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Maron Tate March 6, 2019

Maternity and the Aging Female Body in Postmodern Hollywood Horror Film

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Abstract

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Beginning in the 1960s and progressing rapidly with the closure of the classical period in 1968, Hollywood departed from the supernatural "thing" theme of the horror genre and became fascinated with the familiar, and specifically, the familial. An era of maternity-coded films emerged, specifically with the debut of *Psycho* (1960), progressing to where Hollywood horror cinema stands now: a conglomeration of remakes, reinventions, and revisitations to recognizable themes entrenched in white (and often female) victimhood, paranormal visits, inexplicably violent strangers, and disease. This list of contemporary horror themes, though generalized, encapsulates the intrinsic instinct to remain alive. From this understanding, more specified themes emerge like the fear of being exiled from society. Horror monster archetypes represent these specific fears, and they often exhibit, at least in their physicality, death rapidly approaching or a closer relationship to morbid bodies. Horror films often rid themselves first of the most disposable characters and obstacles so that the antagonizing being may at last come head-on with the protagonist--someone who the audience has stakes in, perhaps identifies with, and very much does not want to die. Scholarship confirms that The Final Girls, the categorically pure, beautiful, and young women who frequently represent femininity in horror. The mobilization of a female victim hero does not necessarily represent a feminist movement, nor do women characters occupying the genre who strictly prey on male victims. I'm less interested in this final woman, and far more interested in the use of female monsters to attract viewership, but most specifically, old female monsters. My aim is to scrutinize the aging female body as projected in the postmodern horror film genre, and analyze how these representations of women characters function as antagonizing forces, especially in maternal roles. I hope to dissect the ways that the female body, when it is at its most repellent towards the heterosexual male character, instills fear. Femininity wielding violence over manhood is one subject, but aging femininity that wields such violence represents a kind of untouchable and even inhuman depiction of femaleness. To be young and fruitful, often times for women, is to possess utmost humanity, though when that fruitfulness and youth is betrayed, these women become deadly. This project is divided into three chapters: Controlling Mothers and Their Violent (Grown-Up) Children, Maternal Possession and Deterioration, and Body (and Mind) Horror: Old Women Who've Lost Their Minds.

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Maternity and the Aging Female Body in Postmodern Hollywood Horror Film

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Introduction

Hollywood horror cinema, though has transformed both stylistically and technologically over the years, has always insisted on disorientation above all things. The genre favors discomfort over coherence, violence over banality, and fear over complacency. In this thesis, I aim not to consider the universality of horror across eras, but rather to explicate how certain female monsters chosen to disorient and scare reflect sociocultural anxieties about gender and age. Of course, these implications go beyond gender and age, and also extend to race, sexuality, disability, and class-- all of which have been discussed at lengths in previous scholarship on the genre. Here, I am interested in the intersection of the aging female body and monstrosity, and how postmodern[1] horror films conflate the two.

Horror films pose horrifying figures and monstrous bodies as antagonistic forces to the "good," and as threats to societal norms, so that they exhibit incomprehensible characteristics such as super strength, immortality, or a total lack of human empathy. In the introduction to her book *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*, Rhona J. Berenstein argues that in the quintessential horror structure, contradiction must be drawn between the normal and abnormal, the human versus nonhuman, and the sexual versus asexual. This disparity, of course, lies in the monster versus its prey, with the monster being the asexual, gender violating or blending, and inhuman. Berenstein also asserts that horror intends to emphasize maleness and the narrative surrounding men, as she states that "males perform both the civilized and uncivilized parts, and their status as fiend or hero is determined by woman" (3).

[1] I am defining postmodern as beginning in 1968, designated by Isabel Cristina Pinedo in *Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film.* Pinedo describes postmodern horror as a site located "in the contemporary everyday world, where the efficacious male expert is supplanted by an ordinary victim who is subjected to high levels of explicit, sexualized violence, especially if the victim is female. Women play a more prominent role as both victims and heroes. The postmodern genre promotes a paranoid world view in which inexplicable and increasingly internal threats to social order prevail" (20). I am using this definition for its preoccupation with women in a genre which disrupts societal expectation, and also for its fixation on the 1960s as a turning point for this intimate horror.

Even in horror films determined by the narrative arc of female monsters, there is often a male hero, such as Father Merrin in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973).

I recognize that feminism and film theory have evolved, perhaps even radically, from 1968 to 2019—the time of writing this thesis. In this work, I argue for a resurfacing of the old woman monster horror trope which emerged first directly after *Psycho,* and again later in the 2010s. Another thesis could investigate the exact traces of sociocultural changes during second wave feminism, then postfeminism, and third wave feminism that resulted in this fascination with and repulsion towards the aging female body over time.

Regardless of era, postmodern horror interests me collectively for the persistent use of aging female bodies to scare and disgust, particularly when these aging bodies are associated with motherhood, which is precisely the kind of intersection recent feminism may concern itself with. Motherhood, through second wave feminism and far beyond, has been culturally associated with nurturing, safety, and intimacy. The construction of this parental role as one that can be violated and weaponized—and the simultaneous lack of scrutiny on fatherhood—suggests horror's prevailing obsession with womanhood and mothering. This thesis takes a closer look at aging womanhood in ways that horror theory has largely neglected.

In horror theory's discussion of gender, there is the influence of Carol J. Clover's investigation of slasher film's "final girl" and Barbara Creed's dissection of the "monstrous-feminine," both of which are rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis. Clover's final girl refers to the protagonist character so often seen in slasher films: a young, beautiful girl who survives the other teenagers against the psychosexual killer, who is "detached, unsexual, and watchful to the point of paranoia" (39). Clover states that this character transgresses feminism and instead speaks "deeply and obsessively to male anxiety" (61) concerning emasculation, sexuality, and strength.

Contrarily, Creed's monstrous-feminine examines the female monster for its roots "[dating] back to a myth of a toothed vagina, vagina dentata, [which] must be softened by a male hero" (2), which is clearly entrenched in societal tension surrounding female sexuality and the conceived threat of womanhood and sexual difference (to the phallus). The monstrous-feminine in horror cinema, according to Creed, "aims to explore women's sexuality—which renders them desirable but also threatening" (5). Both recognized representations of women horror, whether victim-hero or monster, express a friction between womanhood and patriarchal society in a way that suggests womanhood in and of itself is seen as a threat to that society. In this thesis, I analyze these female horror figures and their significance in the scholarship on gender and horror films made in the past 40 years. I will use Creed and Carol's texts along with other scholarship on horror to argue that the genre exploits aging womanhood, which is often in conversation with aging maternity.

Women characters of horror become defined by maternity whether they have maternal narratives or are not maternal at all, and both iterations of womanhood can be weaponized against aging womanhood. Women's bodies, which society demands be beautiful and useful, become repulsive and worthless when they age and decay, and the women inhabiting these bodies in horror often reflect destructive behavior that is culturally uncharacteristic for caring mothers leading acceptable lives. They are meant to be as appalling as they are sickening.

I am interested in the canonical use of a monstrous mother in *Psycho* in 1960, which predates postmodern horror, though introduces thematic tropes of the postmodern era, like the threat on gender and familial constructs. Contemporary scholarship on the use of women, physical bodies, and age in horror seems to first collectively agree that the genre, as an essential objective, tends to focus on the reversal of normality. This normality, when applied to the female

body, creates rigid constraints for the function and appearance of womanhood in horror. Carol J. Clover states in the introduction of *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* that "the female body is an enterable but unseeable inner space, a production of the uncanny" (16).

This aspect of horror, its unfamiliarity and uncanny use of bodies in which "women play a more prominent role both as victim and hero" (16), creates "a violent disruption of the everyday world" (17) (Pinedo, 2004). This suggests that there is a type of woman whose specific age and bodily appearance are appealing and comforting, which do not transgress societal perception of gender. This accepted appearance in horror includes that of the Final Girl, whose prettiness and youth (and almost always, whiteness), poses female heroism as only possible when in the form of this type of female. In Josephine Dolan's *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age': Gender and the Silvering of Stardom,* she notes that "cinematic old age is embroiled in the politics of representation not simply because the Hollywood conglomerate is reliant on stereotypical characters and tropes, but because the discursive underpinnings of old age and all it supports needs to be exposed and resisted" (246). Here, specifically, Dolan refers to female cinematic aging and how it differs from masculinity, which "is constituted as a stable identity uninterrupted by the concerns of age" (59-60).

