The Dread of Difference

Gender and the Horror Film

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Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulders of their dates. There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder. Another excellent reason for the refusal to look is the fact that women are given so little to identify with on the screen. Laura Mulvey’s extremely influential article on visual pleasure in narrative cinema has best defined this problem in terms of a dominant male look at the woman that leaves no place for the woman’s own pleasure in seeing: she exists only to be looked at.¹

Like the female spectator, the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her. In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of the “good girl” heroines of the silent screen were often figuratively, or even literally, blind.² Blindness in this context signifies a perfect absence of desire, allowing the look of the male protagonist to regard the woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur’s pleasure, with no danger that
she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own. The relaying of looks within the film thus duplicates the voyeuristic pleasure of the cinematic apparatus itself—a pleasure that Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey have suggested to be one of the primary pleasures of film viewing: the impression of looking in on a private world unaware of the spectator's own existence.3

But even when the heroine is not literally blind, the failure and frustration of her vision can be the most important mark of her sexual purity. An illuminating example of this failed vision occurs in D. W. Griffith's 1911 two-reeler, Enoch Arden.4 A remarkable illustration of the pleasures of voyeurism the cinema could offer audiences of that time, the film is entirely structured as a series of romantic or domestic scenes which are spied upon by two successive male voyeurs.

In a small fishing village Enoch Arden and Phillip Ray are rivals for Annie Lee's affections. After separate shots that introduce each of them, Enoch in the background spies upon what he presumes to be the happy love of Phillip and Annie Lee. Soon after the shot is repeated, but this time with Phillip as the outsider spying on Annie Lee and Enoch. A title provides Tennyson's lines, "Phillip looked, and in their eyes and faces read his doom."5 The decision as to which of these rivals "gets" the girl is based on the abdication of an unseen onlooker who believes he "reads" the true desires of the couple. But since Enoch and Phillip have each read the same desire in the couple which excludes them, it becomes apparent that what matters is not so much the desire of the couple but the sad and jealous look of the outsider- voyeur who imagines—and thus constitutes—a happiness that must exclude him. Through this process Enoch wins Annie.

After some years of marriage, Enoch is forced to leave his happy home and family to go to sea. Annie Lee stands on the beach waving to Enoch's ship as it disappears in the distance, watching "to the last dip of the vanishing sail." The frustration of her look is emphasized by the spyglass she brings with her and through which she vainly peers for the next twenty years as she awaits Enoch's return.6

What Annie strains to see but cannot, Griffith's parallel editing permits us to see clearly: Enoch's shipwreck and long vigil on a desert island, scanning the horizon for the ship that will bring him home. Throughout their long separation Griffith is careful to maintain consistent screen direction in both Enoch and Annie Lee's looks "off." Annie always looks screen left, Enoch on his island looks screen right, thus preserving the spectator's hope that their gazes, and their paths, might one day meet. This is especially acute when Enoch is on the ship transporting him home. Throughout his long absence

Annie has steadfastly resisted Phillip's renewed advances. Although she finally gives in to his offer of marriage "for the children's sake," she still refuses his embrace and remains loyal to Enoch by continuing to look out her window in the "correct" direction—away from Phillip and toward the absent Enoch.

But just as parallel editing informs us that Enoch is about to arrive home, an intertitle, for which we have had no visual preparation, informs us that "when her new baby came, then Phillip was her all and all." Given the visual evidence of Annie's rejection of Phillip's advances and her persistent watch out the window for Enoch, this baby comes as rather a surprise. It does not seem possible for it to have arisen out of any sexual desire for Phillip on Annie Lee's part. Griffith uses this baby, which will soon become the visual proof of Annie's happiness with Phillip in Enoc's eyes, as the proper maternal justification of Annie finally turning her eyes from the window and toward her new family now headed by Phillip. The baby thus functions as cause, rather than effect, of Annie's desire for Phillip. This remarkable reversal of the usual logic of cause and effect allows the narrative to deny Annie a look of desire in both directions—at both Enoch and Phillip. The film ends as it began, with the look of the male voyeur (this time a literal voyeur) as the long-lost Enoch creeps up to the window to spy on the happy family scene from which he is now excluded. Once again he "reads" their happiness and his own "doom."

Let us take Enoc's Arden as one paradigm for the frustration of the woman's "look" in the silent melodrama. It is a frustration necessary for the male regime of voyeuristic desire already clearly articulated by 1911. Given this paradigm, we can go on to examine the exceptions to it: those moments (still in the silent film) when the woman in the text not only tries to look, but actually sees.

