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Monster Pains

Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film

It hurts to be a monster. The make-up and costumes alone could make you scream. Encased in padding, plaster, and greasepaint, Boris Karloff endured impossible tortures to become Frankenstein's creature. As he described, "I felt, most of the time, as if I were wearing a clammy shroud. No doubt it added to the realism!"¹ Bela Lugosi traced his debilitating drug addiction to the physical pain he experienced while making horror films such as *Dracula*.² Lon Chaney, the man of a thousand monstrous faces, seemed to take a sort of pleasure in his suffering, anticipating it before the shooting of his films and prolonging it during their production. Referring to the wire apparatus installed in Chaney's nostrils to give him the Phantom of the Opera's cavernous nose, a process that would often lead him to "bleed like hell," the film's cinematographer confirmed, "He suffered, you know."³ Joan Crawford, Chaney's costar in *The Unknown*, a 1927 flick about a man who amputates his arms for a woman who has a phobia about being held, described his surprising devotion to this role: "Mr. Chaney could have unstrapped his arms between scenes. He did not. He kept them strapped one day for five hours, enduring such numbness, such torture, that when we got to this scene, he was able to convey not just realism but such emotional agony that it was shocking . . . and fascinating."⁴

But despite its indulgence in various slashings and slicings, the horror film may seem quite oblivious to pain. Moralistic critiques of the genre often accuse it of desensitizing its audiences to the realities of suffering and suggest that its fascinated explorations of the various things that can happen to a human body favor spectacle over "real" feeling. In what follows, I will suggest that pain is central to how we relate to the



Pre-teen trauma in *Audrey Rose*

horror film—but not as a vehicle through which we can sympathize with the monster's victims. Instead, I will propose that it is the monster's pain that determines audience positioning in the horror film. The genre presents two contrasting modes of monstrous suffering: masochism and menstruation. These two options dictate spectatorial identification in gendered terms. Masochism is central to the construction of male monsters, who initiate their sadistic rampages with acts of self-mutilation. These "masochistic moments"⁵ close off the film to viewer identification and draw our attention to the *process* of identification itself. Neither complicit in nor victimized by the on-screen violence, we remain at a safe critical distance from the cinematic events. The female counterpart to the act of self-mutilation is menstruation, a narrative event that positions the audience in an uncomfortably close relationship to the female monster. These differences between the masochistic and menstrual plots of horror cinema expose an underlying conservatism in a potentially radical genre.

The Masochistic Monster

Before they set off to harm others, male monsters revel in masochistic acts. In Rouben Mamoulian's

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931) and in subsequent film versions of the story, Jekyll's drinking of the transformative potion is an act of both intense pain and pleasure, as the doctor writhes around his laboratory before turning into the toothy, smiling Hyde. Seth Brundle's slow degeneration into a monstrous insect in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) is marked by his fascination with the various putrefactions and amputations that his body undergoes along the way. Clive Barker's 1980s *Hellraiser* series (originally titled *Sadomasochists from beyond the Grave*)⁶ is populated by humans who turn into monsters by seeking the most intense experiences of pleasure and pain: once they solve the cursed puzzle box, their flesh is ripped apart by pins and hooks and they realize that "Some things have to be endured, and that's what makes the pleasure so sweet." In the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* (dir. Wes Craven, 1984) and its many sequels, Freddy Krueger prefaces his killings of teenagers by gleefully engaging in acts of self-mutilation, saying, "Watch this!" and cutting off his "real" fingers with his razor claws or slicing his own head open. *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (dir. Rachel Talalay, 1991), the sixth and definitely not the final installment of the series, features a scene of the adolescent Freddy cutting his torso with a razorblade and laughing. His stepfather, played by Alice Cooper, appears with a belt and asks, "Are you ready for it, boy?" Freddy welcomes his beating with gusto, begging, "Thank you, sir. Can I have another?"

Although it acknowledges the centrality of masochism to the genre, recent horror film criticism overlooks the monster's self-mutilations. Critics tend to focus instead on the spectator's masochistic pleasure in watching films full of suffering and carnage, often geared toward characters who are meant to represent the audience in some way.⁷ In her famous study of the slasher genre, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover defines masochism as the "dominant" aesthetic in "horror cinema and . . . one of that genre's defining characteristics; . . . the experience horror moviegoers seek . . . is rooted in a pain/pleasure sensibility."⁸ Clover focuses much of her argument about the masochistic elements of the horror film on the "Final Girl," the androgynous female character who suffers the monster's tortures throughout the film, but who ultimately defeats him and survives. The Final Girl's subjection to and eventual victory over the monster provide a site of identification for the male spectator. Revising Laura Mulvey's view that the male spectator's gaze is sadistic, Clover argues that his identification with the Final Girl demonstrates a maso-



Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster

chistic impulse: "The willingness and even eagerness (so we judge from these films' enormous popularity) of the male viewer to throw in his emotional lot, if only temporarily, with not only a woman but a woman in fear and pain, at least in the first instance, would seem to suggest that he has a vicarious stake in that fear and pain."⁹ In his essay "Masculinity and the Horror Film," Peter Hutchings takes Clover's argument further by suggesting that the monster can become a site of masochistic identification. He contends that the male monster frequently suffers in the horror film; the force of evil becomes vulnerable in the course of the narrative, as evidenced by Dracula's and King Kong's persecutions or by Michael Meyers' pathetic loss of his mask at the end of *Halloween* (dir. John Carpenter, 1978). According to Hutchings, the monster's suffering offers a masochistic position with which the male spectator can identify. This spectatorial position is pleasurable, in that it allows the spectator to experience a

“willing subjection” that makes his return to authority all the more powerful.¹⁰

The monster’s masochism does not allow for sympathetic identifications. It is a profoundly disturbing occurrence, the shock value of which emanates both from the unexpectedness of the monster hurting himself when his apparent role in the film is to harm others, and from its challenge to conventional notions of monstrosity. Is the monster a show-off, bragging to his prospective victims (and, by extension, to his audience) that he can withstand what they cannot? Is he using his own body to preview what he will ultimately do to them, thereby disrupting the boundary between victims and monsters? And, perhaps most importantly, is he capable of feeling pain? In the flashback to Freddy Krueger’s adolescence in *Freddy’s Dead*, the young monster tells his abusive stepfather, from whom he has just demanded more punishment, “You wanna know the secret of pain? If you can stop feeling it, you can start using it.” Freddy’s statement about the origins of monstrosity reverses Freud’s claim in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) that masochism is “nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self.”¹¹ Instead, the monster’s statement follows Freud’s later work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in acknowledging the presence of a “primary masochism” that can precede sadistic behavior; once he has delivered his declamation on pain, Freddy directs his razorblade toward his father.¹² His transition from inflicting violence on himself to turning the violence outwards suggests that monstrosity originates when the ability to resist pain turns into a desire to harm others.

This trajectory dictates the spectator’s own process of identification in watching the masochistic monster. Freddy’s suggestion that the monster does not *feel* pain when he wounds himself inhibits audience identification in this cinematic moment. The monster creates a self-referential space around himself that cannot be penetrated by any of our sympathetic identifications, which might emerge when he is attacked by angry villagers or Final Girls. As such, the masochistic moment epitomizes Elaine Scarry’s discussion of pain more generally as representing an “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons.”¹³ The dramatic separation between the monster and his audience places us in a spectatorial limbo in which we are unable to situate ourselves on screen. When the monster attacks his victim after his masochistic act, however, we can begin to claim our proper place in the film—with the



Bela Lugosi in Tod Browning’s 1931 *Dracula*

monster’s victims. Just as the monster’s violence is first directed toward himself and then projected into his surroundings, our identification must initially be self-reflexive (it cannot go anywhere during the masochistic moment) before it can extend into the cinematic world.

Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) follows this sequence in tracing the misfortunes of a group of five teenagers on a road trip who fall prey to a chainsaw-wielding, cannibalistic family. All the teenagers are massacred except for Sally, the Final Girl, who escapes at the end. In one of the film’s early scenes, the kids pick up an ominous looking hitchhiker, who grabs the knife of the disabled teen, Franklin, and proceeds to slice his own hand while laughing maniacally. This act suspends our identification with both the hitchhiker (the monster) and the teenagers. The hitchhiker’s apparent disregard of the pain that would ordinarily result from self-mutilation bars us from identifying with him; he is involved in a purely self-reflexive, and thereby exclusionary, action. Recalling Freddy’s statement, we are uncertain about the nature or extent of his suffering. On the other hand, we cannot fully place ourselves in the teenagers’ positions. Their horrified screams and questions—“What are you doing to yourself?”—invite the

audience to notice the incomprehensible horror of the situation, but not in the same way as the teenagers. Their stupefaction renders them somewhat stupid. As connoisseurs of the genre, we know that their question should not be, “What are you doing to yourself?” but, “What are you going to do to us?”