Certainly, concepts of womanhood and youth have radically if not consistently changed since 1960 and the release of Hitchcock's *Psycho.* Second wave feminism of Western culture arrived and went during the 1960s and 1970s. Birth control pills became legalized by the FDA in the United States in 1960. The average age for marriage jumped from 20.3 in 1960 to 23.3 by 1985 (census.gov). Although postmodern horror, at least by Pinedo's definition, began creating more ambiguously villainous characters who violate societal norms in 1968, United States

history proves that by 1960, women began to have more agency over their bodies and their independence, so that soon they would even be marrying and having children later on average.

Youthfulness, in this way, slowly became pushed back and less preserved than it had been when most women were denied secondary education and careers, and instead encouraged to marry and have children as soon as possible. Therefore, this thesis aims to keep in mind the differences between Hollywood—and culture's—treatment and definition of aging women from 1960 horror to that of 2018 horror, when the latest film of the thesis was released. Third wave feminism allows a larger conversation about independence and agency for women, and delves into the junction of womanhood and motherhood as cohabitating functions instead of competing ones. Yet, the exclusion of ageism from arguments on feminism has continued from 1968 through the 2010s, in the sense that feminism has often revolved around the conversation of reproductive rights and domestic and career goals, which often fall into the hands of younger activists. This thesis argues for the similarities in the condemnation of aging which have permeated culture for over 50 years.

Chapter one, "Controlling Mothers and Their Violent (Grown Up) Children," initiates a discussion of mother horror with *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), and the infamous Mrs. Bates who is so popular that Netflix released a successful reboot series told from young Norman Bates' point of view, *Bates Motel* (2013-2017). It is through Norma Bates' character that I identify the contemporary genesis of monstrous maternity horror themes. Pinedo has rationalized that the monster of horror represents some kind of repressed person or persons, and the monster's "violence runs its own inexorable course" (24-31). Although the original *Psycho* depicts Mrs. Bates as imperious and diabolical in capitalizing on her son's body as vessel to inflict violence, *Bates Motel* allows Norma a more complex history. In the show, Norma is both sexually and

physically abused, self-conscious about her status and age, and slowly losing her son to his pursuit of adulthood and independence. Norma's parasitic values develop out of a deeply intrinsic sense of self-pity and physical weakness.

The other two films discussed in the first chapter, *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (Miner, 1981) and *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), resemble Mrs. Bates (or Norma, depending which Psycho rendition you refer to) for their child-mother relationships which displace blame of child's violence onto parent. In both films, the killers, who are child-like adults like Norman Bates, dictate the narrative of the films and their violence blossoms and multiplies the more we learn about their relationships with their mothers. Barbara Creed, author of *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis,* discusses the archaic maternal figure in her scholarship as one who "traps the child, and more often than not, the father proves to be invariably absent (12). Both of the mother characters of *Friday the 13th* and *Carrie*, Pamela Voorhees and Margaret White, mirror Norma Bates in their obsessive exhorting to their children, especially when condemning sexuality and mature sexual expression. Each woman, furthermore, lacks any visible husband or romantic partner, which de-eroticizes the conception of their children, and creates even more sterile, cold versions of maternity.

These behaviors reflect Creed's investigation of women villains who function as abject figures within a symbolic patriarchal order (76), which reflects theories of Freudian castration anxiety. I am less interested in psychoanalysis as an investigation for why these mothers are written to behave the way they do, and instead, more interested in their necrosis or aging (and always asexual, if not anti-sexual) character depictions which align with said behavior. The sexuality of these characters is relevant not because all female characters need or should be eroticized, but because horror has so often played upon the trope of Carol Clover's Final Girl

theory, which insists that a young, beautiful girl, who is abstinent while the other female characters are explicitly sexually active, becomes the sole survivor of the film. Sexuality, like maternity, can then be weaponized to displace the female character outside of societal norms, or, as I argue throughout the thesis, "Other" and antagonize older women villains.

Chapter two, "Maternal Possession and Deterioration," investigates portrayals of monstrosity colliding with womanhood through occult films and the transition of human mothers to creatures of violence and gore whom, during their possessions, attempt to harm even their own children. This chapter uses *The Exorcist* (1973) as a referential text which presents horror with a sanctified version of the deteriorating, oozing, wrinkling, bloodied female body once she becomes possessed by a demonic force. Sarah Arnold argues in *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* that both in melodrama and horror (which both often centralize maternal figures), "the female body [is] defined by an excess of emotion, whether it is fear and terror (screaming) or as tears and sadness (crying)" (78).

Arnold also explains that "where[in] the body horror projects the horror of the maternal onto the body of the mother, in the gothic horror the maternal figure is often manifested through the child" (92-93). Regan of *The Exorcist*, as well as the mother victim-monsters of *The Devil Inside* (Bell, 2012), *The Conjuring* (Wan, 2013), and *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), each exhibit this excess through their scenes of exorcism and through their rapidly changing appearances as the demons grow stronger inside of the vessels of their bodies. The horror of the three later films, indeed, is body horror for their use of the horror of the mother's body instead of a mother witnessing a horror done to her child, independent of her body.

This chapter utilizes Carol J. Clover's assessment of White Science (Western medicine, white heterosexual men in authority) versus Black Magic (people of color, women, mysticism,

gay men in the Catholic Church) as the solving force for these possessions. The mothers of these contemporary possession films are inexplicably unstable and increasingly aggressive. They are diagnosed, initially, by doctors and husbands as being mentally ill, overcome with grief, or deficient in nutrients. It is only when their possessions become climactic with violence, especially towards their sons/daughters, that figures of Black Magic attempt to intervene. As explained by Clover, in the trend of American horror cinema, it is almost always the case that possession is gendered female and that female bodies subsume the initial disease which men around them can contract like an infectious disease (72). Possession, nearly more than any other subgenre of horror, obsesses over the process of decay of the female body to an unrecognizable condition, one which reflects a corpse-like state.

Chapter three, "Body (and Mind) Horror: Old Women Who've Lost Their Minds," develops this preoccupation with body horror with elderly women who have become or have always been isolated from motherhood as well as grandmotherhood. I begin the chapter with a close analysis of the Room 237 scene of *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) in which Jack, the protagonist, is seduced by who appears to be a young, beautiful, naked woman in a bathtub, and then the audience watches as, mid-kiss, her body starts to melt into that of an extremely old woman with patches of decaying flesh and no teeth. In this chapter, I use Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz's definition of body horror, which is a genre trope that "showcases graphic violations of the human body" to define the graphic scenes which fill *Drag Me to Hell* (Raimi, 2009), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Robitel, 2014), and *The Visit* (Shyamalan, 2015). Each features a woman villain in around her 80s or 90s, who slowly reveals herself as violent, senile, and even arguably inhuman.

Dolan argues that old age in Hollywood, like class, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc., works to "exacerbate existing inequalities and privileges alike" (8). In this final chapter, one which most explicitly involves senescence, the films investigate the erasure of each female monster's personhood through erratic, vicious, inexplicable and antisocial behavior, often blamed on mental illness. The women claw their own skin off, have rotting teeth and grey hair, and are frequently shown naked during a "jump scare" moment of the film. These films differ from the occult films of chapter two because the women never depart from the physical and mental monstrosity that overtakes them, and they are never presented as anything or anyone more complex than their own antagonism. Unlike occult films, these films lack a site of possession, themes of Catholicism or exorcisms, and refrain from assigning the alterations of the human body to a result of satanic possession. Instead, Mrs. Ganush of *The Devil Inside*, Deborah Logan of *The Taking of Deborah Logan*, and Nana of *The Visit* function to portray what Creed discusses at length as abject bodies.

Horror cinema is most interested in a patriarchal discourse and the overthrowing of normality through male society's interest. In his introduction to *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Modern Horror Film*, Barry Keith Grant writes that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (5). In later scholarship, Xavier Aldana Reyes writes in "Beyond Psychoanalysis: Post-millennial horror film and affect theory" that "modern horror simply engages the body in intensity, excitation, and excess" (253). Both men are correct, and I assert repeatedly in this thesis that postmodern horror participates in the violation of (white) patriarchal discourse through visual media in which subjugated bodies, like those of the elderly and of women, become threatening. The normality which becomes violated, then, is coded as white, heterosexual, ableist and ageist patriarchy. In

this thesis, I explore the ways horror takes those whose physical and ideological attributes defy this narrow patriarchal society which functions as normal, and in this way, are always posed as the "Other." Horror, then, can be read as nearly always revolving around this specific definition of man and masculinity, even when the monster or protagonist is not a man.

Berenstein describes horror narratives as almost always fitting into one of three categories: male coded creature hurts women, male coded villain attacks other males, or males become threatened by some combative power (200). When depicting the interplay between White Science and Black Magic, Clover describes Black Magic is conducted by the "Other" party, often women or people of color (any marginalized group, really), who use spiritualism and other alchemy to solve the issues White Science cannot control (66).

