

Have the Presentations of Women in Horror Films Evolved from the 20th to the 21st Century?

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Recommended Citation

Byers, C. (2024) *Have the Presentations of Women in Horror Films Evolved from the 20th to the 21st Century?* PAD Perspectives in Art and Design: Edition 11, Article 5. January 2025.



Byers's dissertation investigates the tropes in 20th century horror films referred to as 'classics' to analyse against contemporary 21st century horror films. This dissertation discusses the representation of female characters from the stereotypes of horror movie tropes, in references to films such as *Carrie*, *The Shining* and *Scream*. Byers' analyses films released after 1974, following the peak of the horror genre, noting on societal factors, slasher theory and feminist theories. This dissertation's objective is to conclude whether the portrayal of female characters has evolved from the 20th to the 21st century. Examining female character representations and psychoanalysis, contributing to the understanding of the hysterical woman image in Western cinema.

Read Time (Approx.): 25 minutes

Ettenhofer, V. (2018) *Still from Jennifer's Body*. [online image] Available from: <https://filmschoolrejects.com/women-in-horror/> [Accessed 14 Jan 2025].

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“Women are such an indispensable element of the horror film that it is almost impossible to conceive of one with no female characters.”

(Basili, 2021, p.108)

Far from being victims or secondary characters, women in horror narratives have evolved into complex and empowered figures, or have they? Within this dissertation the presentation of women through the 20th and 21st century is investigated, researching specific tropes that have been selected due to the reoccurrence despite the passage of time. These tropes are the Menstrual presentation of women, which looks into the way a woman’s development is portrayed on screen, the Sexual presentation, which focuses on the way a woman’s sexuality is shown, whether that be explicitly or underlying and the Hysterical representation, the trope that explores the portrayal of female characters as overly emotional and disturbed.

This essay focuses on the presentation of female characters in horror films rather than the representation of women in horror as the tropes do not ‘represent’ the real woman, they are fictionalised events that happen to characters that do not reference factual occurrences. It is understood that some of the things may be based off of real-life events, however, they are not intended to act as accurate portrayals of women.

The dissertation is sectioned into two chapters, the first to investigate the tropes and see how they are applied to 20th century horror films, the ones selected to be investigated are widely accepted as ‘classics’ in the genre. (Sheetz, 2023) The investigation of the tropes will apply them to the presentation of female characters and explore the theories and concepts surrounding the tropes. The findings from these investigations will then be applied to the analysis of contemporary horror films from the 21st century, including both independently distributed and commercially distributed films, which is seen in the second chapter.

The first chapter looks into the tropes found in the presentations of female characters, explores the theories that discuss the tropes and looks into how and why the characters were presented in this way, considering societal factors. The films examined are ‘Carrie’, ‘The Shining’ and ‘Scream’, the reasoning for these films being selected to be examined is

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that they were produced and released after the genre hit a peak in 1974 following the release of 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' (Hooper, 1974) as well as having female characters with interesting presentations.

The second chapter features the analysis of selected films from the 21st century that present the same tropes in female characters as the ones in the 20th century. The reoccurrence of tropes is why these horror films have been selected and the analysis of how they are presented through the female characters will be conducted, applying the theories and concepts discovered in the research from the first chapter. The films that will be analysed are 'Jennifer's Body', 'Black Swan', 'IT' as the commercially distributed films and 'The Witch', 'Midsommar' and 'X' as the independently distributed films.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine if there has been any development in the portrayal of female characters from the 20th century to the 21st century, by investigating and analysing the tropes depicted in horror films. The conclusion will be based on the presentation of women in the 'classic' horror films discussed in the first chapter and the analysis of female characters' presentations in contemporary horror films from the 21st century in the second chapter will be included.

The research needed for this dissertation focussed mainly on that of feminist film theory and texts that use theories to support a specific avenue of investigation. These texts were found among books of published theories and thesis papers that look into applying theories to a subject. Referring back to the aim of this dissertation, the texts reviewed were then applied to the investigation of tropes and stereotypes of horror films in the 20th century and the analysis of the presentation of women, to understand if these tropes have been developed in contemporary films of the genre released in the 21st century.