Once the scene shifts from masochism to sadism, however, we discover our proper place on screen. Having stabbed himself, the hitchhiker moves on to the sadistic act of stabbing Franklin, and the events leading up to the attack drift away from the self-referentiality of the monster’s masochism. This transition is initiated by the hitchhiker’s offer of his own knife to one of the teenage boys, as if inviting him to emulate his masochistic gesture. The hitchhiker then decides to take a picture of his teenage audience. This seemingly random act, which has its double in the randomness of the masochistic moment, restores the characters to their proper roles and allows us to begin our process of identification. Franklin’s reaction to being the subject of the shot—“You took my picture!”—reminds us that it is we who are the real subjects of the horror film. The genre is notorious for confronting its target audience—in this case, young Americans—with cinematic images of themselves in various states of danger. The parallel between the kids in the van and the spectators reaches its peak when the hitchhiker points out the economic relationship in which they are now involved: “It’s a nice picture; you can pay me now, it’s two dollars.” The possibility of a financial transaction linked to seeing pictures mirrors the spectators’ seeming masochism in paying money to be terrorized. The masochistic monster takes on the role of director in this scene, reminding spectators that they rely on him to have their picture taken, to find their proper space on screen. When he burns the photograph shortly afterwards, he confirms what we expect from the slasher film—a visual display of our own decimation.¹⁴

The impenetrability of the masochistic moment, coupled with the enigma of the monster’s pain, creates an uncertainty that extends throughout the narrative. The film never allows us to forget that our subject position originates in the monster’s self-reflexive violence. Franklin provides a model of the impact that this initial encounter with the monster will have on the audience. He is traumatized after his experience with the hitchhiker, and, until he is cut to pieces himself, tries to piece together what he has just witnessed. Fascinated with the knife, he scrutinizes it for traces of the hitchhiker’s blood and wields it dangerously close to his own hand, while pondering, “Yeah, it takes



Jeff Goldblum in David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*

something, though, just to do that to yourself like he did.” The monster’s act also haunts the viewer and becomes the basis of our horror spectatorship. We gravitate toward the hitchhiker, but the strangeness of his act and the unknowability of his pain prevent us from fully identifying with him. While we do end up aligning ourselves with the teenagers, this identification is limited by what we witnessed early on in the film. We may feel endangered by the images of violence on screen, but we are ultimately numb to the pain they represent.

Our spectatorial distance is also assured even when we encounter monsters who seem to ask us to feel for them. The monster’s masochism suspends our identification even when he visibly suffers. Cronenberg’s *The Fly*, a film that tests the line between horror and melodrama,¹⁵ keeps us at a safe distance from Seth Brundle’s grueling transformation into an insect. Like his masochistic predecessors, Seth’s entrance into monstrosity results from a self-inflicted act: in this case, walking into the incompletely tested teleporter pod he is in the process of designing. Although he does not choose the disaster that follows his recklessness—he fuses with a fly lurking in the machine—the film suggests that he is the willing victim of his own experiment. Cronenberg repeatedly reminds us

of the masochistic nature of this act in the various scenes of Seth (a.k.a. Brundlefly) precipitating his physical demise by removing parts of his body, which he stores in a bathroom cabinet he has named the “Brundle Museum of Natural History.” His extraction of his own teeth and nails recalls the troubling detachment with which the hitchhiker and Freddy perform their self-mutilations. At the same time, however, there are moments in the film in which Seth is clearly affected by his degradation, and, in the words of his girlfriend, Ronnie, is “scared, and angry, and desperate.” When his ear falls off toward the beginning of his transformation, he pleads, “I’m scared. Help me. Please, please help me.” Although we are not completely immune to his pathetic changes, we are forced to maintain a safe distance from Brundlefly. Cronenberg never lets us forget that we are watching a film. He depicts Seth’s journey through the teleporter as a passage from reality to representation; as the scientist tells his girlfriend, the machine provides an “interpretation” of whatever goes through it.¹⁶ The Seth who comes out at the other end is a film version of the “real” Seth. His cinematic identity begins as an aggrandized, narcissistic projection of himself (like many larger-than-life film stars, he develops superhuman strength, a fabulous sex drive, and an unrelenting ego) and ends up as a B-movie monster (his explanation that he has been “spliced” with a fly evokes the film editing that makes such monsters possible).¹⁷ Seth’s status as a representation is further confirmed by the introduction of a real camera into the narrative: the one through which he and Ronnie map his mutation into Brundlefly. The double mediation of the teleporter and camera distances us from the scientist and his suffering. His pain is like the steak that he sends through the machine early on in the film; it starts off as the real thing, and ends up “synthetic.” The teleporter and the camera both allow flesh to “get lost in the translation.” The reflexivity of Seth’s ordinary masochism heralds an equally self-referential mode of narrative that foregrounds cinematic technology over transparent affect.

