

Buxom Monstrosity: Theatricality and the Ostentatious Body of the Horror Film

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Abstract

The low-brow horror film is often criticized for indulging in the display of 'some stupid killer chasing some big-breasted girl.'¹ While this cliché is generally inaccurate, the presence of curvaceous young women in horror is common enough to have become a recognizable stereotype. Rather than merely claiming that they appear in horror films only to appeal to the sex-crazed teenage boys who apparently flock to see schlock, this article proposes that the voluptuous bodies that adorn much of horror cinema mirror the threateningly ostentatious physique of the monster in its subversive challenge against patriarchal normality. To make this argument, I consider first how the monster's impact on the audience results in great part from its theatricality. Subsequently, I discuss how the concept of theatricality and its various implications applies to the notion of buxom monstrosity. Using examples ranging from classics such as Terence Fisher's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961) to current releases like *The Exorcist Chronicles* (2013, Philip Gardiner), I show that buxom monstrosity, in all of its aberrantly captivating theatricality, epitomizes the paradox of patriarchy. The monstrously curvy body stands for the (un)containable feminine figure that hegemonic masculinity finds at once irresistible and repulsive; endearingly fragile and frighteningly potent.

Keywords: Corporality of the female character in the horror film; Subversive bodies in horror; Theatricality of the monster.

1. Introduction: Horror's Big-Breasted Girl.

Early in Wes Craven's thoroughly self-referential slasher, *Scream* (1996), the main character, Sidney (Neve Campbell), summarizes the clichéd conventions of schlocky horror movies in these words: 'some stupid killer chasing some big-breasted girl who can't act, who's always running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door. It's insulting.'² While this is obviously not an accurate characterization of all horror films - there are very many cinematic tales of terror that feature neither stupid killers nor big-breasted girls, such as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991, Jonathan Demme) and *The Exorcist* (1973, William Friedkin) for instance - the presence of the bosomy young woman is common enough to have become the stereotype that Sidney identifies. From the many buxom wenches that are featured in Hammer Studio's 1960s and '70s film adaptations of gothic novels to the well-endowed Mistress of Darkness, Elvira (Cassandra Peterson), curvaceous damsels (in distress or not) have been associated with horror. Why would that be? The lazy answer is that voluptuous women appear in horror films to appeal to the sex-crazed teenage boys who apparently flock to see schlock. While this might be partly true, the association between horror and the buxom heroine deserves [page 45] closer scrutiny than this dismissive response. This article proposes that the voluptuous bodies that adorn much of horror cinema present a challenge against patriarchal normality comparable to the monster's threateningly ostentatious physique, which disrupts boring ordinariness. To make this argument, I will consider first how the monster's impact on the audience results in great part from its theatricality. Subsequently, I will discuss how the concept of theatricality and its various implications also applies to horror's 'big-breasted girl.' Using examples ranging from classics such as Terence Fisher's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961) to current releases like *The Exorcist Chronicles* (2013, Philip Gardiner), I will show that buxom monstrosity, in all of its aberrantly captivating theatricality, epitomizes the paradox of patriarchy. The curvy monster stands for the (un)containable feminine figure that hegemonic masculinity finds at once irresistible and repulsive.

2. Monstrous Theatricality

I shall open my consideration of the theatricality of the monster with a brief reflection on syntagmatics³ and etymology. If, as Robin Wood has famously suggested, the horror film can be summarized as 'normality is

threatened by the monster,⁴ the question that comes to mind is how can we recognize the term 'monster' as the disruptive element in this phrase? How does 'monster' signify its unsettling difference from 'normality'? While there can be many definitions of what a monster is, including Jacques Derrida's statement that 'a monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name,'⁵ etymologically the word is related to the notion of being put on display. Derived from the Latin *monstrare*, 'monster' connotes the state of [page 46] being shown. The word is also associated to *monere*, 'to warn': the monster is an ostentatious warning sign of impending disaster.⁶ The term 'monster' therefore is recognizable as a signifier of threatening ostentation that brazenly challenges the 'normal' syntagma which, by definition, is unremarkable, banal and commonplace. The monster stands out in all its spectacular abnormality before the appalled gaze of the mundane observer who sees it as an omen of terrible things to come. The monster might be a person, object, image or merely an impression. But whatever it is, that which is displayed in all of its unsettling to-be-looked-at-ness⁷ threatens nondescript reality.