The key texts that aided in this dissertation supported the ideas that would be developed, and lead to further research into the specific tropes and theories, the knowledge gained has been applied to the writing through the dissertation, even if not directly mentioned. These texts being from Carol J Clover, Tania Modleski Lindsey Haralu, Tiffany Basili and Erin Harrington. These texts work together to provide a framework to apply to both the investigation of 20th century horror films in the first chapter as well as the analysis of films in the second chapter.

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Carol J Clover's book, 'Men, Women and Chainsaws', allowed for an understanding of feminist film theories and how they came about from works made in 20th century. This aided massively in applying specific tropes to films to be able to investigate them further as the book not only presents new ideas and theories but also takes into consideration other texts by theorists. The sexual presentation of women aspect of this dissertation drew from this book, with the understanding of the final girl trope and how it is applied to the investigation of 'Scream' and the analysis of 'X'.

Tania Modelski's book, 'The Women Who Knew Too Much', was significant in understanding the applications of theories and contexts to specific elements of the presentation of the hysterical woman which was examined in the first chapter before also being applied to the contemporary film analysis in the second chapter. This book instigated the start of further research into the hysterical woman and the negative connotations the stereotype brings forth. The condemnation of female presentations in the films this book discusses propelled further examination of texts to apply the concepts to the contemporary films. The writing about the emotional woman led to the research into this presentation in films, directing to Haralu's thesis. Lindsey Haralu's thesis, 'Madwomen or Mad Women: An Analysis of the Use of Female Insanity and Anger in Narrative Fiction, From Vilification to Validation', impacted the writing in this dissertation specifically the investigation into the hysterical woman and the emotional aspects of female characters. These texts combined aided massively in the investigation of the trope in 'The Shining' and the analysis of the trope applied to 'Black Swan' and 'Midsommar'.

Tiffany Basili's thesis, 'Final Girls and 'Mother': Representations of Women in the Horror Film from the 1970s to the Present', aided in the understanding of how women are shown in the horror genre generally, this thesis discusses the place of women in these films and how presentations change throughout the various films, this text was not referenced within the main body of the text but provided a quantity of knowledge that was applied throughout the piece.

Erin Harrington's thesis, 'Gynaehorror: Women, Theory and Horror film', despite this text being referenced only once, the analysis of varying female presentations in horror allowed for the understanding of multiple stereotypes that could manifest into a more specific character presentation. The writing about the psychoanalysis of female characters provided knowledge to further look into the hysterical woman trope. Within this text, the exploration of how women's bodies are intrinsically linked with their presentation in horror is a topic

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widely expanded upon in this thesis. The writing on the sexual and menstrual presentations in this dissertation was heavily impacted by the discussions of women's bodies in the horror genre, covered in this text.

The gaps in knowledge and research for this dissertation were mainly on that of specific feminist film theories such as Laura Mulvey's theory of 'the male gaze' however, it was investigated through other sources. The books and theses used to support this dissertation referenced ideas and theories and weaved in some aspects of such that were not researched in depth but were still investigated to apply where necessary.

Investigating the Tropes of Female Presentations in Horror Films of the 20th Century

A common denominator in horror films is having female characters be a compelling aspect of the piece, despite being one of the least popular genres to women, only 47% of women surveyed said they watch horror films, found in a study conducted by Morning Consult for The Hollywood Reporter (2018, Statista, 2023). Making up a large portion of the main characters in this area of cinema, women are the "driving force behind the horror genre" (Miller, 2021), a variety of different styles of films feature female leads that fit the stereotypes created by classics in the genre. The female acts as the perfect model for the horror film as so many elements can be used to draw the audience in, such as the ones that will be covered in this dissertation; monstrous through menstruation, sexualised and hysterically emotional. This chapter will investigate the theories behind these stereotypes and films from the 20th century that perpetuate the themes that will be applied to the contemporary 21st century films discussed later in the piece.

In horror, the female character is rarely interchangeable with a male counterpart, there is always an aspect of the character that is only achievable or believable if portrayed by a female. One of the main aspects of this is the reproductive aspect, only women can experience the physical process of the body preparing itself to be fertile, and this is a common theme in cinema, whilst this is a narrow mindset to have that ignores wider gender representation, it is important to note that menstruation has only been presented amongst female presenting characters in horror films.

