

²⁴Other vampire narratives have toyed with this premise, such as the vampire Jessica on *True Blood* who learns that her hymen will literally regenerate after each time she has sex. Virginity loss has also been grappled with in other vampire television series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Swain).

from the death of the Father, Abby loses nothing as she drinks; rather, she gains maturity and a new partner in Owen. She also gains the power to choose to take hold of her maternal identity and hide at the margins of in/visibility, as if mocking the gaze that wants nothing more than to covet, and consume, her youth.

Chapter 4

A Dynasty of Screams: (Re-)Voicing the Maternal in *Scream Queens*

Introduction

In 2015, Princeton University Press published the second edition of Clover J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film*. Originally released in 1992, Clover's book has become a canonical text in horror studies, and is most known for its chapter "Her Body, Himself" and its groundbreaking analysis of slasher horror films.¹ Clover defines the slasher film as "the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who survived" (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 21), a formula which has been imitated in series such as the *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* films.

The singular concept from Clover's work that has gained the most traction in academic literature is the "Final Girl," Clover's term for the lone, usually teenaged female character who is strong enough to thwart the killer and make it to the end of the film alive.² The re-publishing of Clover's work and the subsequent reintroduction of the Final Girl coincided with a new zeitgeist of slasher horror in contemporary media. Aptly titled films such as *Final Girl* (2015) and *The Final Girls* (2015) received theatrical runs and some critical acclaim, and slasher horror also found a place in American households through television programs such as MTV's *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-present),

¹Prior to its inclusion in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, "Her Body, Himself" was originally published in the journal *Representations* in 1987.

²Clover has publicly bemoaned the fact that the Final Girl dominated much of the criticisms of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* ("Preface").

Netflix's *Slasher* (2016-present) and, most notably, the subversive FOX comedy horror series *Scream Queens* (2015-2017).

Screen Queens, which I will take up as the focus of this chapter, is a particularly compelling case study for the study of orality, age, and gender because of the implications behind the names of both the series title and some of the performers comprising its cast. The "scream queen" is a moniker often applied to actresses who have made careers starring as Final Girls, their loud and frightened screams being their signature feature that they bring to each entry in their horror filmography. In a brilliant example of deliberate stunt casting, the series includes a featured role from actress Jamie Lee Curtis, who originated the scream queen identity through her portrayal of Final Girl Laurie Strode in the 1978 slasher classic *Halloween*.³ In *Scream Queens*, Curtis plays Cathy Munsch, the dean of students at fictional Wallace University who is trying to keep the campus safe from an anonymous killer wearing a "Red Devil" costume like that of the school mascot. Despite subpar ratings, *Scream Queens* has gained a devoted cult following and Curtis garnered a Golden Globe nomination for her role on the series.

By emphasizing orality in *Scream Queens*, I explore how Curtis and the series are also linked to horror media of the past. In particular, they display strong ties to the 1960 Alfred Hitchcock classic *Psycho*, which Clover claims is the "appointed ancestor of the slasher" (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 23). *Psycho* was crucial to the eventual emergence of slasher horror, but is also important to Curtis herself in that it starred Curtis's mother, the late actress Janet Leigh in the Oscar-nominated lead role of Marion

³Curtis would appear as the Final Girl in later slasher titles such as *Prom Night* (1980), *Terror Train* (1980), and *Halloween II* (1981).

Crane.⁴ Marion is, in many regards, the antithesis of the Final Girl. For example, one of the common attributes of the Final Girl figure is her refusal to participate in any form of sexual activity. In contrast, many of the other characters in slasher horror are depicted as sexually adventurous, which, because of a conservative morality that often informs these narratives, contribute to their violent demise. Clover argues, “Killing those who seek or engage in unauthorized sex amounts to a generic imperative of the slasher film” (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 34). Likewise, Marion is killed in *Psycho* after audiences learn of the passionate love affair she is having with a local man.

Many remember *Psycho* for Marion’s death, a shockingly violent and eroticized scene in which Marion is stabbed to death by a knife-wielding maniac while showering. One of the most disquieting elements in this moment is Leigh’s scream as she is being murdered. Her scream is visually presented through startling close-up shots on Marion’s mouth (Durgnat 130) and remains at high volume until the very last slice of the knife. The notorious scene has not only been examined by countless scholars (Durgnat, Skerry),⁵ but for decades has been repeatedly referenced,⁶ parodied,⁷ and remade⁸ across an array of media texts. *Scream Queens*, though, offers one of the latest and arguably one of the most fascinating recreations of the *Psycho* shower scene. Specifically, the eighth

⁴Nowell notes Curtis’s position as daughter to Janet Leigh as being paramount to her success and the success of *Halloween*, contending that “it was Curtis’ [sic] unique Hollywood pedigree that made her especially appealing to both the independent producers and the distributors of horror films” (“A Kind of Bacall Quality,” 137).

⁵As Philip J. Skerry writes in his 2009 book-length study of the scene, “It’s no exaggeration to say that the shower scene is *the* most analyzed, discussed, and alluded-to-scene in film history” (220, emphasis in original).

⁶Allusions to the *Psycho* shower scene can be found in Brian DePalma’s arthouse thriller *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and episodes of *Murder, She Wrote* and *The Simpsons*.

⁷See comic lampoons like *High Anxiety* (1977) and *The Silence of the Hams* (1994).

⁸For example, Gus Van Sant’s stylized reimagining of the shower scene in his 1998 *Psycho* remake, and in the final season of the A&E’s *Psycho*-inspired series *Bates Motel* (2013-2017).

episode of the series' first season, entitled "Mommie Dearest," received much attention after it first aired for showcasing its own version of the shower scene with Curtis standing in for Leigh; that is, for the daughter assuming the role originally played by her mother.

Once Curtis's Cathy Munsch enters the shower in "Mommie Dearest," though, the attention is momentarily not on the character and more on the iconography of Curtis as the actress portraying her. The significance of casting Curtis in *Scream Queens* is obvious because of how tethered she has been to slasher horror. But Curtis is also intertextually bound to *Psycho* and, more specifically, to her mother, based on their shared membership in horror's pantheon of scream queens. Therefore, this chapter is guided by the question: (how) does the oral act of *screaming*, a mainstay of slasher horror, serve as a mechanism through which generations of women are connected in *Scream Queens*? I argue that Curtis's scream as it is presented in *Scream Queens*'s "Mommie Dearest" shower sequence creates an uncanny vocalic bond between mother and daughter, in which Curtis queers age (and therein blurs the familiar binary divides between mother and child) by both drawing upon her mother's voice and also reinterpreting it. Curtis translates Leigh's scream from a scream of futility, which denotes the slasher genre's fondness for punishing and undermining female sexuality, into a battle cry that symbolizes both the strength of the Final Girl and the eroticism of the would-be slasher victim, and gives Curtis's Cathy Munsch a more auspicious fate than Leigh's Marion Crane had in *Psycho*. Nonetheless, while the scream offers a cross-generational bridge between Curtis and Leigh, the scream as it is represented in the remainder of the series actually reinforces barriers between Curtis/Cathy and the younger generation

following her (represented by Wallace University's Kappa Kappa Tau sorority in *Scream Queens*) and stymies any further intergenerational coalitions amongst women.

The *Psycho* shower scene and the horror/orality of the screaming voice as they are depicted in *Scream Queens* are worthy of analysis for three reasons. First, while previous psychoanalytic scholarship on slasher horror has been concerned exclusively with the Oedipal mother-son relationship (like that of the dysfunctional Mrs. Bates and Norman in *Psycho*) (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*), this chapter also outlines the parent-child dyad in the slasher genre as it applies to the variation of the mother-daughter relationship. Second, *Scream Queens* provides a fresh angle on representations of intergenerational relationships in horror by centralizing the scream as the device connecting mother to daughter (Leigh to Curtis). The continuities between these generations are particularly useful to address in slasher horror in that the genre has not only been historically marketed to young audiences (Nowell, *Blood Money*) but has often, as I will explain further below, told the stories of youth rebelling against the parental order (DeGraffenreid, Trencansky) instead of establishing common ground with them.

Third, and lastly, an examination of *Scream Queens* can contribute to recent scholarly discussions regarding the postmodern state of contemporary slasher horror (the self-referential *Scream* series being a prime example) and the explicit acknowledgment of the relationship between texts often woven into slasher narratives (Jackson, "Metahorror and Simulation in the *Scream* Series and *The Cabin in the Woods*"; Perkins; Phillips, "Scream [1996]"; Wee). The focus on Curtis in *Scream Queens* sheds light on what Jeffrey Bussolini has referred to as "intertextuality of casting" ("Television Intertextuality After *Buff*y"). Bussolini draws inspiration from John Fiske, who claims that the actors

and actresses that populate our television sets are “media people” who exist for the viewer intertextually, and who “bring with them...residues of the meanings of other roles that they have played...” (8). According to Bussolini, intertextual casting is particularly common in horror and fantasy television series because of the niche that many actors have found for themselves in these genres.⁹ For Jamie Lee Curtis, though, it is not just the “residue” of her professional horror resume that affects her role in *Scream Queens*, but also that of her mother’s that she also carries with her and that should also be interrogated.

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three sections. First, I will offer a review of previous literature on age, femininity, and sexuality in slasher horror and *Scream Queens*; in doing so, I will also consider Linda Williams’s claims regarding the mutilated female body (a familiar tableau in slasher cinema) as the very site upon which castrating violence is dispensed and female sexual expression is censured. Second, I will address how I am employing voice in this study as part of a tradition of using voice to question and evaluate gender and intergenerational relationships. Third, and finally, I will analyze what I am naming the voice of the “scream-cry” as it is heard in the first season of *Scream Queens*, with select episodes, including “Mommie Dearest,” and the

⁹Relatedly, Lorna Jowett notes that *Scream Queens* executive producer Ryan Murphy has been prone to intertextual casting, such as bringing Kathy Bates onboard *American Horror Story* in its third season, with her image likely reminding viewers of her Oscar-winning role as the sledgehammer-touting lunatic in *Misery* (1990) (“American Horror Stories, Repertory Horror and Intertextuality of Casting”). However, Jowett adds that such casting decisions also result “in providing roles for older female actors that result in complex, critically-acclaimed and fan-favorite performances and characters, [which] in turn challenges norms of industry practice as well as of dramatic representations” (25). Thus, intertextual casting, as it welcomes actors and especially actresses of horror’s past, may help in subverting ageism in mass media representation.

paratextual packaging of this first season on DVD (specifically, its cover design, interactive menu screens, and use of subtitling) as the centerpieces of my analysis.¹⁰

Final Girls and Bad Girls: Age, Sexuality, and Castration in Slasher Horror

While little research has been produced on representations of age in slasher horror films, the existing scholarship focuses mainly on the demented villains' childlike characteristics. For instance, in her description of the cannibal brothers known as the Hitchhiker, Chop Top, and Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise, Clover states, "Hitchhiker and Chop Top seem gangly kids and Leatherface jiggles in baby fat behind his butcher's apron" (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 27-8). Building off Clover, Janet Staiger reads the Final Girl's defeat of the killer during slasher finale as an effort to tame his out-of-control childish impulses ("The Slasher, the Final Girl and the Anti-Denouement"). Meanwhile, Tony Magistrale argues that the killer Michael Myers of *Halloween*, who is shown in the film's opening as a six year-old boy cutting up his sister while wearing a clown costume, effectively "*conflates concepts of adult and child*, violence and play, buffoon and agent of revenge that Michael will never solve satisfactorily" (150, emphasis added) as a form of his own queering of age.

The conflation of child and adult can also be found in his counterpart, the Final Girl. To be sure, though she is a teenage "girl" in most respects, scholars have adopted the Final Girl as a figure of horror who confounds the boundaries between gender identities. That is, scholars have noted how the Final Girl, while anatomically female and displaying conventional feminine traits (e.g. her whimpering, crying, and cowering in fear as the killer approaches), often exhibits masculine tendencies (Halberstam, *Skin*

¹⁰At the time of this writing, the first season of *Scream Queens* has not been released in Blu-ray format.

Shows; King). J. Halberstam states that the Final Girl “represents not boyishness or girlishness but monstrous gender...[and] something much messier than male or female” (*Skin Shows*, 143).¹¹ Specifically, Clover claims, the Final Girl’s eventual aggressiveness and willingness to engage in violence against the killer allows viewers to see this character as queering gender by signifying both femininity *and* masculinity at differing points within the film.

However, the Final Girl also queers age, and seems to shift seamlessly between the binaries of childhood and adulthood, as her fight against the killer becomes tantamount to a maturation process. Clover writes, “When the Final Girl stands at last in the light of day with the knife in her hand, she has delivered herself into the adult world” (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 49). The Final Girl’s newly found maturity is also reflected in resentments she harbors toward the immaturity of her peers (Brickman). The Final Girl’s peers—reckless partiers who indulge in alcohol/narcotics and shirk all responsibility—are employed to distinguish the more grown-up Final Girl from the rest of the “kids” on the screen.

But equally problematic is the immaturity displayed by the adult parents of the Final Girl and her peers. Pat Gill writes,

Parents in these films are generally absent, either physically or emotionally. [...] They go on business trips or on vacations without the kids, or on getaway weekends with friends. Sometimes the parents have drinking or drugs problems, or are involved in new relationships. Some parents are well-meaning but inept and

¹¹Because of the Final Girl’s “messy” and “monstrous” performance of gender, Communication scholar Claire Sisco King remarks that this figure “may open up space for queer reading[s] in which she might be imagined as lesbian and/or gender-queer...” (261).

insufficiently attentive, making a show of interest while failing to grant the seriousness of their children's worries and fears (18-9).

The careless and incompetent parent in slasher films is most often the mother. Examples include Ms. Parker in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* parts 3 and 4 (1987/1988), and Mrs. Prescott in *Scream* (1996). These mothers are especially vilified because of their sexual promiscuity which causes them to neglect their children. For instance, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3*, Kristen Parker tries to tell her mother about bad dreams that have been keeping her awake at night. Her mother responds "Look honey, I've got a guest," and rushes away to make a drink for a gentleman suitor downstairs. Thus, in slasher horror, sexuality turns women into "bad" mothers who jeopardize their children's well-being.

In commenting on the maturation of the Final Girl in opposition to these other characters, Gill states, "The final person in slasher films does not so much bend gender as age, somehow gathering into her or his character the maturity and responsibility missing in the adults" (23). That is, she fluctuates between Final Girl and Final Woman (Connelly). All the more, Klaus Rieser adds, "[T]he fluidity assigned to her [the Final Girl] is often not so much one between masculine and feminine as between girlhood and full-fledged *motherhood*" (379, emphasis added). Nevertheless, the Final Girl is not just a version of the usual maternal adult in slasher horror, but more specifically, she is the kind of mother she never had to begin with; the Final Girl is "better" than her own maternal parent because she is miraculously able to be anything and everything that Western culture expects of its mothers (unconditionally loving, compassionate, watchful, puritanical, etc.). The maternal connotations of the Final Girl can be seen in Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, who spends most of the film in the domestic environment as she

babysits neighborhood children, reading stories and carving Jack-O-Lanterns with them while her friends sleep with their boyfriends and her parents are away at a social function. Therefore, the Final Girl figure that Curtis helped to popularize is typified as ultra-mature and utterly non-sexual. By virtue of the Final Girl's unqualified chastity and her championing a mature identity steeped in unrealistic maternal ideals, her survival is largely guaranteed. Conversely, Janet Leigh's Marion Crane in *Psycho* is the exemplar for the Final Girl's oversexed and childish friends. Yet because of the maternal identity now attached to Leigh as Curtis's mother, she is also like the thoughtless parent that the Final Girl holds in just as much if not more disdain.

In the words of Linda Williams ("When the Woman Looks"), the "bad girls" of slasher horror, like Marion, are punished for behaving outside of moral bounds. Williams uses the psychoanalytic language of castration to explain how gender, sexuality, and violence interrelate in American horror cinema.¹² However, along with castration, orality is also present in these scenes of sadistic punishment, which I will discuss more below.

In chapter 1, I explained Williams's argument that the monsters that abound in classical horror are linked to the female body. What unites monstrosity and female corporeality is that both, under patriarchal rule, are marked as "different." As a result, Williams writes, "The destruction of the monster that concludes so many horror films could therefore be interpreted as yet another way of disavowing and mastering the castration her [woman's] body represents" ("When the Woman Looks," 22).

¹²Tony Magistrale argues, "No subgenre in the horror field has felt the need to emphasize....the trauma of castration and the compulsion to reenact symbolically its violence....more than the slasher film" (148).

Still, Williams claims that castration anxiety is redeployed differently in more contemporary horror. Beginning in the 1960s, films containing startling acts of misogynistic violence, such as *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* (1960), became increasingly common. Williams cites Susan Lurie's feminist psychoanalytic revision of Freudian theory to examine the meaning behind heightened violence toward women on screen. Lurie claims that the Freudian belief in the male child's perception of the maternal genitals as castrated and his experiencing anxiety because of it is patently false; rather, Lurie counters by stating, "The terrifying problem, of course, is not that Mother is 'castrated,' but that she isn't. [...] [T]he idea that women possess the whole range of individual powers that the male identifies with his penis and yet have 'no penis,' is what is so terrible" (166). Relating Lurie's rewriting of the Freudian theme of castration to contemporary horror, Williams notes how horror has come to feature female characters who act out in a manner that does not conform to traditional gender values. Marion Crane in *Psycho* is emblematic of these new depictions of women in the horror genre. Not only is Marion having a steamy romance with a man out of wedlock, but her sexual energy also arouses the interests of other men around her (such as the nebbish Norman whom she meets at the infamous Bates Motel).

Despite not possessing a penis, what Marion does possess is a sexual potency that the male psychopath finds disturbing. As punishment for being so sexually forward, the female body becomes brutalized as a kind of long-awaited castration that will ostensibly sever her of her sexual urges (and her life in tandem). As Williams states, "The problem...is that she is not castrated: the fantasy solution of the male psychopath and the film is to symbolically prove she is" ("When the Woman Looks," 32). For instance, when

Marion is stabbed as she showers in *Psycho*, the scene has castrative undertones when all that is shown are the killer's knife plunging out of frame at Marion's lower body and droplets of blood crashing down between her legs. In comparison, Marion's more modest and sexually inert sister, Lila, who Williams deems a "good girl," is permitted to live. This reward of life, as it would be for Laurie Strode and the other good/Final girls thereafter, is due in no small part to Lila's avoidance of sexual activity as "the woman's power to resist the monster [and/or killer] is directly proportional to her lack of sexual desire" (Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 27). The American conservative political climate of the 1980s, the decade in which the slasher genre was most prominent (Nowell, *Blood Money*; Phillips, "*Halloween* [1978]"), also adds to this filmic condemnation of women's sexuality.

As stated earlier, the visual orality of the scene—the image of Marion's open mouth—and its auditory by-product—her piercing, petrified scream—also magnify the horror of this moment of symbolic castration. However, the nature of orality and castration changes in this context in comparison to how I have addressed it in earlier chapters. In this case, castration is no longer an act carried out by the mouth (like the *femme castratrice*). Instead, castration is an act levied against the body that elicits a vocalic response from the mouth of the recipient of this violence. Nonetheless, this vocal response is fleeting; for all of the screaming that audiences hear from Marion as she is being attacked, her final moment in the shower scene is but a close-up shot on her face after she has tumbled to the bathroom floor, her mouth slightly open but without a sound coming out of it. That is, the "bad girl" of slasher lore, who opens her body to the sexual penetration of others, also opens her oral body, wider and with louder reaction to each

thrust of the killer's knife. The sexual sating that follows the act of intercourse becomes mirrored in the conclusion to the murder sequence, as the body of the victim is now still, no longer caught in the stirring "rapture" of being prodded the killer's phallic instrument, and is, above all, permanently silenced. It is a convention that is even blatantly carried out in *Psycho II* (1983), in which Lila is finally slayed by the killer, screaming at the top of her lungs up until the point that the killer mutes her by literally shoving the knife into her mouth.