The term 'monster' is also a close relative to the narratological term 'monstration,' used primarily by historians of early cinema, such as André Gaudreault, to discuss cinema's relationship to the theatre, and its departure from it. In his book, *Du littéraire au filmique: Système du récit* (1988), Gaudreault argues that film creates its meaning through a combination of two broad techniques: *monstration*, or showing in a continuous shot; and *narration*, or the juxtaposition of shots through editing. Monstration is the aspect of cinema that links it most directly to theatre. In fact, what Gaudreault calls profilmic monstration, 'is the equivalent on film of the monstrative work performed on stage.'⁸ Although certain types of filmographic monstration, like variable framing, differ from traditional theatrical staging, monstration on stage and in film share the notion of the unity of time and space. But, unlike the theatre, Gaudreault continues, film can escape the limits of monstration through narration or montage, which allows it to move freely across time and space. Gaudreault writes:

Although filmographic monstration [...] can detach itself from profilmic monstration, although it can become autonomous and add a discursive layer to the profilmic, it is still nailed to the *hic et nunc* of the enunciation [...] It is impossible for filmographic monstration to achieve what is so simple for the filmographic narrator: namely, to move instantaneously (time) from one place (space) to another.⁹

Monstration, therefore, is the characteristic of film that can most readily be labelled 'theatrical'; meaning that monstration is the aspect of the cinematic text that achieves its effects primarily through a straightforward showing within the unity of time and space.

Given the close etymological relation between monster and monstration and given that monstration is an instance of the theatrical within the cinematic, it follows that the presence of the monster in the horror film should operate as an instance of monstrative theatricality. In other words, the emergence of the monster in the horror film interrupts the 'normal' narrative flow of the film as theatrical monstration disrupts the straightforward *telling* of the characters' stories and imposes the terrifying regime of *showing* on the spectator, who is suddenly trapped in the *here and now* of the horrifying spectacle from which there is no *easy narrative escape*. Whether through ostentatious histrionics or unnatural stillness - both of which looking equality artificial within the otherwise realistic milieu depicted on screen - the theatricality of the monster appeals to the spectator as a *perceptual aberration* that shatters the banal familiarity of ordinary life.

Such moments of monstrous monstration on film correspond to a process of stylistic transformation that dates back to the theatrical precursor of the horror film: the Théâtre du Grand Guignol. In their book, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (2002), Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson argue that horror plays performed at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol from the late 19th century to the theatre's closure in the early 1960s generally oscillated in style between naturalism and heightened melodrama. The former would prevail during most of the drama, as the 'normal' narrative would unfold, until the 'moment of horror' when the tone [page 47] would switch drastically to melodramatic dread. 'It is at these moments that any pretence of naturalism is finally abandoned and the full force of stylized melodrama is brought to bear on the performance,' say Hand and Wilson. The moment of horror represents, through stylistic shift, 'a journey which leads from bourgeois security to mortal danger, from the rational to the insane, from - in effect - Naturalism to Melodrama.'¹⁰ Many cinematic tales of terror display a similar shift, at the *moment of horror*, from the naturalism or realism of narrative normality to the fearsome theatricality of stylized melodrama. In the horror film, the 'normality' that is threatened by the 'monster' is cinematic ordinariness being challenged by blatant theatricality.

Theatricality in the horror film expresses itself in many ways. First, of course, it comes across in the physical performance of monstrosity. But it can also manifest itself through the depiction of the site of horror - the *locus horribilis* - where space, architecture and landscape operate as striking theatrical spectacles. The artifice of the gothic castle in shadowy ruins, the foggy cemetery with broken down tombstones and twisted gnarly trees, and the decrepit cabin in the woods surrounded by the creepy detritus of grotesque deprivation are only the most obvious examples of how the theatricality of set design infringes on the realism of the peaceful village or dreary suburb where normal people live. Similarly, radical syntagmatic departures from realism through frantic montage create *showy* theatrical moments of dread that shatter the stability of the mundane and the everyday unremarkably conveyed through conventional continuity editing. More to the point of this article, the theatricality of horror also appears in ostentatiously sexualized female figures. In all of her astonishing physicality, revealed at specific moments of horror, the curvaceous protagonist functions as a brazen display that clashes with the humdrum reality

that surrounds her in a way that is not unlike the monster's carnal disturbance of normality. The typical horror-film device of first hiding the monster to build up anticipation and then revealing it in all its horrific glory finds its origins in medieval morality plays like *Mankind* (c. 1470). In *Mankind*, the appearance of the devil Titivillus, who scorns moderation and common sense, marks the climactic point of the show, as spectators are solicited for donations before they can enjoy the excessive display of evil.¹¹ Like Titivillus, the voluptuous heroine is displayed at crucial moments of theatricality in the cinematic narrative to disrupt the flat banality of realism and astound the audience.