Cronenberg’s film develops another effective strategy for distancing us from its celluloid monster: it provides a nightmarish vision of what the alternative might be. The biggest threat posed by Seth is a suffocating intimacy. As Adam Knee writes, the film presents a claustrophobic view of romantic relationships and suggests that “getting involved means having oneself inextricably fused with another.”¹⁸ By the end of the narrative, when Seth’s masochism has mutated into sadism, he tries to coerce the now-pregnant Ron-

nie to fuse with him in the teleporter. This fusion would be dangerous to the spectators as well, since Ronnie is our point of identification in the narrative; it is through her that we know when to feel disgust, fear, or pity.¹⁹ Were she to be spliced with Brundlefly, our mediated vision would be endangered, and we too might end up as part of the fly/man/woman/baby mess resulting from the teleportation. Cronenberg saves us from this debilitating overidentification by conflating Seth with the cinematic apparatus at the end of the film: his attempts to meld with his girlfriend fail, and he splices with the teleporter instead, thus losing all claims to flesh.

The film presents us with a nightmare of ultimate fusion only to release us from its actualization. Ronnie gives us a sense of what such a union would entail. Even after she has exterminated her insectile lover in an act that lies somewhere between a mercy killing and self-defense, she must deal with the consequences of her pregnancy. Seth had curtailed her attempts to have an abortion by crashing into the operating room and abducting her. Although she had pleaded earlier on that she wanted the fetus “out of my body now . . . I’ll do it myself if I have to,” the narrative ends with her entrapment within the biological imperative of pregnancy. Were the film to trace her own monstrous transformation into the mother of a baby fly—it gives us a vision of this earlier on, in showing her nightmare of giving birth to a horrific larva—we might not be able to separate ourselves as easily from her as we did from Seth.²⁰ As I will discuss in the next section, the female monster demands the very claustrophobic closeness from which Cronenberg mercifully spares us.

Cramp: Why Female Monsters Make Us Cry

As *The Fly* begins to suggest, the horror spectator’s numbness depends on a gendered system of identification; the masochistic monster is always male. Female monsters do not inflict pain on themselves before undertaking their sadistic rampages. On the contrary, they tend to commit acts of violence out of revenge for earlier abuse by parents, partners, rapists, and other offenders. Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976) presents a textbook example of this model, as Carrie White’s fiery destruction of her teachers and peers is preceded by countless scenes of her victimization: she is physically and emotionally abused by her mother; pelted with tampons by teenage girls in the locker

room; and humiliated by having pig's blood dumped on her by her classmates during her brief stint as prom queen. In Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979), Nora responds to her childhood of abuse by spawning an army of dwarf-sized minions who murder the objects of her anger (her mother, her father, her daughter's kindergarten teacher). Jason Voorhees's mother from *Friday the Thirteenth* (dir. Sean Cunningham, 1980) follows in the footsteps of the female monster by slaughtering the teenage camp counselors who killed her son through their negligence; they were too busy making out to hear his drowning cries.

When the female monster engages in masochistic acts, she does so either by coercion from an outside force or as a way of terminating her monstrosity. The horror film is rife with examples of women who compulsively harm themselves once they have been possessed. In *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973), Regan is compelled by the demon within her to stab herself with a crucifix in the face and crotch. Friedkin explains that when choosing her makeup for the film, he "thought that her disfiguration should come from something she did to herself."²¹ Her self-inflicted pain recalls the male monster's masochism but lacks its intentionality. The passivity of such self-mutilations is expressed by the character Frankie in the 1999 film *Stigmata* (dir. Rupert Wainwright). Possessed by a combination of holy and unholy forces, she is made to bleed Christ's wounds. When a doctor implies that Frankie has inflicted these gashes on herself, she retorts, "You keep saying 'she,' but I didn't do this!" Her resistance to becoming a monstrous being (her voice and appearance change in a manner recalling Regan) suggests the passivity inherent in these unwanted wounds. Pinhead, from the second *Hellraiser* film (dir. Tony Randel, 1988), asserts the importance of intentionality to male masochism when he denies torture to a young, mute girl who has solved the puzzle box. Rather than subjecting her to the "sweet suffering" he reserves for men who willingly enter his domain, he declares, "It is not hands that call us, it is desire," and leaves her alone. When women do assert a more active control over their self-inflicted pain, it is often out of a self-destructive impulse that eliminates rather than generates monstrosity. Carrie uses her telekinetic powers to kill herself and her mother; Ripley jumps into a fiery pit once she has been inseminated by the alien in *Alien 3* (dir. David Fincher, 1992); and Sarah in *The Hunger* (dir. Tony Scott, 1983) stabs herself in the jugular to avoid becoming a vampire like her lover Miriam.²² These female characters demonstrate a form of masochism



Piper Laurie gets what's coming to her in *Carrie*.

that is intended to eliminate—rather than unleash—their monstrosity.