The bold, smouldering dark eyes of the silent screen vamp offer an obvious example of a powerful female look.7 But the dubious moral status of such heroines, and the fact that they must be punished in the end, undermine the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look, frequently turning it into a mere parody of the male look.8 More instructive are those moments when the "good girl" heroines are granted the power of the look, whether in the woman's film, as discussed by Mary Ann Doane, or in the horror film as discussed below. In both cases, as Doane suggests, "the woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization."9 The woman's gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy.

The horror film offers a particularly interesting example of this punishment in the woman's terrified look at the horrible body of the monster. In 
what follows I will examine the various ways the woman is punished for looking in both the classic horror film and in the more recent “psychopathic” forms of the genre. I hope to reveal not only the process of punishment but a surprising (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman, in the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing.

In F. W. Murnau’s Nosferatu (1922), for example, Nina’s ambiguous vigil by the sea is finally rewarded, not by the sight of her returning husband, who arrives by land in a carriage, but by the vampire’s ship toward which a wide-eyed Nina in a trancelike state reaches out her arms. Later, from the windows of facing houses, Nina and the vampire stare at one another until she finally opens the window. When the vampire’s shadow approaches, she again stares at him in wide-eyed terror until he attacks.

There are several initial distinctions to be made between what I have characterized above as the desiring look of the male-voyeur-subject and the woman’s look of horror typified by Nina’s trancelike fascination. First, Nina’s look at the vampire fails to maintain the distance between observer and observed so essential to the “pleasure” of the voyeur. For where the (male) voyeur’s properly distanced look safely masters the potential threat of the (female) body it views, the woman’s look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster or the freak’s own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trancelike passivity that allows him to master her through her look. At the same time, this look momentarily shifts the iconic center of the spectacle away from the woman to the monster.

Rupert Julian’s 1925 version of The Phantom of the Opera, starring Lon Chaney and Mary Philbin, offers another classic example of the woman’s look in the horror film. Christine, an aspiring young opera singer, is seduced by the voice of the Phantom speaking to her through the walls of her dressing room at the Paris Opera. She follows “her master’s voice” by stepping through the mirror of her dressing room. Her first glimpse of the masked Phantom occurs as she turns to respond to the touch of his hand on her shoulder. Thus her look occurs after the film audience has had its own chance to see him—they are framed in a two-shot that has him standing slightly behind her; only when she turns does she see his masked face.

Similarly, in the famous unmasking scene, Christine first thrills to the sound of the organ music the Phantom plays (“Don Juan Triumphant”), then sneaks up behind him and hesitates several times before finally pulling the string that will drop his mask. Since both he and Christine face the camera in a two-shot (with Christine situated behind him), we again see the Phantom’s face, this time unmasked, before Christine does. The audience thus receives the first shock of the horror even while it can still see the curiosity and desire to see on Christine’s face.

Everything conspires here to condemn the desire and curiosity of the woman’s look. Our prior knowledge of what she will see encourages us to judge her look as a violation of the Phantom’s privacy. Her unmasking of his face reveals the very wounds, the very lack, that the Phantom had hoped her blind love would heal. It is as if she has become responsible for the horror that her look reveals, and is punished by not being allowed the safe distance that ensures the voyeur’s pleasure of looking. “ Feast your eyes, glut your soul, on my accursed ugliness!” cries the Phantom as he holds her face up close to his.

When the men in this film look at the Phantom, the audience first sees the man looking, then adopts his point of view to see what he sees. The audience’s belated adoption of the woman’s point of view undermines the usual audience identification and sympathy with the look of the cinematic character. But it may also permit a different form of identification and sympathy to take place, not between the audience and the character who looks, but
between the two objects of the cinematic spectacle who encounter one another in this look—the woman and the monster.

In The Phantom of the Opera Christine walks through her mirror to encounter a monster whose face lacks the flesh to cover its features. Lon Chaney's incarnation of the Phantom's nose, for example, gives the effect of two large holes; the lips fail to cover a gaping mouth. Early in the film women dancers from the corps de ballet argue excitedly about his nose: "He had no nose!" "Yes he did, it was enormous!" The terms of the argument suggest that the monster's body is perceived as freakish in its possession of too much or too little. Either the monster is symbolically castrated, pathetically lacking what Christine's handsome lover Raoul possesses ("He had no nose!"), or he is overly endowed and potent ("Yes he did, it was enormous!"). Yet it is a truism of the horror genre that sexual interest resides most often in the monster and not the bland ostensible heroes like Raoul who often prove powerless at the crucial moment. (The Phantom of the Opera is no exception. Raoul passes out when most needed, and Christine's rescue is accomplished by her accidental fall from the Phantom's racing carriage.)