Though unacknowledged by Williams, many of the examples that she provides of women whose sexuality leads to castrative violence are mothers. For instance, Williams references Kate in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), a doting wife and mother who is slashed to death after she has a one night stand with a stranger. Lila in *Psycho II* is also a mother, and her sexual "crime" is that of "stealing" and having a child with her deceased sister's beau. In more recent slasher horror, like *Scream*, Mrs. Prescott, mother of the film's Final Girl, cheats on her husband and is murdered and consequently blamed for breaking apart her lover's family. Thus, maternal sexuality is seen as particularly reprehensible and meriting death in the slasher genre.

To be sure, while the slasher genre suggests a divide between the "good" Final Girl and the "bad girls" around her, a divide that would seem to create a chasm between Curtis and Leigh within the world of horror, the *Scream Queens* homage to the *Psycho* shower scene puts Curtis, as Cathy Munsch, directly in the shoes that Leigh once filled. This sense of connection between real-life mother and daughter differs from how women's intergenerational relationships are displayed throughout the series. In what is currently the only piece of scholarship on *Scream Queens* in Communication literature,

Emily D. Ryalls argues that the show is guilty of “accentuating the divisions between generations” (171), especially generations of women who identify as feminist. Specifically, Cathy’s feminism is positioned against that of the young members of *Scream Queens*’s Kappa Kappa Tau sorority, including the sorority’s sociopathic president, Chanel Oberlin (Emma Roberts). Ryalls writes, “Chanel expresses the language of feminism while at the same time seeming to have no need for its politics, since she is shown to be empowered” (172) through her cruel reign over the other Kappas. Meanwhile, Ryalls explains that even though “Dean Munsch is situated as a stereotypical second-wave feminist” of the American 1960s-80s, hers is a feminism that she fails to make relevant to the young women of Kappa (171). Consequently, according to Ryalls, because of their disparate approaches to defining feminism, the insuperable distance between generations of women in *Scream Queens* remains.

However, age is also dealt with in *Scream Queens* as the series tackles social biases surrounding age-appropriate sexual relations.¹³ Ryalls closely evaluates the

¹³Both sexuality and age have also been at the core of many of the ruptures between second and third-wave feminism (Faludi). Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier write that some third wavers have held a deep-seated (and erroneous) belief that the second wave movement was dismissive of women’s pursuits of heterosexual expression, claiming that “second wave feminists hate sex and perpetuate Victorian ideals” that negate sexuality as a space for feminist politicizing (15). For decades, writers in both the academic and popular presses have addressed the harm being done by these feminist “daughters” in their attacks on their allegedly sexless foremothers. Although the American third wave emerged in the early-to-mid 1990s following the second-wave “sex wars” and the debates surrounding sexuality that ensued in the late 1970s-early 1980s, Astrid Henry states that “some third-wavers ascribe the anti-sex position to the second wave in order to grant themselves an unrivaled claim to pro-sex feminism, thereby obscuring the ways in which the original ‘war’ was *intragenerational*, not *intergenerational*” (91, emphasis in original). Meanwhile, Lisa Maria Hogeland argues that age has been the strongest factor in some third wavers’ unwillingness to associate themselves with the prior feminist generation. Of course, Hogeland does not deny the real political discrepancies between the feminist waves, but notes that these differences are overlooked when they are mistakenly described in generational terms. Hogeland claims that the main reason the generational model for explaining feminist conflict prevails is because “it is easier to construct these differences as generational because of the persistence of ageism and, more benignly, simple age-stratification, in and outside of the feminist movement (117). For Hogeland, who is inspired by the feminist practice of consciousness-raising and women’s interpersonal exchange of personal testimonies to expose how sexism affects the lives of all women, the promise for critical conversations about ideologies of *age* between the feminist waves is also important but difficult to achieve. Hogeland writes,

character Chad (Glen Powell), a college student with unusual sexual predilections. Not only is Chad is turned on by the sight of dead bodies and lactating goats (!), but Chad is chastised by his fraternity for his sexual flings with women almost twice his age, including Cathy Munsch. Nevertheless, Chad is unfettered and continues seeking out his atypical partners and satisfying his bizarre fetishes. Due to Chad (one of the only male characters to survive) being true and “authentic” in his sexuality, Ryalls claims, “*Scream Queens* contributes to a postsexuality ethos in which *sexuality no longer matters* and all forms of desire (heterosexual, homosexual, bestiality, necrophilia, etc.) are to be celebrated...” (175, emphasis added). However, because Ryalls is unpacking the politics of the series solely as they operate in the genre of satirical “camp” comedy,¹⁴ she does not take into account how *Scream Queens* is also rooted in the slasher genre. I underline this point because, in slasher horror, sexuality *does* matter and has material consequences. While the unconventionally sexual Chad lives to see the end of season one, for many of the women of the slasher genre, any hint of sexuality (be it mere sexual curiosity or actualized sexual engagement) is an absolute death sentence. Chad’s particularly *youthful* masculinity also protects him, while older women’s, especially mother’s, enactment of their sexuality endangers them.

Young(er) and old(er) feminists have much to say to each other about their specific historical locations, about the effects of ageism on their efforts, about how women’s experiences in patriarchy differ because of age. But the false belief that political differences are generational differences make these and other crucial conversations impossible (117).

Thus, age often comes to hamper, more than advance, these conversations between feminists young and old, conversations that might reveal less difference and more commonalities between the waves—such as a shared value in women’s performances of healthy and confident sexuality—than originally perceived.

¹⁴While I am less concerned with the overall comedic tone of the series and will continue to discuss it as a constituent of the horror genre, the mixture of the horrific and the hilarious has nonetheless intrigued past scholars (Brophy; Carroll; Paul), and humorous parody of slasher horror can also be seen in numerous titles, such as *Student Bodies* (1981), *Pandemonium* (1982), *Wacko* (1982), *Scary Movie* (2000), and *Shriek If You Know What I Did Last Friday the Thirteenth* (2000).

My analysis differs from Ryalls in that I put greater emphasis on how orality and voice illustrate the intersecting of age and gender/sexuality in *Scream Queens*. I find this crucial to examine because of how, as I note above, the voice has figured into how castrative violence against sexual maternal characters is traditionally carried out in slasher horror. Unlike Ryalls, I am less concerned with reading into the historical-generational frictions between the second and third waves of American feminism that are prevalent in the series' characters. That being said, the "mother-versus-daughter" paradigm that is often used to define the relations between phases of the feminist movement (Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*) is still a helpful framing tool for assessing how the intergenerational relationship of Leigh and Curtis is represented through Cathy—or rather, through Cathy's voice—in *Scream Queens*.

Intergenerational Voice and the Scream-Cry

In an interview with *Variety* prior to the first airing of the "Mommie Dearest" episode, Curtis admitted to some uncertainty about *Scream Queens*'s recreating the *Psycho* shower scene that had been immortalized by Leigh more than half a century earlier. Curtis commented, "My entire life I have refused to step into the shower because it belongs to my mother. I have attempted to step out of the shadow of my parents for a long time" (qtd. in Birnbaum). For Curtis, the stardom of both of her parents (including her mother and her father, actor Tony Curtis) seems to loom over her own celebrity, but particularly that of Leigh, causing Curtis to have dissociated herself from her mother (i.e., step out of her shadow) for much of her career.

However, Curtis also admits to the appeal of paying tribute to Leigh, who had died in 2004, and finally accepting her familial horror heritage (i.e., stepping into the

shower). When approached by *Scream Queens* producers about incorporating the *Psycho* shower scene into the “Mommie Dearest” episode, Curtis claims to have said, “If we’re going to go for it, let’s go for it. Let’s be as accurate as we can” (qtd. in Birnbaum). Curtis’s zeal for this remembrance of Leigh is conveyed in a photograph from the set of *Scream Queens* that Curtis disseminated via Twitter in the months prior to the series’ premiere. The photo, shot in black and white like Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, shows Curtis from her bare shoulders upward. Curtis’s hair is damp and the background behind her is a white porcelain surface, presenting the illusion of Curtis in a bathroom setting while in the midst of bathing herself. Her mouth is stretched wide, seeming to be screaming out in horror, while Curtis holds a photo in her left hand of a famous still of her mother’s own screaming scene in *Psycho*, which Curtis is obviously mimicking (Figure 25). In this instance, the scream, as integrated into horror on both the big screen and the small screen, unifies mother and daughter. Through this photo, Curtis is also presented as an uncanny double for Leigh.



Figure 25: Jamie Lee Curtis (with Janet Leigh) screams in the shower on the set of *Scream Queens* (image provided courtesy of *Variety*)

As noted in chapter 1, Freud likens the uncanny to that which seems both familiar and unfamiliar to a subject, and which “is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development, a phase that we have surmounted” by repressing childhood fears/fixations (“The Uncanny”). However, feminist age scholars like Lynn Segal have argued that the uncanny is more correctly understood as horrific not because it represents a repressed childhood past but the future and what one will become as one ages (older, less vital, and eventually dead). Thus, the uncanny fear of that which is older contributes to what Segals call a “generational warfare” that often ensues between young and old. It is not altogether unrelated to the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in Western American culture, encapsulated by what feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich have called daughters’ “matrophobic” fears of *becoming their mothers* in the future (*Of Woman Born*). Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues that matrophobia and the mother-daughter tensions that result have informed many popular culture narratives, pointing to strained mother-daughter relationships in film (e.g., *The Devil Wears Prada* [2006], *Love and Basketball* [2000], *Titanic* [1997], and the slasher *Scream*) and television (e.g., *My So-Called Life* [1994-1995] and *Ugly Betty* [2006-2010]).

However, Karlyn adds that by recognizing how media come to reflect the matrophobic bent of the larger culture, audiences and critics can begin “to hear the suppressed voices of mothers” (11) whose identities are often discounted in these texts. Similarly, despite noting both the ageism of Freud’s work and the pervasiveness of generational warfare, Segal also broaches the topic of voice as a means of achieving an uncanny reconnection with the maternal. As I cited in chapter 1, Segal writes, “Personally, nowadays, I continually find it strange (yet oddly, also interesting,

sometimes even reassuring) to watch my mother staring back at me from the mirror, *or to hear, not my laugh, but hers*, when I am trying to please others” (22, emphasis added). That is, voice and the sharing of voice across the generations can be a force uniting mother and daughter in an ageist/sexist culture that would rather keep them apart. But rather than the shared laughter between mother and daughter to which Segal refers, what *Scream Queens* offers, as that side-by-side image of Curtis and Leigh makes clear, is the promise of a queer-uncanny intergenerational scream. It is a scream that queers age by signifying voices across this familial old-young (mother-daughter) binary, and is uncanny in that it is both familiar (the familiar and famous scream of the maternal Leigh) and unfamiliar (the reinvention of this scream by the daughter Curtis).

Many feminist scholars have insisted on analyzing voice, especially as an actual acoustic phenomenon and a key component of women’s identities (Cavarero, Salvaggio, Schlichter). That is, these scholars have argued that voices should be examined for their auditory oral qualities, what Ruth Salvaggio has deemed “hearing the O” (*The Sounds of Feminist Theory*). Inspecting the aural elements that co-mingle with the verbal/linguistic is important in that it redeems the voice that, in being a creation of the body, often becomes derided in androcentric Western culture. As Adrianna Cavarero eloquently states, “Symptomatically, the symbolic patriarchal order that identifies the masculine with reason and the feminine with the body is precisely an order that privileges the semantic with respect to the vocal” (6), giving supremacy to language over the voices that help to convey it.

However, this chapter is more focused on the voice as a rhetorical-representational device, particularly in terms of the *maternal* feminine voice that comes

to be relegated in patriarchal culture. Psychoanalytic film theorist Kaja Silverman refers to the mother as the parental authority through which the child, especially the male child, comes to learn to use his voice in order to communicate, toy with language, and enter the social world. As a result, the motherly voice eventually functions as another abject, unwelcome reminder of his infantile past. Silverman states that “through a symmetrical gesture to that whereby the child ‘finds’ its ‘own’ voice by introjecting the mother’s voice, the male subject subsequently ‘refines’ his ‘own’ voice by projecting onto the mother’s voice all that is unassimilable to the paternal position” (*The Acoustic Mirror*, 81). However, Silverman also proposes that what Kristeva saw as the earlier “erotic” connection of mother and daughter (before the daughter becomes socialized, detached from her mother, and is, in theory, paired with a “suitable” heterosexual partner) is still possible even after the daughter’s move into the Symbolic state. In Silverman’s words, Kristeva “is simply incapable of imagining that the mother can have any place within the symbolic, or that the daughter can maintain a relation to language while pursuing her unconscious desire for the mother” (*The Acoustic Mirror*, 124-5). On one hand, some scholars have argued that sound technology in film production “allows the individual to recover or recreate the pre-linguistic condition where s/he existed in an infinite space, united there with the mother and the body...that the recorded voice momentarily returns to us” (Lawrence 29). On the other hand, Silverman insists that because sexuality itself is an invention of the Symbolic, it is possible for the mother-daughter erotic bond to exist without out it being deemed as a reversion to the abject or without stigmatizing of the mother (and her voice) as an abjection to be avoided.

The restored, and sometimes eroticized, mother-daughter relationship has also been a reoccurring leitmotif in scholars' investigations of voice and queer identity. For example, "The Queer Voice in *Marnie*," Lucretia Knapp writes that the film (another Hitchcock classic) hinges on its protagonist's memories of her mother that she shares during sessions with her male analyst. Though these sessions do not entirely "cure" Marnie of her criminal compulsions as is expected, Marnie's recollections of her mother brings the maternal figure to the forefront and reveals how, despite being "Marnie's source of trauma" that has molded her into a social deviant (16), the bond between mother and daughter can nonetheless be detected within the memories that Marnie "voices" aloud. Thus, Knapp concludes,

The voice is, this time, shared by the mother and daughter and moves against the possibility of a successful father-figure replacement [for the mother]. [...] The maternal bond is a threat because it opens up the possibility for a desire that is not informed by, or in harmony with, the masculine (18).

Marnie, though, was not Hitchcock's first attempt at depicting the harmonious union of mother and child through the voice. Michel Chion states that *Psycho*, in which a beleaguered son, Norman Bates, begins speaking in his deceased mother's voice, carries some of the same erotic connotations to which Silverman alluded above. This mismatched arrangement of voice and body exemplifies what Freya Jarman-Ivens, in her theorization of queer voice, states as "the detachment of voice from body [that] renders unstable the signifiers at play here in such a way as to make the voice itself a space highly productive of the queer" (3). However, despite Hitchcock's strategic placement of his camera so as to never show Norman's lips moving as "Mrs. Bates" talks, Chion

claims, “The spectator still hopes to see the incestuous marriage between the mother’s voice and Norman’s body” (*The Voice in Cinema*, 149). In other words, the extraction of voice from its body of origin (i.e., the voice of Mrs. Bates excised from the matriarch herself) allows that voice to then be allocated to a new body (i.e., the body of Norman), and leads to another representation of the oral queering of age, in which the younger body becomes equipped with the older voice as part of a forbidden erotic adjoining of the two.

Apart from the merged voice of Norman-Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*, though, the prospects for the concurrent queering of identity and age through the film’s other iconic voice—the scream of Marion/Janet Leigh—has remained unexamined. As a category of sound, the scream falls under what Chion calls the “cry.” Chion explicates the gendered implications of the cry, stating that “we tend to call the woman’s cry a scream, and the man’s cry a shout” (*The Voice in Cinema*, 78). The male shout is “a shout of power, exercising a will,” such as the example Chion provides of Tarzan’s shout as he swings from the tree branches of his jungle (Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 78), while the female scream connotes vulnerability and futility. At the same time, though, there is a power contained in the scream, as well. Chion explains, “The man’s shout delimits a territory [e.g., Tarzan’s shout to those who enter his turf]; the woman’s scream has to do with limitlessness” (*The Voice in Cinema*, 79). Chion equates the limitlessness of the female scream to the sounds of female sexual pleasure. Chion writes, “[F]or men, the woman’s scream poses the question of the ‘black hole’ of the female orgasm which cannot be spoken nor thought” (*The Voice in Cinema*, 77). This orgasmic scream reflects male fears of women’s insatiable sexual yearnings that are so limitless that they cannot be satisfied,

so that to “hear the O,” à la Salvaggio, is not just to hear and appreciate the female voice but also to hear the taboo of female sexual desire that resounds within it.

Whereas, for Chion, the scream can be considered separate from the cry, as its own unique variation of it, I believe that both can be yoked together in what I will herein refer to as the “scream-cry.” Of course, the feminine *scream* is recurrent in the horror genre, such as that of the Final Girl when the killer menaces her and threatens to castrate/silence her voice. Nevertheless, the *cry* should also be affixed to the scream of the Final Girl for two reasons. First, while the cry intimates the sounds of orgasm, it also simulates a violent battle cry. This interpretation complicates psychoanalytic scholar M.N. Searl’s claim that, “The most primitive of human reactions to danger is not flight but screaming” (194). If screaming is the antithesis of the flight response, then the scream—or more correctly, the scream-cry—is the vocal equivalent of the instinctual fight response. Thus, the scream-cry signifies one’s ability and willingness to fight back and defend oneself, on par with the Final Girl’s own eventual violent defense against the killer in slasher horror.

Second, when the scream is restated as a cry, it recalls one of the pastimes of the infant that mediates the relationship between child and parent. Brandon LaBelle notes that the cry

finds its primal manifestation in the baby’s cry, a sonority that most certainly communicates by its sheer force. A baby’s cry is the first act of vocalization, one whose rending echoes break into the world in search of comfort, warmth, and assurance (47).

The “comfort, warmth, and assurance” that the baby seeks with her cry is a parental duty often imposed on the mother. Therefore, the cry becomes imperative to bringing about the meeting of child and mother.

The intergenerational scream-cry in *Scream Queens* is important to observe in that it connects a mother and daughter pair (Leigh and Curtis) who are, within the universe of slasher horror, framed as disparate to one another. In particular, sexuality drives a wedge between Leigh’s Marion Crane and Curtis’s Final Girl figure. Whereas the Final Girl is virginal, Marion Crane is by comparison a vixen, and according to slasher conventions that *Psycho* helped to institute, Marion’s sexuality becomes justification for her death. Curtis in *Scream Queens* (and in particular, the “Mommie Dearest” episode) calls upon the voice (i.e., the scream) of her mother, Janet Leigh, but also revamps it as a scream-cry along three dimensions. First, it takes Leigh’s scream of victimhood in *Psycho* and turns it into a scream-cry conveying agency, aggression, toughness, and a penchant for violence as Cathy goes toe-to-toe with *Scream Queens*’s Red Devil killer. Second, it takes the sexualized context of the scream in the original *Psycho* shower scene (Leigh’s vocal release with each second of penetration into her naked body) but accentuates (indeed, basks in) Cathy’s sexuality and resists reprimanding female sexuality with castrating violence like what has been witnessed in *Psycho* and its many slasher derivatives. Third, and lastly, the scream-cry in *Scream Queens*’s *Psycho* homage results in (as I have said previously) the queering of age, uncannily signifying and oscillating between the voices of both mother and daughter, Leigh and Curtis. I will flesh out these observations below through an analysis of the “Mommie Dearest” episode and a sampling of other episodes that precede and follow it, as well as the series’ DVD

packaging, cover art, and interactive menus. Additionally, in light of (as I addressed in chapter 1) Chion's claims about how the presence of written materials on screen can influence how audiences come to comprehend and interpret media texts, I will also be looking at the use of subtitling in the *Scream Queens* first season DVD set, which I see as another type of paratextual content that can also affect how the voice/the scream-cry is understood by audiences.

