

Angry women in horror: Challenging traditional notions of femininity

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ENG Abstract. One of the major contributions to popular culture by feminist movements has been that of the figure of the angry woman in horror cinema. Although the expression of female rage challenges traditional notions of femininity and disassociates strength and power from masculinity, it also makes women to be portrayed as perverse and monstrous. With this videographic essay, I want, on the one hand, to show how the rage of women protagonists in horror has nevertheless recently been depicted as the complex emotion it is. On the other hand, this video essay proposes to emphasize the idea of rage as a site of political resistance that can be channelled into a productive form of social change and justice. To this end, I focus on a scene from *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019) in which a group of women reflect the protagonist's emotions of rage and pain as a form of healing. Their cries connect to those of the women who in 1984 protested nuclear weapons in Greenham (England), weaponizing traditional notions of femininity to denounce an environmental injustice.
Keywords: female rage; female horror; good-for-her genre; monstrous feminine; keening.

ES La rabia femenina en el cine de terror: Desafiando las nociones tradicionales de feminidad

Resumen. Una de las principales aportaciones de los movimientos feministas a la cultura popular ha sido la de la figura de la mujer enfadada en el cine de terror. Aunque la expresión de la rabia femenina desafía las nociones tradicionales de feminidad y desvincula la fuerza y el poder de la masculinidad, también hace que las mujeres sean retratadas como perversas y monstruosas. Con este videoensayo quiero, por un lado, mostrar cómo la rabia de las mujeres protagonistas en el cine de terror ha sido sin embargo representada recientemente como la emoción compleja que es. Por otro lado, este videoensayo propone enfatizar la idea de la rabia como un lugar de resistencia política que puede canalizarse en una forma productiva de cambio social y de justicia. Para ello, me centro en una escena de *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019) en la que un grupo de mujeres refleja las emociones de rabia y dolor de la protagonista como forma de curación. Sus gritos conectan con los de las mujeres que en 1984 protestaron contra las armas nucleares en Greenham (Inglaterra), empoderando las nociones tradicionales de feminidad para denunciar una injusticia medioambiental.

Palabras clave: género good-for-her; mujeres en el cine de terror; monstruoso femenino; rabia femenina.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. References.

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1. Written statement

As Carol J. Clover (1993, p. 17) noted in her renowned study of gender in horror cinema *Men, women and chainsaws: Gender in the modern horror film*, one of the major contributions to popular culture by feminist movements has been that of the figure of the angry woman in horror cinema – a woman who through her rage and violence ceases to be a victim

and at last achieves the status of a main character. This expression of female rage thus transforms the passive and symbolic caretaker function of women and challenges the hegemonic insistence on linking force and the right to exercise power and violence with traditional masculinity (Halberstam, 1993, p. 193).

It is certain that through its history horror cinema has depicted several angry women as main

characters, although the expression of their rage is precisely what makes them perverse and monstrous. Madness and irrationality are the most common accusations associated with women's expression of rage, which continues to be stigmatized and even in some cases keeps reinforcing the same patriarchal structures (Maseda-García, Gámez-Fuentes and Gómez-Nicolau, 2022, p. 300). Horror films usually reflect this patriarchal stigmatization since, according to Barbara Creed (1993, p. 7), female monstrosity in this film genre is generally constructed around maternal or reproductive functions and, on some occasions, it is based on questions of sexual desire. With this video essay, I want to discuss the contemporary representation of female rage in horror cinema, so I start by including a series of disturbing images of various angry women in contemporary horror cinema.