Clearly the monster's power is one of sexual difference from the normal male. In this difference he is remarkably like the woman in the eyes of the traumatized male: a biological freak with impossible and threatening appetites that suggest a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack. In fact, the Phantom's last act of the film is to restage the drama of the lack he represents to others. Cornered by a crowd more bestial than he has ever been, a crowd that wants to tear him apart, the Phantom pulls back his hand as if threatening to detonate an explosive device. The crowd freezes; the Phantom laughs and opens his hand to reveal that it contains . . . nothing at all.

It is this absence, this nothing at all so dramatically brandished by the Phantom, that haunts a great many horror films and often seems the most effective element of their horror. It may very well be, then, that the power and potency of the monster body in many classic horror films—Nosferatu, The Phantom of the Opera, Vampyr (1931), Dracula (1931), Freaks (1932), Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931, 1941), King Kong (1933), Beauty and the Beast (1945)—should not be interpreted as an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexuality of the civilized male (the monster as double for the male viewer and characters in the film), but as the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the woman).

As we have seen, one result of this equation seems to be the difference between the look of horror of the man and of the woman. The male look expresses conventional fear at that which differs from itself. The female look—

Bette Davis and Joan Crawford as horror objects in Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962).

a look given preeminent position in the horror film—shares the male fear of the monster's freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibitionist-object by the desiring look of the male. There is not that much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned. (In one brand of horror film this difference may simply lie in the age of its female stars. The Bette Davises and the Joan Crawfords considered too old to continue as spectacle-objects nevertheless persevere as horror objects in films like Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? [1962] and Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte [1965].) The strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be less an expression of sexual desire (as in King Kong, Beauty and the Beast) and more a flash of sympathetic identification.

In Carson McCuller's The Member of the Wedding, Frankie fears that the carnival freaks look at her differently, secretly connecting their eyes with hers, saying with their look "We know you. We are you!"12 Similarly, in The Phantom
of the Opera, when Christine walks through a mirror that ceases to reflect her, it could very well be that she does so because she knows she will encounter a true mirror in the freak of the Phantom on the other side. In other words, in the rare instance when the cinema permits the woman's look, she not only sees a monster, she sees a monster that offers a distorted reflection of her own image. The monster is thus a particularly insidious form of the many mirrors that patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman. But there are many kinds of mirrors; and in this case it may be useful to make a distinction between beauty and the beast in the horror film.

Laura Mulvey has shown that the male look at the woman in the cinema involves two forms of mastery over the threat of castration posed by her "lack" of a penis: a sadistic voyeurism which punishes or endangers the woman through the agency of an active and powerful male character; and fetishistic overvaluation, which masters the threat of castration by investing the woman's body with an excess of aesthetic perfection.13

Stephen Heath, summarizing the unspoken other side of Mulvey's formulation, suggests that the woman's look can only function to entrap her further within these patriarchal structures of seeing: "If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen, seeing herself seeing herself, Lacan's femininity."14 In other words, her look even here becomes a form of not seeing anything more than the castration she so exclusively represents for the male.

If this were so, then what the woman "sees" would only be the mutilation of her own body displaced onto that of the monster. 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 body represents. But here I think it may be helpful to introduce a distinction into Mulvey's, Heath's, and ultimately Freud's notion of the supposed "mutilation" of the "castrated" woman that may clarify the precise meaning of the woman's encounter with a horror version of her own body.

A key moment in many horror films occurs when the monster displaces the woman as site of the spectacle. In King Kong, Kong is literally placed on stage to "perform" before awed and fearful audiences. In The Phantom of the Opera, the Phantom makes a dramatic, show-stopping entrance at the Masked Ball as the Masque of the Red Death, wearing a mask modeled on the absences of his own face beneath. Count Dracula, in both the Murnau and the Browning versions, makes similarly show-stopping performances. Tod Browning's Freaks begins and ends with the sideshow display of the woman who has been transformed by the freaks into part bird, part woman. These spectacular mo-

ments displaying the freakish difference of the monster's body elicit reactions of fear and awe in audiences that can be compared to the Freudian hypothesis of the reaction of the male child in his first encounter with the "mutilated" body of his mother.