The image of blood is not an uncommon one for horror movie audiences, an audience expects to see it, acting as an indicator that something is happening to cause pain and

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distress or to affirm that a death is taking place. It can not only perpetuate the idea of death but also that of life, and act as a taunt. If a character still has blood moving through their body, they are alive, despite all that they may have endured throughout the events of the piece. Alternatively, blood may also signify a rebirth in the character such as in De Palma's 1976 film 'Carrie'. (Figure 1) In this film, the lead, a young girl who is relentlessly bullied by not only her classmates but by her mother too, has a rebirth through blood before becoming her most powerful, monstrous self.



Figure 1

Blood and gore are seen by many as necessary to a 'good' horror but if one is watching they will expect it to come from torturous murder or violence, if the story comes from the female perspective however, the viewer may find the blood comes from within, "when it comes to an apparent femme character, the bloodlust is often symbolised through menstruation" (Ray, 2022). Whilst this does not separate blood from violence, it perpetuates the idea that the horror of the blood comes from something much more developed and personal to the character "a violent departure ... as female sexuality announces itself with a particular violence" (Lindsey, 1991). The beginning of menstruation marks the start of womanhood in a lot of cultures, this concept also pushes the idea that the girl is fertile and ready to be impregnated, which brings its own concepts of losing innocence and purity, "the normative and culturally sanctioned trajectory of a woman's sexual maturation, from these initial

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fundamental considerations of the space of the body, to first sex, to pregnancy” (Harrington, 2014, p.11). This change of the girl into a woman pushes her into a new category for society, her monstrosity must now be controlled, and the impurity created by the new possibility to be fertile and therefore engage in sex makes her a whole new entity. A girl’s first period being her “initiation into mature female sexuality” (Lindsey, 1991) is seen in ‘Carrie’, it is what propels her towards her change and eventual downfall.

With this being said, blood is still most commonly associated with violence and injury, female characters of both victim and villain are shown to experience both in horror films. It is their reaction to such that is most likely focussed upon in media that involves the femme. The newfound sexuality of the woman is a theme that can be found underlying in horror, if not directly implied, theories can be applied to texts to discover hidden details that point towards a more impure connotation.

In a book expanded from an article condemning the misogynistic presentation of women by notorious director Alfred Hitchcock, feminist cultural critic Tania Modleski writes “to what extent does the film share this point of view and make us condemn the woman for her sexual availability?” (Modleski, 2005, p.21), from this question, it can be applied to the wider idea of women being deemed socially ready for sexuality when they enter puberty and how this is not realistic in the minds of modern society. The original piece was written in response to the way Hitchcock’s female characters were presented in his films, often weak, submissive, and dull. The Hitchcockian ‘emotional woman’ is a stereotype found in the presentations of female characters in his films, this portrayal makes the women appear to only be hysterical and not have any valuable qualities to the film.

“the male-dominated film industry has portrayed women as hypersexual, ditsy, submissive, or a “damsel in distress.””

(Early, 2022)

The sexuality of the femme is a theme that is found in horror films frequently, despite criticism from both feminist theorists and modern media. The presentations of women in this way perpetuate the concept of women being placed in films for the ‘male gaze’, appeasing the human desire to witness women. In earlier horror films, the female characters in horror films did not provide to the story but rather acted as an addition to the mise-en-scene, they made the scene look more appealing to the male audience, “they are there not to participate in the narrative so much as to adorn it” (Jackson, 2023). The male

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gaze was a theory developed by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in an essay titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1973. The piece criticizes the way characters are modelled to fit a fantasy that a male viewer would have and exposes the way it aligns with patriarchal standards. (Jackson, 2023). The way this theory can be applied to horror films is by looking into what parts of the film are unnecessary to show the female characters in the context of the story. It can be seen in these slashers, that as the story runs, the female spectacle of the film becomes progressively more distressed, often leading her to be more dishevelled, this aligns with the male gaze, positioning the women in the male viewership fantasy of being dominating and in power above the woman, "the object of the male gaze is fully present, there for the spectator." (Modelski, 2005, p.23). Seeing a character in this light reminds them of overpowering a female, and so fits the notion of fulfilling a fantasy. The idea that the sexuality of a woman is what leads to a female character's demise is shown in the 1996 film 'Scream', directed by Wes Craven. The slasher classic holds Sidney Prescott as the main character, she is an innocent, virginal girl whom the antagonist, Ghostface, is obsessed with. The film shows the killer attempting to murder Sidney as he taunts her and her friends. She is perceived as the 'final girl', a character trope first described by Carol J Clover in 1987 in the article 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher film'.