3. The Uncontainable Bosom

While the ample bosoms of horror form one of the more common 'show stoppers' in conventional scary movies, they are relatively rarely displayed in the nude. There is obviously a fair amount of nudity in horror films. But more often than not the ostentatious display of the curvaceous female figure centres on the spectacular cleavage mustered by large breasts compressed into tight, strategically designed low-cut outfits. What matters here is that horror seldom showcases the large breast in its 'natural state'. Rather, as in the case of Elvira and other ostentatiously curvaceous scream queens, theatrical femininity is constructed as an artificially cantilevered bust line that assertively sticks out from the unremarkably modest norm, like Quasimodo's cries during Low Sunday Mass. I would argue that the image of the buxom female character whose uncontainable, heaving bosom irrepressibly spills out of her low-cut garments signifies the destabilizing potential of the buxom monster. To quote Amy Jane Vosper, 'An untamed woman, like an untamed monster, can threaten the patriarchal order so the male must suppress and dominate any threat before it can destroy him.'¹² The untameable bosom is evident in one of Hammer's best productions, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, which stars the shapely Yvonne Romain as the servant girl who gives birth to the son who is doomed to become a werewolf, charismatically incarnated by Oliver Reed.

Years before the werewolf kills his first victim, Romain's character, only identified in the voice-over account as the jailer's daughter, appears as the mute servant of the old, decrepit, [page 48] cruel and powerful Marques Siniestro. The turning point in the first part of the narrative occurs when the Marques makes advances on the servant girl. She forcefully resists him and bites his hand. She escapes the Marques, but is immediately captured and literally thrown in jail. The only other inmate in the dungeon-like cell, an old beggar unjustly imprisoned by the Marques decades earlier, emerges from the dark, grabs the girl and rapes her. The offspring of this violation will become the werewolf. In the first scene with the Marques, the servant girl's indomitable unwillingness to submit to his authority is visually allegorized through a medium shot showcasing her voluminous bosom weightily bulging out of her décolletage. This image of large heaving breasts refusing to be contained conjures up a sense of powerful irrepressibility.

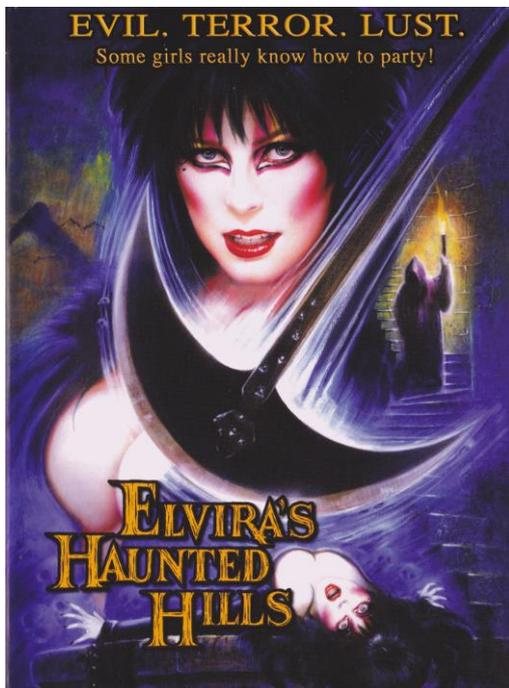


The Curse of the Werewolf - The jailer's daughter forcefully resists the Marques's advances.

Following the rape, which is not shown on screen, she is seen bruised and scarred. But significantly her bountiful chest still cogently suggests potency and determination. A cut reveals the dead body of the rapist, eyes wide open in terror. It is never revealed why or how the inmate might have succumbed. But visually the girl's hefty bust line seems aligned with the petrified eyes of the deceased, implying a certain correlation between his death and her imposing breasts. She soon manages to escape the dungeon and return to the Marques's chamber. Armed with a sharp instrument, she proceeds to violently stab the old man to death. In this moment of horror, her unrestrained brutality in killing her oppressor is equalled only by the sensual theatricality of her irrepressible cleavage, which suspends the narrative into an image of intensely sensual carnality. After the murder, she flees and eventually gives birth to her cursed child.