Although the films in this video essay star women, and my research focuses primarily on issues of gender and feminism, most of the films I have chosen have not been made by women or do not have women on their technical crew. And, while a feminist reading may be possible, this does not mean that the films or the filmmakers are feminist *per se*. However, I think it is important to note that women have been working in horror (as directors, editors, writers, producers, camera operators, and actors) since the inception of cinema (for more information, see the study on women making horror films edited by Alison Peirse, 2020). Also, in the movies featured in the video essay, most of the protagonists are white women, except for the Iranian vampire of *A girl walks home alone at night* (Amirpour, 2014), the maid in the Guatemalan *La llorona* (Bustamante, 2020), and the character played by Lupita Nyong'o in *Us* (Peele, 2019). In addition to the low visibility regarding gender and racial diversity in contemporary Western horror films, I find it critical to note that the rage-related emotions of white, middle-class, cisgender women are often treated more favorably compared to those expressed by black women and women of color (Cooper, 2018; Phipps, 2021). However, as stated by Audre Lorde (1981, p. 8), «any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger, [...] an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes» that «focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change».

My video essay starts with *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), in which its teenage protagonist is depicted as a menstruating monster, and it is followed by *Jennifer's body* (Kusama, 2009), in which the teenage girl is monstrous through her active sexuality, while on the other hand we also have the character of the disturbed 'spinster' played by Kathy Bates in *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990). In addition to archetypes such as the forementioned vampire woman and the popular –and generally old– witches, monstrous mothers are also very common, the archetype that Creed (1993, p.1) defined as the 'castrating mother'. These mothers who, as in the case of *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), deconstruct traditional notions of motherhood have also been shown as increasingly complex characters. This is also the case of *Babadook* (Kent, 2014), in which a widowed mother is struggling to raise her child, while a fairytale monster named Babadook –who embodies her depression, grief, and mourning–

stalks her, and eventually possesses her, until she is able to control it and learn to live with it. Thus rage, as Brené Brown (2021, p. 224) points out, hides behind it a tempest of pain, grief, betrayal, disappointment, and other emotions, and is shown at last to be a complex emotion and a human experience that we all have a right to feel and possess, regardless of our gender, race, or class, and that, as Lorde (1981) also asserted, can be transformed into something life-giving.

In recent years, several horror films within the subgenre labelled as 'good for her' contextualize and demystify patriarchal violence directed toward women (primarily white, heterosexual, cisgender women) and offer a more advanced perspective on female rage and revenge, as well as a more complex depiction of female monstrosity (Heimberger, 2022, p.8). Some of the films that fit into this category are featured in the video essay –*Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), *Jennifer's body* (Kusama, 2009), *Pearl* (West, 2022), *Ready or not* (Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett, 2019), *A girl walks home alone at night* (Amirpour, 2014)–, to which could be added others such as *The witch* (Eggers, 2015) or *Promising young woman* (Fennell, 2020) (Stockton, 2022; Heimberger, 2022). The film *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019) is often framed within this label (Pfister 2022; Squires 2023), although this categorization can be problematic, as the protagonist ends up recruited into a cult. However, I wanted to include in the video the scene in which the women of the cult comfort the protagonist, reflecting her emotions and wailing as a group with her, sharing her rage and grief as a way of healing. This lament known as 'keening' derives from the Gaelic verb 'caoineadh', meaning 'vocalized cry', and it was a funeral lament performed by women at wakes in pre-Christian Ireland (Huber, 2019, p. 9). In addition to guiding individuals and communities through the grieving process, «lamenting traditions also gave women living in patriarchal societies one of the only outlets for honest discussion and reflections on their relationships with men» (Pidgorna, 2022, p. 130), so it is not surprising that this tradition came to be banned by the clergy, as it was considered an example of paganism (Huber, 2019, p. 11).

With this videographic essay, I want to stress the idea that if emotions are «a primary site of control», they are also «a site of political resistance» and «can mobilize movements for liberation» (Boler, 1999, p. xiii). Playing with the sound, the same cries of the women of *Midsommar* intermingle with the cries of the horrific angry women of the beginning, and link to those of a group of women who in 1984 protested nuclear weapons in Greenham (England), forming a peace camp and uttering these characteristic cries of lament to mourn for the future children who might be lost to nuclear war (Finer, 2021, para. 2). These women weaponized the traditional notions of femininity (Reed, 2017, para. 3) and their cries of rage and pain were thus transformed into a collective strategy of sorority and protest to denounce an environmental injustice, a productive way of channeling an emotion so commonly stigmatized, especially as it relates to women.

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