In her essay "Pornography and the Dread of Woman," Susan Sontag offers a significant challenge to the traditional Freudian notion that the sight of the mother's body suggests to the male child that she has herself undergone castration. According to Sontag, the real trauma for the young boy is not that the mother is castrated but that she isn't: she is obviously not mutilated the way he would be if his penis were taken from him. The notion of the woman as a castrated version of a male is, according to Sontag, a comforting, wishful fantasy intended to combat the child's imagined dread of what his mother's very real power could do to him. This protective fantasy is aimed at convincing himself that "women are what men would be if they had no penises—bereft of sexuality, helpless, incapable."15

I suggest that the monster in the horror film is feared by the "normal" males of such films in ways very similar to Sontag's notion of the male child's fear of this mother's power-in-difference. For, looked at from the woman's perspective, the monster is no so much lacking as he is powerful in a different way. The vampire film offers a clear example of the threat this different form of sexuality represents to the male. The vampire act of sucking blood, sapping the life fluid of a victim so that the victim in turn becomes a vampire, is similar to the female role of milking the sperm of the male during intercourse.16 What the vampire seems to represent then is a sexual power whose threat lies in its difference from a phallic "norm." The vampire's power to make its victim resemble itself is a very real mutilation of the once human victim (teeth marks, blood loss), but the vampire itself, like the mother in Sontag's formulation, is not perceived as mutilated, just different.

Thus what is feared in the monster (whether vampire or simply a creature whose difference gives him power over others) is similar to what Sontag says is feared in the mother: not her own mutilation, but the power to mutilate and transform the vulnerable male. The vampire's insatiable need for blood seems a particularly apt analogue for what must seem to the man to be an insatiable sexual appetite—yet another threat to his potency. So there is a sense in which the woman's look at the monster is more than simply a punishment for looking or a narcissistic fascination with the distortion of her own image in the mirror that patriarchy holds up to her; it is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to a vulnerable male power. This would help explain the often vindictive destruction of the monster in the horror film and the fact that this destruction generates the frequent sympathy of the women
characters, who seem to sense the extent to which the monster's death is an exorcism of the power of their own sexuality. It also helps to explain the conventional weakness of the male heroes of so many horror films (e.g., David Manners in Dracula, Colin Clive in Frankenstein [1931]) and the extreme excitement and surplus danger when the monster and the woman get together.

Thus I suggest that, in the classic horror film, the woman's look at the monster offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a nonphallic sexuality. Precisely because this look is so threatening to male power, it is violently punished. In what follows I would like to look closely at a different kind of horror film that offers a particularly self-conscious and illuminating version of the significance of the woman's look in the horror genre. And then, lest we get carried away with enthusiasm, I shall look at two other, more typically exploitative examples of the recent evolution of the genre.

Michael Powell's Peeping Tom (1960) is a self-conscious meditation on the relations between a sadistic voyeur-subject and the exhibitionist objects he murders. Along with Psycho (1960), it marked a significant break in the structure of the classic horror film, inaugurating a new form of psychological horror. In these two films, a physically normal but psychologically deranged monster becomes the central figure of the narrative. For better or worse (we will see later just how bad it can be), the audience is now asked to identify with the monster's point of view, and even to sympathize with the childhood traumas that produced his deranged behavior. In Peeping Tom, the first images we see are through the lens of Mark's 16mm camera as he murders a prostitute with a knife concealed in a leg of his tripod. We learn in the opening credits that Mark is a killer whose only apparent sexual gratification comes while watching from the womblike safety of his dark projection room the murders he commits in his own movies.

Peeping Tom suggests that Mark's obsession evolved as a protection against his father's voyeuristic experimentation upon him as a young child. We see home movies showing the young Mark terrified by lizards placed in his bed, probed with lights and coldly spied upon by his father's camera. It becomes clear that Mark's only defense was to master the very system that had turned him into an exhibitionist object of scientific spectacle. In one of the home movies we see Mark receive a camera from his father and turn it, weaponlike, back upon the world, mastering his own victimization by gaining the means to victimize others.

Where Mark's father represents the sadistic power of the voyeur-scientist to scrutinize his subjects safe from any involvement with them, Mark's own manipulation is on a different level: he is the voyeur as romantic artist. His home movies are a desperate attempt to capture on film the perfect expression of the terror of his victims—a terror that might match his own. As Mark is a classic voyeur, any actual contact with his victims disrupts the distance so necessary to his sadistic pleasure. It is precisely this distance that Helen, an artist herself (she has a book of stories about a "magic camera" that she wants Mark to illustrate), disrupts. Helen intrudes upon the inner sanctum of his screening room, watches the home movies of Mark as a child, demands an explanation ("I like to understand what I'm shown!"), and eventually switches on the projector to view his latest murder. Her own autonomous looking, her ambitious sense of herself as a creator of images in her own right, and her instinctive distrust of Mark's dependence on his camera to avoid contact with the world, force him to see her not as another victim, but as a subject with her own power of vision. All his other victims, a prostitute, a movie stand-in, and a pornographer's model, have willingly accepted their positions as exhibitionist spectacles for his camera.