Intergenerational Voice and Sexuality in *Scream Queens*

Mothers, Daughters, and "Young Girls"

The first shot of the pilot episode of *Scream Queens* is an extreme close-up on a pair of bloody hands. The camera pulls back to reveal that the hands belong to a visibly traumatized 20-something woman as she walks through a crowded house in the midst of a raucous party. Taking place in 1995 at the residence of the Kappa Kappa Tau sorority, viewers learn that this young woman has assisted with delivery of a Kappa sister's twin babies. She brings a cadre of fellow sorority members to the upstairs bathroom, where the new mother lies in the bathtub and clutches her infants in disbelief (she thought her recent weight gain was merely "the freshman 15"). The sorority president, furious at how this news will affect the levity of the party, states, "How are we supposed to get you to the front door without everyone seeing you all gross and postpartum? No one wants to see that at a party! [...] You are officially the worst Kappa pledge of all time" ("Pilot/Hell Week"). Though this young mother will die from childbirth complications minutes later, there are no kind words to mourn her passing, and her name and identity will remain a mystery for much of the first season. For the time being, she is only remembered for her maternal and bleeding body that the series designates as repulsive and "gross."

Before even viewing this episode, though, audiences who insert a disc from the first season DVD release of *Scream Queens* will find (after a string of advertisements) their television screens suddenly fill with a montage of shots of human faces, mostly female and each screaming one right after the other as the opening to the disc's main title page. As they scream, in what are clearly snippets of scenes from the series, a thick pool of blood oozes down the screen, drenching these bodies and mouths in red as the show's theme song begins to play and drown out the sounds of their voices (Figure 26). These elements recreate the drama of castration as perpetrated in slasher horror: the scream, followed by bodily violence and blood shed, and then the silencing of the voice entirely. Of course, as Williams argues, this castration is inflicted upon the female body, and especially the *maternal* body in horror.



Figure 26: Blood pours over the screaming mouth on the *Scream Queens* season one DVD title page (image captured by author)

Obviously, the cacophony of screams featured on the *Scream Queens* title page is a gimmicky effect tied to the very title of the program. However, the equally important visual symbol of blood should also be addressed because of its own connections to the

maternal body within the series. In fact, consumers of the *Scream Queens* season one DVD set have already encountered the sight of blood on its front cover, which presents several characters from the series arranged in rows and columns like a modern-day *Brady Bunch* checkerboard (Figure 27). Each of these characters is shown with their hands coated in blood, linking them to the bloody hands of the anonymous coed and the act of natal labor from the show's premiere episode. Several of the characters on the cover are also positioned with their bloody hands close to their mouths—blowing a kiss, seductively tracing their lips with a fingertip, holding a cup of coffee, etc.—including Jamie Lee Curtis as Dean Cathy Munsch, clutching her palms together just underneath her chin. The image cannot help but support the Kappa president's characterization of the “gross” maternal blood, and the abject horror of the mouth being contaminated by bodily waste. However, the placement of (maternal) blood and the mouth in such stark closeness to one another—on the DVD cover and the show title page—also creates the expectation of a correlation between maternity and orality that (through the voice) the show will ultimately exploit.



Figure 27: The cover image for the *Scream Queens* first season DVD set (image captured by author)

Contempt for the maternal continues, as the series jumps ahead in time to the 2015 fall semester at Wallace University. Chanel Oberlin is the Kappa house's new and even more callous president. Chanel is waited upon by a team of dutiful followers, whom she renames Chanel #2 (Ariana Grande), Chanel #3 (Billie Lourd), and Chanel #5 (Abigail Breslin), with Chanel #4 having died of meningitis the semester prior. The Chansels reap power from tormenting the people around them, including their middle-aged housekeeper, Ms. Bean (Jan Hoag). Ms. Bean is dubbed "White Mammy" by Chanel and her posse, a "maternal" moniker with racist and classist connotations, especially when delivered by the young, white, and affluent Chanel. Chanel's first

conversation with Ms. Bean is indicative of the belittling manner in which she speaks with many older authority figures, especially older women.

Chanel: I have a question. And it's just a hypothetical. If I asked you if you 'know somethin' 'bout birthin' babies,' or if you 'didn't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies,' which would you say?

Ms. Bean: I'd say I don't know.

Chanel: Don't know--?

Ms. Bean: I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies.

Chanel: Amazing. Thank you. ("Pilot/Hell Week")

Chanel turns to her "minions," as she calls them, and laughs. Not only is Chanel humiliating Ms. Bean for her lack of formal education, but her use of the language of "birthin' babies" only adds to the age differences between them, differences that are often (particularly in psychoanalytic theory) framed through the identities of the "birthin'" mother and the birthed child. Interestingly, Ms. Bean's scream will also be the first one heard in the series. An enraged Chanel dunks Ms. Bean into the deep fryer of the sorority house kitchen, and the housekeeper screams out as she tears off the skin that has been burnt from the hot fryer oil. Thus, from its first utterance, the scream is associated with the maternal (albeit that of an enormously problematic "mammy" character).

It should be stated, though, that Chanel is not the only member of Kappa who has conflicts with an older generation of women. Zayday Williams (Kiki Palmer) one of the sorority's latest pledges, has joined with the aspiration of becoming Kappa's first Black president. Zayday's involvement in Kappa does not sit well with Denise Hemphill (Niecy Nash), the sorority's African-American head of security who was rejected by Kappa

because of her race during her time as a student at the university. While Denise is vicious in her ridiculing of Zayday and even publicly accuses Zayday of being the Red Devil killer, Zayday is not remotely sympathetic as to why Denise envies her position in Kappa. Zayday snidely remarks, “You have it out for me because when you were here, Kappa wouldn’t accept women of color. So, now you look at me and see everything you could’ve been. [...] And that’s just gonna chap your hide” (“Haunted House”). Rather than become allies to one other based on their mutual goal of changing the racial make-up of the sorority, Denise and Zayday remain divided because of generational differences that appear insurmountable.

Instead of seeking out venerable maternal figures in the older, more mature women to be found on the campus (Denise, Ms. Bean, or Cathy Munsch), the young women of Kappa look to each other. For example, in a conversation with Grace (Skyler Samuels), the daughter of a Kappa sister whose life spiraled from drug and alcohol dependency after the psychological turmoil of sorority life, Chanel admits that the sorority has become her outlet for dealing with the years of abuse heaped upon her by her own mother.

Chanel: They say if a girl doesn’t have a healthy attachment to their mother, they never feel safe in the world. That’s why I joined a sorority—to create a space that could fill the void my mother carved out. Kappa’s like the mom we never had.

Grace: No, Chanel, Kappa is the like the mom you did have. You’re not healing anything with the way you run Kappa. You’re just continuing the same pattern.

How are you any different than your mom?

Chanel: I'm a work in progress, OK? Maybe I have to get all this bitch out of me before I can be the real me. Maybe the reason we came into each other's life is to help us deal with our mom stuff. ("Mommie Dearest")

In spite of her criticisms of Chanel, Grace seems to validate this idea, stating to Chanel and the others, "Guys, I joined this sorority to feel close to my mom, to get a taste of the sisterhood she was so inspired by, and...I really feel it. I'm with you guys, no matter what" ("Seven Minutes in Hell"). Additionally, another budding Kappa pledge Hester (Lea Michele) asks if she can call Chanel and her namesakes "Mom," commenting, "I feel so loved and protected by all of you." When Chanel expresses dismay at the request, Chanel #3 explains, "Actually, it's a new pop culture trend where young women in need of role models call other girls that they look up to Mom. Lorde's fans call her Mom" ("Pilot/Hell Week"). With the endorsement of a teenage pop star like Lorde and the young members of the sorority, *Scream Queens* does not outright negate the mother-daughter relationship but situates it exclusively within the Kappa house and within a single generation of women, as opposed to a cross-generational relationship spanning age.

The inability for women of different generations to cooperate and facilitate an even remotely amicable relationship with each other is most noticeable in the rivalry between Cathy Munsch and the Kappas. Cathy tells Chanel, "I'm gonna be honest. I hate sororities, and I hate you. For years, I've seen the damage these so-called sisterhoods have had on young girls." ("Pilot/Hell Week"). Later in this episode, Cathy lies in bed after making love with Chad, a dimwitted undergraduate student who exchanges sex for

being able to stay enrolled at Wallace despite his failing grades. Cathy delivers a monologue that drips with jadedness and derision toward the Kappas, stating:

How did my life turn into this? I marched for the Equal Rights Amendment. I burned my bra in the middle of this campus, and then left school to intern for Gloria Steinem at *Ms. Magazine*. This generation, it could give a rat's ass about any of it. Nothing's changed. Have you seen the way girls dress on this campus? These sorority bitches strutting around in basically just their underwear, screaming bloody murder about being objectified, as if they haven't objectified themselves already. And all that marching. All the protests. What did I get out of it? ("Pilot/Hell Week")

When she does not receive a meaningful reply from Chad, Cathy insults him and orders him to take a psychology class "to figure out who gave you such disgusting mommy issues." By implying that their tryst is due to Chad's "mommy issues," she also presents herself as "mother" to him. Later, in another confrontation between Cathy and Chanel, Cathy declares that she is going to be "the strong parental influence [Chanel] never had," thus further maternalizing herself.¹⁵

That being said, Cathy's identity as mother figure on the series is overshadowed by the actress Jamie Lee Curtis's identity as daughter in real life. The source of much of Cathy's consternation with the younger women at Wallace is initially presented by the series as if it stems from Curtis's own "mommy issues." One week prior to the "Mommie Dearest" episode, the series' seventh episode, "Beware of Young Girls," aired, in which audiences learn more about Cathy's backstory. Specifically, viewers are introduced to

¹⁵Incidentally, Cathy is also maternalized later in the season by another sexual partner who asks if he can breastfeed from her during intercourse ("Ghost Stories").

Feather McCarthy (Tavi Gevinson), a former Kappa sister and Wallace student who has seduced and moved in with Cathy's now ex-husband Steven (Philip Casnoff). When Feather is interviewed by reporters with the school newspaper who suspect that Cathy might be the Red Devil, Feather divulges that, after her husband abandoned her, Cathy would routinely stalk Feather and even began wearing identical clothes as her. Feather states, "Everywhere I'd go, she'd just be there dressed exactly like me" ("Beware of Young Girls"), provoking screams from Feather in those moments when she would catch Cathy standing right behind her in the bathroom mirror (Figure 28). Cathy also attempts, with no luck, to kill Feather by dropping a transistor radio into Feather's bathtub one night. By the end of the episode, Steven is murdered by Cathy, and she implicates Feather for his death by planting her DNA on a half-eaten sandwich found at the crime scene.



Figure 28: Cathy stalks Feather in matching wardrobe in "Beware of Young Girls" (2015) (image captured by author)

In several ways, Feather is arguably a reimagining of Leigh's Marion Crane from *Psycho*. Not only does Feather have a short-blond haircut vaguely reminiscent of

Marion's hairstyle in *Psycho*,¹⁶ but her name, Feather, has birdlike associations, as does Marion's Crane surname.¹⁷ When the detective investigating Steven's death comments on the sandwich with the evidence that incriminates Feather, he states, "If only she had a bigger appetite, she might have gotten away with it" ("Beware of Young Girls"). This scene recalls *Psycho* and Norman Bates's remark to Marion, "You eat like a bird," another instance of orality in horror, when Marion slowly eats and fails to finish a sandwich Norman makes for her after she checks into his motel. Cathy dressing up like Feather is also analogous to Norman Bates who wears the same clothes as his oppressive mother, but with Curtis dressing up as the character that is most closely related to her own mother. Feather's scream in the bathroom set piece and her near electrocution while bathing are also uncannily similar to Marion's death in *Psycho*.

Furthermore, Feather is, like Marion, a "young girl" who is sexually self-assured, though her and Marion's sexuality occurs outside the marital contract, and Feather's is even an affront to the institution of marriage (causing Cathy and Steven's divorce). In the final scenes of "Beware of Young Girls," Feather is shown being locked away in an asylum, hollering, "No! Please, I'm innocent! I loved him!", while elsewhere, Cathy twirls around her apartment as she sips a glass of wine and relishes having pulled off the perfect crime. The intercutting between these two scenes insinuates that it is not just the incarceration of Feather that brings Cathy joy, but also the veritable sound of her helpless scream. If one grants legitimacy to the claim that Feather is a substitute for Marion Crane, then Feather (like Marion) is a "bad girl" being punished and the price she must

¹⁶Feather's hairstyle is, in fact, almost identical to that sported by actress Anne Heche when she played the role of Marion Crane in Gus Van Sant's 1998 *Psycho* remake.

¹⁷For more on the symbolism of birds in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, see Durgnat.

pay (once the door to her room in the asylum permanently closes) is to have her voice silenced, and metaphorically castrated, forever.¹⁸ However, if Feather is a stand-in Marion Crane, she is therefore also a representation of Janet Leigh. The result is that the scene implies that, as Cathy delights in the silencing of Feather's voice, Curtis also distances herself from her mother and delights in her mother being punished for her (character's) sexual transgressions. Nevertheless, in the immediate follow-up to "Beware of Young Girls"—the "Mommie Dearest" episode with its remake of the *Psycho* shower scene—the voice is used to achieve the opposite. Curtis's scream-cry revalorizes the maternal (Leigh), honors female sexuality, and performs the identities of mother and daughter by bringing them together in one voice.

The Violence/Eroticism of the Scream-Cry in Scream Queens

In her psychoanalytic inquiry into the function of voice in early infancy, Searl explains that the scream of the infant proceeds through three states of transformation. First, there is a scream of love or a "desire for that which the child loves" (203), such as the mother and her body (for instance, when screaming to be breastfed). It is followed by a scream of rage/hatred and then a scream of love once more. When her first scream does not unite the infant with the object of love to which she is calling out, the subsequent scream of rage expresses her hatred at the inability of herself and her mother to bring about the satisfaction she demands. However, the scream of love eventually returns once

¹⁸The allusions to *Psycho* and Leigh could be detected in *Scream Queen* even well before "Beware of Young Girls." For example, in the season one premiere, former Kappa president Melanie Dorkus (Brianna Howey) is disfigured by a tampered spray tan machine, falling to the ground and pulling down the modesty curtain like Leigh did with the shower curtain after her run-in with Norman Bates. Later in this episode, Zayday reports on the poor conditions of her dorm by announcing, "Somebody call CSI, because there was a murder scene in that bathroom" ("Pilot/Hell Week"). Furthermore, Cathy's description of having sex with Chad could just as easily be something that Marion might say of her experience in the *Psycho* shower: "It lasted, like, 45 seconds, and the whole time it felt like I was getting stabbed in the abdomen" ("Pumpkin Patch").

gratification is achieved. Using the case study of “Terry” in her piece “The Psychology of Screaming,” Searl writes, “The hatred of his own body which refuses to do what he wanted...[and] the terror of his mother’s body which he wanted to attack, indeed felt he had attacked and exhausted, apparently changes into love of his own body...and of hers” (203). Nonetheless, Searl notes that this final scream of love is often a “highly sexualized love” (203), suggesting an eroticized underpinning to the delayed meeting of mother and child. Setting aside the instrument of the voice for a moment, the first and second of these transformations in the infant-parent relationship is replicated in the relationship of the Final Girl to the adults of the slasher genre. Final Girls plead with their parents, especially their mothers, and the other members of adult society for help, only to discover that they are oblivious, ineffective, and occasionally just uncaring, thus prompting the Final Girls’ resentments toward them.

However, in *Scream Queens*’s “Mommie Dearest” episode, Curtis reintroduces the variable of voice to this pattern and, unlike other Final Girls, unlocks the third transformation of the love scream. More specifically, because of the familial and intertextual casting ties that connect Curtis in the “Mommie Dearest” shower scene to Leigh in *Psycho*, Curtis in this episode restores the affectionate bond between mother and child. This bond is affirmed through Curtis’s appropriating the castrated scream of Leigh in *Psycho* and adapting it into an aggressively-sexually empowered scream-cry.

Scream Queens’s mother-daughter intertextual casting choices are made apparent by DVD menu screen for “Mommie Dearest” (Figure 29). In addition to a description of the episode that states, “Dean Munsch goes ‘psycho’ when she becomes the latest target” of the campus killing spree, the menu screen foregrounds the image of the character

Chanel #3, played by actress Billie Lourd. Lourd dons the signature pair of ear muffs that Chanel #3 wears throughout the series to protect her ears from an ex-boyfriend who has threatened to cut them off. However, the ear muffs also have additional meaning in that they remind audiences of Lourd's mother, actress Carrie Fisher, and the unusual hair buns that covered her ears in her definitive role as Princess Leia in George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). Therefore, the episode, including the shower scene contained with it, becomes immediately framed in terms of familial relationships amongst women in Hollywood.¹⁹

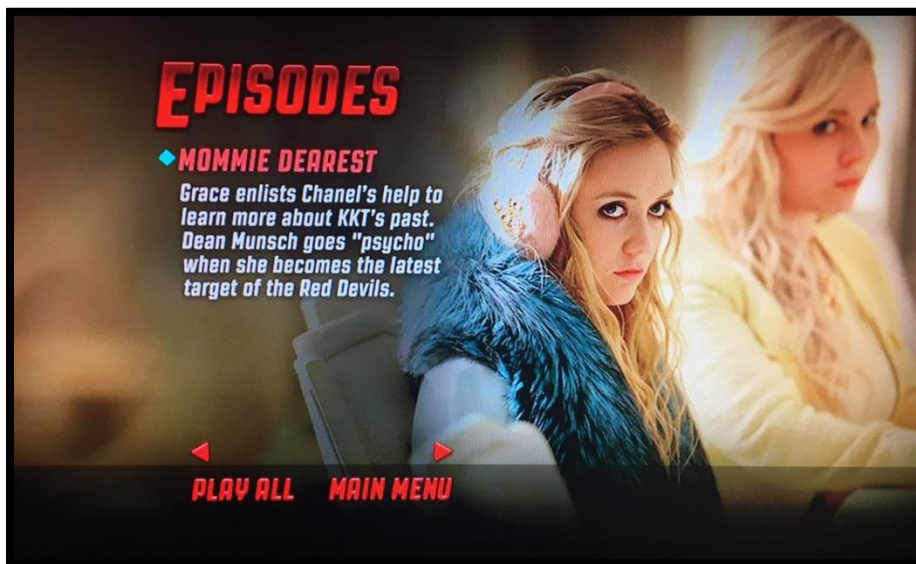


Figure 29: The menu page for the “Mommie Dearest” episode on the *Scream Queens* first season DVD (image captured by author)

Cathy's shower scene begins as an almost shot-by-shot duplication of the one from *Psycho* (with a black and white preview of the scene even released to YouTube before the episode was broadcast). Cathy enters her bathroom and closes the door behind her. She walks across the room while untying her robe, and the camera cuts to a shot of

¹⁹Emma Roberts, who plays Chanel Oberlin on *Scream Queens*, is also a member of a famed Hollywood family, as the daughter of actor Eric Roberts and the niece of actress Julia Roberts.

Cathy's feet as the robe lands on the tile. Cathy steps into the shower and, in a head-on shot, turns on the water. In another shot from the side, Cathy smiles and lathers her arms and neck, exuding a sensuality as she bathes herself that is comparable to Leigh blissfully caressing herself during her time in the shower.

Suddenly, through the shower curtain, a silhouette in the familiar shape of the Red Devil can be seen. The Red Devil pulls open the curtain and raises his knife, but, in the first of many major and increasingly absurd deviations from the surprise attack on Marion in *Psycho*, the killer is shocked to find that Cathy is no longer inside the shower. An impossible feat, Cathy has not only somehow escaped the shower, but also pops up behind the killer. Cathy slams the killer's head into the wall, and declares, "I saw that movie fifty times!", confirming that it is Cathy's (Curtis's) repeated viewings of what became of Marion (Leigh) in *Psycho* that has prepared her to be hyper-alert and ready to outwit the killer at a moment's notice.