While male monsters wound themselves before turning to violence, female monsters menstruate. Violence in the horror film is often initiated by the female monster getting her period, an event that is either suggested or overtly displayed. *Carrie* and John Fawcett's teenage-girl werewolf film, *Ginger Snaps* (2000), both graphically show their female leads' menstruation as a precursor—or even a prerequisite—to their committing acts of violence. Other films, such as *The Exorcist* and *Audrey Rose* (dir. Robert Wise, 1977), imply that menstruation heralds monstrosity, as both of their victims become possessed (once they reach puberty). Menstruation, or its absence, is also central to films dealing with women's monstrous reproductions, such as *The Fly*, with its ominous treatment of Ronnie's pregnancy, and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Rosemary and her husband carefully map out her menstrual cycle in planning her pregnancy. Beyond this, menstruation can exist as a metaphorical condition in the horror film, particularly in the case of female vampires; as Barbara Creed writes, the vampire is a "menstrual monster."²³ Countess Zaleska in Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and Miriam in *The Hunger* are both inflicted with a "curse" that compels them to drink the blood of their victims.²⁴

In fact, the horror film positions menstruation as the structural double of the masochistic moment offered by male monsters. At the beginning of *Carrie*, we witness the nerdy adolescent girl getting her period for the first time. De Palma presents this event as a rewriting of the famous shower scene from *Psycho* (1960). For *Carrie*, a student at Bates High School, as



Susan Swift and Marsha Mason in *Audrey Rose*

for Hitchcock's Marion Crane, a temporary lodger at the Bates Motel, the shower is at first a refuge from external anxieties, a comforting site of self-pleasuring. The shots in both scenes are fragmentary, fetishizing the body's pleasure and then its pain.²⁵ Our languorous attention to Carrie's physicality is disrupted by the sudden appearance of a stream of blood from the very spot between her legs that she had just been stroking. With its intertextual reference to *Psycho*, the scene suggests that her blood is the outpouring of a wound instead of a sign of healthy puberty.²⁶ But De Palma's film implies that Carrie, unlike Marion, has inflicted this wound on herself through her illicit touching. The close-ups on Carrie's hands and legs as she engages in and eventually bleeds from her "self-abuse" mirror the camera's attention to the hitchhiker's self-mutilations in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The experience in the shower leads to Carrie's later sadistic acts, as she acquires her destructive telekinetic powers right after getting her period: her anger makes a bathroom light explode. Eventually covered in pig's blood rather than menstrual blood, she will use these powers to burn down her prom.

And yet, the similarities between Carrie's menstruation and the masochistic moment end up reinforcing their essential differences. While both herald the advent of monstrosity, menstruation appears as a passive, uncontrollable act that reflects an equally passive identity. The film misleads us with its suggestion that

Carrie has caused her own period through her masturbation. As soon as we meet her mother, we realize that this is how *she* would read the scene, as she brutally punishes her daughter in one of the most heartbreaking moments of the narrative. As viewers, we want to distance ourselves from the mother's Christian, prohibitive attitude, and thus we remember that periods are not caused by masturbation, that they will happen regardless of how steamy Carrie's showers are. Carrie has as little control over what her body does in the shower as she will later have over her victims; she seems always on the point of asking, "Did I do that?" The film taunts Carrie with the impossibility of her masochism through its repeated attention to a statue of Saint Sebastian, which Mrs. White keeps in the closet where she locks her daughter for punishment. Saint Sebastian, the unofficial patron saint of masochism, stares reproachfully at the young girl as a model of what she can never be. Carrie reacts to her suffering as one might, by crying and screaming, rather than by enjoying or controlling her pain.²⁷ Because Carrie is unable to stop feeling pain, she cannot use it as effectively as her male counterparts, whose violence often displays an obsessive control.

Carrie's inability to manage her pain and to control her violence affects how we place ourselves in the film. At first, it seems that the shower scene parallels the structure of identification produced by the masochistic moment. When Carrie gets her period, we can neither identify with her cruel classmates, who yell, "Plug it up!" while pelting her with tampons, nor can we identify with Carrie, whose shock at her own blood reveals a disquieting and even reprehensible innocence. As her gym teacher and mentor, Miss Collins, tells the high-school principal, "The thing is, I know how they felt. . . . The whole thing made me want to take her and shake her, too. . . . It was just her period, for God's sake." By the end of the shower scene, however, we are firmly situated in the body of the suffering teenager. The female monster denies us the space and numbness afforded by the male monster's masochism. Carol Clover begins *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* with a quote from Stephen King regarding his character's appeal: "And one reason for the success of the story in both print and film, I think, lies in this: Carrie's revenge is something that any student who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumb-rubbed in study hall could approve of."²⁸ Much of the film's appeal is based on the suffocating intimacy that we are made to share with Carrie. This intimacy is represented by her telekinesis, an unwanted power that projects her into



Carrie wreaks havoc at the prom.

the surrounding world. In contrast to the teleportation device of *The Fly*, which creates a separation between the viewer and Seth Brundle, Carrie's telekinetic powers project outwards and eliminate the space between herself and those around her. It is a supernatural manifestation of the aggressive demands of sympathy.