The success of Black Magic to alleviate the failures of White Science, on the surface, seems to suggest the heroism of female characters (especially old ones, for my purposes), yet Clover points out that, while the possession itself is ingrained in a female body, the actual narrative bends to the psychological torment of the white male protagonist who witnesses this physical disturbance in another person (70, 85). Having noted this, I would argue that while contemporary horror does principally engage with male-driven narratives and the displacement of male power, there are some films which illustrate the toxicity of misused female power, and how that can be used not necessarily against men, but other women, like *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976). Here, the narrative becomes less about who the victim is but more about the antagonism of certain "Othered" groups for the sake of creating compelling horror.

This thesis will dissect the traces of patriarchal discourse within filmic texts that vilify aging womanhood. Most specifically, this thesis will analyze the relationship between aging and

maternity by deconstructing three styles of female-themed horror: controlling mother horror, possession horror, and body horror.

Controlling Mothers and Their Violent (Grown-Up) Children

This first chapter, which examines *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (Miner, 1981), *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), and the Netflix television series *Bates Motel* (2013-2017), aims to identify the contemporary beginnings of monstrous maternity horror themes. This collection of media texts tracks the transition from Hitchcock's introductory mother-centric horror hit to two reactionary postmodern films which also deal with mother monsters, and finally, the ultra-popular five-season show based upon *Psycho.* This chapter argues for the influence of *Psycho*, one of the highest grossing horror films in Hollywood history, on the subsequent slew of horror films which employ older actresses and/or create themes of monstrosity out of aging motherhood[2].

This chapter centralizes *Psycho* as a momentous horror film in which an elderly mother exerts control over her child and forces this person to commit unspeakable violent crimes. However, in the case of *Psycho,* this elderly mother is in fact a dead mother, and in the case of *Friday the 13th: Part Two,* the dead mother is presented, visually, as an alive middle-aged mother (through the vision of the killer). In *Carrie,* the killer murders the middle-aged mother by the end of the film. These texts collectively, though individually, explore maternity in both middle age and death, so that middle-aged mothers become associated with mortality itself.

The films tell these narratives from the killers', rather than their mothers', perspectives, which allows these killer-adult-children to be alleviated from the responsibility of their actions.

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[2] As mentioned in Peter Shelley's *Grande Dame Guignol: A History of Hag Horror from Baby Jane to Mother,* many horror films featuring aging Hollywood female stars like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford emerged during the 60s and 70s. These roles were handed out when roles became fewer and far between for these senior women actors, and were often unglamorous and unflattering (Shelley, 2009). I will not be investigating the industry's casting changes, but rather, the characters and films that emerged from this era.

The thematic implications of the films rest on the notion that the mothers, through their psychopathic dominance over their sons and daughters, absorb the motivation for the killings since it is their voices the killers hear before they embark on a violent act. They taunt the killers, and even instruct them to kill, and therefore, the films detach the blame of murder from the murderers themselves.

Mrs. Bates and Mental Manipulation After Death

Psycho, ranked by *Forbes* as one of the top five grossing horror movies of all time, brought in about $280,000,000 in the box office upon its release (*Forbes,* 2013) and is remembered by cinephiles and film historians alike for its infamous use of implied violence in a time when censorship and technology prohibited horror from creating "real" blood and guts scenes. Its legacy, which includes a revolutionary use of point of view changes between killer and victim, largely surrounds the scene in which Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is stabbed to death in the shower though we never see the knife contact her physical body. Based on Robert Bloch's 1959 thriller novel, the film centralizes the narrative around Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), an attractive, kind, and collected young man, though he compulsively commits graphic murders, which, as we learn by the end of the film, is due to the psychological invasion of his mother and her despotic influence. Norman killed his mother years before the story begins, but kept her corpse, and hears her voice criticizing him in his head, which drives Norman to begin killing those who come to his business, Bates Motel.

Mrs. Bates may be known as the first "archaic mother" in Hollywood horror, or at least the most famous one. Creed describes the archaic mother figure as "a totalizing mother who evokes the subject of anxiety of fusion and dissolution, and has no phallus that disposes her" so

that her character "is beyond all organized forms and all events" (20). This description, certainly rooted in psychoanalysis and the fear of mother for physically what she lacks (the penis), and what she is perceived to be capable of because of it. Psychoanalysis, which has been criticized by many scholars such as Arnold for the ways it "places responsibility on the mother for the child's psyche" (5-6), has misogynistic underpinnings. Yet, I would argue that is the entire point, as the audience recognizes that killers like Norman are excused from violence when their mothers are so heinous. Norman, when discovered to be his mother's pawn, becomes labeled an enigma. At the end of a film, a psychiatrist explains that Norman both did and did not kill Marion Crane, that the murders he committed partially resulted from "the mother half of [his] mind." His psyche, which Mrs. Bates invades, becomes a detachable part of him through which Norman no longer must answer for. He kills, we decide, because his mother made him this way.

The film opens with Marion Crane, a real estate secretary based in Phoenix, who absconds with $40,000 of a client's money in hopes of starting a new life with her boyfriend, Sam (John Gavin), who lacks financial security after paying years of alimony. She begins a road trip towards California, where Sam lives, but gets tired on the road and decides to pull off the road and stay at the remote Bates Motel, where she is the only guest. Norman invites Marion to come up to the house and have a sandwich with him, but Marion overhears a woman's voice berating Norman from the house, denying that she be brought up for dinner "in the cheap erotic fashion of young men with cheap erotic minds." Norman instead eats in the motel with Marion, where he tells her, regarding his relationship with his mother, that "we're all in our private traps, clamped in them," and that he doesn't hate his mother, but merely "hates her illness."

Marion goes back to her room to take a shower and get some rest. She spends nearly an entire minute of the movie undressing, stepping into the shower, basking in the water and

bathing herself. Norman watches her with unbreakable interest and arousal through a peephole in the wall. The moments before her murder are laced with titillation and the eroticism that Mrs. Bates condemned verbally to Norman. Then, the camera cuts to a shot of a shadow of an old woman raising a knife and then the famous murder sequence ensues where we understand--through Leigh's theatrical screams, the washing of bloody water down the drain, and the repeated raising and lowering of the weapon--that the young woman is killed. Norman discovers her body in Marion's room after supposedly seeing his mother come back to the house with blood on her. He is horrified at what "his mother" has done.

Lila (Vera Miles), Marion's sister, Sam, and a private investigator, Arbogast (Martin Balsam), who has been hired to find the stolen money, convene to track down Marion's whereabouts. Arbogast confronts Norman on his own, only to meet the same fate as Marion Crane once he gets into the house. Then, Sam and Lila go to the motel to confront Norman themselves, who then attacks Sam, but only after Lila has already discovered Mrs. Bates to be a decaying corpse of an old woman still dressed and sitting in her rocking chair. Norman, wearing his mother's clothes and a wig, is stopped from killing Lila just as Sam awakens from unconsciousness and comes to her rescue.

It is only at the end that we learn Norman has absorbed his mother's persona, though her disembodied voice berating Norman and guiding his actions allows her to be viewed as a separate character with internal motivations. The psychiatrist tells Lila and Sam in the end that "matricide is the probably most unbearable crime of all, most unbearable to the son who commits it." Here, he advocates for Mrs. Bates's culpability in Norman's violence, even though she first fell victim to this violence herself. Even Norman's murder of his own mother rests heavily on his psyche, so that *he* must endure the insufferable nature of the crime. Thusly, Mrs. Bates's

character exists in a mercurial state between her own personhood, which is at fault for being a terrible mother, and the intruder on her son's mind, which is also her fault for the atrocities she influences him to commit. Her state of fluidity is more than just psychological or spiritual, and extends to the physiological function of her corpse and Norman's mind, as she occupies both. Mrs. Bates exists in a state of abjection.

Arnold and Creed alike both describe Julia Kristeva's theory of abject bodies as a state of in between, which is most often embodied by women. When they menstruate, the blood resides both outside of them and a part of them. When they give birth, the child exists outside and as a part of them. The mother, Arnold states, "is situated in between the border of binaries," the border of which is understood as clean and dirty, human and non (74). Mrs. Bates and her body serve to validate these theories.

Mrs. Bates functions as both dead and alive, between situated corpse and menacing voice. She is physically dead, which disgusts the viewers. She is also vocally alive and torments Norman, which disgusts as well. Her physicality reflects and symbolizes her malice. Mrs. Bates, argues Creed, "is part of her child's subconscious," which then enforces the fluidity and disembodiment of her terror (150). A mother, who was at least once an external person, and who also is empowered by psychic invasion, symbolizes abjection and the fear it elicits.