While the servant girl bears little resemblance to her monstrous son, Leon, the uncontrollable body of the werewolf under the influence of the full moon is clearly reminiscent of the servant's own unruly full figure as she achieves revenge, giving fleshy form to the concept of uncontainable resistance against repressive authority. The only onscreen transformation of Leon into a werewolf, late in the film, not coincidentally occurring in a jail cell in the company of an incarcerated vagrant, is performed through Oliver Reed's theatrical tearing off of his clothes and bearing his hairy chest. This other moment of theatrical horror performs a grotesque replication of his mother's bulging bust line signifying uncontainable corporeal power. Like his mother, who died shortly after giving birth to the werewolf, the adult Leon also succumbs shortly after his spectacular transformation on screen. In both instances, corporeal confrontation of oppressive normality only lasts the time of a brief disruption.

As is the case for the onscreen transformation, there is a strong element of artifice and exaggeration in the depiction of the servant girl, resulting from the filmmaker's intense emphasize on Romain's stunning curves. Obviously, the few scenes featuring the jailer's daughter are meant to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze. But beyond that, the lower-class girl's large breasts also stand in calculated contrast with the decaying aristocracy that surrounds her. As such, her brazenly protuberant breasts denote unruly otherness in a world of repressive nobility. Like the performance of monstrosity, looming architecture and the use of aberrant editing techniques, the display of flamboyantly heaving bosoms in horror movies is an instance of 'cinematic theatricality',¹³ where artifice stands in conspicuous *difference* from what is narratively presented as standard and normal; for the artificiality of the ostentatious spectacle is central to the pleasure of horror cinema. As Isabel Cristina Pinedo argues in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), 'awareness of artifice, then, is not a flaw but an essential ingredient of recreational terror.'¹⁴



Elvira's Haunter Hills (2001)- Elvira's bosomy artifice

4. Bosomy Theatricality, A Certain Tendency of the Lower Genres

My contention here is not that all horror films must feature a shapely protagonist displaying miles of cleavage or that only horror films employ bosomy theatricality as a means to challenge boring normality. I am merely underlining what François Truffaut might have called 'une certaine tendance du cinéma d'épouvante'. Indeed, while this tendency is especially [page 49] common in horror films, it is far from limited to this genre. The theatricality of the curvaceous body is as obvious in the work of Russ Meyer as it is in the numerous instalments of the British sex comedy series 'Carry On!' What Meyer, 'Carry On!' and horror cinema have in common is that they are all 'low genres'. Sexploitation films, burlesque comedy and cinematic tales of terror are deemed to be facile entertainment that relies, among other things, on curvaceous starlets to achieve their easy thrills and cheap laughs. Save for the notable exception of Fellini, respectable film *artistes* never indulge in the superficial pleasures of overabundant flesh.

It is no coincidence that bosomy performers are associated almost exclusively with the more crass popular genres. For socio-anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu¹⁵ the aesthetic experience linked to good taste (which provides symbolic or cultural capital), is associated with 'difficulty.' Those bourgeois individuals who can appreciate a difficult, avant-gardist work of art display the cultural power of 'good taste.' Conversely, those objects that too

obviously or ostentatiously provide pleasure are in bad taste as they can readily be appreciated by the uneducated lower classes. The cheap, easy thrills of schlock horror, therefore, are of a lower aesthetic or cultural value than more 'difficult' art films. Even within horror, there is an obvious hierarchical divide between the simple gory pleasures of, say, David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975) and the more difficult aesthetic experience of his more complex, and therefore 'aesthetically superior' *Dead Ringers* (1988).