Even at the very end of *Carrie*, when the young girl's telekinetic powers have destroyed her high school, her mother, and herself, she returns to us and demands our attention. The very last scene of the film portrays Sue's (the only one of Carrie's female peers who tried to help her) post-prom nightmare. She dreams that she is slowly drifting through a landscape bearing markers of Carrie's absence: the barren earth where her house once stood and a "For Sale" sign that resembles a graveyard cross, covered with the sinister graffiti, "Carrie White burns in hell." Sentimental music pervades the scene. When Sue bends down to put flowers on what seems to be Carrie's fresh grave, a hand shoots out and grabs her wrist. This scene marks the violent return of Sue's repressed sympathy for the

monstrous Carrie. Carrie's hand is at once threatening and pathetic, as it reaches out to remind us of its suffering. The film rewrites the typical return of the monster in the horror film, a genre that notoriously resists closure, as a moment of sentimental violence.

Similarly, Regan in *The Exorcist* tries to garner sympathy when she is deep within Satan's control; who can forget the scene in which the pathetic words "Help Me" appear on the surface of her repulsive body? This demand for sympathy does not work against her monstrosity, but forms its very core. The possessed young girl poses the threat of a stifling intimacy that rivals the danger of complete fusion at the end of *The Fly*. When Father Karras prepares to exorcise her, her demonic voice expresses delight at the prospect of an act that "would bring us together." Fulfilling this promise, she temporarily assumes the identity of Karras's deceased mother, and addresses the son in a suffering voice; he responds by yelling, mostly to convince himself, "You're not my mother!" By the end of the film, Karras does end up fusing with

Regan's Satanic host as he commands it to take him over instead. Karras is the victim of the female monster's overwhelming demand for sympathy; he succumbs to a collapse in boundaries between self and other.²⁹ This type of stifling fusion is also provoked by Miriam in *The Hunger*, whose crushing love subjects her partners to a lifetime of vampirism, ending with a painful span of accelerated aging. Miriam gets her due when she is murdered by her lovers' violent affection, as they escape from their coffins to stifle her in their embrace.

Like Miriam's bisexual appeal, the menstrual plot draws both male and female viewers into a painful identification with the monster. It is precisely the fact that horror seems to originate from within the woman's body that allows for a generalized identification with the monster, one that draws in male and female spectators alike. Critics tend to insist on the female monster's status as an ungraspable Other, whose abject body defies comprehension or identification. In her essay on *Carrie*, for example, Shelley Stamp Lindsey writes, "In charting Carrie's path to mature womanhood, the film presents female sexuality as monstrous and constructs femininity as a subject position impossible to occupy."³⁰ On the contrary, I would argue that the female monstrous body is completely knowable, that it is one of the main sites of predictability in these films. The viewer is trained to expect that once the female body bleeds, it will breed a very predictable form of horror. This predictability compounds our identification with the female monster—her changes and pain become our own.

John Fawcett's cult film *Ginger Snaps* magnifies this predictability in its self-conscious rewriting of *Carrie*. It tells the story of Ginger and Brigitte Fitzgerald, misfit teenage sisters living in small-town Canada. One night, Ginger is bitten by a werewolf, and shortly afterwards she gets her period. Along with the curse come disturbing secondary characteristics, including excessive, fur-like body hair, the growth of a tail, an insatiable sexual appetite and bloodlust. At first, both girls treat Ginger's menstruation as an extreme yet understandable predicament. They know what is supposed to happen when girls get their periods; Ginger, for instance, treats her first cycle as a cliché, telling her sister, "If I start hanging around tampon dispensers, moaning about PMS, shoot me, okay?" When Ginger's symptoms worsen and it becomes clear, as her sister explains, that "something's wrong—like more than you being just female," those around her continue to treat her physical changes as part of normal female development. The girls' mother greets

them with touchy-feely discussions about growing up (she announces at the dinner table, "Our little girl's a young woman now"), while the school nurse insists that heavy blood flow (Ginger is gushing at this point) is perfectly normal. Pointing to a chart of the uterus, she tells the sisters, "I'm sure it's a lot of blood; it's a period," and insists on the familiarity of Ginger's story: "Expect it every 28 days . . . for the next 30 years." When Brigitte tries to bring up her sister's severe hirsuteness and abdominal pain, the nurse responds that these symptoms "come with the territory." These reassurances echo Regan's mother's attempts to calm her daughter about her dramatic physical changes with the platitude, "It's just like the doctor said—it's nerves, and that's all. Now just take your pills and you'll be fine, okay?"