Whenever another character wants to go to the house to meet her, Norman explains that she is too unwell to see others. Her voice rings out in the movie, usually accompanied with a shot of the Bates house mounted majestically on the hill above the motel. She condemns Norman for wanting to have dinner with her, especially since Marion is a stranger. Creed explains that the Bates house is elevated and isolated in a way that represents the purity of it, at least to Mrs.

Bates, while the motel manifests dirty and the unclean (142), which, divorces Mrs. Bates from the carnality and "sinfulness" of the young women who stay in the motel.

Mrs. Bates, along with many postmodern archaic mothers to follow in her footsteps, exhibits a preoccupation with sexuality, specifically, feminine sexuality, as a negative force. This unequivocally portrays Mrs. Bates views of herself as the only appropriate woman for Norman to engage with, a possessive quality that drives Norman to kill Marion, and other women, who differ from her. Creed notes in *The Monstrous-Feminine* that one of the most powerful representations of women in horror is the one "who is transformed into a psychotic monster because she has suffered injustice" which then relates to her feeling "sexually and emotionally unfulfilled" (122). *Psycho* denies the audience this measure of character analysis on Mrs. Bates. However, *Bates Motel* contextualizes this loathing for sexuality as a product of sexual and physical abuse which redefines the codependency of her relationship with her young son.

Mrs. Bates as Norma: Roots of Archaic Mother

Bates Motel, a prequel series that lasted four seasons on Netflix, premiered in 2013. It details teenage Norman's relationship with his mother after they move to Oregon to open the Bates Motel. Freddie Highmore, playing the gangly and pallid Norman, spends all of his time with Norma[3], played by Vera Farmiga. Though Farmiga was only 40 years old at the beginning of filming, in the series, her white-blonde hair and greyish, conservative wardrobe make her look much older, especially next to her youthful son.

[3] I use the name Norma to describe the *Bates Motel* character, and Mrs. Bates for the original *Psycho,* though it should be noted that I perceive Norma Bates as an extension of Mrs. Bates, rather than her own distinguished person. The series pays careful attention to detail in continuity between the two texts through set design, characterization, and narrative similarity. For this reason, I understand Norma and Mrs. Bates to be the same character.

She and Norman often sleep in the same bed and change in front of one another, furthering an underlying Oedipal theme suggested by the original film. Norma Bates dies before the story of *Psycho* even begins, but her relationship with Norman is intricately depicted in *Bates Motel,* where the audience learns that she encouraged Norman to think of all young women as "whores" and to abstain from sex. She isolates her son and herself, with their intimacy teetering on the edge of incest. She is a caricature of the previous Mrs. Bates and an explicit personification of Arnold's description of the Bad Mother, which states that "the initial mutual devotion between mother and child transforms into a strangulating hold when the child realizes he/she cannot break free" (98). This type of horror mom in Western cinema is responsible for "the family...being destroyed or attacked from within: within the family home or within the family unit itself" (181).

On the surface, this relationship seems to embody Freudian theories of mothers and the castration anxiety they evoke in their sons, leading to a possessive and even sexual relationship between the two as the boy ages. Yet, Creed's theory of the archaic mother suggests it is not that the empty womb that becomes the site of castration anxiety, but instead, the mother's body represents "a pleasure in returning to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by playing with the body and its wastes" (13, 27). Perhaps, then, Hitchcock's *Psycho* is more concerned with Norman's obsessive nature inherited from his mother, while *Bates Motel* simply aims to be more provocative with intense sexual undertones surrounding Norma and Norman.

In *Bates Motel,* the relationship between mother and son is seen as codependent rather than singularly parasitic from the side of Norma, especially as Norman is depicted to kill his father after witnessing him abuse Norma. In *Psycho,* Norman tells Marion that "a son is a poor substitute for a lover." In season one of *Bates Motel,* Norma tells her son that "It's just you and

me… we don't need anyone else." *Bates Motel,* because of its thorough exploration of Norman's childhood and Norma's traumatic past, allows her a nuanced depiction in which she is only a Bad Mother to Norman, and her other son (not featured in *Psycho),* Dylan (Max Thieriot), seems to lack the antisocial and inexplicably violent behavior of his brother.

In season one, Dylan, the older half-brother of Norman, moves to Oregon after discovering his sibling and mother's whereabouts because he needs a place to stay after living on his own for a while. Dylan then gets employed working guarding a marijuana farm, making hard-earned but illegal money that he wants to use to purchase a home for himself and Norman to live in. His tumultuous relationship with Norma develops into one of pure contempt after we discover that Dylan's biological father is actually Norma's brother, Caleb, and she always rejected her firstborn because he came from sexual assault. At times, he also argues with Norman, who vehemently defends his mother against Dylan's criticisms (mostly about how Norman and Norma are far too close).

Dylan, however, perceives Norman's psychological issues far before anyone else, and wants to help him find mental stability and separation from Norma. In Melissa Houghton's "The Mother, the Son, and the Psycho: Exploring Family Dynamics in *Bates Motel*," she suggests that Dylan "functions as a way to give Norman's murderous tendency more explanation" (29). Dylan, indeed, seems to exist as a comparison to Norman: he doesn't unhealthily thirst for his mother's affection and vice versa.

The show, however, expands beyond an Oedipal relationship and the slow unraveling of a murderer who lacks normal sexual relationships. It works to complicate Norma Bates's character by presenting trauma of her own childhood—a childhood filled with physical abuse and rape from her own brother and then later, a marriage to Norman's father filled with its own

physical and verbal abuse. Norma is portrayed as damaged and skittish from the relationships she has had with the men in her life, and her affection towards Norman is highlighted through her less favorable relationship with Dylan. Dylan is a smoother, handsome, and edgier male member of the Bates family who recognizes Norma's relationship with Norman as toxic and faintly sexual.

In *Bates Motel,* Norma encroaches on Norman's desire to gradually detach from her by having flamboyant mental breakdowns and pleading for him to comfort and appease her. This causes Norman enough stress that he begins to have his "blackouts" during which he begins to commit violent crimes, such as killing his abusive father. The fact that Norman cannot consciously remember these episodes serves as a foreboding suggestion to how Norma, even after she has been killed, will slowly start to invade Norman's psyche.

Any suggestion that Norman himself channels his mother's voice instead of Norma acting as an invader is disproven, previously, in the final scenes of *Psycho*. Norman has been arrested and a psychologist explains his psychogenic manifestation of his mother, to Sam, Lila and the police. The final scene of the film shows a long shot moving slowly in towards Norman as his mother's voiceover explains her incarnation through Norman. She says that she must get "them," referring to the authorities, to believe that she would never ever hurt a fly, and "[she] won't even swat" the one resting on Norman's hand at that moment to prove it. Now, the audience fully comprehends her accountability for the murders.

She says, "They'll put him away now, as I should have years ago. He was always bad, and in the end, he intended to tell them I killed those girls and that man... as if I could do anything but just sit and stare, like one of his stuffed birds" (*Psycho*). Meanwhile, the camera continues to close in on Norman's face, and we see him with a downturned chin and a menacing

brow, breaking into a smile. Mrs. Bates's final speech confirms her manipulation of Norman and deflection of responsibility for her son's behavior, whom she thinks was "always bad." This conclusion is meant to match Mrs. Bates's disgusting, rotting, skeletal close up which is superimposed on Norman's face at the end of the scene. Her skull is visually conflated with Norman's criminality, which leaves us with truest, most repulsive villain: Norma.

Margaret White and Carrie's Bloody Horror

Carrie (De Palma, 1976), based on the Stephen King novel, unveils another self-righteous mother whose pernicious parenting is the suggested cause of her child's destructive rampage. The story, which ignited King's career as a horror writer, opens with Carrie White (Sissy Spacek), a homely, reserved teenage girl, taking a shower in the school locker room. The camera slowly pans over her face and legs, and Carrie closes her eyes in the sensual pleasure of bathing. Then, she sees the red liquid run down her legs, and screams in confusion at her own menstrual blood running down the drain in the locker room, thinking she's dying. Then, the rest of the girls at school, amused at her expense, start pelting her with tampons, chanting at her to "plug it up."