Though she does not scream in the face of the maniac's blade, Cathy's vocalizations as she dukes it out with the killer are still significant precisely because of how they contrast with those emitted by the screaming Marion Crane. Likewise, there is also significance in how paratextual media comes to represent the voice in "Mommie Dearest," especially through the inclusion of English-language subtitles on the *Scream Queens* DVD set. Chion notes that "subtitling is not an integral part of the work" of a media text, particularly in regard to the language that is used to describe mediated sounds, as the terms used in these descriptions "can be replaced by other texts in other translations, including other sets of subtitles in the same language" (*Words on Screen*, 139). Though the decision of what language to use in subtitling can be arbitrary, it can

still have an impact on how audiences read sonic entitles like the voice. Amanda Nell Edgar states that the linguistic framing of voice is critical in discussions of voice and gender, as language used in representing voice “constitutes its subject as a certain type of gendered body and in doing so reconstitutes her voice as well” (58). As a result, the paratextual mediation of language and orality through subtitling is necessary to consider in this analysis of the female voice of horror in *Scream Queens*.

While the linguistic label of the “scream,” as Chion argues above, may denote vocalic female victimhood in film and media, I propose that the term “scream-cry” better describes Cathy/Curtis’s voice in “Mommie Dearest” because of three important qualities pertaining to the voice that it introduces. The first quality of the “scream-cry” is its suggestion of aggression, the “battle cry” to ward off enemies and signal a preparedness to engage in combat if necessary. The subtitles that correspond with Curtis’s voice in the *Scream Queens* shower scene seem most aligned with this aspect of the scream-cry. To incapacitate the killer so that she has enough time to get away from him, Cathy delivers a forceful punch to his head. The subtitle reads “grunts” to characterize Cathy’s voice as she swings (Figure 30). Cathy keeps “grunting” over and over, according to the DVD subtitles, when the killer follows her into her living room and she strikes him with a fireplace poker. Eventually, when two more killers enter the room and it is revealed that the Red Devil killer is actually a diabolical trio, Cathy finds herself outnumbered. She is compelled to intensify both her fight and her voice, the subtitles alleging that Cathy “yells” as she runs toward the gang of masked psychopaths with all of her might. Thus, while not branding Cathy’s voice as a “scream” or a “cry,” the linguistic markers

employed by the DVD subtitles do imply that hers is a voice that, like the scream-cry, promises uninhibited violence.

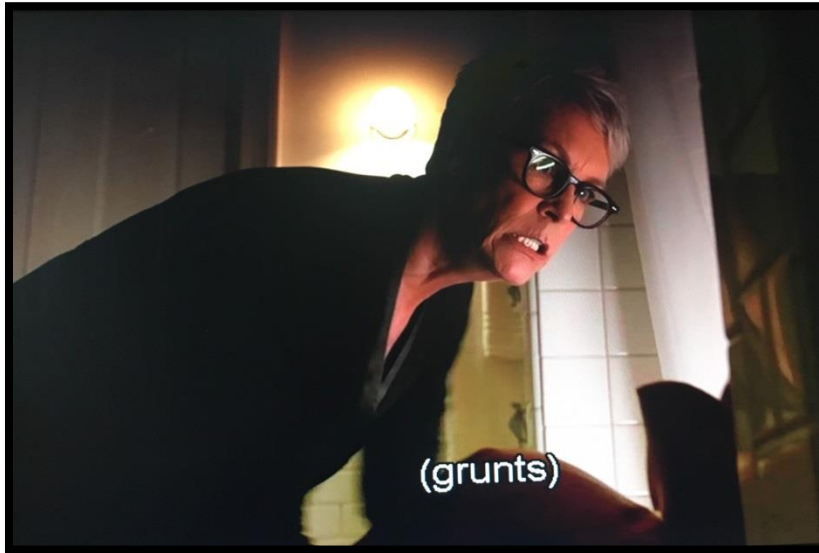


Figure 30: Cathy “grunts” while punching the killer in “Mommie Dearest” (2015) (image captured by author)

A second quality of the scream-cry, though, that perhaps cannot be conveyed through subtitles but is nonetheless a vital aspect of this form of vocalization is its evoking states of female eroticization. The erotic elements of Cathy’s voice manifest once the three killers enter her home, two of whom are disguised as the Red Devil, and one of whom is, rather inexplicably, wearing a mask resembling then Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonin Scalia. Backed into a corner, Cathy momentarily pauses the showdown and shares an out-of-the-blue confession with them:

When I was a junior, I spent a year abroad. I had an affair with a beautiful Eurasian man named Chon Wi Ha. He was a grand champion in the illegal Hong Kong fighting pits. Blood sport, they called it. I taught him everything I knew about making love. And in return, he taught me how to fight. (“Mommie Dearest”)

At this point is when Cathy stops her speech and “yells,” announcing her readiness to wage all-out war. Cathy advances toward the three intruders, delivering hit and hit, and blow after blow, all of which she presumably learned from her former lover. Unlike the “bad girls” of the slasher genre, Cathy’s sexual history does not mean her demise, but rather, is advantageous to her and ensures her survival. Thus, what is heard as Cathy “grunts” and “yells” is not the scream of a violated victim, but the scream-cry that conveys both her anger and the erotic, orgasmic reverberations of her sexual awakening.

After subduing the two Red Devil killers, Cathy turns her attention to the individual in the Scalia mask. She punches the accomplice over and over, and delivers, as her volume swells, an over-the-top diatribe that reeks of liberal sentiments: “The homosexual lifestyle is not disruptive to THE FABRIC OF AMERICAN SOCIETY! The Voting Rights Act should be authorized in EVERY state! And the Affordable Care Act does not require people TO EAT BROCCOLI!” (“Mommie Dearest”). In venting her rage at the highly conservative “Scalia” through both her voice and her fists, Curtis is able to lash out at the repressive political ideology that constructs sexually confident women, like her mother as Marion in *Psycho*, as deserving of punishment and having their bodies symbolically castrated before the camera. Furthermore, as she unleashes her scream-cry, Cathy bears her teeth as if tapping into her basest animal drives and giving in to her violent impulses (Figure 31). This snarl, in conjunction with her unrestrained ferocity, is evincive of Cathy incarnating the *femme castratrice*. In other words, Cathy is not turned into another victim of violent castration for her sexuality and her rebuking of traditional codes of femininity. Rather, in her vocal theatrics, and akin to the *femme*

castratrice, Cathy combines sexuality and violence so as to grant herself some semblance of power in this situation.²⁰

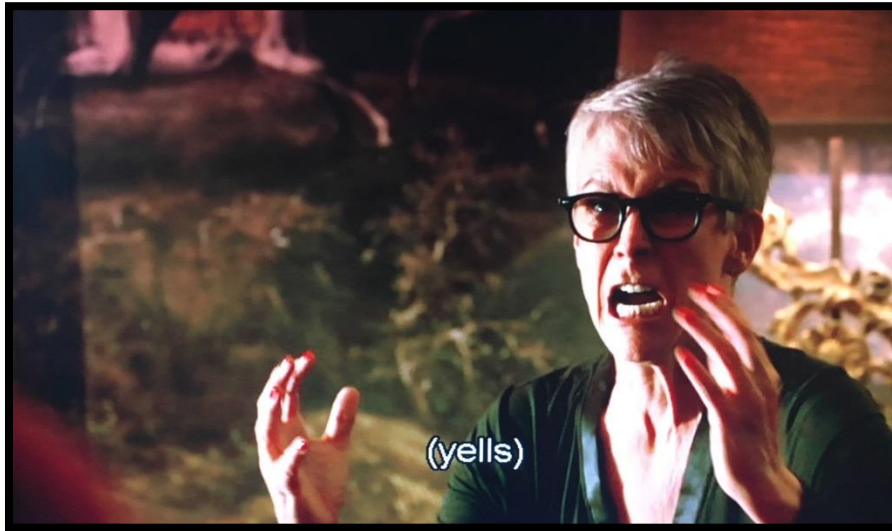


Figure 31: Cathy “yells” and bears her teeth in “Mommie Dearest” (2015) (image captured by author)

Its political commentary aside, the crux of this sequence in “Mommie Dearest,” and the third and final quality of the scream-cry, is its valuable message about the child’s embrace of the maternal. In doing so, it subverts defining features of slasher horror Final Girls, specifically that they survive because of their contempt for immature adults, especially sexually active mothers. However, Curtis—the quintessential Final Girl representative—is saved specifically because of her connection to her mother. While the character Cathy may have savored the destruction of (the Marion Crane-esque) Feather in the previous episode, Curtis in “Mommie Dearest” actually models herself after her mother and willingly “steps into the shower” where Janet Leigh once stood. Most fundamental to the “scream queen” Curtis, though, is her voice and its propensity to both scream and cry. Through the scream-cry, her voice maneuvers between the toughness of

²⁰Creed contends that the Final Girl is another version of the *femme castratrice* in that her defeat of the killer is tantamount to her “emasculating” him (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 124-8).

the Final Girl daughter (Curtis) and the erotic agency of the maternal (Leigh's Marion Crane), giving Curtis (as Cathy) the power to resist further victimization.

On one hand, "Mommie Dearest," and its lesson about maternal redemption, has resonated with some contemporary feminist critics. Writing on the episode's shower scene for the feminist pop culture website *Jezebel*, one reviewer states, "In a nice way, it's giving Marion the ending she deserved—not hunched in the shower, terrified and screaming, but on her feet fighting—completely flattening—any foe who's dumb enough to come at her" (Davies). On the other hand, despite the loving homage between Curtis and Leigh, the remainder of *Scream Queens*'s season one narrative following "Mommie Dearest" falls short in presenting a vision of intergenerational female solidarity. In addition to Cathy's constant verbal antipathy toward Chanel (e.g., "I hate sororities and I hate you"), Cathy also outright mocks Grace when she launches her own investigation into the Wallace University massacre, believing that her mother may have been the Kappa sister who gave birth in Kappa house and that the murders may have spawned from the events of that night. Cathy disparages Grace's motives, coldly stating, "Do you know what I find the most appalling thing about you? You act like you are this benevolent champion of justice when really, at the end of the day, this is just about you finding out who your mommy is" ("Mommie Dearest"). Cathy's display of loathing toward Grace and the other women of her generation is all the more unfortunate in that it occurs just a couple of scenes after the shower scene in which Cathy scream-cried her way through her altercation with the killers and in which, more importantly, Curtis promoted women's intergenerational relationships through the vocalic bond she created with her mother.

Cathy's detachment from the younger women around her is reiterated in *Scream Queens*'s season one finale episode—titled “The Final Girl(s)”—when Cathy's scream-cry makes one last return. Months after the commotion at Wallace University has settled down, Cathy has been heralded as a modern-day feminist heroine by the media and has hired a ghostwriter to pen a book in her name. At a book signing for the fictional bestseller *New New Feminism*, Cathy sits at a table in a roomful of women who are all excited to meet Cathy and who appear to be in approximately the same middle-aged demographic as her. One of Cathy's enthusiastic readers approaches and asks her to summarize the philosophy of her book. Emboldened by the question, Cathy rises from her seat, and answers,

If feminism was about demanding equal treatment for women, and new feminism was saying that men and women are integral complements to one another, then I guess we could sum up “new new feminism” really in three simple words: women are better. [...] I mean, the proof is right in front of us. If you think about all of human history, add up the wars and the genocide, all the oppression, the violence, the exploitation, the degradation of the human spirit, what do all those things have in common? Dudes. (“The Final Girl[s]”)

The women form a circle around Cathy, captivated by her remarks. They clutch their chests and nod in sincere agreement, as if listening to a moving sermon at church. Meanwhile, like a preacher trying to stir the people in the pews, Cathy continues with her oration, but in a highly dramatic tone and with a mounting crescendo.

Cathy: So maybe, just maybe, it's not just places like Wallace University that are better off with a woman in charge. Maybe we'd be better off if a woman was in charge—

Cathy and the women: EVERYWHERE!

Cathy: EXACTLY! (“The Final Girl[s]”)

This collective pooling of women's voices speaking (loudly) in unison is its own variant of the scream-cry, yet in this context the “crying” is less strictly a battle cry and more of a feminist rallying cry. But that it is delivered exclusively to women of her own generation only makes it more clear the tragedy of how Cathy's voice could be just as capable of rallying together the women of Kappa and creating those much needed connections with these younger woman, if only Cathy would make that effort. To be sure, this flaw on Cathy's part does not invalidate the mother-daughter vocalic allegiance between Curtis and Leigh that was achieved in the “Mommie Dearest” episode. However, it does indicate that the value placed on women's intergenerational relationships by the voice of at least one of the performers in *Scream Queens* does not echo throughout the narrative of the series itself.

Conclusion

In 2017, two years after its premiere, FOX announced that it would be cancelling *Scream Queens*. Its cancellation, though, does not mean a decrease of interest in slasher horror or in the films that gave the genre its first breath of life. October 2017 saw the release of Alexandre O. Philippe's *78/52: Hitchcock's Shower Scene*, a documentary devoted to discussing the filming of the *Psycho* shower sequence (and named for its number of cuts and camera set-ups), thus attesting to the scene's enduring cultural

impact. Meanwhile, in that same year, news spread that Blumhouse productions would begin filming a reboot of *Halloween* with, most surprisingly, Jamie Lee Curtis returning to the role of Final Girl Laurie Strode.

On October 31, 2017, Curtis “tweeted” an early publicity still for the film, showing her lying in a pile of autumn leaves beside *Halloween*’s masked killer, Michael Myers, with a hand placed over her mouth and a fearful expression on her face (Figure 32). Her hidden mouth is, quite obviously, a reference to her infamous scream. And yet her being coupled with Myers, lounging next to each other as if in post-coital leisure, brings to mind the image of Curtis’s mother, Janet Leigh, as Marion Crane in her bra and slip and resting in bed by her lover in the opening scene of *Psycho*.



Figure 32: Curtis resting in the leaves with *Halloween* killer Michael Myers (image provided courtesy of the @jamieleecurtis Twitter account)

As this chapter has argued, all of these themes—vocality and sexuality, daughterhood and motherhood—are not unrelated. Through what I have termed the

“scream-cry” as performed by Curtis in the first season of *Scream Queens*, a vocal and queer-uncanny reunion of daughter and mother occurs. At first, Curtis assumes the role of an angry daughter who is complicit in castrating/silencing the maternal voice in *Scream Queens* (i.e., Cathy’s revenge against Feather, a character quite reminiscent of Leigh). However, Curtis also adopts and revises Leigh’s scream from *Psycho*—and likewise, revises the outcome of Leigh’s fatal shower in *Psycho* as part of the *Scream Queens*’s “Mommie Dearest” episode—so as to embody a vocalic identity based on honoring and emulating the sexuality of the maternal while affording it the agency to enact violence, as well. That being said, Curtis’s assumption of the voice of the maternal contradicts her character, Cathy Munsch, who has no interest in nurturing the voices of the next generation of women.

One major shortcoming of *Scream Queens*, though, is that it blatantly whitewashes both the mother-daughter relationship and slasher horror. The so-called matrophobia that is said to plague the mother-daughter relationship is often attributed primarily to white women. In contrast, Black feminist writers like Alice Walker have written of Black daughters who are “in search of” their mothers and who cherish their maternal lineage (“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”). I make this point because the generational warfare between Zayday and Denise (the series’ only African-American women), though racially coded, is never fully explored. That the source of their conflict is the younger Zayday’s ambition to be Kappa’s first Black president, which was never attainable for Denise, is critical because, as Karlyn explains, contemporary popular culture has often featured “girls of color steadfastly going their own ways—in sports, education, or love—even against the wishes of their equally strong-willed mothers”

(226). Meanwhile, Robin R. Means Coleman makes the important claim that, in the slasher genre, “Final Girls tend to be White” (131). This whiteness needs to be addressed because, as opposed to the Final Girl first molded by Curtis in *Halloween*, Coleman states that “1970s horror films featuring Black women handled the Final Girl with noteworthy variation” (132). Most significant for this study is that while Curtis’s Final Girl in *Halloween* is virginal, Coleman writes that “Black women were often highly sexualized” as horror heroines (132). To be sure, Zayday and Denise are both sexually confident and, in different ways, accomplished women. But their relationship is an antagonistic one, as Black women on *Scream Queens* ultimately cannot turn to women of another generation in the same way that white women in the series, like Curtis, can.

However, outside of its troubling renderings of race, gender, and intergenerational age, the insights of this chapter do have implications for the study of horror and orality. First, the emphasis on Curtis’s iconography is substantial in that she is not the only horror thespian carrying the blessing and burden of being a Final Girl; at horror conventions across the country, fans of the genre wait in long lines for the chance to receive autographs and strike up a conversation with actresses like Heather Lagenkamp (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), Adrienne King (*Friday the 13th*), and Danielle Harris (*Halloween 4* and *5*). Scholars of horror would be wise to be mindful of how, similar to Curtis in *Scream Queens*, the celebrity iconographies and connotations of the Final Girls of slasher horror’s hallowed history come to bring new meanings to these narratives. Second, by concentrating on horr/orality in terms of its more typical associations with voice in this chapter, we are offered a new representation of the mouth as it functions (similar to the act of spitting in *I Spit*) as an exiting orifice. In this instance, what exits

from it in the act of screaming is the voice, the voice that has been so common (and so commonly gendered) in the horror genre. My hope, as a result of this chapter's reading of the various meanings that might be pinned to the scream in slasher horror (whether as a scream of terror, a scream of orgasmic delight, a scream of violent retribution, a scream of a child embracing her maternal parent, a scream of a mother scorned, or some combination of one or more of the above), is that scholars who write on the scream will attempt to think more carefully about what exactly it is that they think they are hearing and what that scream (because its interlocking politics of gender, age, and sexuality) is communicating to us.

Chapter 5

A Child is Being Eaten: *Night of the Living Dead* and the Bite of the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight

Introduction

In summer 2017, the horror community experienced an immense loss with the passing of beloved filmmaker George A. Romero. Of all the entries in his prolific filmography, Romero was best known for directing the 1968 horror classic *Night of the Living Dead* (herein *Night*). *Night*, which was subsequently remade under its original title in 1990 and as *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* in 2009, tells the story of a zombie outbreak, in which a swarm of regenerated dead bodies attacks an abandoned farmhouse being occupied by a band of human survivors. While Communication scholars have previously examined Romero as an exemplar of the American film auteur and have analyzed common themes emerging across his collective oeuvre (Phillips, *Dark Directions*), the significance of *Night* 1968, especially as it revised the figure of the zombie, cannot be overstated.¹

The most monumental contribution of Romero and *Night* was the decision to define the zombie largely by its mouth, and more specifically, by its urge to devour living bodies. As Jamie Russell explains, “Before *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies ha[d] been content to scare, strangle or bludgeon their victims. Romero upped the ante by giving them a taste for warm, human flesh” (64). Although Russell and other scholars have argued that this attribute of *Night* 1968 “recreated the zombie tradition with cannibalism” (Hakola 92), the emphasis on cannibalistic eating overlooks its more profound propensity

¹To be sure, the term “zombie” is never once uttered in reference to the monsters of *Night* 1968, and was only applied to the film later.

for *biting*.² Since the release and later re-tellings of *Night*, the biting zombie has remained a prominent figure in popular culture and across numerous media platforms, including film (e.g., *Warm Bodies* [2013], *World War Z* [2013], *Zombieland* [2009], and the *Return of the Living Dead* series), television (e.g., *iZombie* and *The Walking Dead*), and video games (e.g., *Left 4 Dead* and *Resident Evil*).

The rising profile of the zombie as a source of terror in mass media has been followed by efforts to sexualize the zombie. For instance, one can point to Marcel Sarmiento and Gadi Harel's controversial film *Deadgirl* (2008), which tells the story of a group of high school boys who discover a female zombie and hold her captive in order to sexually assault her at their whim. Additionally, zombie-themed pornography has become more predominant in the twenty-first century, with titles including *Dawna of the Dead* (2008); *L.A. Zombie* (2010); *Otto, or Up with Dead People* (2008); *Porn of the Dead* (2006); *Porn Star Zombies* (2009); *Zombie Strippers* (2008); *Zombie Stripper Apocalypse* (2010); and *Zombie vs. Strippers* (2012). Though scholars have observed the tendency toward sexualizing monsters in general in media (Paasonen), zombie sexuality has proved especially fascinating because of its underlining queer connotations. For instance, in their writing on gay zombie porn, Shaka McGlotten and Sarah Vagundy argue that "zombies function as a powerful reminder of queers to reclaim our perverse pleasures...though not necessarily in ways that align with hegemonic ideals of intimacy" (120).³ Thus, the

²Meanwhile, other scholars argue that cannibalism had long been correlated with the zombie, particularly the early zombie created by Haitian folklore, as a means for Western culture to demonize and present Haitian voodoo practitioners as primitive (Kee). Romero's *Night*, though, was the first introduction of the biting zombie in American film. For a complete cultural history of the zombie, see Luckhurst. For a history of the zombie in film, see Russell, Silver and Ursini, and Inguanzo.

