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The Girl Spells Trouble¹

Yulia Toman

The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, those searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the power of us—of our shapely or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter.

— *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood

If in cinema as a whole women's voices have long been historically unfairly underrepresented, then in the horror-genre they have simply been silent. Why have there been no great female horror creators? The answer is simple: only a few have produced any truly cult films. Yes, there have been Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001), and Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), but the rest have gotten lost in the backstreets of the genre and been erased from audience memory. This dovetailed with the cisgender, patriarchal logic of the world. With each passing decade, however, female directors increasingly demonstrated their ability to work with any material, no matter how bloody or macabre it may be, even if it remained difficult to discuss any relatively clear general trends until the 2010s. Critics have deservedly called the outgoing decade a horror renaissance: deviating from stylistic canon—the slowing down of temporality, minimal reliance on jumpscare—films of the “new wave” have widened the spectrum of plot-constituting themes. Horror now is no longer the vampire floating into the bedroom, but a return to repressed psychological trauma. While Hollywood is reshaping comics and franchises (*Wonder Woman*, *Ocean's Eight*, *Ghostbusters*) to meet the new gender demand, a new generation of authors, whether consciously or not, is trying to move away from the male gaze in their films. And while the holy trinity of the founders of elevated horror seems to consist exclusively of men (Jordan Peele, Ari Aster, Robert Eggers), it is worth recognizing that they, too, are increasingly choosing the psychological and emotional states of women as the starting points for their films.

¹ The original text in Russian was published in *Seans [Seance]* 79, *Femmes 2 Femmes* (15 July), pp. 159-169. <https://seance.ru/articles/fem-horror/> upon the release of Julia Ducournau's *Titane*.

Close examination of traumatic experience has changed onscreen subject-object relations both in general and in horror films specifically, where the female image more often than not has been exploited either as victim (final girl) or as the monstrous incarnation of threat. Now everything has flipped upside down: we accompany *Midsommar*'s (Ari Aster, 2019) Dani through her nightmare of sorrow and victorious exit from a toxic relationship; we engage in a class war with our own subpersonality alongside Adelaide in *Us* [Jordan Peele, 2019]; together with Sophia, hoping to resurrect her dead child, we resolve to perform diabolical rituals in *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin, 2016). The heroine's complicity defines the films of Oz Perkins, Robert Eggers, Lukas Feigelfeld, Carlo Mirabella-Davis, and many others. These films also feature male characters, but they determine nothing.

Female directors have pushed even further. Speaking of her debut feature film *The Babadook* (2014), Jennifer Kent notes that she doesn't simply wish to scare viewers, but also to touch their hearts. It seems to be true—Kent's films aim to work with the emotional intelligence of the audience. Post-horror stories have become new fairy tales for women. Therapists have also flocked to fairy tale therapy, seeking to describe the repressed traumas of their patients through allegory and self-identification. Fairy tales have become a radical and effective means of discussing painful experiences. So what tropes are being explored by the creators of films in this genre which, at first glance, seems the least friendly to their aims?

Sexuality and the Body

Literally from the very start of puberty, a girl's body ceases to belong entirely to her. It must be properly looked after, lest it become unattractive; it should be guarded to ensure that the act of deflowering can be given as a gift to a worthy candidate; immodest displays of sexuality are simultaneously not worth it, lest one appear easy. The entire practice of terrorizing women as they mature is built on principles of objectification passed down from generation to generation.

Iranian director Ana Lily Amirpour is challenging these attitudes. The title of her film is eloquent in itself: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). At nightfall, a delicate silhouette with a bloody but noble vision appears on the (almost Pasolinian) streets of the supposedly criminal Bad City. This is a young vampire on a skateboard (the actress Sheila Vand, by the way, is dubbed in these scenes by the director herself) and, in a fluttering chador, seeks out victims,

leading a parasitic lifestyle feeding off men. Silently, she takes the life of her lover's drug-addict father and a druglord pimp. She gives the jewelry taken off the bodies to a sex worker so that she can leave her trade behind. Amirpour's righteous anger looks too romantic when juxtaposed with another elegant metaphor of vampirism, Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016). The coming-of-age story of veterinary student Justine, who goes from guiltless vegetarian to insatiable cannibal, forms the center of the film. The college campus, with its vicious hazing rituals for newcomers, is, in essence, the banal hell of puberty. As for the meat... To be born into a female body in itself means to take top billing in body horror personified: first menstrual bleeding, loss of virginity, then pregnancy and childbirth. Generally speaking, *Raw*—which, during the course of filming, according to rumors, many people suffered nausea—is nothing more than a metaphor for the transformation of a girl into a woman, with its inevitable aggravation of the sense of one's own physicality.