It is in this moment that she discovers her gift of telekinesis, triggered by fury, which causes her to burst a lightbulb. Clover describes Carrie in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* as "the ultimate monstrous hero" (4), embodying the victim and aggressor all at once, though we learn her aggression is the fault of her mother's tyrannical, radically religious parenting. *Carrie* investigates female violence (that done to and done by women), and horror's fascination with feminine blood, either that which spills from or onto the character. *Carrie* expresses horror through blood and the subsequent supernatural powers Carrie gains when upset, but more

contextually, it expresses horror through her mom Margaret White (Piper Laurie) for causing Carrie to become the bloody monster she is.

In the film, one of the girls at school, who feels bad for Carrie, Sue Snell (Amy Irving), encourages her boyfriend Tommy (William Katt) to take Carrie to prom, which Carrie's mother vehemently opposes. Carrie goes anyway, only to have a set of cruel, popular kids at school rig the prom queen election so that she will win, be brought forth on stage in front of the student body, and then be humiliated as a massive bucket of pig's blood pours down on her. While in reality, the students and faculty are staring in horror, Carrie thinks that they begin to laugh at her, which triggers her most violent outburst yet, igniting the gym into an explosive fire that kills nearly all of them. Two other young men from school try to run her over with a car after she departs from the crime scene, but she kills them both as well with an explosive flip of the car.

Carrie returns home to an eerily candlelit house, blood-soaked and disoriented. She wanders upstairs and draws herself a bath and cleans the mess away. Margaret appears, and comforts her daughter in an embrace while explaining to Carrie that she was conceived from an act of marital rape with Carrie's father, and that she believes Carrie to be a witch. She stabs her daughter in the back and chases her, as Carrie tumbles down their stairs, with the cleaver poised in hand ready to slay her daughter. Carrie, in a supernatural fit, pins her mother to the wall with various kitchen knives tools, watching Margaret die with painful moans. Carrie then lights the house on fire, while still in it. In the final scene, Sue Snell, who survived the prom night, has a dream about visiting Carrie's home, only to wake up in terror, but being cuddled by her mother.

Margaret White, through her fanatical confinement of her daughter, created a modern witch. Carrie's blood positions her monstrosity in abjection, and the blood causes monstrosity since it is the blood which incites her rage. Part of Kristeva's theory of abjection is that a woman

can be specifically related to pollution in two different ways: excremental and menstrual, which then informs Creed's argument that through women's blood particularly, horror divides bodies which are coded as clean and safe and those which are viewed and polluted and cursed (10). As mentioned before, blood, especially menstrual blood (of which we see plenty in Carrie), is abject in the way that it exists outside and a part of the woman, evoking a sense of disgust.

Carrie's blood is central to the film's plot, framing her powers around her menstrual blood. Since the first telekinetic power we see is in the locker room, it seems as though with Carrie's maturation into womanhood triggers her first supernatural curse, and then the multiplication of blood—when the bucket of pig's blood is poured onto her by the gallons—her brutal, likewise, escalates. When Carrie comes home, her mother tells her that if she'd never sinned, the "curse of blood" wouldn't have come. Therefore, it isn't the actual onset of puberty that damages Carrie's psyche, but instead, the way in which her mother equates womanhood and menstruation with Carrie's wicked behavior.

Margaret White constantly castigates her daughter for sinning, despite Carrie's pleas that "not everything is a sin." Although Carrie is longer a child, she still possesses childlike qualities, such as going to her closet to pray when her mother tells her to, despite having done nothing wrong. Margaret is no more physically powerful than her child, just as Norma is no more powerful than Norman, but, like her classic predecessor, Margaret still manages to contain her daughter by brainwashing her that women are disgusting and impure. Piper Laurie was 44 at the time of filming, and made to look older and dull through strict costuming of black smock-like shirts. To sleep, she wears modest white nightgowns, like those her daughter wears, making her seem childlike and inappropriate. She never seems quite right.

Margaret, like Mrs. Bates, removes herself from sexuality in every way. Even her conception of Carrie derives from a sexless act of violence, which, even if Margaret partially enjoyed the act (as is detailed in the book), she still labels the sex as nonconsensual. At all times, Carrie's mother looks old fashioned--if not simply old and not conventionally attractive--and her piety and religious obsession is mirrored in her drab costuming. She references Eve from the Bible, stating that it is because of Eve that women like Carrie sin with their menstrual blood, though Margaret never makes mention of Adam or man's sin, or even her own sexual maturation and menstrual blood. In this way, Margaret compares all female sin to witchery while stating that her own female sexuality was an act forced upon her by her husband. Barbara Creed states that "the witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of symbolic order" (76).

Through this interpretation, we can understand that Margaret, who writes off her daughter as a witch, believes Carrie to be adversarial to the security of this patriarchal symbolic order, just as Norma tells Norman that he should not be around other women, that they are all whores, though she never describes herself as such. It should be noted that both in *Psycho* and *Carrie*, single mothers raise killer-children without the co-parenting of a father figure, and any relationship to a husband or father figure pertains to sexual violence. Yet, Margaret and Norma both preach to their children that it is women who contaminate the world, which speaks to a larger anti-matriarchal theme running in both films, but also to a self-hatred each woman harbors, beginning before they become mothers and intensifying as their children grow up and begin to no longer need them.

Shelley Stamp, in her article "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty," discusses the ways in which Carrie's menstrual cycle and transition to womanhood is not only

punishable, but deplorable as a nonhuman trait. Stamp denotes that in horror, "nonhuman and nonmale are confused as equivalent threats to human identity" and therefore it is "the bodily difference" which becomes "the locus of the nonhuman" (333). If all of humanity becomes defined by the demonstration or possession of masculinity and male bodies, then monsters like Carrie, through their developing womanhood, "disrupt and challenge the presumed homogeneity of human identity by confusing or transgressing boundaries" (333). The same, therefore, could be said of Margaret White, whose own womanhood she tries to suppress and who dismisses her own sexual identity. Carrie appears to be the villain, as she is the one who kills her classmates and crucifies her mother, yet it is her mother who labels her as a threat to humanity, one that she has constructed through a warped view of Christianity and an adoption of toxic anti-femininity theories.

Pamela Voorhees: The Lingering Dead Mother Continued

Friday the 13th (Cunningham, 1980), one of the better known 80s slasher films, tells the story of camp counselors who are murdered by an unseen person, until, towards the film's climax, main character Alice identifies the killer as a woman named Mrs. Voorhees (Betsy Palmer). Pamela Voorhees worked at Camp Crystal Lake with her young son, Jason, in tow, but went off the rail after he was presumed to have died in a drowning accident, which she blamed on the young counselors for not paying attention to him. *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (Miner, 1981) begins with a fresh generation of counselors at Camp Crystal Lake gathering around the campfire. Their leader, Paul, tells the story of Jason Voorhees (Warrington Gillette) and his murderous mother. This chapter delves into the psychosis of Jason who, influenced by his

visions of his mother similar to the governing voice of Mrs. Bates over Norman, transforms into an assailant, killing off teenagers at Camp Crystal Lake.[4]

Arnold notes that the bad mother approach of horror, "in which the mother will not disappear fully and continues to haunt from afar, seems to validate the patriarchally inscribed notion that the mother must be repressed in order for the child to [gain] normative subjectivity" (94). This psychological investigation of maternal villains permeates postmodern horror film in the wake of *Psycho,* though few match the character portraiture of Mrs. Bates as closely as Mrs. Voorhees of the *Friday the 13th* franchise. *Friday the 13th: Part 2* personifies Mrs. Voorhees, just like Mrs. Bates, as a voice of criticism and instruction which has total sovereignty over the mind and behavior of her son. When we see her (alive) image in the film, she is roughly in her 40s or 50s, though her true present body is a rotting skull. Just as in *Psycho,* the mother exists vocally in the film as a commander of violence through the vulnerable, childlike mindset of her child, though her physical body is revealed in climax to be the remains of a woman.

In the sequel film, one by one, the counselors are killed off in an obscure series of attacks by a masked killer. The two surviving teenagers, Paul (John Furey) and Ginny (Amy Steel), fight Jason throughout the camp, warding off his hunt, until finally, it is only Ginny left in a shed on the camp property, and Jason in a close pursuit. Mirroring the scene in which Lila Crane discovers Norma Bates rotting body in the home of Norman, Ginny discovers Pamela Voorhees's rotting and severed head placed in shrine with her accompanying old, dusty sweater and lit candles all around. Creed focuses on the various ways the living female body evokes

[4] I've chosen to analyze *Friday the 13th: Part 2* instead of the first *Friday the 13th* because the second emphasizes Pamela Voorhees mental control over her child, even after she dies, just as Mrs. Bates continued to govern the violent actions of Norman. As this chapter is on the violence of grown-up children and its implicative abuse from their mothers, I am less interested in studying Pamela's killer spree in the first slasher film. While it is important to understand that Jason's mother quite literally murdered people, the structure of the second film reduces Jason's actions to those of his mother's will.

repulsion, but she also notes that "the corpse is utterly abject" as it "signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution" (10). That pollution, of course, is the decomposing biological matter of these women's bodies, and the horror of seeing them rot so ceremoniously. We blame Pamela and Norma for brainwashing their adult sons into murder, but we also blame these mothers for their son's desires to preserve the awful sight that they have become.