Helen's power of vision becomes dramatically evident in her ability to refuse the mirror-snare that ultimately gives this film its greatest horror. For Mark not only films his victims as he stabs them, the artist in him wants to perfect this image of their terror. To do this, he holds up before them, while filming and stabbing, a concave mirror that reflects the hideous distortion of their faces. Thus what Mark films is his victim at the moment of death looking at her own distorted reflection and not, as in the conventional look of horror, back at the monster. Our own awareness of this mirror is withheld until near the end when Mark finally turns the apparatus on himself, running on the knife as he looks into the distorting mirror, uniting voyeur and exhibitionist in a one-man movie of which he is both director and star.

In the classic horror film, the woman encountered a monster whose deformed features suggested a distorted mirror-reflection of her own putative lack in the eyes of patriarchy, although this supposed lack could also be construed as a recognition of the threat both beauty and the beast presented to this patriarchy. In Peeping Tom, however, the woman's look is literally caught up in a mirror reflection that does not simply suggest an affinity with the monster in the eyes of patriarchy, but attempts to lure her into the false belief that she is the monster. Mark's self-reflective cinematic apparatus uses its mirror effect to haunt the woman with her own image, to trap her in an attitude of exhibitionism and narcissism that has traditionally been offered as the "natural" complement to the voyeur's sadistic pleasure.

The point of the film, of course, is to show that the woman is not the monster. Mark's attempt to convince her that she is, is simply a way of alienating her from her own look, of forcing her into a perverse reenactment of his own
The art and technology of moviemaking is related to sadistic voyeurism in Peeping Tom (1960).

traumatic experience of being looked at. In making his films (the mise-en-scène of which is murder) Mark assumes the role of his sadistic father, mastering his own terror by becoming the victimizer himself. Then in watching his films he can relive his original experience of terror at a safe distance, identify with his own victims, and repossess his own look of terror from a safer aesthetic distance.

Throughout the film we are invited to equate the art and technology of moviemaking with the sadist- voyeur’s misuse of the female body. Mark lures the women he kills into exhibitionist performances—the prostitute’s come-on, the stand-in’s frenetic jazz dance, the pornographic model’s pose—which he captures with his camera-mirror-weapon and then punishes. Yet this punishment is clearly only a substitute for the revenge on his dead father that he can never accomplish. Ultimately he will turn the weapon back on himself and exalt in his own terror as he dies before the distorting mirror.

Mark’s regression to his original position of victim occurs when Helen refuses to occupy that same position herself. Helen is not transfixed by the mirror Mark holds up to her; she sees it for the distortion it is and has the power to turn away, to reject the image of woman as terrified victim and monster proffered by the male artist.

Helen’s refusal of the mirror marks an important moment in the history of the woman’s look in the horror film: in a rare instance her look both sees and understands the structure of seeing that would entrap her; her look is not paralyzed by the recognition of the horror she represents, and she therefore refuses the oppressive lie of the narcissistic mirror that the cinematic apparatus holds up to her.

Peeping Tom thus lays bare the voyeuristic structure of cinema and that structure’s dependence on the woman’s acceptance of her role as narcissist. Both Mark and his victims are trapped in a perverse structure of seeing that is equated throughout the film with the art of making “true-to-life” movies. Yet it is also true that Helen’s ability to refuse the mirror is simply a result of her status as a nonsexual “good girl.” As played by Anna Massey, Helen is the stereotypical “girl next door.” She mothers Mark, feeds him, tells him not to work so hard, and gives him a chaste goodnight kiss which he later, and much more erotically, transfers to the lens of his camera.

Helen’s refusal of narcissism also turns out to be a refusal of the only way patriarchal cinema has of representing woman’s desire. If she has the power to recognize and refuse the mirror-trap, it is because she is portrayed as ignorant of sexual desire altogether. She is like the one virginal babysitter who survives the attacks of the monster in Halloween (1978), or like Lila, Marion Crane’s “good girl” sister in Psycho, who survives Norman Bates’s final attack, or even like Helen’s blind mother in Peeping Tom who immediately “sees”—in the tradition of the blind seer—the turbulence in Mark’s soul. In other words, in most horror films the tradition of the power of the woman “pure of heart” is still going strong: the woman’s power to resist the monster is directly proportional to her absence of sexual desire. Clarity of vision, it would seem, can exist only in this absence.

If Peeping Tom can be privileged as a progressive horror film, not so much for sparing the life of its “good girl” heroine as for exposing the perverse structures of seeing that operate in the genre, then we might compare two much more popular horror films in the same mode: Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho (made in the same year as Peeping Tom) and Brian de Palma’s Psycho-inspired Dressed to Kill (1980). Both films offer insidious and much more typical forms of the narcissistic trap that frustrates the woman’s look of desire.