The same could be said of the relationship between social class and preferences for certain body types. The bodies deemed attractive from the highbrow perspective of the upper classes are those that are more *difficult* to appreciate. Those are bodies whose appeal demands a certain 'acquired taste'; bodies to which not everyone can be attracted. Conversely, bodies whose charms are too easily enjoyed are in bad taste. In other words, an ostentatious female body with large breasts, a small waist and protruding buttocks is too obviously feminine and readily appealing to be of interest for the educated upper classes. Conversely, the skinny, curveless, almost gaunt physique of haute-couture models best incarnates the upper-class ideal of beauty, for only the erudite few can appreciate the sensuality of the waif behind her emaciated surface. Any self-respecting bourgeois man, therefore, should stay away from both gory horror films and well-endowed women if he is to maintain the image associated with his high social status. As Carolyn Latteier suggests in *Breasts: the women's perspective on an American obsession* (1998), according to patriarchal discourse,

Woman is 'the other' and somehow less than human. She is nature with all its unpredictable, untamed power. She is flesh with all its temptations. When she has large breasts, she is even more so [...] Small-breasted women, on the other hand, are seen as competent, intelligent, moral, polite and modest.¹⁶

The large-breasted woman is just too *womanly* for the respectable gentleman to trust her.

The independent art-horror film *Love Object* (Robert Parigi, 2003) provides an interesting take on this cultural association. The film centres on Kenneth an educated, sophisticated, successful but lonely technical writer, who decides to order an anatomically-correct silicone doll to keep him company. When the online ordering service offers him 'full-figured' as an option for his silicone mistress he has a flashback from an earlier scene he espied where his lustful neighbour is fondling a young woman's ample breasts. His reaction to this is immediate: 'too cheap'. Rather than going for the 'cheap' option of a buxom doll, he chooses instead a more delicately proportioned model who reminds him of an attractively timid co-worker, Lisa. Horror ensues when Lisa and the doll start merging in Kenneth's confused mind. What is worth noting here is that *Love Object*, an intelligent, stylish horror film that avoids the cheap thrills of the slasher, features an intelligent, middle-class principal who also avoids the [page 50] cheap thrills of a bosomy love object. The more 'simplistic' horror films, which avoid intelligent realism and feature instead grotesquely histrionic monsters, or abnormally silent and expressionless sadistic killers, also tend to showcase the ostentatious charms of deviant women. 'Breasts are attractive,' says Latteier 'and yet there is something disreputable and *dangerous* about them.'¹⁷

5. The Final Girl's Opposite.

The bosomy figure of the horror film is in many ways the *opposite* of the 'final girl', famously theorized by Carol Clover¹⁸ as the tight-laced, responsible, boyish, flat-chested good girl who helps re-establish normality by killing, or at least controlling, the monster in the end. Conversely, the big-breasted girl undermines normality. She is sometimes more sexually adventurous. But this is not her only, or even most important, attribute. More significantly, she is the one who *resists* patriarchy in one way or another and, as such, aligns herself with monstrous forces. A recent film that overtly displays the difference between the goody-two-shoes final girl and her voluptuously subversive counterpart is *Night of the Demons* (2010, Adam Gierasch), which takes place during a wild Halloween party in an old cursed mansion, as real demons attack a group of fun-loving young adults. From the outset, Maddie (Monica Keena) is immediately recognizable as the final girl. She is modestly costumed, and readily perceived as less overtly sexual and more sensible than her friends Lilly (Diora Baird) and Suzanne (Bobbi Sue Luther), both of whom are dressed as pussycats for the Halloween party and show a remarkable amount of cleavage.

A typically postmodern, self-referential horror flick (it includes scenes that explicitly evoke Clouzot's *Diabolique* (1955) and Polanski's *Repulsion* (1966), as well as a number of more recent scary movies such as the *Saw* series) *Night of the Demons* is more blatantly sexual than most other comparable productions. For instance, in one quick shot, a female demon is noticed deep-throating the devilish horn of a male counterpart. Suzanne whose large breasts are most ostentatiously displayed during the film is the character who is most directly associated with the demons that ruin the Halloween party. She is the only character who is knowledgeable about the curse that afflicts the house in which the party is taking place, telling her friends the ancient tale of the mansion's original owner, Evangeline. As Suzanne seductively recounts, Evangeline unwittingly released cruel and forbidding demons when she resorted to black magic in a vain attempt to seduce an unresponsive love object. After being dormant for years, the demons have been disrupted by the party and return to overtake the realm of tediously hip twenty-somethings.



Night of the Demons - Final girl Maddie rolling her eyes at bosomy Suzanne's flirtatiousness.