"The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again."

(Clover, C.J, 1992, p.35)

It is widely accepted that the reason for Sidney's survival is due to her purity, "female characters who engaged in sexual behaviour were not only less likely to survive than their non-sexual female peers and their male peers" (Harrington, 2014, p.67) she remains a virgin whilst the other girls are being slaughtered due to their desire to have pre-marital sex. Tatum Riley is killed after being lured away from a party, an event that shows the character's promiscuity and impurity. (Figure 2). "Tatum is a character that represents the common practice of murdering the sexual "bad" girl." (Brunger, 2022). The way Tatum is portrayed highlights her sexuality despite her age and places her in the male gaze before leading to her death. This presentation is drastically different to Sidney's and places her on a different level to both the killer and the audience.

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Figure 2

The emotions felt by a woman have often been misunderstood due to a lack of knowledge on the different hormone balances between men and women, this led to the idea of 'hysteria'. The word comes from the Greek word for uterus, fortifying the idea of hysteria only affecting the female gender. The earliest known diagnosis of hysteria was in Ancient Egypt, describing it as a 'spontaneous uterus movement' that led to psychological issues. This was widely believed up until the 1600s when Thomas Willis, an anatomist discussed the symptoms coming from the brain rather than the uterus. This theory allowed the hysteria diagnosis to be applied to men as well as women. (Cherry, 2022).

The hysterical woman is a trope in horror films that plays on the notion that her emotions are expressed so outwardly that it is almost uncomfortable to watch as a viewer. The expression is presented often as reaching levels of madness, reinforcing the depiction of women as emotionally fragile and unstable, a harmful gender stereotype that is now being criticised by society as well as academics; "Women have long been invalidated on the basis of being too emotional, irrational or weak, of being unable to control emotions and sensitivities" (Haralu, 2021, p.14). The thesis written by Lindsay Haralu explores the presentation of women in films and the characteristics that are often placed upon them, including the hysterical, over-emotional trope, she explores the different representations of women in this also, looking at how the hysterical develops into dangerous, violent, or

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alternatively submissive. The development of hysterical into violence is presented in the 1980 film 'The Shining' (Kubrick, 1980). Shelley Duvall plays Wendy Torrence, a character whose emotions seem to overtake her and weaken her, through all she endures though, she survives (Figure 3). As she experiences the relentless pursuit of her now mentally unstable and violent husband Jack, the character's emotions build and develop into anger and aggression, used only to defend herself and her son. The hysteria of this character is presented mainly through her physical appearance, she begins to look more uneasy and dishevelled as the events of the film play out. The presentation of the hysteric or "madwoman" (Haralu, 2021, p.1) in this way is portraying the emotions as unnecessary or overexaggerated, despite the situation they are placed in, it is now seen as overdone and unfamiliar to the audience who are consuming contemporary films, Haralu states "this trope is used time and again to villainize and invalidate women" (Haralu, 2021, p.1). This expanded idea of 'female hysteria', and how it has been utilised to look further into a female character's presentation of emotions and eventual progress in their character development is an element that will be further investigated and applied to the analysis of the contemporary films later piece.

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Figure 3

The second part of this dissertation will now look into the previously discussed representations and stereotypes of women and investigate how they have developed over time to align with the expectations of modern feminist values as well as societal values. A variety of horror films produced in the 21st century will be analysed, and a conclusion will be made to understand if a positive development of female characters has been made throughout the growth of the genre in the contemporary timeframe.

Analysing the Presentations of Female Characters in Horror Films of the 21st Century

In the past 20 years of cinema, the representations of women have developed drastically, there are many more female-leading roles, and the biggest change seen in the horror genre

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is the presentation of women's stories being one of the more developed aspects of the film. Audiences can now expect stronger female characters and more contemporary films place female characters in the foreground of the story, having them tell stories that are not only limited to the female body, "The woman is no longer a whimpering victim but a strong protagonist who survives the ordeal." (Sur, 2021).