³In fact, upon its release, critics derided Romero's *Night* as being tantamount to a "pornography of violence" (qtd. In Heffernan, "Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film").

queerness of zombie sexuality lies in its ability to appeal to desires and cravings that do not conform to expectations deemed “appropriate” and “acceptable” by normal society.

One of the most recent and most provocative efforts to sexualize the zombie came in late 2016, courtesy of the Fleshlight “sex toy” manufacturing company. In business since the mid-1990s, Fleshlight specializes in producing masturbatory aids for its male clientele that recreate human orifices. Fleshlight toys are made to replicate mouths, vaginas, and anuses to be penetrated and used for genital stimulation.

In October 2016, Fleshlight released the latest additions from its Fleshlight Freaks series, a line of toys modeled off famous horror movie monsters.⁴ Included in this latest batch of Freaks was the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight (Figure 33). What is most shocking about the Zombie Mouth, aside from the synthetic “skin” around it that is died green and designed to look like rotting flesh, is that as the mouth opens to receive the sexual organs of its owner it bears a set of pronounced sharp teeth that create the illusion that those who place their genitals inside this mouth risk having them bitten off in the process.



Figure 33: The Zombie Mouth Fleshlight (image provided courtesy of the Fleshlight official website)

⁴The Fleshlight Freaks series has been produced since 2011.

The Zombie Mouth Fleshlight, as a cultural artifact created in the years following each of the aforementioned iterations of *Night*, will be the focus of this chapter. I see an analysis of the Zombie Mouth as merited on multiple grounds. First, this study can offer long due legitimacy to the study of male sex toys. As multiple authors have noted, whereas the proliferation and acceptance of female sex toys has been seen as a progressive feminist development (Comella; Lieberman, “Intimate Transactions”), male sex toys have not been granted the same dignity and “are often the most ridiculed of sex toys” (Nixon, “Hell yes!!!!,” 207). Even sincere scholarly interest in sex toys (Lieberman, *Buzz*) has resulted in cultural histories of this industry in which male sexy toys receive little mention. Second, the *Zombie Mouth* also offers a unique vantage point through which to explore orality (the bite) and monstrosity (the zombie) in contemporary horror paratexts. While it appears far removed from some of the earliest incarnations of the zombie in Romero’s *Night*, I see the *Zombie Mouth* as a paratext that is intertextually linked to the original film (and the later *Night* films) because of how it appropriates the zombie’s biting function that *Night* established.

The ostensibly biting/castrating *Zombie Mouth* also duplicates the family dynamics found in *Night*. Amongst the dwellers in the doomed farmhouse in *Night* are beleaguered mother Helen Cooper (Marilyn Eastman in *Night* 1968/2009, and McKee Anderson in *Night* 1990), and her sickly daughter, Karen (Kyra Schon in *Night* 1968/2009). Ultimately, Karen, who is renamed Sarah in *Night* 1990 (Heather Mazur), transforms into a zombie by the films’ end and eventually comes to direct her monstrous orality toward Helen.

In the context of the previous chapter's discussion of orality and the bond of mother and daughter on *Scream Queens* as well as the overtly sexual nature of the Zombie Mouth, this chapter asks: (how) does the zombie bite serve as another mechanism for representing, and eroticizing, the mother-daughter relationship? By continuing to use Freudian psychoanalytic theory—and, in particular, Freud's writings on the uncanny and the fetish object in relationship to the daughter in the nuclear family unit—I articulate a three-point argument. First, I argue that Karen/Sarah is presented as a fetish object, but one that fails to alleviate the threat of castration, and instead (as it develops throughout the 1968, 1990, and 2009 variations of *Night*) uses her mouth to inflict castration upon Helen. Second, the Zombie Mouth can be read as a paratext borrowing from the narrative of *Night*, thereby positioning the masturbating male body as a site through which the violence between mother and daughter in *Night* is recreated. Third, and lastly, I contend that the Zombie Mouth's intertextual ties to *Night* and users' investment in an uncanny fantasy of the Zombie Mouth as an animated object of oral play results in the Zombie Mouth reimagining castration as both a violent and erotic union between mother and daughter.

This chapter looks at a form of paratextuality that has not yet been grappled with in this dissertation: paratextuality in relationship to merchandising tied to a film, but apart from that of just a film's DVD/Blu-ray edition. Horror merchandising, in particular, has been especially in demand in recent years. Horror fans have ravenously sought out an array of products—including T-shirts and apparel, coffee mugs, lunch boxes, sticker, posters, and so forth—that help them extend their fandom into their everyday lives. Websites such as Horrormerch.com, House of Mysterious Secrets, Urban Collector,

Fright Rags, and Bam Box! have specialized in producing this brand of horror-based paraphernalia for the public.

Of notable significance is the growing interest in horror toys and collectible figures. Companies like McFarlane Toys, Funko, the National Entertainment Collectibles Association, and Trick or Treat Studios have garnered major profits from their ability to take some of horror's most famous characters and render them as play things for their consumers. Many of these toys are released decades after the films from which they are spawned were screened in theaters, perhaps making up for this lack of merchandise in the past.⁵

While this toyification of horror has been explored by several scholars (Botting; Conrich "The *Friday the 13th* Films and the Cultural Function of Modern Grand Guignol"; Conrich, "Seducing the Subject"), the biting zombie in toy form, and how this representation of the zombie affects both the meanings behind its orality and its association with the *Night* films, has yet to receive serious scholarly consideration. Moreover, much like male sex toys have gone unrecognized by many scholars, Suzanne Scott states that "toys and action figures remain perilously under-theorized as paratextual agents, especially considering the high degree of storytelling agency they afford and their centrality to franchising logics" (139). However, as Jonathan Gray explains, film-related toy products are still helpful for scholars to investigate since, based on how they are used in the imaginations of the consumer, they illustrate how "storyworlds can develop and come to life in paratexts, thereby challenging the widespread textual hierarchy that sees

⁵As Ian Conrich explains in his analysis of twenty-first century toys modeled off the villain Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* horror series of the 1980s, these toys "are replacements for the Jason toys that never were" (184) and are targeted to adult horror consumers who were deprived of these kinds of toys in their childhood.

films....as necessarily superior to paratexts, and as the center of narrative universes” (176-7). As such, toys continue to advance the narrative of a film even after its end credits have rolled.

Though the *Zombie Mouth* is not a toy that is officially licensed in connection to any of the *Night* films (in contrast to, for example, the various children’s toys released in conjunction with a Hollywood commercial empire like the *Star Wars* franchise [Gray, Scott]), its adoption of the biting mouth motif that *Night* institutionalized tethers the toy and films together. That being said, as a counterpoint to Gray’s observations above, this chapter utilizes the *Zombie Mouth* to demonstrate not only how merchandising can prolong and modify a film narrative, but how a piece of merchandising can be read as having its meaning shaped by the intertextual influence of pre-existing filmic text. Consequently, the relationships between the characters as they *play out* in the film can also flow into how users’ employ and *play with* corresponding paratextual merchandising.

In this chapter, I interpret the oral violence of the characters of *Night*—especially Helen and Karen/Sarah who signify the aged binary of old-versus-young within the family—as animating the meaning behind the eroticism of the *Zombie Mouth*. While numerous critics have suggested that *Night*, especially Romero’s 1968 original, can be perceived as a critique of Vietnam, hippie counterculture, and the Civil Rights Movement that deeply affected this period of American history (Bacon; Becker; Hakola; Phillips, *Projected Fears*), what is fundamental to my analysis of the *Night* films are their depictions of the horror of what happens when the normative family structure is put in danger. Previous scholars have addressed this theme through the archetype of what Robin

Wood calls the “Terrible Child,” of which Karen in *Night* 1968 is one of its clearest representatives (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” 17).⁶ However, the importance placed on the monstrous child in such a reading of *Night* overlooks how the interaction of the bodies of young *and* old (child *and* mother) determines the meaning of family horror in these films and becomes intertextually reinscribed through the body of the Zombie Mouth user.

One final, and very important, objective of this chapter is to provide a more nuanced view of how a horror text may reaffirm and yet also correct/subvert some of the Freudian psychoanalytic principles that have been crucial to this dissertation. While Freudian constructs of the uncanny are validated and reinforced through *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth*, these texts glorify the terror of bodily castration so as to undermine other Freudian theories of the fetish and the role of children and children’s toys as fetish objects that dissemble signs of supposed castration in the maternal body. This chapter will also rearticulate previously cited feminist critical age studies and feminist Freudian revisionist scholarship. It will reconsider them through *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth*.

The remainder of this chapter will unfold in three sections. First, I will provide an overview of previous literature on the *Fleshlight*, *Night of the Living Dead*, and cultural understandings of acts of biting as they pertain to gender, age, the mother-child relationship, violence, and eroticism. Second, I will address zombie lore and horror merchandising more broadly to suggest their application to Freud’s notions of the uncanny and the fetish, as well as how these concepts manifest through the cultural

⁶As one case in point, Kendall R. Phillips reads the decimation of the Cooper family by Karen in *Night* 1968 as an allegory for the American 1960s counterculture, stating, “Whatever bonds of protection might have been afforded by the family unit are showed stripped bare for their presentations and revealed for what they are: the young will devour their elders just as the new society will rise to overwhelm the old” (*Dark Directions* 31).

phenomenon of the children's toy. Third, and lastly, I will briefly evaluate the 1968, 1990, and 2009 versions of *Night* for how they establish connections between mother and child, orality, and violent eroticism, and then illustrate how these connections are also observable in the operations of the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight.

The De-Fetishizing Bite of the Uncanny Fleshlight

The Fleshlight, Night of the Living Dead, and the Bite

While the Fleshlight and the Fleshlight Freaks series have received some passing reference in literature on the adult sex toy market and monster pornography (McGlotten, Nixon, "Hell Yes!!!!"), the Fleshlight in general has been mostly ignored by scholars. One exception is Slavoj Žižek, who comments on the ability of the Fleshlight to allow its users to experience another body in fragmented form. Žižek explains, "What one buys here is simply the partial object (erogenous zone) alone, deprived of the embarrassing additional burden of the entire person" (64). This bodily fragmentation—and specifically, the fragmentation of the female body—has also been the subject of some deserved criticism. As Karen Boyle writes of the Fleshlight, "Women's bodies are literally atomized here; they are holes to be penetrated, surfaces to be ejaculated on" (266). Boyle is correct in her assessment; the Fleshlight does present the autonomous sexual organ, which reinforces heteronormative arrangements of the active (penetrating) male and passive (penetrated and literally objectified) female body. Nonetheless, the intertextual bridge between the biting Zombie Mouth and the *Night* films where the biting zombie first materialized also permits a rethinking of the male body. As I assert in this chapter, the male body that engages with the Zombie Mouth comes to represent not phallic

masculinity, but an intersectional performance of the feminine-familial and aged roles like those found in the *Night* series.

Numerous scholars have analyzed how gender and age are represented in *Night*. In regard to gender, some scholars have suggested that much like the zombie (and also the vampire) blurs the lines separating living and dead, the borders demarcating gender in the zombie are also distorted. In her essay on the 1968 *Night* (as well as its sequels, *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] and *Day of the Dead* [1985]), Natasha Patterson explains that “the function of the zombie film as a genre does not seem contingent upon reinvoking gender binaries, or boundaries...Binaries are subject to annihilation in the zombie film...and these categories become increasingly futile” (114-5). However, I take issue with Patterson’s claim that the zombies obfuscate gender binaries entirely.

Instead, the *Night films* uphold gender binaries in order to reveal just how appalling gender, especially normative patriarchal masculinity, can be. For instance, several critical examinations of *Night* focus on the friction between Helen’s husband (and Karen/Sarah’s father), Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman in *Night* 1968/2009, and Tom Towles in *Night* 1990), and Ben (Duane Jones in *Night* 1968/2009, and Tony Todd in *Night* 1990), two adversaries who vie to be the leader of the farmhouse. Harry and Ben’s unwillingness to work together results in chaos and death. Thus, in addition to *Night* showing how “the competitive arena of patriarchal aggression is no solution for the besieged humans” (Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero*, 28), Barry Keith Grant astutely argues, “[A]t the beginning of the film the zombies are the monstrous threat, but at the end it is hysterical masculinity that is truly horrifying” (210). These insights into

masculinity as it is de-centered (and concomitantly destroyed) in *Night* will become more fully realized in my analysis of the *Zombie Mouth* below.

Meanwhile, Kendall R. Phillips and Tony Williams contend that particular characters in *Night* are also marked by age and the manner in which they shift from childhood into adulthood. For example, in the opening scene of *Night*, audiences are introduced to a brother and sister duo, Barbara (Judith O’Dea in *Night* 1968/2009, and Patricia Tallman in *Night* 1990), and Johnny (Russell Streiner in *Night* 1968/2009, and Bill Moseley in *Night* 1990). Despite being fully grown adults, Phillips describes the pair in *Night* 1968 as “young and immature” as Jonny pesters Barbara for his favorite candy (*Projected Fears*, 94), and Barbara “falls into childhood fears” when Johnny begins teasing her about a game they used to play in the cemetery as children (Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero*, 28). Nonetheless, Phillips writes, “Their innocent play [is] brought to an abrupt halt by an encroaching, lethal danger” (*Projected Fears*, 94), as Johnny is rendered unconscious by one of the intruding zombies and Barbara is forced to “grow up” and fight back against the monster in order to live. Though I agree with Phillips’s assessment of these characters, I will seek in this chapter to put greater emphasis on other characters from this narrative. In particular, I see Helen and Karen/Sarah, when their relationship is restated through other paratextual media, as also exemplifying the representation of the shifting of age in *Night*.

It is the oral act of the bite, though, that aligns markers of age, gender, and sexuality in *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth*. Brandon LaBelle states that the bite, especially when “turned back toward one’s own flesh sharpens our perspective” on the monstrosity of human orality and how, in monstrous figures like the zombie and the

vampire, the bite renders tenuous the distinctions “between human contact and fantasies of the undead” (21). More crucially, however, the “human contact” facilitated by the bite can, similar to the voice in the previous chapter on *Scream Queens*, work along two dimensions: in the familial bond of mother and child, and in the erotic entanglement of bodies. LaBelle, influenced (like psychoanalysis) by normative understandings of the family, the duties of the mother, and the maternal body, states that the “primary relationship to the mother” is often achieved through orality (as in breast-feeding). Therefore, LaBelle claims that one comes to understand how “the mouth performs a vital channel for developing connections between people and things and, importantly, for often ‘holding onto’ the loved object” (19). But this “holding onto” the object of one’s affections through the clasp of the teeth is also imbued with “additional erotic energies” (LaBelle 17) evidenced by such common occurrences as the “love bite” or the “hickey,” produced in the erotic-oral ritual idiomatically known as “necking.” What these two contexts for the bite have in common is a longing to create a bond between bodies through the enactment of violence that is both orally and erotically driven.

Other scholars, especially those analyzing the recent popularity of zombie-themed pornography, have already outlined the continuities between oral violence and human eroticism. Of so-called “straight” zombie porn, many of which involve female zombies that bite their male partners as a form of intimate mutilation, Steven Jones reads the zombies’ “biting their sexual partners [as] an extension of the sexual moment” (49) but also adds that “the female bite....divests the hu-men of their central ideological status as phallic controller, directly disturbing male bodily boundaries...” (60). Additionally, in his critique of gay zombie porn and its portrayal of male-on-male sexuality-violence, Darren

Elliott-Smith states, “Oral incorporation as a simultaneous desire to annihilate and homoerotically consumes the other sheds light on the flesh eating zombie’s symbolic potential as a potentially queer monster” (“Gay Zombies,” 145).⁷

This oral destruction of the male body, in line with *Night*’s commentary on the fragility of patriarchal masculinity, is nonetheless all too paralleled in the *Zombie Mouth* Fleshlight and the fantasy of castrative violence it propels. I also see the sexualized violence of the *Zombie Mouth* as further evincing the zombie’s queer monstrous capabilities. However, the queerness of the *Zombie Mouth* comes through how it queers age and gender (consistent with the previous case studies in this dissertation) and blurs the binary between young and old/masculine and feminine. The *Zombie Mouth*’s queering of age-gender is accomplished by drawing upon the characters in *Night* and (as I will explain further below) compelling its users to erotically and uncannily recreate the violent relationship of both the maternal Helen and the zombie daughter Karen/Sarah from *Night*.

Placing Helen and Karen/Sarah at the core of the *Zombie Mouth* is useful in responding to, and also recognizing how *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth* pushes back against, two of Freud’s most controversial claims about the family. First, Freud believes that the perceived castration of the female body generates daughters’ antipathy toward their mothers. Second, and relatedly, Freud argues that little girls’ toys (such as dolls) become training for motherhood and attaining a child that will become a fetish compensating for their penile lack.

⁷For more scholarship on gay/queer zombie pornography, see Elliott-Smith (““Death is the New Pornography!””), McGlotten, and McGlotten and Vangundy.

The Fetishistic (Zombie) Toy

As I have stated before, Freud defines the uncanny as that which simultaneously seems both familiar and unfamiliar. Previous scholarship, such as that of Kyle Bishop, has discussed the figure of the zombie through almost identical language, stating that “zombie films horrify protagonists and audiences alike with the uncanny fusion of the familiar with the unfamiliar” (110) by being, as I have already alluded to, not quite alive but not entirely dead either. Additionally, the latest waves of horror merchandising that have piqued the interests of contemporary consumers have also been described by scholars in similar ways. For instance, in his study of the merchandising of Gothic horror, Fred Botting writes, “Clothes, puppets, masks, lifestyles, dolls, sweets, locate Gothic images in a thoroughly commodified context in which horror is rendered familiar,” and this familiarization can, on one hand, make monsters “no different from the norms they once negatively defined” (9), but on the other hand, can make the consumer and his humanity unfamiliar through the strange kinships he forms with the monstrous objects that adorn his life (his body, his home, his office, etc.). Ian Conrich describes this process as being “seduced by the subject” (“Seducing the Subject,” 230), as cinematic monsters prove themselves alluring to the individuals who proudly acquire, display, and use merchandising emulating these monsters as a means of asserting their fandom.

Granting these merchandised objects some agency (such as framing them as actively able to “seduce” their users, of which the Fleshlight might be the exemplar par excellence) is reminiscent of other approaches Freud takes to describe the uncanny. In his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman” that becomes the crux of his reflections on the uncanny, Freud notes how others (particularly E. Jentsch) have seen the figure of the

“apparently animate doll” in the story (who the story’s narrator mistakes as a real human) as one textbook instance of how the uncanny haunts this narrative (“The Uncanny,” 140). However, Freud also contends that while the uncanny is often construed as a source of horror, the doll brought to life prompts a different reaction because of how it resonates with common childhood preoccupations; Freud states:

[T]here is no question of fear in the case of a living doll: children are not afraid of their dolls coming to life—they may even want them to. Here, then the sense of the uncanny would derive not from an infantile fear, but from an infantile wish... (“The Uncanny,” 141).