It is noteworthy that while the finale girl, Maddie, is typically more suspicious and less foolishly promiscuous than her friends - and of course, she is the only one who survives in the end - the character who displays most intelligence about the secret logic of the horror film is the character who also displays most abundant cleavage. Significantly, shapely Suzanne is also the character who is killed in the most gruesome way in a moment of truly effective horror, having her face literally torn off by a demon. As part of her gory destruction, which effects her own transformation into a deadly fiend, her breasts are also shredded by satanic claws, in a mixture of atrocious pain and ecstatic pleasure. In the irrational domain of the supernatural, the most conspicuous figure is the one who is at once best informed, sexiest and most gory: she embodies buxom monstrosity, where abundant female charms and destabilizing knowledge are treated as part and parcel of the monstrous spectacle that challenges patriarchal normality. Because patriarchy views the knowing woman *and* the ostentatiously feminine woman, as a menace, she must be disposed of. But it is also endemic to horror as a genre, that the threat that must be most urgently repressed is also put on display - however temporarily- in a most attractively disturbing way. [page 51]

6. Busty Terror

Although she is generally *associated* with the monster, in the form of a lascivious demon or a voluptuous vampire, the bosomy heroine is rarely the actual perpetrator of horrifying deeds. There are, however, some instances where she does wield the weapons of terror. We have already discussed the case of the jailer's daughter, whose sensually savage stabbing of the Marques is a fully justified act of righteous revenge. In other cases, the bosomy killer's acts of violence are less self-righteous and more gratuitous. But it should also be noted that in many cases the full-figured slaughterer is actually possessed by supernatural forces, and as such is not fully responsible for her brutal deeds. The low-budget schlocker, *The Possession of Nurse Sherri* (1978, Al Adamson), is an intriguing instance of this phenomenon. Denoted through some of the cheapest special effects ever committed to celluloid, the evil spirit of a recently deceased cult leader (Bill Roy) enters the curvaceous body of the eponymous nurse (Jill Jacobson) and compels her to commit horrible crimes. She impales an elderly physician with a pitch fork; stabs another doctor with a steak knife; and almost kills a blind patient before a nurse barges in and stops her. In the climactic scene, she attacks her boyfriend, Dr. Desmond (Geoffrey Land), with two meat cleavers and is about to chop him to pieces when the possession is finally exorcised as two other nurses burn the body of the cult leader.



Nurse Sherri about to dismember her boyfriend

In the end, hospital officials deem Sherri to be insane and commit her to an asylum. As such, Sherri's monstrosity is at once similar to, and different from, the typical serial killer *à la* Michael Myers in *Halloween* (1978, John Carpenter). On the one hand, the authorities see Sherri, like Michael, as the incarnation of pure psychotic evil who must be incarcerated. But unlike the male psychopath, Sherri's possessed body is female and, in spite of her gory crimes, she still incarnates voluptuous femininity. Consequently, she carries with her a certain aura of defencelessness. She is *not* a 250-pound cold-blooded, faceless killing machine, who presents a massive physical threat to anyone who crosses his path. She is petite, pretty and ultimately looks innocent, even as she commits horrible murders. Michael Myers, Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, Tobe Hooper) and Jason from the *Friday the 13th* series, are bulky male monsters who incarnate a straightforward danger and can (generally) be unapologetically punished for their atrocious actions. Sherri is a menace to patriarchy - she exclusively kills men. But like most other buxom monsters, her threat is paradoxical, for as female her body also educes vulnerability. 'Women's bodies are socially constructed as 'naturally' in need of assistance,' argues feminist author Kerri Froc.¹⁹ 'Representations of the [female] body continue to hint at passivity and dependency,' adds Thérèse Murphy.²⁰ No matter how brutal and ruthless she might be, the buxom monster is never just a crudely aggressive beast. She always elicits contradictory responses of fear and pity.