One of the leading producers and distributors of horror films in the 21st century is A24, since being founded in 2012, the company has released some of the most renowned and talked about horror films with titles such as 'Midsommar' (Aster, 2019), 'Men' (Garland, 2022), 'Hereditary' (Aster, 2018) and 'The Witch' (Eggers, 2015). The way A24 works with directors to create such compelling and devastating horror films allows the films to go as big as necessary, be that with set, prosthetics, or the story itself. Being an independent company, A24 has the room to allow the writers and directors of the films to step out of the comfort zones of horror cinema, "A24 allows its directors and writers to have the creative freedom to make their dream movies on the big screen" (Jackson, 2023). A24 horror films are often highly praised by niche critics, whilst the films have very varied reviews from general audiences, lovers of independent horror tend to love the releases and favour the unique voice they put out "one stand out characteristic would definitely be the outlandish stories and original voice each movie has" (Singh, n.d.).

Other films have also gained mass popularity in the 21st century with leading female characters, respected by fanatics as 'cult classics' in the horror genre. This chapter will analyse films released by both A24 and commercial distributors to understand and evaluate the progress made in the representation of female characters in the horror genre from the 21st century by investigating the presentation of tropes found in classic horror films of the 20th century.

The trope of a girl developing into a woman and the effects that has on her is an element that is still seen in horror films now, the films that will be investigated to analyse this trope are 'IT' (Muschiatti, 2017) and 'The Witch' (Eggers, 2015). 'IT' distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures follows a group of young friends as their town is cursed by a murderous clown, Pennywise. This villain transforms himself into the children's biggest fears and one of the most impactful portrayals of a fear that is seen is that of Beverley, the only girl in the group. The scene takes place in the bathroom, she begins to hear voices and as she goes to investigate, she discovers the blood in the pipes of the sink, which momentarily acts as a rope to pull her into the sink, as the scene progresses, more and more blood appears,

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before the entire bathroom becomes covered, along with Beverley. (Figure 4) This image of a blood-soaked girl is reminiscent of 'Carrie'. This scene is significant to this trope as the blood signifies Beverley's immense fear of growing up and going through puberty as she is terrified of what her already abusive father will take her development as. She is worried about how she is perceived by the world and struggles to understand how to act and process her own changes in the world, her emotional distance from her father scares her as she cannot grasp the way he will act towards her, "the thick red liquid spraying the walls of her bathroom encompasses her fears concerning womanhood and her father's inability to see it denotes his male obliviousness" (Film Frolic, 2017). This representation of menstruation being the catalyst for her fear and the underlying issues surrounding it are much deeper than it meaning the start of her development into sexuality, she fears it in fact.



Figure 4

The A24 film 'The Witch' presents the descent from female development to sexuality in a way that is intertwined with themes of witchcraft. Set in the 1630s, the protagonist, Thomasin, deals with the natural onset of her menstruation whilst also dealing with the repercussions of the mindset of the time. (Figure 5). Deeply rooted in Puritan values, it is believed that the reason for her menstruation is punishment for Eve's Original Sin, (Graves, 2021). The notion of witchcraft being intertwined with femininity is discussed by Haralu, "Already situated as a scapegoat for evil and as lesser beings due to their femininity ... women were largely targeted." (Haralu, 2021, p. 15), noting that women's madness, which

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is commonly associated with hysteria, was blamed entirely on the non-physical, theoretical forces due to the lack of knowledge of the human mind. The presentation of female development as misunderstood and therefore incredibly challenging to have to undergo reflects the same feelings and experiences felt by women from the past to the present. This film portrays the female character as a manifestation of this. The presentation of Thomasin's character has been criticised, mainly on the fact that the harmful aspects of the female development are not subverted but leaned into, despite the developments needed in the representation of female development, the notion of menstruation into monstrous is supported in the film, a factor that is condemned "the film seems to suggest that the only way to conceive of or to represent womanhood and femininity is through monstrous metaphor" (Graves, 2021).