Like Margaret White and Norma Bates, we can also assume that Pamela has instilled negative associations about young women and sexuality into her child's mind. We know, from the first film, that her history of hate for all camp counselors resides in her blame of them for her son's alleged death. Specifically, for the counselors having sex while she thought they were watching Jason. Jason's killing spree in *Friday the 13th: Part 2* begins the night around the campfire when some counselors can be seen kissing by the fire. He kills another set of counselors after a girl goes skinny dipping and a boy teases her, taking her clothes away, and they start to flirt and play fight. Shortly after, he kills another set of counselors as they are in the middle of sexual intercourse. Right after this, he kills a girl counselor who had been putting on makeup and primping herself for a sexual encounter with a boy.

Nearly all murders of the film are anticipated by an insinuation or explicit act of sex. Because Pamela is the voice driving these murders, we can assume, like Margaret and Norma, that some of her anger is triggered by sexuality, particularly that of young women. Clover, in her Final Girl theory, renders this use of young sexuality as a "cinematic formula of a 26-year history" beginning in the 1960s, which was "rooted in 1950s sensibility" (26). She argues that these male psychosexual killers demonstrate a childhood trauma or moment which then forces them to substitute murders for sex (27-28). That trauma, this chapter argues, surrounds maternal conduct for Norman and Jason. Margaret and Norma, Pamela herself is a single mother and, in

every capacity, distanced from her own sexuality. Her entire existence revolves around the obsession with her son in this film.

At the end of the film, in a moment of panic and psychology-major-induced thinking, Ginny, who is trapped in the shed, puts on Pamela's sweater. When Jason comes in wielding his weapon, Ginny speaks as though she is his mother, placating him like a child, saying "Jason! You've done your job well and mommy is pleased." The perspective changes, and the audience can see that the sweater trick works and Ginny's face blends into his mother's, and he is entranced by the vision. He sinks to his knees, half bowing to her and half collapsing at her will. He envisions his mother's face telling him he has done well. The ability to embody a monstrous, violent motherly role saves Ginny from her death.

In the first *Friday the 13th*, we meet Pamela Voorhees unhinged and unmerciful, slaughtering the camp counselors at Camp Crystal Lake out of a rage for her drowned son. Although she blames the counselors for having sex and not protecting him, the film insists that Pamela's absence allows for the bullying that then encouraged him to try to swim in the lake. She, like Norma, presents herself to Jason in the afterlife, and serves as his full motivation for killing.

Arnold claims that Bad Mother horror films are sites where "misogynistic fears of the deadly woman/mother are played out, but also a site where unconscious fantasies of maternal separation and fulfilment are realised" (69). This chapter demonstrates three mothers who prove more than capable of aggression towards their own children (and, in some cases, deadly violence to all young people around them), though their aggression stems from the threat of maternal separation. Norman, Carrie, and Jason have grown up and no longer need mothering, yet they cannot escape the oppressive grip from their obsessive, old mothers, and it costs lives as a result.

Each of these texts blurs the distinction between the slasher and possession genres, focusing not so much on the gore and anticipation of the murders themselves but instead on the psyche of the killers and their hidden motivators. In Tony William's "Trying to Survive the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror," he discusses how 1980s horror films have emerged from a particular set of historical and social circumstances and operate accordingly" (205). These circumstances, which allowed for the creation of *Friday the 13th: Part 2,* include, as William argues, the development of the special effects industry (193), the increasing provocative use of sex and gore in media, and, as intended to demonstrate through this thesis, the use of family horror to evoke violence in communities.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am particularly interested in the ways that these women embody monstrosity, and how their malicious behaviors are reflected in their appearances. In these texts, Norma Bates, Pamela Voorhees, and Margaret White could be coded as failures, not only by being single parents, but through their obsessive-compulsive tendencies to control those around them, which, as seen with *Psycho* and *Friday the 13th*, worsens with age, and even with death.

They all, before they die at least, are around ages 40 to 50, and throughout the film, either presented through their disgusting remains or drab and dark costuming, look frightening. Each woman possesses a sense of self-hatred, especially related to their sexualities and conception of their children. Norma Bates is depicted in *Bates Motel* as having been abused by Norman's father and sexually abused as a child by her own brother. Pamela Voorhees, as explained in earlier texts than *Friday the 13th: Part Two,* had her son when she was 15 and, as proven by his alleged death, failed to raise him alone. Margaret White occupies her time fervently worshipping

God, assigning sin to everything around, and teaching her daughter that developing womanhood itself invokes sin and misbehavior.

In these types of horror films, the damaged, toxic egos of these women incite their vindictive motherhood, implying that marriage (or at least a proper father figure) could have allowed these families stability and normality. Creed argues that these images of aging motherhood relate to a deeply rudimentary discourse on patriarchal ideology, which works to "curb the power of the mother, and by extension, all women, by practicing autonomy over her body" (162). As psychoanalysis is so frequently referenced in the theory of horror, it becomes necessary to introduce that which Freud defines as castration anxiety, or the fear of one's dismembered body often represented through female genitalia. This representation of mothers, one which Creed describes as uncanny, also relates to her theory of the "archaic mother" figure, one who could be described as pathogenic, "to the point of origin and end" (17). While these theories are useful in identifying how female and mother monsters may be constructed by filmmakers, subconsciously or intentionally, I also believe we should examine these characters under a more specific lens than just an overarching antagonization of women.

These narratives imply that the killers' actions and mothers' parenting style are correlative and even reflexive. Furthermore, theory rarely considers the casting, makeup, and costuming of these women, and how their physical bodies on screen are meant to be representative of their repulsive nature. These women function as off putting through their oldness or deadness in the aesthetic sense, but more fundamentally as a specific kind of mother who inevitably is harmful--one without a husband/male partner and without a purpose except for her children, who have grown up and already started killing.

When thinking of the mothers of Carrie, Jason, and Norman as the true antagonists of the stories, they must be compared to other women in horror, such as Clover's familiar Final Girl of the slasher genre, who surpass their peers in stealth and innovation and manage to get out alive against murderous men. These elderly, aging, and dead mothers depart from the archetypical beautiful, virginal, young female victim-hero of horror genres, and as a result, the genre seems to savor youth in a way that presents middle age and womanhood outside of motherhood as toxic and repellent (Clover, 1992). It is not that motherhood itself is illustrated as a vicious cycle of oppression and violence-inducing, but instead, mothers who overwhelm their children and are the sole caregiver, become, once extracted from the role of motherhood as their children mature, neurotic, ugly, and infectious.

Maternal Possession and Deterioration

The first chapter of this thesis began with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and chronologically progressed into the 1980s slasher genre in which mother figures dominate their children's psyches in order to influence violent behavior. The mothers portrayed in these films die during middle age--roughly in their forties--or, as in *Carrie*'s case, are still alive in middle age but are killed later on in the film. Their misuse of female power, which is to say, their total control as single parents over malleable-minded children (even when these children are physically grown up), has led to their own toxicity. Therefore, the killings that take place within these narratives are a result of the mothers' own transgressions. They may not be the murderers, but the films reveal them to be indirectly or directly responsible for the killings that take place.

This second chapter deconstructs powerful maternal figures after they have transformed into monstrous figures and examines their position as instigators of violence in horror films. Here, I will approach horror through the lens of early twenty-first century possession horror, and the mothers who suffer--and cause others irreconcilable suffering--through their demonic possessions. I will briefly discuss the influence of *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) as a postmodern but pre-2010s influential text which sparked a distinctive subgenre of significant female possession horror films in Hollywood.

The three primary texts which I will be discussing are *The Devil Inside* (Bell, 2012), *The Conjuring* (Wan, 2013), and *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018). In each of these films, a middle-aged mother becomes possessed by a demonic force (or became possessed earlier in her life but is now middle-aged, as is the case with *The Devil Inside)*, and her slow, excruciating demise destroys

her children, and in some cases, her entire family. These women begin narratively as kind, loving, or otherwise expectedly nurturing mothers. Then, after or during their possessions, they seek to harm others, especially their own children, and lose all sense of an empathic human consciousness. Along with this transition from human to non-human, mother to violent channel for Satanism, these women characters physically begin to deteriorate. They become older looking, unruly in appearance and also in their behavior. They become supernatural-bodied and/or dismembered. The fear evoked by these possession films is centralized in these mothers' ferociousness, but also intensely in their repulsive bodies, and desire to kill their children.