This paradox is made even more evident in the recent 'mockumentary' *The Exorcist Chronicles* (2013, Philip Gardiner). In the opening sequence, a possessed young woman only known as a 'Vatican Extreme Case Captive' (Jane Haslehurst) is seen beating a priest to death with her *bare hands*, and later viciously castrating a man who was innocently relieving himself near a tree. As in *Nurse Sherri*, this gratuitous cruelty on the part of the shapely monster against seemingly blameless men unquestionably presents a danger for the established masculine order. And indeed much of this film, which 'investigates' the current epidemic of possession cases across Europe, pits male clerics against devil worshipping women. Yet behind the ferocity of her actions, the rancid filth and foul obscenity caused by the possession, and the vulgarity resulting from the immodest exposure of her sizable breasts, the Vatican captive exudes suffering, sorrow and anguish in an incongruous mixture of terror, loathing and lust. In this role, Jane Haslehurst is simultaneously putridly ugly and pitifully alluring; fiercely hostile and entrancingly victimized. While hardly a masterpiece of horror cinema, *The Exorcist Chronicles* succeeds in exhibiting buxom monstrosity in all of its abhorrently captivating theatricality as [page 52] the paradox of patriarchy. The curvy villain stands for the (un)containable feminine figure that hegemonic masculinity finds at once irresistible and repulsive; endearingly fragile and frighteningly potent.



The Exorcist Chronicles

7. The Paradox of Motherly Voluptuousness

The paradox of the busty horror fiend is also related to the appeal of the nurturing abundance, engulfing warmth and voluptuous comfort associated with large breasts. Ample bosoms embody motherly largesse, overflowing generosity and benevolent opulence. But these qualities are difficult to reconcile with typical representations of women in the horror film. As Barbara Creed has famously explicated, the Mother has tended to be depicted as the most disgustingly abject of all horror creatures.

The modern horror film often 'plays' with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order [the realm of the father] in the domain of the body which never

ceases to signal the repression of the mother. [...] This is particularly evident in *The Exorcist*, where the world of the symbolic, represented by the priest-as-father, and the world of the pre-symbolic, represented by woman aligned with the devil, clashes head on in scenes where the foulness of woman is signified by her putrid, filthy body covered in blood, urine, excrement and bile.²¹

While Creed's argument does apply to a number of films, the *motherly* can also be depicted in a more ambivalent way, where horrific images can coexist with the nurturing and protective large-breasted body. A good example of this can be found in Lamberto Bava's R-rated *Delirium* (1987), starring well-endowed Serena Grandi in the role of Gloria, the owner of the popular man's magazine *Pussycat*.

As the benevolent proprietor of a successful business, Gloria is caring towards her primarily-female employees and, as such, comes across as a motherly figure, even if she is as youthful-looking as the models she hires. Furthermore, she generously employs her younger brother, Tony (Vanni Corbellini), whom she has had to support since they were orphaned as youths. And, out of pity, she also patiently allows a disabled teenager, Mark (Karl Zinny), to indulge in his sexual fixation on her. But soon, her happy 'family' existence comes under attack when a number of her staff fall victim to a serial killer with a perverse penchant for gruesome photography. In the end, it turns out that the killer is Tony, who has developed a twisted oedipal obsession with his older sister, and proceeded to dispatch all those who (he imagined) threatened to take her away from him. During the mandatory climactic scene where Tony reveals his insanity to Gloria, he demands to see her breasts as an ultimate treat for the jealous child afraid of losing his mommy. In the nick of time, Gloria's teenage admirer Mark shoots Tony in the crotch. Tony falls to his knees before his sister, spews out blood on her torso and rubs against her chest before expiring.



Delirium - A brother's oedipal fixation on his sister's breasts.

This culminating moment of horror is significant, for it blends imagery of the 'good breast' and the 'bad breast', as theorized by celebrated psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.²² According to Klein, while the 'good breast' incarnates nurturing abundance, the 'bad breast' reflects the infant's own aggressive anxieties. Generally, in the horror film, the 'bad breast' dominates. As Sarah Arnold explains in her book *Maternal Horror Film* (2013), the notion of the 'bad breast' upon which the infant projects its destructive impulses is central to the terror narrative.²³ This process constitutes a typical 'masculine fantasy/nightmare projected onto the body of the mother. Ritual acts of sacrifice, prohibitions, the process of abjection, all of these operate to disavow the maternal...'²⁴ As a typical child of horror, Tony does seek to destroy the [page 53] paranoid 'bad breast' by threatening Gloria with a knife. But he simultaneously experiences a deep desire to enjoy his sister's 'good breast', her 'rose-capped hills.' And certainly, the film's visuals in that scene emphasize *simultaneously* the repulsive perversity of Tony's psychosis *and* the alluring form of Gloria's voluptuous bust line. Perhaps the most meaningful moment of the sequence is Tony's spewing his guts on his sister, squirting a fluid that is concurrently evocative of milk, blood and semen. In this one shot, Bava manages to evoke at once the twisted horror of morbid incestual fixation, the climax of conventional sexual desire and the comforting motherly appeal of the large breast. But as is to be expected within the peculiar logic of the tale of terror, bloody red rather than milky white dominates the shot and becomes the primary color associated with the large, motherly breast. In this moment of horror, buxom monstrosity appears as the paradox of spine-chilling fear and intense infantile desire - which is ultimately what horror cinema should always be about.