“I didn’t want to glamorise anything, especially with the girls’ bodies,” Ducournau says. “A body is a body. In every movie we see, women have to be beautiful and fit or whatever the hell, and they have to fit a certain box, and no: women fart, poop, pee, burp.”²

The Crisis of Motherhood

One important image of the Middle Ages is that of the horned demonic womb. The Christian custom of trembling at the capacity of a woman to conceive was also adopted by the classics of horror. But history has long been aware of an efficient method for controlling and subjugating the unknown (that is to say, threatening)—its sacralization. For thousands of years, social and religious institutions have elevated motherhood to a cult, and reproduction was deemed to be practically a woman's only function. The number of countries where a complete or partial abortion ban reigns only increases year by year. Forced, unwanted motherhood (especially in extreme cases, such as in instances of rape) turns into a traumatic ordeal that spans years.

This turns out to be a defining theme for Australian director Jennifer Kent (a former actress and assistant to Lars von Trier). In 2005, she directed a black-and-white short film titled “The Monster” and, nine years later, the fleshed-out feature-length version of it, *The Babadook*. Both films tell the story

² In an interview with Alex Godfrey for *The Guardian* published March 30, 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/30/raw-director-julia-ducournau-cannibalism-is-part-of-humanity>).

of the strange, unbearable relationship between single mother Amelia and her six-year-old son Sam (who, in a twist of fate, was born on the same day his father died). A terrible creature that lives in the closet inserts itself into the relationship, trying to take over Amelia's body and mind and to steal her child from her. Anthropologist and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes in her book on female archetypes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* [1989], that the evil entities repressing the heroine are often the shadow sides of her own personality.³ While ostensibly struggling with evil, the woman is in actuality trying to defeat her own repressed desires and fears as represented in the images. The finale of *The Babadook*, as well as “The Monster,” supports this theory—Amelia defeats the dark entity but rather than banishing it she locks it in the basement, even managing to befriend it.

The blessing of motherhood is also called into question in the Austrian horror film *Goodnight Mommy* (2014) directed by Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala. Confrontation between twin brothers and their mother Susanna, who has returned home after undergoing plastic surgery, gradually escalates into an act of execution which they commit against her. Here, as in *The Babadook*, it is unclear who the real monster is right up until the end. Is it the distant, irritated mother? The children with their set of torture implements? Or some invisible evil spawned by someone among them? Likely, all three answers are correct.

Lucile Hadzihalilovic, in her slow burn film *Evolution* (2015), places minimalistic families (single mothers and their sickly sons) on an untamed island. The whereabouts of the fathers remains unknown. The women themselves do not possess the qualities typical of respectable mothers—their care is limited to the cold-blooded transfer of their children to the staff of a hospital that looks more like a penitentiary. It's a bit Kharmsian⁴: “Poisoning children—it's cruel. But something must be done with them.”

The anthology film *XX* (2017), which includes four horror shorts shot by women, begins with “The Box” by Jovanka Vukovic. More precisely, it begins with the overheard thoughts of the main character: “It's quite difficult to spend time in the city with two children ...” It ends with the simultaneous deaths of these children and a husband, as if by the woman's wish. The final film of the anthology is Karyn Kusama's “Her Only Living Son.” The protagonist Cora is a single mother who has been hiding her son from his father—either an actor or Satan—for eighteen years, suffering nightmares about her pregnancy over

³ First published in 1989, Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* was a long-running *New York Times* bestseller. It was later published in a 2008 revised edition with the new subtitle *Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman*.

⁴ That is, evoking the work of absurdist Russian artist, writer, and thinker Daniil Kharms (1905-1942).

and over. It would not do to take these films as a childfree manifesto, arguing that these directors are coming out against the horrors of motherhood. It is of course not motherhood itself that disquiets, but rather the social pressure with which it is associated. With each tick of the clock, women are being deprived of their right to their own bodies and the capacity to make informed choices.

Sisterhood

The theme of motherhood in women's post-horror is dichotomous. Every mother was once a little girl and, therefore, someone's daughter. And now, for female directors, the Freudian Electra Complex, the figure of the father, and relationships with men on the whole play a much smaller role than the transfer of female experience within the family and communication amongst each other. In the deeply profound Russian meta-horror *The Imagined Wolf* ([Valeriya Gai Germanika with Yuliya Vysotskaya], 2019), mother and daughter spend a third of the film wandering through a forest at night, ostensibly searching for a path home but in fact looking for each other. The women—whether quarreling friends, rivals, or two of the closest people to each other—are confronted with an invisible force, a wolf, a threat that appeared so that they could establish the connection with each other only possible between a mother and daughter.

Lured by the same vague pretext, the heroines of Natalie Erika James' *Relic* (2020), a mother and daughter, return to the old family home somewhere out in the backcountry. They come in search of grandma who is, however, right in front of them. The connection between these three relatives has obviously long been lost, but that is not the only issue. There is also dementia and old age. Using the genre framework, James hyperbolizes the illness, turning the grandmother into a monster, then a mummy, but she is absolutely right in that caring for a person with dementia (a charge that most often falls on the shoulders of women) completely changes one's way of life. In this house, there no longer exists truth, logic, rationality, no tomorrow or yesterday.

Both films rhyme in a surprising way: each with a phantom behind the wall trying to devour the heroines and a magic frame, shot from above, where people spanning three generations lie on a bed, merging into one common body. A wonderful illustration of continuity and cyclicity so important to a feminine nature.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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