Psycho has been the model for the new form of the “psycho at large” horror films that began to emerge in the early 1960s and which now dominate the market. There is no more convincing proof of the influence of this model
Marion Crane is punished for sexual desires which put her in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet her decision to return the money and go back to face the consequences of her theft makes her subsequent murder seem all the more gratuitous. One of the more insidious changes in Brian de Palma’s reworking of the Psycho plot in Dressed to Kill is that Kate, the Angie Dickinson character who replaces Janet Leigh’s Marion, is a sexually frustrated middle-aged woman whose desperate search for satisfaction leads directly to her death. Not only does a “woman” commit the crime but the female victim asks for it.19

In this and other ways de Palma’s film Dressed to Kill extends Psycho’s premise by holding the woman responsible for the horror that destroys her. Here too the psychiatrist explains at the end that it was the woman in the man who killed—in this case the female, “Bobbie” half of Kate’s schizophrenic therapist, Dr. Elliot. Bobbie wants the doctor to undergo a sex change operation so that “she” will become dominant. Bobbie kills Kate when she discovers that Kate’s sexual desires have aroused the very penis that Bobbie would like to eradicate. But this time the murder is clearly meant to be seen as the fault of the sex-hungry victim who, in the words of the detective who solves the case, was “looking to get killed.”

The film begins with a form of interior “looking”: with Kate’s violent sexual fantasy of being attacked in the shower. This fantasy, which begins with the blurring of Kate’s vision by the steam of the shower, condenses Hitchcock’s illicit love-in-a-motel-room scene with the famous shower sequence, encouraging us to believe that Kate’s desire is to be the victim of male aggression. The rest of the film will give her what she “wants.”

A second instance of Kate’s desiring look occurs during a therapy session with Dr. Elliot. She discusses her sexual frustrations with her husband and her unwillingness to confess her lack of satisfaction: “I moaned with pleasure at his touch, isn’t that what every man wants?” The doctor assures her that the problem must lie in her husband’s technique; she is perfectly attractive so there could be nothing wrong with her. The film thus assumes that sexual satisfaction must be given by the aggressive man to the passive and sufficiently attractive woman; there is no route to achieving it herself. This lesson is borne out by Kate’s very next act: her aggressive proposition to Dr. Elliot leads not to sexual satisfaction but to humiliation and death.

Proof follows in an elaborate cat-and-mouse chase in the labyrinthine art

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18. In Psycho we learn that the mother did it. As the psychiatrist explains at the end of the film, Norman Bates had been dominated by his demanding and clinging mother whom he eventually killed. Not able to bear the crime of matricide, he maintains the fiction that she lives by dressing in her clothes and speaking in her voice. Each time he feels sexual desire for a woman, the mother he has killed rises up in him to murder the cause of this betrayal of her son’s affections. Thus Norman, the matricide and killer of several other women, is judged the victim of the very mother he has killed.

19. In Dressed to Kill Kate is a monster who attacks the woman. The monster who attacks both looks like and, in some sense, is a woman. But unlike Peeping Tom, which exposes the lie of the female victim’s encounter with her own horror in the mirror image that Mark holds up to her, Psycho and Dressed to Kill perpetuate this lie, asking us to believe that the woman is both victim and monster.
museum where Kate tentatively pursues a strange man. Throughout the sequence Kate’s look and pursuit of the man is continually frustrated and outmaneuvered by his look and pursuit of her. It is as if the game for him consists in hiding from her look in order to surprise her with his.

Once again the camera adopts Kate’s subjective point of view only to demonstrate her failure to see, while the objective shots reveal the many times she fails to look in the right direction to see the lurking figure of the man she seeks and whom we so easily see. Repeatedly, her look of expectation encounters thin air. She only encounters him when vision can give her no warning, as when she turns at the sudden touch of his hand, wearing her dropped glove; or outside the museum when he waves her lost glove, symbol of his triumph, at her from a cab.

When she thanks him for the glove, he pulls her into the cab, aggressively undresses her, and performs cunnilingus. Her ecstasy is mixed with the humiliation of watching the cab driver adjust his rear-view mirror to get a better view. Later, in the stranger’s apartment, she encounters a second humiliating punishment for the dubious pleasure she has just received: a public health record attesting to the fact that the stranger has venereal disease. But these humiliations are only teases for the real punishment to come: the revenge of Bobbie, the tall blond in sunglasses, who slashes her to pieces in the elevator, spoiling her pretty white suit.

Bobbie wreaks her revenge on Kate as a substitute for the castration she has not yet been able to have performed on her male half. The film stresses the gory details of the transsexual operation in no uncertain terms when Liz the hooker explains to Peter, Kate’s son, just how a “penectomy” is performed. In Psycho the dead mother-villain was guilty of an excessive domination that figuratively castrated her son, eventually turning him into her entirely. In Dressed to Kill this figurative castration by the woman in the man becomes a literal possibility, and the desiring look of the female victim becomes a direct cause of the sexual crisis that precipitates her own death.