To be sure, the horror genre has given us multiple examples of films that discredit this claim, in which the doll-come-to-life is depicted not as a pleasurable premise but an unequivocally terrifying one for its child protagonists (e.g., *Child’s Play* [1988], *Dolls* [1987], and *Dolly Dearest* [1991]). Furthermore, scholars have discussed how sex toys, especially those modeled off human bodies like sex dolls, appeal to their consumers because they are not alive; they are inactive, passive, and do not impose their own sexual needs upon their users, as would probably be the case with a real human sex partner (Boyle).⁸

It is not unthinkable, though, to assess the *Zombie Mouth* as an object that, analogous to the uncanny living doll, satisfies a similar wish in the adult to have their dolls/toys become alive and active. In fact, the erotic appeal of the *Zombie Mouth* is that it can be imagined in the mind of the user as an animated mouth ready to chomp and dismember, but also bring sexual gratification. Katriina Haljakka notes that sex toys can be

⁸For an alternative view of passivity as a form of agency promoted by the sex doll (an idea which, while fascinating, is beyond the reach of this chapter), see Kim.

tackled in continuity with more traditional toy forms, and thus, through the toy, adulthood can be comprehended as also in continuity with childhood; Haljakka states, “Where sex toys...serve the fulfillment of sexual desires whether directly or indirectly, toys of the more traditional kind represent comparatively more nostalgic products delivering non-erotic, emotional and childish pleasures related to play...” (64-5). In other words, the sex toy queers age in signifying (through its association with toys in a classical sense) both a return to an earlier childhood state and a more adult (sexually mature) state. Likewise, as the zombie clumsily lumbers about and decays before the eyes of the viewer, Stephen Harper points out how “the uncoordinated helplessness of the zombie...makes them appear childlike” (“They’re Us”). As a result, the *Zombie Mouth* brings together the sex toy and the zombie, thereby underscoring the uncanny oscillation between childhood and adulthood that both have come to represent.

While the *Zombie Mouth* opens doors to consider the uncanny and the complexities of age embedded in an object of this sort, it also complicates other Freudian notions entirely, like that of the fetish object. After all, the term “zombie” derives from the Haitian *zumbi*, which also means “fetish,” albeit in a more anthropological context (Silver and Ursini 12). However, the mother-child family drama that is ingrained in the biting zombie figure in *Night* (and accordingly, in the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight*) affords an opportunity to explore the fetish more specifically for how it is filtered through Freudian theory, including Freud’s speculations on the place of the fetish in the family structure.

As I discussed in chapter 1, Freud purported that the male child’s discovery that the mother is without a penis results in the belief that she has been castrated. The male

child then insists on nominating a fetish object to serve as a substitute for the mother's supposedly missing genitals ("Fetishism"). But in the case of the female child, whose genitals match those of her mother, the belief in the female body as castrated is replaced simply by the belief that her mother has "sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped, [and] is almost always held responsible for her [the daughter's] lack of a penis" (Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," 254). As a result, Freud attests, the daughter harbors hostile feelings toward her mother.

Even though, as Freud claims, the female child longs to possess the penis herself, she will eventually seek out an alternative to it: a baby who, like the fetish, she can claim as her own and who can stand in for the penis she does not have. Her "training" for eventually raising a child begins in childhood through the toys she plays with and the fantasies and scenarios attached to them. Roland Barthes writes that toys "prefigure the world of adult functions [and] obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all..." ("Toys," 53). Barthes specifically observes that the toys conventionally played with by girls, such as dolls, are "meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to 'condition' her to her future role as mother" ("Toys," 53). Freud is no less essentialist than Barthes in stating that the "doll-baby" fulfills for the little girl "the most powerful feminine wish," that being the wish for the baby and the ability to fetishize her that it holds ("Femininity," 128). Furthermore, while Freud claims that the doll-baby might connect the female child and her father (such as when she might imagine that the doll is actually a baby that her father has given her ["Femininity," 128]), the daughter's

achieving motherhood, as Freud presents it, still does not mend the rifts between the daughter and her mother.

However, any fetish (whether in the form of a child or a toy) will inevitably fall short in its mission of covering castrative lack. As feminist and queer scholars like Heather Findlay (“Freud’s ‘Fetishism’ and the Lesbian Dildo Debates”) and Marjorie Garber (“Fetish Envy”) have observed, the fetish itself holds a dual nature: it can be used to hide genital lack, but it also (because of its very existence) points to the fact that there is a lack in the first place. Therefore, the fetish disavows castration, while at the same time producing (the impression of) castration. Because it can never completely fetishize the body like it is supposed to, the fetish is always determined to fail to some degree.

In her own right, Karen/Sarah in *Night* is also a failed fetish. With each variation of the film, Karen/Sarah’s monstrous orality is increasingly accentuated, an orality that leads her to apply the zombie bite to Helen. Karen/Sarah is not the Freudian child who fetishizes the mother, but does the opposite: with her bite, she actually enacts violence that is tantamount to her symbolically castrating her mother as she cries out for mercy. Thus, *Night* brings together the two tropes of castrative orality that I have employed throughout this dissertation—Creed’s *femme castratrice* and Williams’s screaming castrated body—as they are represented through Karen/Sarah and Helen, respectively, in the *Night* films.

The Zombie Mouth Fleshlight, too, becomes a fetish that fails in reaching Freudian ideals: it is not the toy that fetishizes, but that, just like Karen/Sarah, actually incites (the fantasy of) castration. The biting Zombie Mouth, therefore, becomes a paratextual extension of the conflict of Karen/Sarah and Helen from *Night*. Moreover, the

Zombie Mouth user, whose uncanny fantasies are what give the toy life, acts as both *Night's* daughter equivalent (the individual in control of the bite) and as a proxy for *Night's* mother (the body onto which the castrating bite is directed). In re-presenting *Night's* mother-daughter biting through the Zombie Mouth sex toy, Freud's hypothesis that castration exacerbates the tensions of women's intergenerational relationships would seem to remain, and yet the Zombie Mouth actually dismantles this Freudian logic. First, the Zombie Mouth reconstitutes castration as a highly eroticized experience. Second, this chapter contrasts with the preceding analysis on *Scream Queens*, in which the bond of mother and daughter was solidified in the series through the child sparing her parent from castrative violence. Instead, the Zombie Mouth (influenced by the Karen/ Sarah and Helen in *Night*) presents erotic castrating violence between mother and daughter (whose roles are now being performed by the Zombie Mouth user) as being precisely what unifies these women in the end.

Although I have argued against J. Halberstam's conceptualizations of queer monstrosity and queer age as they apply to this dissertation (chapter 1), my understanding of Karen/Sarah/the Zombie Mouth as failed fetishes is directly inspired by Halberstam's writing on failure as a means of queer resistance. Halberstam states that "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhood to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 3). Failure, as it is deployed in this chapter, becomes a useful apparatus for considering how *Night* and the Zombie Mouth combat the linear Freudian progression from childhood into adulthood, and challenge the necessity of fetishization in overcoming childish castration anxieties.

In this chapter, I will conduct a twofold analysis. I will, first, examine the 1968 and 1990 versions of *Night of the Living Dead*, as well as 2009's *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated*, for how these texts incorporate narratives and themes that gesture toward Freudian constructs of the uncanny, the fetish, and castration. Second, I will analyze the *Zombie Mouth* for how it intertextually reinstates and revises some of *Night's* Freudian elements.

While the *Zombie Mouth* is itself a paratextual rendering of *Night's* biting zombie motif, it is also saturated with its own paratextual media that inform my reading. First, I am interested in supplementary media that accompanies the *Zombie Mouth* as it is packaged and shipped to users. Second, I turn to the Fleshlight official website to mine further information into how the *Zombie Mouth* is marketed and how consumers define their engagements with this product. Past scholarship, such as that of Claire Sisco King, has looked at the paratextual influence of web media on audience receptions of queer identity in film, writing that “these online [paratexts] make arguments about what spectators should want and expect from onscreen representations of GLBT identity” and can “not only shap[e] readings of the film but also regulat[e] queerness according to heteronormative directives” (254). These points aside, I consider the web media connected to the *Zombie Mouth* Fleshlight not so much as regulating queer sexuality, but as reveling (by suggesting its male users embody the feminine roles of mother and daughter) in the queering of both age and gender. I also differ from other scholars who have isolated queerness solely with the figure of the zombie child; for instance, Shaka McGlotten and Sarah Vagundy write, “The zombie child, like the queer child, is uniquely frightening, suggesting desires that are enacted toward the destruction of traditional

reproduction, the family form, and the future of humanity” (114). Instead, I propose that queerness, as mediated through *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth*, is not exclusively the agenda of the child in antithesis to the family, but is generated between parent and child within the family structure.

Orality, the Uncanny, and Failed Fetishization in *Night* and the *Zombie Mouth*

Fleshlight

The plot of 1968’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which remains unchanged in its 1990 and 2009 adaptations, is fairly well-known. As deceased bodies suddenly become sentient and roam the earth in search of humans to feast upon, seven average citizens seek refuge in a desolate farmhouse and fend off this sudden onslaught. Amongst the group is a family trio consisting of, as previously stated, Harry; his wife, Helen; and their daughter, Karen, also known as Sarah in *Night* 1990. Harry is abrasive, stubborn, and hot-headed, spending much of his time bickering with his fellow occupants and even barricading himself and his family inside the basement of the house in order to avoid socializing with the others.

Still, while Harry is presented as having some relationship with the other people in the house, even a tempestuous one, Helen and Karen/Sarah are presented as almost exclusively in relationship with each other. To be sure, the daughter, after being bitten by one of the undead creatures outside, falls ill and spends nearly the entire story asleep in the basement. Helen sits beside her daughter and watches over her for much of her time on screen. Even when Harry re-opens the door to the basement and he and his spouse join the others upstairs, Helen (especially in *Night* 1990) still periodically retreats back to the basement to check on her sickly child. Although the bite will turn Karen/Sarah into one

of the zombie legion, how she comes to embrace her full oral monstrosity differs dramatically across the 1968, 1990, and 2009 *Night* films.

In *Night* 1968, Harry attempts to lead a mutiny against Ben, who has defied Harry throughout the course of the film. In the film's climax, Helen and Ben desperately board up the windows of the house as zombies begin bursting inside. Spotting a shotgun on the floor that has been left unattended, Harry retrieves the weapon and orders that Helen follow him back to the basement. A shot of Ben turning his head toward the right (presumably to look at Harry) is followed by a corollary shot of Helen turning her head to the left (looking at the zombies that have begun invading). Helen, frustrated with Harry's tactics, then shakes her head in refusal of his command. What is implied in this act, and in the supposed exchange of glances between Ben and Helen that the film edits together, is that she has abandoned her marital partner for a new male counterpart, or at the very least a new male leader of the house.

Ben snags the shotgun from Harry and fires a round into his stomach. Harry slowly staggers into the basement and drops lifeless beside his daughter. Overwhelmed by the zombie insurgence, Helen flees into the basement after him, where she finds Karen, seemingly recuperated but kneeling beside her dead father and shoveling mounds of flesh that she has plucked from her father's body into her mouth.

Nonetheless, even though the newly zombified Karen gnaws on pieces of her father's corpse, she does not use her monstrous orality against Helen. As Karen menacingly approaches Helen with her arms stretched out in front of her (Figure 34), Helen trips and falls backward to the ground. Karen retrieves a gardening trowel hanging on the wall (Figure 35), while Helen lies paralyzed with fear as Karen walks toward her,

a POV shot now with Karen as she stands like an oppressive authority towering over Helen. Helen screams, and Karen plunges the trowel repeatedly into her. A close-up shot of Helen's face is strategically framed so that, while viewers can see the shadow of the trowel blade as it is lowered onto her, the exact spot where the blade makes contact is kept invisible, as if the blade is stabbing some area of Helen's bodily (i.e., genital) nether region but without allowing the audience to fully witness Karen doing so.⁹ Whereas the visual depiction of the castration of Helen's body is lacking in violent spectacle, the vocal elements of this moment (themselves another form of orality in the scene) are actually quite spectacular. Sound effects are used to manipulate the auditory properties of Helen's voice, adding a rippling echo and raising her shrieks to an unnaturally high pitch.



Figure 34: The zombie child, Karen, reaches for Helen in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (image captured by author)

⁹Other scholars have noted how the visual presentation of violence is obscured in *Night* 1968, proposing that Romero may have been influenced by moral codes from the classical era of film that limited what particular acts could be depicted on screen (Hakola).



Figure 35: Karen grasps the gardening trowel in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (image captured by author)

On one hand, the scene underscores Helen's condition as the castrated victim whose unnerving, but pathetic scream verifies the "emasculating" violence being dispensed upon her. The scene is also the first appearance of the failed fetish in the child who does not make up for her mother's (presumed) castration, but instead insists on delivering castration onto her. On the other hand, although Karen is put in the role of castrator, it is not an altogether exact embodiment of the oral *femme castratrice* of horror cinema, as least in regard to the violence she wreaks on Helen.¹⁰ Karen's violence is based more on a manual-tactile experience (her hands reaching outward to nab Helen, and her handling of the trowel and the masses of flesh that she pulls from Harry) than it is a predominately oral experience. William Paul claims that this scene denotes a latent hostility in Karen and Helen's relationships in so far as Karen's refusal to apply her

¹⁰Other scholars, such as William Paul, have also interpreted Karen as a castrating figure in *Night* 1968, but more in regard to how she interacts with men in the film (such as when she later attacks Ben and causes him to drop and momentarily lose possession of his phallic shotgun) (264).

mouth to Helen's body serves as the ultimate rebuffing of her mother, synonymous to the child who refuses to breastfeed and "declar[es] that nurturance will be taken only on her own terms" (264). However, Paul does acknowledge the bite and its erotic qualities, but only as it concerns her eating Harry, which Paul reads as "cannibalism conjugated by incestuous desire" (262). Thus, in *Night* 1968, eroticized oral violence is achieved, but strictly through violence as it weds father to daughter.

However, in *Night* 1990, several modifications to the film alter how zombie orality is showcased in the narrative. Though Harry will be shot to death again, it does not occur until much later in the film which helps to put the focus squarely on the parent-child pair of Sarah and Helen. Helen returns to the basement to check on her daughter, and finds that Sarah has awoken from her slumber and is stalking about the room. As opposed to Karen in *Night* 1968 who advances toward Helen with her arms extended in front of her, Sarah in the 1990 *Night* lurches toward her mother with her mouth opened and ominously bearing her teeth. Helen blubbers in fear, and Sarah leans in close to Helen and presses her teeth against her neck (Figure 36). This scene stands in sharp contrast to the earlier *Night* because it is the first time that viewers see Sarah biting into a living person, a development that is also undeniably shocking in that this person is her own mother.



Figure 36: Sarah bites Helen’s neck in *Night of the Living Dead* (1990) (image captured by author)

Night 1990 also uses this scene to illuminate the eroticism of the bite itself. As Sarah begins devouring Helen, the film cuts away to a close-up shot of a rusty trowel on the wall, an homage to the original film both in the display of the gardening tool and in keeping invisible the body-to-body violence between Sarah and Helen. Helen screams in pain, and viewers see a streak of blood splash onto the blade of the trowel.

The scene resonates with Linda Williams’s argument that the female body is often framed, across multiple genres of film, as an “out-of-control” entity associated with the wild release of bodily by-products such as blood (in horror) or ejaculatory emissions (the “money shot” of pornography) (“Film Bodies”).¹¹ This interchangeability of bodily fluids tied to the female body that can convey both extreme horror and uninhibited sexuality means that the blood spurting from Helen in *Night* 1990 could be alternatively read as a vague stand-in for the release of sexual fluids. That is, Sarah’s castrating mouth becomes

¹¹Other communication scholars have explored how the convention of the “money shot” is re-presented in scenes of violence and emotion, and in a range of media texts including religious melodrama and reality television (Dubrofsky, Gunn). However, this research is either too distanced from the psychoanalytic groundings of this study or is based primarily in Lacanian psychoanalytic perspectives (e.g., questions of *jouissance* in relation to media depictions) that differ from the Freudian focus of my study.

not only a means of violence but a device facilitating the erotic congress of mother and daughter (the hickey gone awry). Moreover, because the domineering Harry is removed from this scene, it results in also removing patriarchal prohibitions against this carnal intergenerational encounter.

While there are also lingering shots of blood spattering the walls as Karen stabs Helen in *Night* 1968, subsequent scenes in *Night* 1990 further equate the symbolically castrating death of Helen (the bite of her neck) with a kind of sexual awakening that is absent from the original film. By the end of *Night* 1990, when Ben attempts to hide out in the basement, he confronts the now undead Helen as she walks slowly toward him with a desirous look in her eyes and a familiar compulsion for monstrous mastication (Figure 37). Whereas *Night* 1968 merely hinted at Helen's longing to separate from Harry and claim allegiance with Ben, *Night* 1990 presents it as a sexualized longing and one that she will actively pursue with her newfound oral powers. Thus, Sarah (much like her predecessor, Karen) is also the failed/castrating fetish child, but in *Night* 1990, the act of castration becomes correlated not only with the violent destruction of the female-maternal body but specifically with *oral* violence. More significantly, through castrative orality in *Night* 1990, the child is able to enliven and bring to the surface the orgasmic sensations and erotic yearnings of the maternal.



Figure 37: Helen desires to bite in *Night of the Living Dead* (1990) (image captured by author)

One of the most recent reworkings of *Night* which has yet to receive the attention of scholars is 2009's *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated*, created by professional animator Mike Schneider. *Night 2009* is an experimental film in which Schneider curates the works of various artists who use their respective media—oil painting, “clay-mation,” comic book images, digital animation, etc.—to visually recreate scenes from Romero's *Night*, all of which are laid over the original film soundtrack. Although *Night 2009* is most clearly related to its 1968 forebear, it also combines many of the components of fetishization and castration from both *Night 1968* and 1990.

In particular, the artwork of Mattieu Lefebvre, featured in the scene of Karen's attack on Helen, introduces the iconography of the toy that, as I have explained above, has been integral to Freud's theories of fetishization (the doll that is an early model of the fetish-child in little girls' play) and the uncanny (the toy that seems inanimate, and yet also seems very much alive). In this segment, Lefebvre's uses Barbie dolls to represent the mother and daughter. The scene proceeds with many of the same elements as *Night 1968*. The manual-tactile experience of Karen reaching her arms out as she prowls is

hyperemphasized through the stiff non-pliability of the Karen Barbie's arms (Figure 38). Additionally, the odd jolting movement of the Karen and Helen Barbies as they walk toward/away from one another seems to parody the manner in which children often play with these dolls and also makes obvious the manual puppeting of the dolls that is occurring below the shot.



Figure 38: Karen reaches for Helen in *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* (2009) (image captured by author)

The oral violent castration and eroticism of *Night* 1990 is also carried onward in the 2009 version, though far more subtly. Although Karen again stabs Helen with the trowel in *Night* 2009, the blade strikes Helen first in the neck. The positioning of the weapon in relationship to this specific body part may remind viewers of Sarah's oral attack on Helen's neck in *Night* 1990, and the castrative-erotic connotations attached to it. Furthermore, the smile that is permanently plastered on the Barbie dolls' faces—as Karen assaults Helen, and as Helen is slain—implies, within the intense horror of the

scene, an equally intense feeling of enjoyment being experienced by the mother and daughter. Even as audiences hear Helen's screams of agony, her perpetual smile evokes ecstatic bliss in the midst of her brutalization (Figure 39).



Figure 39: Helen smiles as Karen attacks her in *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* (2009) (image captured by author)

The use of the Barbie dolls in this scene is noteworthy for three reasons. First, infusing the dolls with the narrative/characters of *Night* is commensurable to Freud's writing on the uncanny and the imaginary infusing of the toy with life. Second, the dolls continue *Night's* custom of keeping the violence of the scene invisible by displacing it away from the human agents and onto the artificial bodies of the dolls. Third, and lastly, while taking on characteristics of Freud's uncanny, it also participates in the subversion of Freud's fetish object wherein the doll (like the child Karen/Sarah) does not fetishize and negate castration, but instead administers castrative violence onto others.