Figure 5

The sexualisation of female characters still exists in modern cinema, however, the way in which it is done so can be found to come from the character herself, the male gaze is not the leading reason for the character to be perceived in a way that is sexual, but rather from the character's own prerogative. The films that will be analysed against this trope are 'Jennifer's Body' (Kusama, 2009) and 'X' (West, 2022). In the latter film, Mia Goth plays both aspiring sex symbol Maxine, and, Pearl, in both forms, Goth's characters strive to be desired in a sexual sense. (Figure 6). Set in the 1970s, 'X' follows a group of young people as they go

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on an endeavour to create pornography videos, they arrive on a farm, revealed later to be owned by Pearl and her husband, an elderly woman who is the unsuspecting villain of the film. As the film progresses, Pearl's envy of the porn actors' lustful adventures drives her to violence, eventually killing everyone, except for youthful doppelganger Maxine. Throughout the film, the young woman's sexuality is seen to be used for her own personal growth and it is eventually what keeps her alive to be the 'final girl'. "In a genre hallmarked by "final girl" tropes in which virginal young women are usually the ones who outlast their peers, "X" offers a rebuttal" (Yamato, 2022) The idea of Maxine being the final girl subverts the history of the trope, she is in no way seen as virginal in the film and expresses her sexuality abundantly.



Figure 6

In 'Jennifer's Body', the character's sexuality is presented as monstrous, she uses it to lure her victims. Despite being presented in a way that is clearly sexualised, and the main actress Megan Fox being declared a 'sex symbol', reviewers claimed the film did not play into the fantasies of male viewers (Ibor, 2022).

The character is presented wearing 'revealing' clothing and acting in lustrous ways, yet the plot of the film is her utilising her sexuality to get what she wants, fulfilling the 'monstrous feminine' trope but destroying the pleasure of the male gaze as she overpowers the men

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she seduces (Figure 7). This presentation strays from the way trope of female sexuality was previously used as it shows the character using her sexuality to get what she wants, whilst effectively murdering the men whom she has seduced, and not caring about the repercussions as they are just boys to her. Jennifer's violence towards men, the result of her sexuality is within reason, she does not become monstrous for no reason, it is in response to being a victim, "Jennifer is a victim of male violence, but she does not take her revenge on those who abused her, choosing to victimise her innocent classmates instead." (Ibor, 2022) the monstrous in Jennifer overcomes her morality and sees boys as a dispensable breed. This is an interesting development of the trope that separates it from the way films presented women's sexuality previously in the 20th century.



Figure 7

The final trope of female presentations in the horror genre that will be used to analyse modern films is the 'hysterical woman'. This trope will be used to analyse the films 'Black Swan' (Aronofsky, 2011) and 'Midsommar' (Aster, 2019). The trope of the emotional, hysterical woman has changed drastically since the time of 'The Shining', this is in part due to the developments regarding mental health and how it affects both men and women and how this is considered on a societal level. The diagnosis of hysteria was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, meaning that the symptoms and conditions that fell under the hysteria diagnosis now had been applied to the mental disorders in which were relevant. This progress in the attitude of how a woman's emotions

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are perceived demands for the presentation of female characters and their portrayed emotions to be based more on reality and more connected to a situation rather than overly emotional and 'hysterical'. The fragility of mental health is presented throughout the 2011 film 'Black Swan', Natalie Portman portrays professional ballet dancer Nina, the pressure of the constant need for perfection weighs on her pushing her gradually into insanity. (Figure 8) "Nina continues to lose her mind through the pursuit of perfection as a dancer" (Final Girl Studios, 2023, 1:10:09 – 1:10:13). The key factor of this decline is that it is pushed only by Nina's own mind, she takes every critique and overanalyses it, driving herself deeper into the illusion of perfection, despite being told by her director that perfect can only exist with imperfection. "he tells her perfection exists only when there is imperfection. It is a paradox that Nina, in her hysterical state, cannot admit." (Hake, 2011)



Figure 8

The hysteria of woman presented in 'Midsommar' however, gives more context and reasoning for the female character's emotional displays. Dani, portrayed by Florence Pugh, is a young woman who has experienced a tragic and deeply harrowing incident involving her suicidal sister killing herself and their parents in a horrifying, traumatising way. (Figure 9). Regardless of the fact Dani never seeing this happen, the imagery of the deaths haunt her and frequently plays into her mental decline. This presentation of a deeply emotional woman subverts the trope of hysteria seen in previous horror films; the entire film puts a twist on the expectations of horror. Aster has created a deceptively utopian setting for the lead female to experience her deepest, darkest emotions in, the completely opposite story to setting makes the film incredibly compelling to audiences. (Haralu, 2022, p.61) Within the

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film, Aster creates a character that presents her emotions explicitly without seeming over-exaggerated, removing her from the stereotype of the Hitchcockian 'emotional woman' (Hodgson, 2023) and elevating the trope of the hysterical woman away from the presentations seen in the 20th century horror cinema.