The predictability of the female body is antithetical to the male monster's self-mutilations, which can never be reconciled within the formulaic nature of the horror film. The randomness of the masochistic moment shocks us into alienation and forces us to step back from what is to come; we experience the fear of the chase, but with the understanding that we are not really a part of it. Although the ensuing events are predictable—we know that a group of teens will be killed, that a Final Girl will survive—this predictability has little to do with the monsters themselves, whose mystery and terror depend on our distance from them. On the other hand, the menstrual plot displaces this generic predictability onto the female monster's body, forcing us to realize that we know her cramps and cycles as much as if they were our own. The calendar on Ginger's tampon box—or the one on which Rosemary plans her pregnancy—becomes the emblematic object of these narratives of female monstrosity.

Ginger Snaps does explore a different monstrosity, one based on female masochism. The film precedes its menstrual plot by referencing the self-mutilating monsters of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The first time we see the sisters, Brigitte carries a chainsaw while Ginger holds a knife to her wrist in a shot that mirrors the hitchhiker's self-abuse. She casts the knife aside and says, "Wrists are for girls. I'll slit my throat." The sisters then discuss the suicide pact they had made as young children, joining their scarred hands, the mark of their bond, in solidarity. This is followed by an intricate montage of the girls posing in various acts of self-mutilation. Fascinated with their own deaths, they take theatrical photographs of themselves as suicide victims: bloodily impaled on fences, poisoned, drowned, hanged, all in extreme graphic detail.³¹ They show a film they have made of these



Puberty brings sex, violence, and excessive hair in *Ginger Snaps*; Right: Ginger plays dead.



scenes to their high-school class, and the reaction they receive is far more dramatic than the school nurse's banal reassurances. After a few unsuccessful stutters, their male teacher says, "I am completely sickened by that," a comment that echoes the shocked reactions provoked by the monster's masochism. The sisters' faking of monstrous mutilations exposes the masochistic moment as an effective cinematic trope for the production of horror, and, more importantly, one that is not confined to the male monster alone. As the film progresses, however, it soon turns to the more predictable structure of the menstrual plot. The film both critiques and enacts our comfort with the familiarity of female monsters by presenting us with a story that can be mapped over the course of 28 days.

My argument about the horror film's rigid separation of male and female monsters counters other readings that examine the genre's productive dehiscence of gender from sex. Clover argues, for example, that horror, with its many androgynous creatures and victims, "collapse[s] male and female to the point of inextricability."³² Other critics, such as Creed and Hutchings, apply the argument of the genre's gender instability to the figure of the male monster, whose excessive sufferings, bleedings, and oozings end up feminizing him.³³ These claims depend in large part on the cultural gendering of masochism as a female condition, an association crystalized by Freud in essays such as "A Child Is Being Beaten" (1919) and "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924). Clover suggests that these essays loosen gender cate-

gories by opening the female perversion to male subjects: Freud paves the way for "the idea that one's sex/gender/sexuality has no existence outside the acts or performances that constitute it."³⁴ My analysis points to a more conservative trend in horror cinema's treatment of gender. Monsters who hurt themselves are male in these films, and the violent empowerment that results from their self-inflicted pain has little to do with conventional forms of female submission. Likewise, the menstruating monster exposes her biological identity with every drop of blood she sheds, both her own and her victims'. These essentializing constructions of monstrosity mitigate the films' more revolutionary play with gender and identity categories. They work to reassure audiences that the terrors they are witnessing on screen are containable, that they will not uproot deep-seated beliefs about gender and violence. Whatever else the horror film may stir within us, its gendering of the pain felt by monsters and the sadistic acts they subsequently commit provides an unfortunately reassuring stability. It sets a safe parameter around the spectators' alleged masochism in choosing to sit through a horror film and prevents this "willing subjection"³⁵ from turning into an act of self-destruction, if not of lives, then of identities. By gendering the monster's pain, the horror genre prevents the audience from losing control of its own.