“If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air.” Kate’s crime is having tried to look, having actively sought the satisfaction of her desires. The film teaches that such satisfaction cannot be actively sought; it must be received, like rape, as a gift from the gods. And if Kate dies while Liz, the hooker and ostensibly promiscuous woman, survives (much as Marion Crane’s “good girl” sister survives in Psycho), it is because Kate’s desires have made disturbing demands on the male that Liz does not make.

Thus, although the film gives the impression of reversing the conventions by which the “good girls” are saved and the promiscuous ones punished, it actually reinforces the convention by redefining the “good girl” as the professional sex machine who knows how to satisfy but makes no demands of her own.

The film leaves us with one last, nagging “insight” as to the nature of woman’s desire: Liz’s dream of the return of Bobbie to murder her as she steps out of the shower that was the scene of Kate’s original fantasy. She awakens from the dream and is comforted by Peter as the film ends. But there can be no comfort for the female spectator, who has been asked to accept the truth of a masochistic female imagination that envisions its own punishment at the hands of the sick man whose very illness lies in the fact that he wants to become a woman.

In the decades since Psycho and Peeping Tom began the new horror tradition of the psychopathic hero, one of the most significant changes in the genre has been the deepening of the woman’s responsibility for the horror that endangers her. We have seen that in the classic horror film the woman’s sexually charged look at the monster encounters a horror version of her own body. The monster is thus one of many mirrors held up to her by patriarchy. But, as I have tried to suggest, she also encounters in this mirror at least the possibility of a power located in her very difference from the male.

In the more recent psychopathic horror films, however, the identification between woman and monster becomes greater, the nature of the identification is more negatively charged, and women are increasingly punished for the threatening nature of their sexuality. Peeping Tom is both exception and rule to this in its self-conscious exploration of the male monster’s need to shift responsibility for her victimization to the woman. For Peeping Tom exposes the male aggressor’s need to believe that his female victims are terrified by their own distorted image. It thus reveals the process by which films themselves ask women to believe that they have asked for it.

Much more typical are Psycho, Dressed to Kill, and a host of vastly inferior exploitation films—what Roger Ebert calls the new brand of “woman-in-danger” films—including He Knows You’re Alone (1980), Prom Night (1980), Terror Train (1979), and Friday the 13th (1980). Ebert points out that in these films we rarely see the psychopathic murderer whose point of view the audience nevertheless adopts. This “non-specific male killing force” thus displaces what was once the subjective point of view of the female victim onto an audience that is now asked to view the body of the woman victim as the only visible monster in the film. In other words, in these films the recognition and affinity between woman and monster of the classic horror film gives way to pure identity: she is the monster, her mutilated body is the only visible horror.

These films are capitalizations—and vulgarizations—of currently popular formulae begun with Psycho and Peeping Tom. There are, of course, obvious
differences of technical and aesthetic quality between these exploitative women-in-danger films and a film like *Dressed to Kill*. Ebert suggests that the distinction lies in the "artistry . . . and inventive direction of view" of such films as *Halloween*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) over *Friday the 13th* and the rest. The former films endow their villains with characters, while in the exploitative films they are faceless noncharacters whose point of view the audience is forced to adopt.21

Although we must be deeply indebted to Ebert for identifying and condemning the onslaught of these offensive films (and for doing so on public television), the argument that the greater artistry and characterization of the more "artistic" films exonerate them from the charge of gratuitously punishing their female heroines rings false. The real issue (to continue the argument in Ebert's terms of false or nonexistent characterization) is that the women in these films are nonexistent fantasies. *Dressed to Kill* is a male horror fantasy in drag: the film attributes a whole slew of inauthentic fantasies to an ostensible female subject who is never really there in the first place. While supposedly about Bobbie's desire to castrate her male half, what the film actually shows is not this mutilation but another: the slow-motion slashing of Kate's body as substitute for the castration Bobbie cannot yet perform on Dr. Elliot. In this light, Bobbie's vengeance on Kate can be viewed not as the act of a jealous woman eliminating her rival, but as acting out the male fantasy that woman is castrated, mutilated, "what men would be if they had no penises—bereft of sexuality, helpless, incapable."22 Thus the mutilation of Kate should be properly viewed as a form of symbolic castration on a body that is frightening to the male precisely because it cannot be castrated, has none of his own vulnerability. The problem, in other words, is that she is not castrated; the fantasy solution of the male psychopath and the film itself is symbolically to prove that she is.