All the occult films mentioned in this thesis (and almost all occult films generally) position a woman as the initial vessel through which a demonic force can enter and operate. Maria Rossi (Suzan Crowley), Carolyn Perron (Lili Taylor), and Annie (Toni Collette) of *The Devil Inside, The Conjuring,* and *Hereditary,* each are middle-aged mothers, placing each of their characters between the ages of mid-40s to late-50s, and their characterizations are largely dependent on their role as parents. Other than the case of Maria Rossi, whose narrative begins after her possession, these mothers begin as conventional mother figures, dedicated to their children's lives and their respective marriages. This establishes them as familiar and comforting to the audience.

Pinedo establishes violence in postmodern horror as a "constituent element of everyday life" but in a way that insists on violence as incessant and relentless for these films (5). She poignantly argues that horror takes what we know as "normal" life, that defined by strict social boundaries and regulations, and uses violence to violate these norms. In the postmodern occult films examined in this chapter, this violence takes place not only in what the forces inhabiting

mother's bodies do to other characters, but it also manifests in the violence done to the possessed bodies.

The Exorcist and Black Magic

Creed defines possession in horror film as "an excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behavior which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject--and perversely appealing" (31). Such is true of Regan (Linda Blair) from *The Exorcist,* whose enthralling performance of puberty-related or induced possession earned the film 232 million dollars in box office profit and a legacy in horror as one of the most shocking films of its century (Forbes, 2017). Regan is a twelve-year-old girl living in Georgetown with her mother, Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), when she begins to act inappropriately and unusually, including swearing, lying, saying things that do not make sense, and expressing symptoms of depression and anxiety. Chris, an actress with no husband to turn to, takes Regan to the doctor only to be dismissed. She meets Father Karras (Jason Miller), a priest and psychiatrist, whom, despite his dubiety regarding Regan's possessions, assists another priest from the church, Father Merrin (Max von Sydow), and together they excise the girl.

Like the rest of the films of this chapter, *The Exorcist,* employs Catholicism as a combative force against demonic--if not entirely Satanic--possessions such as Regan's. Clover introduces a concept called White Science and Black Magic, in which in possession films, White Science refers to Western authority figures, usually meaning white males who work as medical doctors, in hegemonic science, psychotherapy, or Western drug use (66). Black Magic, its counterpart adversary within the narrative, refers to that force which steps in after White Science has failed to eradicate whatever unusual and dangerous circumstances have begun to take over

(such as a possession). Those involved in Black Magic often include women (specifically women of color), elderly people, priests (especially homosexual priests), or other marginalized persons, and they ameliorate the situation through spiritualism, prayer, exorcisms, animal healing powers, or some other non-traditional-non-Western form of medicine (66).

The Exorcist displays this trope of White Science/Black Magic, and then challenges it, with the introduction of Father Karras and Father Merrin to perform an exorcism on Regan. As Clover states, possession narratives often vacillate between the horror of the female body (and it is practically always a female one) undergoing her possession and the "male crisis" which is embodied by whatever main male character witnesses it and then undergoes his own, lesser psychosis as a reaction (70). This thesis would not be the first one to point out that *The Exorcist* is called *The Exorcist* and not *Regan* or even *The Exorcism.* One of these alternate titles would displace the effect of Regan's horrific body and behavior on Father Karras, and instead, become about how the possession is horrific for the possessed herself.

During the scene of the exorcism itself, Regan's face ages, becoming more wrinkled, the skin cut and damaged, all color of her skin gone to resemble a many-years-dead corpse, other than the green puss which oozes from her lacerations. Her voice deepens many octaves as she yells obscenities at the priests, sounding raspy and low like a very old woman's voice. Fear, in this climactic scene, originates at her appearance but also comes from her immense power over these men as a demonically possessed force, especially as she attempts to emasculate them, calling Father Karras a homosexual. Here, Regan's labeling of Father Karras as a homosexual priest and then his ability to exorcise her confirms the rescue of Black Magic, especially after White Science forces like Western medical doctors failed to cure her.

The fascination with *The Exorcist,* and one could argue all occult films, is not necessarily how the girl or woman of the possession's origin came to be possessed but rather the process of transmission and the fear of contagion from possessed female to unpossessed male (Clover, 80). These unpossessed males take form of the priests of Black Magic who see the occult nature for what it really is and oppose it. Other unpossessed males include the husbands who witness their wives' transgressions, when it's an occult film with a marriage. *The Exorcist* demonstrates the power of its infamous exorcism scene not for the fear of what the internalized demon is doing to Regan but for the fear of what her body, voice, and behavior morphs into and how it threatens the male authority around her. Everything she does while possessed--masturbate, swear, scream, threaten, and moan--intensifies the fact that she is no longer a twelve-year-old girl, but instead, a violent channel of Satanism which is most clearly exhibiting through her maturing, then aging and deteriorating body and voice.

The women in the following three films, Maria of *The Devil Inside,* Carolyn of *The Conjuring,* and Annie of *Hereditary* are mothers, and in some cases, wives, and their possessions occur violently in the pseudo comfort of their homes, where their children can watch. The films exploit the danger associated with an unhinged mother, one willing to manipulate and even kill her children, but most interestingly, each emphasizes the physical change of possession. Just as Regan's body and voice deteriorate until she's an unrecognizable heap of flesh and anger lying on the bed, these three women, at their most violent and demonic, look and sound deadly.

Emblematic Displays of Dejected Bodies in *The Devil Inside*

The Devil Inside opens with a black screen and the digital glare of a 911 call transcription unfolding. Maria Rossi's croaky voice comes on as she explains to an operator that she "killed

everyone." Then, the image cuts to a crime scene of three clergy members slain inside of a house. A chair in the middle of one room, presumably, an exorcism chair, has a broken arm rest. Later, we learn that Isabella Rossi (Fernanda Andrade), Maria's daughter and the film's protagonist, travels with a cameraman documentary-style to the Vatican City to discover what has happened to her mother after she was put into a mental hospital for the triple homicide.

Before going to see her mother in the institution, Isabella visits the Vatican School of Exorcism where she sits in during classes and learns more about Satanic possession. Intermittently in the beginning, we see interviews of white, male neurologists and Catholic exorcists offer further explanation to why a person could commit the crimes that Maria Rossi has committed. Here, the film establishes opposing counter theories of White Science and Black Magic, one of which represents the medical institution containing Maria and the other represents the exorcists who attempt to expel more spiritual force from within her.

In one class at the Vatican School of Exorcism, Isabella meets two priests, Father Ben Rawlings (Simon Quarterman) and Father David Keane (Evan Helmuth), who believe that Maria has been misdiagnosed with dissociative identity disorder and has actually been possessed. The two men have been performing exorcisms without the approval of the Catholic Church, because they want to help those possessed people whom the Church has dismissed or oversighted. They take Isabella with them to the exorcism of Rosa Sorlini (Bonnie Morgan), a young woman living with her parents in Rome who is demonically possessed. During this exorcism, Isabella witnesses the horrific reality of the abused and tormented female body under the constraints of possession.

Rosa wears dirty, dingy pajamas and has been tied to her bed posts. Her hair is stringy and unwashed, her body contorts into impossible positions, and her breath is scratchy. The skin

on her face peels and bleeds, her teeth have begun to decay to black rot, and during the height of the exorcism, her eyes begin to bleed. This scene preemptively defines female possession as the utter destruction of the body, making its victim unrecognizable and corpse-like, and also instilling an overt sexual agenda onto her body. Rosa aims to disturb those in the room with her, especially Father David and Father Ben, asking David if "[she] can suck [his] dick?" She thrusts her pelvis upward in a sex-mimicking rhythm, and during this performance, begins to profusely release menstrual blood. Blood, particularly menstrual blood, functions in this moment to highlight a perverse sexuality, one specifically defined by femaleness. This gory sexuality is a demonic tool to violate the men in the room, which, as discussed in *The Exorcist,* is meant to be the true horror.