With these observations in mind, *Night* amalgamates and readdresses many of the theoretical tenets pertaining to age and the maternal that I have surveyed throughout this dissertation. In chapter 2, in my analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*, I discussed Margaret Morganroth Gullette's writing on how age and maturation are often equated to states of "decline" in the aged subject, especially for women experiencing motherhood. However, through Helen in *Night*, the figure of the mother becomes emblematic not of states of decline, but vitality, and more specifically, sexual vitality. Nonetheless, much like my argument in chapter 3's examination of *Let Me In* that orality can age the monster into a maternal identity that places her outside of what Kathleen Woodward characterizes as the youthful male gaze, the biting orality of the zombie child in *Night* also makes invisible the maternal and her experience of erotic castration. Finally, *Night* rethinks Lynne Segal's notion of women's generational warfare from chapter 4's analysis of *Scream Queens*. While intergenerational strife and the violence of daughter against mother are exceedingly present in *Night*, it is represented as a violent act that does not diminish the maternal but instead unlocks her sexual agency.

As an intertextual/paratextual descendant of the biting zombie figure, early comparisons were made between the *Zombie Mouth Fleshlight* and the *Night of the Living Dead* franchise. For example, in October 2016, the sex toy consumer blog The Casquetero Files posted its review of the then newly released *Zombie Mouth*. As this particular reviewer writes, "I expected the *Zombie Mouth* to be an intense ride, but it was a different type of intensity... Lets [sic] say this zombie is more a George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* version," adding that similar to how the Romero zombies of *Night* are "slow" and "relentless," the *Zombie Mouth* is "like a slow zombie because the

[feeling of the toy] is intense...but it will not make you finish [ejaculate] quickly” (The Casquetero Files, “Rubber Pussy Project #178: Fleshlight Freaks Zombie Mouth,” first parenthetical in original).

However, other parallels can be drawn between the *Zombie Mouth* and *Night*. First, the same uncanny investment in the zombie toy present in *Night* 2009 is discernible in how users discuss the *Zombie Mouth* on the Fleshlight official website. On the web page advertising the *Zombie Mouth*, a reviewer identified by only the forename George (perhaps an unintentional nod to Romero) shares his enthusiastic review for it, writing, “The new *Zombie Mouth* toy has great suction and a better throat chamber than the normal *Mouth Swallow* toys. The toy actually feels like very very light teeth play before you enter a throat and get deepthroated. [...] The *Zombie Mouth* replicates both penetration and withdraw[al] from deepthroat excellent[ly]...” (“Light Teeth Play, Great Deepthroat, Very Realistic, Better than Swallow”).¹² Therefore, users appear committed to the fantasy of the toy as a *real* mouth—that has actual teeth and a throat that can “swallow”—and not just an inanimate play thing.

Furthermore, while the *Zombie Mouth* keeps the oral cavity central to the zombie, other parts of the body important to using the toy, and which were just as important to the interaction of Karen/Sarah and Helen in *Night*, are also magnified by the Fleshlight website. On Fleshlight’s online message forum, users find a variety of categories and topics to discuss, but two categories of the forum—referred to as Entry Point (with general guidelines for participating in the forum) and Helping Hand (with pointers for first-time Fleshlight users)—are the only ones to explicitly allude to specific body parts.

¹²Though multiple reviews for the *Zombie Mouth* have been shared on its official web page, I will continue to refer to George’s review in particular as it is the most thorough user review currently available.

These parts are those that are most essential to the toys themselves: the “entry point” of the orifice being imitated by the Fleshlight, and the user’s “helping,” masturbating hand. Moreover, these bodily themes of the Fleshlight discussion boards evoke, first, Helen’s genital region that Karen appears to violate in *Night* 1968, and second, Karen’s hands as they “thrust” her instrument of death at her mother. Of course, what is being thrust by the hands of the Fleshlight user is the Zombie Mouth that also brings monstrous orality, like that of Sarah’s in *Night* 1990, into the equation.

Additional paratextual items related to the Zombie Mouth help to further demonstrate the aged binary of mother and child that become incorporated into the hand-genital sectors of its users’ bodies. Packaged with the Zombie Mouth is an informational insert on how to properly maintain one’s Fleshlight over time (Figure 40). Included in this insert are illustrated step-by-step instructions on what to do with one’s toy after each use, entitled “Caring for Your Fleshlight.” This language of care is complemented by illustrated images of hands performing all of the necessary tasks for keeping one’s toy in pristine shape. Though the gender of the model whose hands complete these tasks cannot be confirmed, the hands themselves appear conventionally feminine, sporting long, well-manicured nails. And yet these hands are ostensibly *not* that of a female subject presenting the Fleshlight to the user, but are supposed to represent, and thereby feminize, the hands of the male Zombie Mouth user himself. Furthermore, the actions that are being performed by these hands in order to “care” for the Fleshlight (washing it with water, gently drying it, applying special powders, etc.) are reminiscent of a child—typically a young girl—playing with her doll and caring for it like an infant which, as Freud would attest, is crucial in preparing her for an eventual maternal identity that will

fetishize/obscure her so-called genital lack. In all, the visual imagery of the insert suggests that the Zombie Mouth user's hands are put in a position that is both feminine and youthful, a position usually occupied by the daughter in the family.



Figure 40: The informational insert included with Fleshlight purchases (image captured by author)

Multiple user reviews offer one common negative critique of the Zombie Mouth: that it “smells absolutely terrible” (“Light Teeth Play, Great Depththroat, Very Realistic, Better than Swallow”) because of the particular odor of the plastic material from which it is molded. George elaborates, “I have cared for it to the best of my ability. Several hot water soaks, corn starchings, drying, repeating [and] the smell seems to be fading, but it [the smell] is still ...very strong...” (“Light Teeth Play, Great Depththroat, Very Realistic, Better than Swallow”). George’s bemoaning the scent of the Zombie Mouth despite putting his hands to work and intricately caring for it recalls the almost unending parental care necessary for handling infantile “smelliness” (e.g., changing diapers) that is acted

out in how many girls change and pamper their infant dolls. Once again, the uncanny illusion of the toy as a living being, and one that in terms of the Freudian family is meant to fetishize the female subject, is implied here.

Considering that Fleshlights cater specifically to a heterosexual male demographic, it is not surprising that the Zombie Mouth is often referred to using female pronouns.¹³ For example, on the Zombie Mouth web page, it states, “Brains are overrated and with this zombie, you get one with *her* priorities in order” (“Freaks Zombie Mouth Fleshlight,” emphasis added). Meanwhile, other (less-gendered) terminology is also imperative to note. For example, the soft, plastic section of the Zombie Mouth—in other words, the part that is shaped in the form of the mouth—is what is called the “sleeve” of the toy. A Fleshlight sleeve is detachable both for cleaning purposes and so that it can be inserted into a variety of outer casings (Figure 41). Its being associated with childish play, gendered female, termed the sleeve of the Fleshlight, and carrying the visual representation of the biting mouth altogether link it with the zombie daughter of *Night*, both the manual-tactile menace of Karen in *Night* 1968/2009—the “sleeves” of her arms as they reach for Helen/the trowel blade—and Sarah in *Night* 1990—the zombie orality that breaches the maternal body. Once more, it is the hands of the user that become akin to the female zombie child in the actions they perform by repeatedly thrusting their toy up and down (like the motions of Karen’s trowel) and in the very nature of the object they are thrusting (the teeth that seem to bite like Sarah’s castrating mouth).

¹³Fleshjack, a subsidiary brand of Fleshlight launched in 2007, specializes in sex toys marketed to gay men.



Figure 41: The respective Zombie Mouth sleeve (left) and outer casing (right) (image captured by author)

Still, in the same vein as *Night's* failed fetish child, the *Zombie Mouth* is also fated to be the failed fetish toy. On the reverse side of the *Fleshlight* informational insert is an advertisement for *Fleshlight Girls*, a line of *Fleshlights* cast in the shape of the orifices of famous female adult film stars. In this advertisement, the immortalized women stand in a row wearing only bras and underwear and holding a *Fleshlight* that has, presumably, been made in their likeness; many of them clutch their *Fleshlights* just inches above or below their pubic area (Figure 42). While the exhibition of these objects in close proximity to the “girls” nearly naked and alleged castrated bodies would insinuate that these objects are meant to serve a fetishizing purpose, the orificial openings of the *Fleshlight* simply reify lack rather than nullify it. The *Zombie Mouth*, though, does more than fail to fetishize: it hinges on the perverse fantasy that, rather than fetishization, only more castration awaits.



Figure 42: The insert advertisement for the Fleshlight Girls series (image captured by author)

Where the hands of the *Zombie Mouth* user stand in for *Night's* castrating daughter, his genitals become the corporeal site through which the performance of the castrated maternal figure (like *Night's* Helen) manifests. On the *Zombie Mouth* official webpage, the product description for the toy reads, “Contrary to popular belief, most zombies don’t want to eat your brain. But they do want to make-out! Perhaps a little lip-biting. Gentle neck kisses too? Doubtful. Pure pleasure awaits you inside” (“Freaks *Zombie Mouth* Fleshlight”). The mention of the lips and the neck suggest that these parts have now become grafted onto the penis of the user. Anatomically speaking, the frenulum, or the area directly underneath the “head” (glans) of the penis, becomes the penile neck, while the urethra becomes the closest equivalent for the lips/mouth. It is perhaps coincidental, but nonetheless significant, that the frenulum is the part of the penis that is particularly sensitive to sexually stimulation, and thus, is most likely one of the

primary areas that the Zombie Mouth is intended to stroke in order to bring its user to sexual climax and produce ejaculatory expulsion via the urethra. Put differently, the Zombie Mouth seems to bite the necklike frenulum, just as Sarah bites the neck of Helen in *Night* 1990, prompting the ejaculation of the user like the culminating gush of blood from Helen's body. The result is that when the Zombie Mouth "bites" its user's orgasming genitals, it re-genders the user and recreates both the daughter's oral castration of the maternal in *Night* and the mother's erotic revitalization that comes with it.

However, as in *Night*, the erotic violence of the Zombie Mouth is kept largely invisible. Indeed, invisibility has been pivotal to the invention of the Fleshlight. Žižek explains that part of the appeal of the Fleshlight is that, because it is hidden within an outer casing that resembles a flashlight (hence the pun of its brand name), it means that "when we carry it around, we are not embarrassed" (63). More to the point, though, the body of the user—specifically, his genitals and his ejaculatory emissions—also becomes invisible through the Zombie Mouth, especially because of the outer casing shrouding it. While regular connoisseurs of the Fleshlight company may purchase various casings for them to pair with their toys—with these casings available in different colors and different degrees of transparency—the standard casing that is packaged with the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight is a black and opaque model, one which offers no visible display of what is happening inside the toy. The Zombie Mouth ingests the penile body of the user and an implied rapturous violence takes place that is felt by the user. However, the Zombie Mouth also heightens the invisibility of violence from the *Night* films; where *Night* gives viewers the climactic eruption of blood on the wall, in the Zombie Mouth both the bite and the *seminal* moment that follows are left unseen. Therefore, the genitals of the

Zombie Mouth user becomes all the more coded as maternal in that they are the recipient of violent castration (like Helen in *Night*), and correspondingly, once they are subsumed within the toy, are then figuratively aged out of what even the gaze of the male user is permitted to see.

While, as I address above, intergenerational and violent conflict between daughter and mother is seemingly reinforced through the play of the Fleshlight consumer's body (his daughterly-castrating hands, and his castrated sex organs like that of the mother), its subversive potential is also apparent. First, it offers a representation of female sexuality but one that also escapes visual objectification. To be clear, although the use of the male body as the canvas upon which these representations are brought forth is rife with its own problematics, I am also not reading the Zombie Mouth as an unequivocal celebration of phallic masculinity. Rather, by virtue of its intertextual affiliations with *Night*, the Zombie Mouth draws on, and relies on the imagined deconstruction of, the male body so as to restage the violent relationship of Helen and Karen/Sarah in which said violence becomes symptomatic not of a matrophobic disdain for the mother but of a sexual vitality stirred within her. Finally, the Zombie Mouth faithfully employs certain Freudian theory (the uncanny) in order to, paradoxically, also envision other Freudian mainstays failing to do what they promised they would (the fetish—as child or toy—promising to offset the anxiety of bodily castration, but instead only perpetuating it further).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored orality and monstrosity in contemporary merchandising surrounding the figure of the zombie, and more specifically, the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight sex toy. I have assessed the horr/orality of the act of the biting in the

Zombie Mouth, a tradition of the zombie founded in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). With particular attention to the bite as it is shared between *Night's* mother-daughter pair, Helen and Karen, I note how with each reiteration of *Night* (in its 1990 and 2009 remakes), the zombie bite and castrative violence directed from daughter to mother becomes increasingly eroticized. As the *Zombie Mouth* borrows *Night's* representation of oral violence, it also borrows the films' intergenerational family roles, situating its users in the dual roles of mother-child and mediating an encounter between the two that, like the orality of the zombie in *Night*, is also classified as both castrative and erotic. The mouth also becomes presented as an orifice to be entered, first, by the vulnerable flesh of the zombie's prey, and second, by violent-sexual fluids being summoned by the bite.

From these findings, I see this chapter offering four major implications for future research on the study of horror and oral monstrosity. First, this chapter provides a new means of looking at the relationships between intertextuality and paratextuality. Though the *Zombie Mouth* as a paratextual product is not officially connected to a preceding text (as was the case in my previous analyses of *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Let Me In*, and *Scream Queens*), this chapter suggests that by adopting facets of oral monstrosity that have been important to cinematic horror of the past (e.g., the bite of the zombie in *Night of the Living Dead*), texts can carry, sometimes inadvertently, the impressions of past filmic texts within them. Second, this chapter supports Gray's claim that toys are paratextual objects worthy of criticism. Furthermore, though this chapter has looked specifically at monstrous orality in the sex toy market, the rise of games and toys that are geared specifically toward children and families and that also delight in monstrous presentations

of the mouth also warrant scholarly attention; examples include board games such as Watch Ya Mouth and Speak Out, in which players have to transmit messages to their teammates while wearing a mouth guard that stretches their lips open and inhibits their ability to communicate, all for comic effect.

A third, more theoretical implication of this chapter is that it sheds light on how horror texts are capable of both honoring and dismantling Freudian theory. While certain Freudian precepts may find a home in certain paratextual forms (like Freud's uncanny toy as it informs users' engagement with the Zombie Mouth), my analysis shows that the Zombie Mouth challenges and makes a failure of Freud's theory of the fetish, with the child in *Night* and the Zombie Mouth as failed fetish objects that only ensure greater castration to come. Fourth, and relatedly, the notion of failure in terms of the mother-daughter relationship offer possibilities for new forms of queer-feminist politicizing that might confound other Freudian thinking. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam proposes a feminism based on what he dubs "radical passivity" and steeped in the Freudian concept of masochism; for Halberstam, masochism (which Freud sees as a feminine trait) can be used as a form of resistance to normative standards of subjectivity, writing that "in a performance of radical passivity we witness the willingness of the subject to actually come undone..." (140). Obviously, this chapter has not framed its conversation within these ideas of masochism and passivity, though the title of this chapter is a tribute to Freud's famous 1919 essay on the subject, "A Child is Being Beaten." In this essay, Freud pontificates on what he interprets as the sadistic (active)-masochistic (passive) stratification of power-disempowerment between parent and child. However, whereas Halberstam is dismissive toward the mother-daughter psychoanalytic

tropes that I have called upon herein and claims (as I cited in chapter 1) that these “familial metaphors snuff out the potential future of new knowledge formations” within feminism (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 124), I believe that it might behoove other scholars to address these questions of the politics of masochism in feminist practices but without abandoning the mother-child relationship that has been prevalent in the horror genre. Furthermore, scholars might devote more attention to these additional psychoanalytic underpinnings of a text like the *Zombie Mouth*, in which the user is forced to act, in tandem, as sadist—the subject who b/eats—and masochist—the individual who is being both eaten and beaten (off).

Chapter 6

Final Thoughts: Chewing Over Horr/orality

Overview of Study

The mouth has always been right underneath our noses. This statement is literally and anatomically true. However, it is also true in terms of the trajectory that horror studies has taken in the late twentieth/early-twenty-first centuries. In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted that while other scholars have been interested in representations of the body in the horror genre since the 1980s, the mouth is one particular part of the body that has yet to receive in-depth critical analysis. And yet this fact is surprising considering how prevalent the mouth has been to many of horror's most common figures of monstrosity.

My realization of this oversight came to me one day while gathering research materials for what would eventually be this project. By chance, I glanced at the covers of two texts, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* and *Phallic Panic*, both of which, as I discussed in chapter 1, have been monumental contributions to the study of psychoanalysis in horror (Figure 43). What struck me about these covers was what they had in common: foregrounded images of the human mouth, disembodied and presented in an unusual and unnerving manner. Even though these texts were published close to a decade apart, the iconography had not changed much. I was also struck, though, by how little orality ultimately played into Creed's work, or in most of the psychoanalytic horror scholarship that has followed hers. Again, the mouth has been there all along, even decorating the very literature that has been crucial to this field of research. Many scholars have just, generally speaking, never paid a great deal of attention to it.

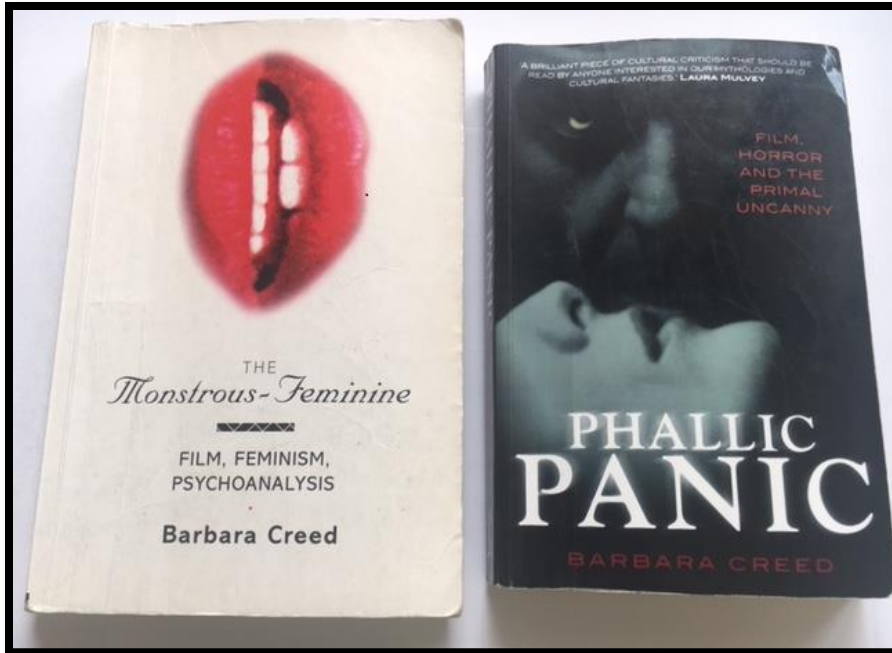


Figure 43: The covers for Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* and *Phallic Panic* (image captured by author)

At the beginning of this dissertation, I proposed two research questions that I have sought to answer in the preceding chapters. The first question asked was: (how) are the mouth and the functions of the mouth represented in figures of contemporary horror? My answer to this question is that the mouth operates as a synecdoche for monstrous figures of horror. Much like monsters have been defined by bodies that are untamed and out-of-control, the monstrous mouth is that part of the body that has especially failed to abide by societal norms in the horror genre. In particular, monsters disobey social customs and laws that designate what is or is not permitted to both enter and exit the mouth; they are monstrous because of how they drink, gulp, and ingest as much as they are because of how they spit, scream, and vomit.

I have also been interested in figures of horror as representations of human identity, especially age in its relationship to gender identity. For this reason, my second overarching research question asked: (how) does the mouth come to signify age and

gender in contemporary horror? I find that the monstrous/out-of-control mouth in horror is indicative of a childhood state, in which (like the small child) it has not yet internalized social rules and regulations pertaining to the body and how the body is to be used in order to participate as a member of wider society. However, the mouth can also represent a shifting in age in those moments when it comes to be restrained, controlled, and disciplined; in these instances, the mouth conveys both an adult identity and also, because of the demands placed upon the mother to socialize the child's body in the normative family structure, a maternal one. Nevertheless, the monstrous mouth also points to the tenuousness of age, and by extension gender. Through simple and yet significant practices, the mouth can vacillate between age identities. For example, the same mouth that has learned to keep itself closed while chewing or avoid sticking its tongue out at others, like a mature adult would, can suddenly start biting others or hollering uncontrollably, like that of a more immature and *unadult*-erated childish orality. Thus, another important part of my answer to this second question is that the ability of the monstrous mouth to signify and shift between age identities means the mouth can render age uncanny, making it at times familiar and distinctly childish/adultlike (maternal) while at other times difficult to precisely pinpoint and recognize.