Figure 9

The analyses conducted in this chapter have allowed the investigation of how the tropes used in 20th century horror films have been developed and applied to contemporary films of the 21st century. These analyses will aid in reaching a conclusion of how female presentations in horror films have been developed.

Upon exploring tropes forged in 20th century 'classic' horror films, and examining theories and concepts intertwined with the tropes, an investigation has been conducted through this dissertation to understand if a development has been made regarding the presentation of female characters. Research has been carried out and applied throughout the piece to gain a better comprehension of the theories and ideas that have been looked into. An analysis of certain 21st century horror films that presented the same tropes of female characters was conducted to see how the portrayal of the tropes has changed over the time passed. The research into the tropes revealed the societal contexts, which developed the understanding and granted access to the deeper meanings of the tropes and where they originated from. For example, the female hysteria is a presentation that is often condemned by both theorists and society and from the study of the topic, allowed comprehension of the

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historical, medical theories that it developed from. This research gave more background on the trope and how it is then applied to female characters in horror films.

From the evidence gathered, it can be found that developments of the presentation of female characters have most definitely occurred from the 20th century to the 21st century in horror cinema, the analysis of contemporary works reveals that despite using what could be deemed as outdated tropes, the way in which they are applied to the characters is used as an extra platform for their stories to be told from. For example, the trope of Dani in 'Midsommar' is hysterical. The trope is definitely portrayed by the character, but it is the expression of her traumatic story and how it affects her deeply that stands out. The element of her being hysterical is supported by the reasons she feels her emotions and the story explains why she shows them in such an expressive, outwardly way. The development of the presentation of female characters is clearly seen through the comparison of the presentation of Dani as hysterical to how Wendy is seen as hysterical in 'The Shining'. The portrayal of Wendy's emotions was not supported in her character, despite the audience knowing the root of her hysteria. The character does not show other aspects of her besides her hysteria caused by the situation she is in.

The analysis of tropes conducted in both independently distributed films and commercially distributed films provides evidence that both have successfully developed the presentation of female characters. Whilst the A24 independently released horror films allow for more room to experiment and push boundaries, the horror films selected to analyse from all show positive development despite limitations of what will earn money overpraise.

In conclusion, through the exploration of 20th century 'classic' horror films and their discovered tropes and the evolution into the films from the 21st century, a drastic and significant development can be found in the presentation of female characters. Through analysis and research of the tropes and the portrayal of them, this dissertation has uncovered necessary perceptions of the societal contexts that formed the presentations. As the horror genre continues to evolve to be more inclusive and representative, the development of the presentation of female characters will also continue to evolve. Based on the evidence discovered and investigated in this paper, positive developments of female characters have most definitely transpired.

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Figure 1

Carrie discovers she has started her first menstruation. Carrie, 1976.

<https://www.slashfilm.com/1184419/carries-shower-scene-terrified-sissy-spacek/>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 2

Tatum at the party. Scream, 1996.

<https://eurodynamic.tumblr.com/post/682000738374844416/dailyflicks-rose-mcgowan-as-tatum-in-scream>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 3

Wendy narrowly misses an axe to the head. The Shining, 1980.

<https://www.whatsleepsbeneath.com/archive/the-shining-wendy-torrance>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 4

Beverley blood-soaked in the bathroom. IT, 2017.

<https://geektyrant.com/news/it-chapter-2-will-apparently-have-a-scene-that-will-have-the-most-blood-thats-ever-been-in-a-horror-film>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 5

Thomasin accepts the devil. The Witch 2015.

<http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2020/4/28/the-new-classics-living-deliciously-in-the-witch.html>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 6

Maxine telling herself she's a going to be a star. X, 2022.

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/128563764356982532/>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 7

Jennifer defends her killings as they were only 'boys'. Jennifer's Body, 2009.

<https://iprime.wordpress.com/tag/jennifers-body/>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

Figure 8

Nina spirals into her desire for perfection. Black Swan, 2011.

<https://fictionmachine.com/2015/08/05/i-just-want-to-be-perfect-black-swan-2010/>

Figure 9

Dani panics as she trips on mushrooms upon arrival to the commune. Midsommar, 2019.

<https://m.imdb.com/title/tt8772262/mediaviewer/rm4149832960/>

(Accessed 18 January 2024)

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