It is crucial for women spectators to realize the important change that is taking place before our very eyes, but which habits of viewing, not to mention habits of not viewing, of closing our eyes to violence and horror in general, may keep us from seeing. We are so used to sympathizing, in traditional cringing ways, with the female victims of horror that we are likely not to notice the change, to assume that films such as these have maintained this sympathy while simply escalating the doses of violence and sex. What we need to see is that in fact the sexual "freedom" of such films, the titillating attention given to the expression of women's desires, is directly proportional to the violence perpetrated against women. The horror film may be a rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women's sexual potency and desire and that associates this desire with the autonomous act of looking, but it does so in these more recent examples only to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be.

Notes

1. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 6–18. See also John Berger's description of the different "social presence" of the woman in western painting and advertisement in *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1978), 46–47. Berger argues that where the man in such works simply "surveys" the woman before acting toward her, the woman is split into a "surveyor" and a "surveyed." In other words, she is constantly aware of being looked at, even as she herself looks. Mary Ann Doane similarly notes the woman's status as spectacle rather than spectator and goes on to make a useful distinction between primary and secondary identifications within these structures of seeing in "Misrecognition and Identity," *Cine-Tracts*, no. 11 (Fall 1980): 25–37.

2. The pathetic blind heroine is a cliché of melodrama from D. W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) to Chaplin's *City Lights* (1936) to Garry Green's *A Patch of Blue* (1965).


4. Enoch Arden is a two-reel remake of Griffith's earlier one-reeler entitled *After Many Years* (1908). Both are adaptations of Tennyson's 1864 poem "Enoch Arden." The earlier version is often cited as Griffith's first integrative use of the close-up and as his first radical use of spatial discontinuity. The 1911 version is usually cited as his first expansion into the two-reel length. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), pp. 103–104.

5. The intertitle is quoted verbatim from Tennyson's poem.

6. In Tennyson's poem Annie Lee fails to catch even this last sight of Enoch. Enoch had assured her that she could prolong their farewell by looking at him through a spyglass—the same spyglass that Griffith uses to emphasize her inability to see in subsequent scenes. In the poem Annie fails to operate the glass properly and thus misses her last look at Enoch.

7. It could very well be that the tradition of the fair-haired virgin and the dark-haired vamp rests more upon this difference in the lightness or darkness of the eyes than in hair color. The uncanny light eyes of many of Griffith's most affecting heroines—Mae Marsh, Lillian Gish, and even his wife Linda Arvisdon, who plays Annie Lee—contribute to an effect of innocent blindness in many of his films. Light eyes seem transparent, unfocused, easy to penetrate, incapable of penetration themselves, while dark eyes are quite the reverse.

8. Mae West is, of course, one "master" of such reversals.

10. Miriam White points out that the film’s visuals suggest that Nina is really awaiting the Count, not her husband, even though the film’s intertitles construe Nina’s behavior only in relation to her husband. “Narrative Semantic Deviation: Duck-Rabbit Texts of Weimar Cinema” (paper presented at the Center for Twentieth-Century Studies Conference on Cinema and Language, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, March 1979).
11. I am indebted to Bruce Kawin for pointing out to me the way in which the audience receives the first shock of this look at the Phantom.
17. *The Book of the Vampires*, as quoted in Murnau’s Nosferatu, states that only a woman “pure in heart,” who will keep the vampire by her side until the first cock crows, can break his spell.
18. Henry Herrings’s as yet unpublished comparison of these two films, “The Endurance of Misogyny: Psycho and Dressed to Kill,” points out the way in which the woman is both cause and perpetrator of the violence against her in both films.
19. Andrew Sarris, one of the few critics to call the film on this issue, writes: “In de Palma’s perhaps wishful world, women do not just ask for it, they are willing to run track meets for it.” *Village Voice*, September 17, 1980, p. 44.
20. This is another of de Palma’s Hitchcock allusions—this one to *Vertigo* (1958)—in which the Kim Novak character sits pretending to be entranced before the portrait of her supposedly dead former self. Sarris correctly points out with respect to such borrowings that de Palma “steals Hitchcock’s most privileged moments without performing the drudgery of building up to these moments as thoroughly earned climaxes.” Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 56.

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Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection

*Barbara Creed*

Horror and Abjection

*Mother is not herself today.*

—Norman Bates, *Psycho*

All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. “Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals,” Freud wrote in his paper “Fetishism” in 1927.1 Joseph Campbell, in his book *Primitive Mythology*, noted that “there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as the ‘toothed vagina’—the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called ‘phallic mother,’ a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.”2 Classical mythology also was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female. The Medusa, with her “evil eye,” head of writhing serpents, and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female...