Each of the case studies comprising this dissertation use a combination of Freudian psychoanalysis (especially Freud's writings on orality, the uncanny, and castration anxiety), critical feminist age theory, and queer theory to shed light on the uncanniness of age/gender as depicted and queered (i.e., distorted) through the mouth and its many functions in horror. I have called this phenomenon "horr/orality." In chapter 2, I analyzed the 2010 rape-revenge horror film *I Spit on Your Grave* and how the film

comments on rape culture in conjunction with Margaret Morganroth Gullette's notion of age culture. Specifically, I noted how the film reflects tendencies in American rape culture to excuse male perpetrators of sexual violence as mere "boys" too immature to assume responsibility for their actions. Conversely, female victims in rape culture, particularly those who experience pregnancy as a result of sexual violation, become branded as mothers-to-be with all of the obligations that often get imposed on women in these circumstances (e.g., being expected to "mother" their unwanted fetuses and carry them to full term). In *I Spit on Your Grave*, Jennifer, a survivor of a sexual assault, becomes the classic castrating "rape avenger" (Read) and lashes out at the men who attack her. Jennifer often uses the mouths of the men to torture them (e.g., cramming in dead animal carcasses, prying teeth out of them, inducing nausea, etc.). I read the corresponding oral response from these men—as witnessed in scenes of their spitting up blood, vomit, and foreign substances forced into them—as a metaphor for the act of birthing, with the film transforming the men's mouths into an uncanny reminder of the womb. Therefore, through Jennifer's castrating violent attack on their mouths and the spitting/"birthing" that follows, the men are turned from "boys" into stand-in adult mothers experiencing many of the horror and brutalities heaped upon women by rape culture.

Chapter 3 examined the 2010 film *Let Me In*. In particular, this chapter was concerned with the vampire, an undead figure of horror that grows old but also seems to pause the physical aging process (never looking older than the day it died). To appear perpetually young has strong implications for the *female* vampire in Western culture, especially considering societal demands that women "masquerade" as young in order to

be valued in a culture that highly endorses a youthful male gaze (Woodward, “Youthfulness as a Masquerade”). In *Let Me In*, the vampire in question is that of the seemingly 12 year-old girl Abby who is compelled to drink human blood in order to survive. I framed drinking blood as not only an oral act but a sexual one that equates drinking to virginity loss. This act takes place in a patriarchal culture in which sexual initiation in women becomes perceived as preparing them to mature into motherhood. *Let Me In* seems at first to approve of this logic, as Abby shares the secrets of her thirst for blood with a neighborhood boy, Owen, and becomes a second mother to him. However, Abby also exploits this thinking, as well as the ageist notion of the older woman as practically invisible to the male gaze, to her advantage. With each act of drinking that figuratively “de-virginizes” Abby and matures her out into adulthood, she becomes invisible to the world around her and escapes the gaze of male characters who seek to objectify and hurt her. Consequently, Abby is able to castrate the male gaze and deplete it of some of its power.

In chapter 4, I analyzed the FOX television series *Scream Queens* as a small screen adaptation of the slasher horror genre. The slasher genre has been known for promoting, first, intergenerational conflicts, especially between mother and daughter characters; and second, misogynistic attitudes toward sexually active women. The result is that women who exert their sexual agency, especially mothers, are deemed “bad girls” (Williams, “When the Woman Looks”) and are often subjected to symbolic castrative violence. This violence is punctuated by the screaming and subsequent silencing of these women, dubbed the “scream queens” of horror cinema. A classic example is the death of the shrieking Marion Crane, played by the late actress Janet Leigh, in the infamous

shower scene from the 1960 film *Psycho*. Meanwhile, other scream queen figures are permitted to survive—such as that of slasher horror’s Final Girl heroine (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*)—and have been evaluated for how they queer gender binaries and embody a mix of masculine and feminine traits. I contended, though, that *Scream Queens* queers *age* in the series through the use of voice, and more specifically the scream of actress Jamie Lee Curtis, the daughter of *Psycho*’s Janet Leigh. I focused on the eighth episode of *Scream Queens*’s first season, entitled “Mommie Dearest,” in which Curtis pays tribute to the *Psycho* shower scene that brought her mother stardom. I argued that Curtis’s scream makes the age attached to her voice uncanny, and becomes reminiscent of both the young Final Girl who yells as she fights back against a maniacal killer, and also the sexual rapture of her mother (the “bad girl,” Marion Crane). Furthermore, because Curtis’s character does not fall prey to the knife-wielding villain who encroaches upon her in the shower, I read Curtis’s vocal tribute to Leigh as also sparing her mother from the fate of castration that previously befell her and combatting the prevalence of generational warfare (Segal) in slasher horror.

Lastly, in chapter 5, I turned my attention to the Zombie Mouth Fleshlight, a male masturbatory sex toy released in 2016. Resembling the oral orifice of the zombie, the Zombie Mouth seems uncannily alive as it bears teeth that promise to bite its user. I noted that the Zombie Mouth adopts the trope of the zombie bite that was established in the 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. *Night of the Living Dead* is also notorious for showcasing shocking depictions of matricide, what I saw as another instance of symbolic castrative violence, carried out by a zombie daughter against her human mother. In my investigation of the Zombie Mouth, I argued that the toy not only recreates *Night of the*

Living Dead's zombie bite and mother-daughter relationship, but also queers age and gender in its user. Specifically, through different portions of his body, the user is positioned in the roles of mother and daughter through his handling of the toy. The hands of the user that thrust the biting *Zombie Mouth* toward himself are like those of the violent daughter in *Night of the Living Dead*, while the genitals of the user are coded as maternal and "castrated" by the *Zombie Mouth*. However, the *Zombie Mouth* also reimagines castration as, first, an act enabled by fetish objects (instead of the Freudian fetish that negates castration), and second, an erotic and unifying experience between mother and daughter.

Contributions, Limitations, and Implications

I believe this dissertation offers three major contributions. First, this dissertation coheres with the mission of Lynne Segal who, in her own work in feminist age studies, states that her research is centered on "listening out for alternative stories of ageing, confronting some of [our] own fears" about age (37). Throughout the dissertation, I have attempted to conceptualize my own alternative model for how we might view aging. Specifically, I utilize the mouth in horror to present aging as neither solely biological nor a necessarily linear process in which one becomes gradually and unavoidably older and older. Aging is often narrowly understood this way, which ageist culture uses to present aging as a terrifying experience, especially for women. Instead, I reframe aging as a performance, and as a process defined by oscillation and the possibility of pivoting between, and using the body to enact, identities of young *and* old.

Second, this dissertation utilizes queer theory in a manner that returns to some of its original goals. For instance, in her masterpiece *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains

the problematics of feminism's investment in upholding and lauding the singular identity category of "woman." Butler writes, "[T]he premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category" (*Gender Trouble*, 6), refusals which become observable in those performances of gender that are bound to fail to perfectly enact masculinity or femininity. Likewise, inherent to my alternative model of aging is a different approach to understanding categories of age and addressing how age is used to oppress and stigmatize. This model does not simply venerate and demand respect for individuals from subjugated age groups (a strategy employed by past scholars and activists), as doing so risks reifying these categories of "young" and "old" that essentialize and are sometimes used to demean these individuals. Rather, this model highlights the performative aspects of age alongside gender. Through its shifting and queer performance of age, the mouth in horror refuses to privilege any one age group and exposes the social-cultural norms behind how we have come to define age. Therefore, monstrous oralities both enact and subvert essentialist age and gender roles/identities that have fueled ageist-sexist practices in the past. In particular, those age-gender roles related to the family, especially that of the maternal parent, become muddled as any clear-cut understanding of who is expected to "be maternal" is rendered questionable when it becomes an identity that can be enacted across different (oral) bodies.

Additionally, this essay satisfies early queer theorists' call for research that acknowledges many of the complexities of identity. In chapter 1, I briefly referred to Teresa de Lauretis's field-defining essay, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities." Some scholars believe that this essay, published in 1991, includes an early rallying cry

for intersectional scholarship that was simultaneously being championed by Black feminist thinkers (Jagose). Emphasizing the intersection of race and sexuality, de Lauretis writes,

The differences made by race in self-representation and identity argue for the necessity to examine, question, or contest the usefulness and/or the limitations of current discourses on lesbian and gay sexualities...[and] urge the reframing of the questions of queer theory from different perspectives, histories, experiences, and in different terms (x).

Although this dissertation has not been largely concerned with race (which I address in more detail below), I have sought to use queer theory to inspect other intersections of identity, including intersections of gender, sexuality, and age.

Third, and lastly, this dissertation expands on how orality might be theorized in cultural studies and psychoanalysis. I have attempted to augment discussions of orality-as-voice by considering other forms of orality and other functions of the mouth beyond the production of voice. I have also aimed to add to traditional Freudian psychoanalytic insights into the childish perversion of oral entry/incorporation (e.g., fixations such as thumbsucking) by also examining the mouth as an orifice through which what is or is not allowed to exit from it can have childish or adultlike connotations as well.

Nonetheless, I also realize that this dissertation has been, by its very design, limited in a number of ways. The most apparent limitation is its insistence on using a binary model for representing/queering age. While I deployed this binary—young-versus-old—in order to look at how age becomes segregated within the Freudian family structure—child-versus-parent—it may come at the cost of obfuscating the full range of

age identities. That is, this twofold child-adult system of discussing age may ignore how age manifests along several stages of life and human development (infancy, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, etc.). Perhaps most egregiously, it discounts elderly age, which may have significant implications for feminist and gender studies scholars. As Toni Calasanti, Kathleen F. Slevin, and Neal King explain, “Women’s studies scholars recently have expressed more concern about *aging* (perhaps because more feminists are aging); but rarely do they study the *old*” (14, emphases in original; cf. Calasanti and Slevin). Furthermore, in regard to how elderly age functions within the family, Kathleen Woodward argues that Freud’s preoccupation with the relationship between the child and the maternal leaves one member of the family without her due recognition: the grandmother. Thus, Woodward writes, “For feminists concerned with the subject of aging, the figure of the grandmother requires sustained analysis” (“Inventing Generational Models,” 156). Fortunately, horror has provided a bounty of texts to begin analyzing representations of the grandmother, or of the grandparents and elderly age in general. Possible texts worth examining might include: Nana and Pop Pop who prey upon their grandchildren in *The Visit* (2015), the mummy who targets (and incidentally, uses his mouth to suck the souls out of) the residents of a nursing home in *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2002), and even Jamie Lee Curtis in the forthcoming *Halloween* reboot, whose character Laurie Strode is being presented as a grandmother compelled to protect her middle-aged daughter and teenaged granddaughter from being slaughtered.

Because of the influence this dissertation has pulled from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, it is also inhibited by some of psychoanalysis’s own limitations. As I have previously noted, psychoanalysis often essentializes the role of motherhood according to

stilted traditional values for being “maternal” that it only applies to the female parent. Although I have attempted to show how maternal identity is also affected by social ideologies concerning age/gender (which Freud never took into account), there is still a need to begin deconstructing the notion of the maternal itself, especially in horror studies. Moreover, psychoanalysis’s essentializing of human experience also disregards cultural and racial factors in human identity and development. Discussions of race, in particular, have become more prominent in recent horror and monster scholarship (Abdi and Calafel, Brooks, Calafel, Means Coleman), presenting another crucial intersectional variable worthy of consideration in the study of horror/orality. Horror and Black identity has an especially long history, and one need only recall Wesley Snipes’s turn as the vampiric title character in *Blade* (1998), the barking/canine-esque ghost played by rapper Snoop Dogg in *Bones* (2001), the boogeyman of the Chicago projects who unleashes swarms of killer bees from his mouth in *Candyman* (1992), or the smiling but suspicious Black maid Georgina in *Get Out* (2017) to see how deeply interconnected race and orality have been in the horror genre.

Finally, my use of a paratextual methodology also carries some limitations. While this dissertation has detailed my particular interpretations of the paratexts that were packaged with the texts I examined, Jonathan Gray writes that “[i]ndividuals or communities will construct different ideas of what that package entails, based on their own interactions with its varying proliferations, and on their own sense of its textual hierarchy” (3). Robert Brookey also adds, “What’s really hard [in paratextual analysis]...is to answer the question of how we ascertain which flow audiences experience. Which paratexts are loud and which paratexts are quiet? Which are the ones

we cannot avoid and which are the ones we are likely to avoid” (qtd. in Brookey and Gray 105). In other words, what this dissertation cannot assess is how paratexts may be read differently by different audiences based on the value granted to them (since not all audiences place the same importance on those texts surrounding the central one), and how different paratexts (and the messages they espouse) may stand out more than others.

Despite these limitations, I still find that this dissertation has promising implications for future research. First, while this study honed in on four specific oral acts in contemporary horror (spitting, drinking, screaming, and biting), other scholars may continue to analyze the wide “lexion of the mouth” (LaBelle) as it appears in the horror genre. For example, scholars may note the monstrous orality of other figures of horror, such as the howl of the werewolf, the devilish laughter of the villains in *IT* (2017) or *Dr. Giggles* (1992), the tongue-lashings of the “Licker” mutant in *Resident Evil* (2002), or (in yet another connection to age) the kiss from Jack Nicholson that turns a nubile young woman into a cackling crone in *The Shining* (1980).

Second, along with examining other types of horr/orality, scholars may also explore orality in other types of horror texts beyond film, television, and merchandising. Outside of mass media, one fascinating area where orality frequently appears is in live performance, especially horror-inspired musical theater. Figures of monstrous orality can be seen in shows both on and off-Broadway, such as the fanged protagonist of *Bat Boy: The Musical*, the incanting voice in *Evil Dead: The Musical*, the overgrown Venus fly trap in *Little Shop of Horrors*, or even the iconic red lips that opened the eventual movie adaptation of *The Rocky Horror Show*. Most recently, in late 2017, it was announced that the Broadway production of *Death Becomes Her* was underway, retelling the story of the

1992 horror comedy about a has-been actress who discovers a magic potion that brings her eternal youth. Therefore, *Death Becomes Her* seems poised to lend its own brand of orality (singing!) in order to tackle, this time on stage, how age and gender intersect in horror.

Third, my findings on orality and age may complement other areas of critical-cultural studies and the Communication discipline. For example, it may be promising to begin evaluating representations of orality within disability studies and to consider how disability affects the ways in which the oral body can(not) be normatively represented (such as deafness, muteness, and the impact they have on voice). Additionally, due to the politics of consumption that surely relate to the mouth, future analyses of orality may also have implications for the emergent field of critical fat studies. Furthermore, critical age studies can also add to field of Communication. To be sure, the National Communication Association currently houses a division on Communication and Aging. A cursory glance at research produced from this division, though, finds scholarship on such topics as elderly caregiving, retirement, and midlife narratives. What these topics reveal is a bias toward viewing aging as, first, innately and only biological (e.g., one is “middle age” simply because one has been alive for 40-50 years), and second, a concern only facing those in later life stages. Though this research is important, I believe that, in light of what I have shown throughout this dissertation, studies of aging in Communication might be enhanced by considering age as an identity that, first, is not only biological but is also enacted and performed, and second, is informed by the relationship between old *and* young and the respective cultural ideals attached to them.

Fourth, and lastly, while this project has been mainly focused on the political work being done at the textual level—how these (para)textual narratives contest heteronormative, patriarchal, and binary understandings of age and gender—there is the potential to begin looking at how horror texts might also be responding to the larger political-historical context in which they are created. Previous Communication scholars, such as Kendall R. Phillips, have argued that the horror genre has been especially prone to reflecting social issues and concerns, and representing them through figures of monstrosity. Phillips states, “By drawing upon our collective anxieties—projecting them, even if indirectly, upon the screen before us—horror films can be said to be vitally interested in the broader cultural politics of their day” (*Projected Fears*, 8). In this regard, my research on horr/orality can be expanded to account for how family, the body, age, and gender do not exist solely within these texts, but are constructs taken from their surrounding culture and that can be assessed as products of that culture.

Despite my reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis, which tends to be ahistorical and often does not recognize social-cultural influences on identity, there are particular “cultural moments” that have affected some of the ideas pertaining to age and gender in this dissertation. For example, I specified that I would only be analyzing American texts created after 2010, a year in which new conversations were taking place between feminist and queer scholars in the American popular press. In that year, Susan Faludi caused a firestorm when she published the controversial essay “American Electra: Feminism’s Ritual Matricide” in the pages of *Harper’s* magazine. In this essay, Faludi identifies what she sees as two threats to American feminism. First, Faludi bemoans feminism’s “generational breakdown” (29) and the tendencies of some contemporary “postfeminists”

to distance themselves from the “older” members of the movement. Faludi frames these disputes through the familiar metaphor of (as I addressed in my analysis of *Scream Queens*) a quarreling mother-daughter relationship. Second, Faludi, in her criticisms of the work of queer theorist J. Halberstam, expresses deep reservations over the “rise of a poststructuralist philosophy in gender studies that prefers the deconstructing of female experience to the linkages and legacies of women’s history and regards generational dynamics...as artifices to perform and discard” (40). That is, just as she fears that the “daughters” of feminism seek to reject and replace their supposedly dated “mothers,” Faludi is apprehensive about how the “next generation” of queer theory, with its interests in de-essentializing conventional gender categories, can threaten and supplant traditional women’s studies of the past. Two years later, in 2012, Halberstam published his response to Faludi in the opening chapter of *Gaga Feminism*. Halberstam alleges that Faludi “cast the mother-daughter bond as transhistorical, transcultural, universal...[and] made no mention of queer challenges to the normativity of the family and of generational thinking; and she cast the mother-daughter relationship as some static bond between older and younger woman...” (*Gaga Feminism*, 2-3). For Halberstam, the binary parent-child system through which Faludi recounted feminist history was stained with heteronormativity, so that “Faludi sounded more Freudian than Freud” (*Gaga Feminism*, 2) and was susceptible to the same essentialism that has discredited much psychoanalysis. Halberstam’s argument is well-founded as developments in areas directly affecting the family (e.g., *in vitro* fertilization/surrogacy, same-sex adoption, increased transgender visibility, and the legalization of same-sex marriage) have begun to rehabilitate and de-heteronormalize depictions of the family in contemporary society and mass media.

Thus, the contemporary cultural moment seems to be one in which the disputes between feminists and queer thinkers have been re-energized, with the institution of the family and the mother-child duo at the core of it. On one hand, the tensions felt between feminism's "mothers" and "daughters" are palpable and real: for instance, where feminists of an earlier era marched in order to "Take Back the Night" and combat the sexualization of women that reinforced rape culture, many feminists in the last decade have made their sexualized bodies, in such movements at the Slutwalk, an important part of their strategy for fighting the normalization of sexual violence in Western society. On the other hand, the need to begin "queering" how we talk about the family and how we assign age-gender roles according to traditional familial frameworks is also real and important. My examination of horr/orality could be advanced in future scholarship by considering how contemporary feminist politics concerning sexual assault (e.g., the Slutwalk) and intergenerational conflict (e.g., the clash between feminism and postfeminism), as well as other movements related to female sexuality that have gained the interests of feminists (e.g., the twenty-first century abstinence movement), might also influence the meanings that can be read into these texts (e.g., the horrors of rape culture in *I Spit on Your Grave*, the warring mother-daughter pairings of *Scream Queens* and *Night of the Living Dead*, and the themes of sexual purity in *Let Me In*). At the same time, queer redefinitions of the family and age-gender identity that have concurrently arisen and have challenged the feminist movement must also be incorporated into these readings.

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