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Notes

- As quoted in Scott Allen Nollen, *Boris Karloff: A Gentleman's Life* (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999), 42-43.
- Gary Don Rhodes, *Lugosi* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997), 35.
- As quoted in David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1993), 68.
- Ibid.*, 73-74.
- This term derives from Paul Smith's essay "Eastwood Bound," in *Constructing Masculinity*, eds. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 77-97. Smith refers to the "masochistic moment" found in Clint Eastwood films, in which the hero temporarily loses power and suffers. He argues that the action film absorbs this lapse into the narrative itself, so that it loses its disruptive potential.
- "Hellraiser," *Internet Movie Database*, 4 July 2004 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093177/trivia>>.
- Noël Carroll refers to this as the "paradox of horror," which raises the question of why "anyone [would] subject themselves to it. Normally, we shun what causes distress; most of us don't play in traffic to entertain ourselves. . . ." Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 10.
- Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 222.
- Ibid.*, 61.
- Peter Hutchings, "Masculinity and the Horror Film," in *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies, and Men*, eds. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thurmin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 84-94.
- Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 24. Freud also refused the possibility of primary masochism in his 1919 essay, "A Child Is Being Beaten."
- Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 66. Freud later acknowledged a primary form of masochism in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924).
- Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
- In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the hitchhiker's masochism can also be read as an act of liberation, since two of the teenagers' families were responsible for laying off slaughterhouse workers—including the hitchhiker and his kin—in order to introduce more advanced cattle-killing technology.
- Linda Brookover and Alain Silver refer to the film as "a love story of operatic dimensions masquerading as a monster flick," in "What Rough Beast?: Insect Politics and *The Fly*," in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 2000), 237.
- Helen W. Robbins also remarks on the similarities between the teleporter and the film camera in "'More Human Than I Am Alone': Womb Envy in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 145.
- Laura Mulvey notably writes about the film star as a narcissistic projection of the male spectator in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 201-02. Cronenberg's film is based on Kurt Neumann's 1958 B-movie, *The Fly*.
- Adam Knee, "The Metamorphosis of *The Fly*," *Wide Angle* vol. 14, no. 1 (1992): 24.
- Several critics have commented on Ronnie's role as mediator between Seth and the spectator. See, for example, Cynthia Freedland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 212; and Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 128-31.
- The sequel to *The Fly*, Chris Walas's *The Fly II* (1989), kills Ronnie off in the opening sequence of the film when she gives birth to Seth's baby. The narrative remains a male story, focusing on how the son comes to terms with his monstrous legacy.
- Fear of God: The Making of The Exorcist* (prod. Nick Freand Jones, 1998). The documentary includes references to the sadism of the film's special effects, which contrast with Lon Chaney's self-imposed suffering. Linda Blair, who played Regan, explains that to film a scene in which she thrashes back and forth on her bed, she was strapped to a pulley system that gave her excruciating pain. She explains that her cries for help, captured in the film's final version, are expressions of real suffering: "That's the footage they used in the movie when I'm crying my eyes out because they're brutally damaging my back." Likewise, Ellen Burstyn, who played Regan's mother, Chris, was seriously hurt in a scene in which the possessed Regan projects an armoire toward her, and Chris jerks back. Although Burstyn had complained about the system used to pull her back, Friedkin allegedly disregarded her complaints and encouraged the special-effects director to "'give it to her this time.'" She remarks that, "It was way beyond what anyone needs to do to make a movie."
- Sarah's suicide fails, and she adopts Miriam's position as an eternal lover.
- Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 67.
- Given the horror film's focus on menstruation, it seems significant that the title of the 2002 zombie film *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle) should feature such a suggestive number. The time it takes for England to be contaminated by a "rage" epidemic is equivalent to the number of days it takes women to reach the peak of their cycles, stereotypically described as a time of rage as well. Further

- pointing to its concern with the female body, the film integrates a plot line about its two heroines falling prey to a group of soldiers who, in order to save the swiftly dying British population, try to rape and impregnate them.
25. For a thorough formal comparison of the two scenes, see Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 279-95. Douglas Keesey draws our attention to the "Bates" parallel in "Patriarchal Mediations of *Carrie*: The Book, the Movie, and the Musical," in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, eds. Kathleen Margaret Land and Theresa Thompson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 39.
 26. Lindsey, 282.
 27. Mrs. White does occupy the role of Saint Sebastian at the end of the film, when Carrie's telekinetic powers pierce her with various knives and household cutting devices. The mother moans with pleasure as she is murdered, and the film draws attention to her resemblance to the statue. The film only allows Mrs. White to enjoy her pain at the end of her life, not as a preface to her monstrosity.
 28. Clover, 4.
 29. Clover describes Karras's fate as an instance of "opening up," an act of invasion that parallels women's susceptibility to possession: "At the level of representation . . . the male story of occult horror is an echo version of the female story: it tells of being opened up by and to something, letting something in" (101).
 30. Lindsey, 281. Barbara Creed makes a similar argument in *The Monstrous-Feminine*. She uses Kristeva's theory of "abjection" to describe the liminal role of the female monster, who comes to stand for the transgression of normative boundaries.
 31. A few of the deaths pictured in the montage seem to result from murder rather than suicide (e.g., being run over by a lawnmower). Because the sisters are figured as an indivisible unit in this part of the film, however, these deaths fall into the category of assisted suicides.
 32. Clover, 217.
 33. Barbara Creed, "Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film," in *Screening the Male*, 118-33; Hutchings, 89-91.
 34. Clover, 215-16.
 35. This is Hutchings's term (92).

Abstract Aviva Briefel examines the ways in which the horror film's gendering of the monster's pain affects audience identification. Male monsters in these films are associated with acts of masochism that allow for a comfortable spectatorial distance. In contrast, female monsters precede their sadistic rampages with moments of menstruation, which claustrophobically draw their audiences to them.