8. Conclusion: An Early Cinematic Memory

One of the first horror films I remember seeing as a kid is the Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee vehicle *The Creeping Flesh* (1973, Freddie Francis). The neo-gothic chiller tells the story of a Victorian scientist, Emmanuel Hildern (Cushing), who develops an anti-madness serum derived from a weird skeleton he brought back from a research expedition in New Guinea. To protect his daughter Penelope (Lorna Heilbron) from hereditary insanity, he injects her with the serum. And of course, she immediately turns crazy and goes on a killing spree. The film itself is not bad, but generally unmemorable, with uninspired special effects and a prosaic sibling rivalry between Hildern and his half-brother, James (Lee). The only moment that breaks the banality of the narrative is a scene in a pub where Penelope, now under the influence of the serum, slashes the throat of an

insolent sailor. His blood spills on the ample cleavage of a nearby on-looker. This is the one moment from *The Creeping Flesh* that captured my imagination 40 years ago and, in some way, inspired this article. To me, the smudge of red liquid dripping on huge, one might even say 'monstrous', breasts is emblematic of the strange pleasure that the cinematic tale of terror provides. Screaming in horror or delight as the sailor's blood spills on her chest, the buxom wench offers her massive cleavage to the camera as either a voluptuous resting place where the weary traveller can lay his head or an overpowering abyss whence one could never return; probably both. This is the theatrical 'moment of horror' *par excellence*, when the tone of the drama switches from the mundane mad-scientist scenario into enthralling terror, aesthetic enchantment and sensual arousal. Buxom monstrosity at its best: delightful fear, spineless lust and uncanny comfort superimposed in a perfect image of terrifying cinematic pleasure.



Blood spilt on a spectacularly memorable cleavage in *The Creeping Flesh*.

[page 54]

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Notes

¹ Mark Clark, *Smirk, Sneer, and Scream: Great Acting in Horror Cinema*, (Jefferson [NC]: McFarland, 2004)183.

² Ibid.

³ Here I use the term 'syntagmatics' to refer to the horizontal succession of signs that acquire meaning through their mutual relationship along a linear signifying chain. See for instance, Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (1974), especially Chapter 5.

⁴ Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' *The American Nightmare*, ed. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979) 14.

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Weber. *Points - Interviews 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 386.

⁶ Marie-Hélène Huet, 'Introduction to 'Monstrous Imagination',' in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 87.

⁷ To borrow Laura Mulvey's well-known expression. See Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18

⁸ André Gaudrault, *Du littéraire au filmique: système du récit*. (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1988), 121. All translations mine.

⁹ Ibid. 123.

¹⁰ Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson. *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 37-38.

¹¹ David Bevington, *Medieval Drama*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 901, 920 .

¹² Amy Jane Vosper, 'Film, Fear and the Female An Empirical Study of the Female Horror Spectator,' unpublished MA Thesis in Film Studies (Ottawa: Carleton, 2013), 24.

¹³ Timothy Corrigan, *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 62-66.

¹⁴ Isabel Christina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New Press, 1997), 55.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 469.

¹⁶ Carolyn Latteier, *Breasts: The Women's Perspective on an American Obsession* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁷ Ibid. Italics added

¹⁸ Carol Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender and the Slasher Film.' *Representations* 20 (Fall 1987): 205-228.

¹⁹ Kerri Froc, 'Women's Multiple Rights Claims under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom,' *Feminist Constitutionalism: Global Perspectives*, eds Daphne Barak-Erez and Tsvi Kahana. (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press), 143.

²⁰ Thérèse Murphy, 'Feminism on Flesh,' *Law and Critique* VIII: 1 (1997): 51. Cited in Froc, 143

²¹ Barbara Creed. 'Horror and the Monstruous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,' *Screen* 27.1 (Jan-Feb. 1986), 52.

²² Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. (London : Karnac and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988), 11-81.

²³ Sarah Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 82.

²⁴ Ibid. 113.