Clover describes her theory of gore as manifested in female possession films in her chapter "Opening Up," stating that "the obsession with blood in horror points to when a woman's body becomes a gaping wound, representing castration as the main fear" (78). This is a nod towards psychoanalysis and castration anxiety, in which Freud believed sons feared their mothers' lack of phallus, which led them to believe their mothers to be castrated, and thusly, they believed they could be castrated as well, losing not only masculinity, but power. While this theory is antiquated and male-centric, Rosa's display of sexuality, openness (open in terms of her veins, her entire body, and her uterus), and flamboyance is meant to inspire fear, especially in anticipation of Maria Rossi's own exorcism which is to come later. Father Ben and Father David successfully dispel the demon inside of her, after which she returns to the normal, calm woman she was before.

When Isabella goes to see her mother, Dr. Costa (Claudiu Istodor), a man who is the Chief of Staff, tells her that her mother's condition is purely a "matter of brain function." As the

authority figure of White Science in this scene, he forebodes to the audience that Maria's deranged behavior, of course, is more than a matter of brain function. Maria's room contains crosses on the wall, and she sits at her desk silently in frumpy pajamas as her daughter comes in to address her. Maria's hair is frizzy and dull, her eyes have heavy dark circles, and she mumbles to herself. Though only 59 at the time of filming, Suzan Crowley looks older, more tired, and poorly taken care of. This type of costuming--that which purposefully ages the woman and makes her seem not only older, but sickly--indicates to the audience that an evil resides inside of her, brewing like an infection.

After a few unsuccessful attempts to have a conversation with her mother, Isabella nearly gives up on telling Maria that she is her daughter. Then, Maria tells her, "You shouldn't have killed your child." The statement noticeably petrifies her young, beautiful daughter. Maria continues, saying "It's against God's will, you know." She then breaks out into an explicable, murderous screaming fit which requires multiple male doctors to subdue her. Isabella has been convinced her mother is possessed, as there is no other way she would have known to mention Isabella's abortion. This scene serves to create a disturbing physical contrast between mother and daughter (young and old, healthy and degenerating), but it also serves to illustrate possession's ability to infiltrate those around the possessed. Possession horror is a dual horror: one about the body of the infected, and about the incorporeal virus of possession which can be transmitted to someone else from the original female host.

In Lianne McLarty's "Beyond the Veil of Flesh: Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror," she describes that it is not the gruesome acts done to bodies that terrifies audiences during horror, but the threat of the body itself that evokes vexation (266). McLarty then eloquently explains the disembodiment of monstrousness as horror acting not as "a function of

the body but rather a result of psychic invasion" (269). In *The Devil Inside*, Maria's possession acts as this psychic invasion, and it becomes a transmittable from mother to daughter, and mother to priest. During the exorcism that Father Ben and Father David perform, Maria screams at the two priests, calling them "faggots," which references Father David's own history of molestation and homosexuality. This slur emasculates him, torments him, and further marginalizes him as a character, making him a prized epitome of Black Magic in the film. The more everyone is distressed by Maria, the more her body becomes afflicted with abnormalities and sickness.

Maria's eyes are rimmed red, and become more and more bloodshot during the exorcism. She growls and snarls like an animal, her skin pales, and her lips become more chapped. She takes on multiple voices, demonstrating her powerfulness and eviction of her humanity for something far more sinister. Eventually, she starts singing a nursery rhyme to Isabella, placing her daughter in a trance. The Satanic force inside of her utilizes Maria's motherhood as its ultimate tool to drawn in, contaminate, and possess Isabella. The act is one of a mother to her young child, which reminds us of Isabella being cared for by her mother when Maria committed her triple homicide. It is eerie, and reminiscent of the violence laced into Isabella's childhood.

Father David, who has also become possessed during the exorcism, shoots himself in the head upon returning home. Yet, his suicide is not the great tragedy of the Maria Rossi narrative. In fact, it pales in comparison to the gut-wrenching screaming we hear from this possessed mother throughout the film. Clover references this erosion of male fortitude in the face of female hysteria in her "Opening Up" chapter multiple times. She says "for men to weep, women must be relocated to a space where they wail uncontrollably; for men to experience emotion, women must undergo a flamboyant psychotic break" (105).

By the end, Maria has killed both priests, the cameraman, and her daughter through her contaminating possession, which we see in a final scene in which the remaining characters fatally wreck a car, having lost total control of their minds and bodies. Her bombastic display of hysteria is only further emphasized by her ailing appearance and her utilization of motherhood to torture Isabella--both by shaming her daughter for aborting her potential child and also by reverting her back to childhood through lullaby. Although Maria Rossi is middle-aged, she uses maternity, a power in and of itself, to force Isabella into infancy and then death.

The Conjuring: Maternal Love as Vulnerability, as Combative Force

Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga, of *Bates Motel*), two paranormal investigators, keep demonically possessed objects contained safely in their home. *The Conjuring* allows a glimpse into their life together before moving forward to the introduction of Carolyn (Lili Taylor) and Roger Perron (Ron Livingston) and their five daughters, Andrea (Shanley Caswell), Nancy (Hayley McFarland), Christine (Joey King), Cindy (Mackenzie Foy), April (Kyla Deaver), who have just moved to an isolated, large farmhouse in Rhode Island. The house, like many haunted houses, is old, creaky, and dilapidated. Their dog, Sadie, is found dead mysteriously one morning, birds fly straight into the windows, and strange sounds, like clapping, can be heard throughout the house.

Carolyn, who first investigates the clapping, is the first in the family to be attacked by the demonic spirit of the house, as it traps her in the basement. Roger releases Carolyn, though at this moment, she becomes the primary target for attack. She wakes up with bruises in the middle of the night, which a doctor (an unseen representation of White Science), diagnoses as an iron deficiency. All of the daughters, like their mother, awaken each night to taunts and torments

from the demon wreaking havoc throughout the house, though Carolyn is the easiest, or at least most preferable body to utilize for possession. The narrative suggests her awareness of this by making her the character--not Roger--to contact Ed and Lorraine Warren to investigate the home.

After receiving permission from the Catholic Church (the secondary, more effective solution of Black Magic), the Warrens come to the house only to discover its history: it used to be owned by a woman named Bathsheba, an accused witch in the 1860s, who sacrificed her newborn baby there to the Devil and then cursed the land for anyone who might come onto it. The Warrens set up cameras, employ 24-hour monitoring, and encourage the Perrons to move into a motel temporarily. By this point, Carolyn has already been possessed by Bathsheba, and takes two of her daughters, April and Christine, back to the house from the motel, presumably to kill them. The Warrens and Roger follow, knowing they must exorcise Carolyn in order to save the girls, themselves, and Carolyn.

Ed and Roger drag Carolyn kicking and screaming to the front door from inside the house, where they try to take her to the car, but as soon as she crosses the threshold of the door, her skin begins to darken into deep maroon bruises, especially on her arms and face, and it looks as though she might disintegrate into one giant wound. Lorraine tells the men that if they take Carolyn's body from the house, Bathsheba will kill her. Through the destruction of Carolyn's body, Bathsheba demonstrates that she now owns Carolyn, and just as she sacrificed her own child, intends for Carolyn to kill her daughters. A force rips Carolyn from the doorway while she screams, and she is thrown down into the basement. Ed and Roger struggle with her (along with a local cop who has come by), as she is suddenly much stronger than them all.

Lorraine covers her head with a bedsheet and they tie her to a chair. Ed urges Lorraine to leave the room so that he can perform the exorcism, as it was indicated earlier in the film that she

had recently had a mental breakdown from one of their former encounters with demons. Lorraine refuses, saying that "God brought them together" for this purpose. They perform the exorcism, during which Carolyn's skin pales and cracks, her eyes turn to a sickly green, and she vomits so much blood that her lips become indistinguishable beneath the red fluid. She escapes the chair to chase down her daughter April, who is hiding underneath the house, and holds her down, preparing to stab her with scissors, when Ed yells out "Bathsheba!" which causes Carolyn to turn, and her appearance alters once again to that of a centuries-old woman with the same sickly green eyes, grey and decaying skin, fried and thin hair, and the guttural, boisterous scream.

Carolyn physically becomes, in this moment, the witch that possesses her, but her appearance returns to that of her disintegrating self once Lorraine gains control once again, telling her, "This is your daughter!" She speaks to Carolyn through the rage of possession, reminding her of a fond memory of a day on the beach with her family, which allows her to overcome Bathsheba's control, and Carolyn breaks into a sob as she becomes--physically and mentally--herself again.

In Creed's discussion of psychoanalysis and abject theory, she focuses on the ways the body of a mother informs the body of her infant, whom she cares for and teaches. When a mother becomes possessed, her body is a "rejection of this corporeal mapping and symbolic order" (38). This rings particularly true in *The Conjuring,* where both Bathsheba and her victim Carolyn attack their own children, and their bodies are presented as hideously old (if not simply dead), deteriorating, and, in Carolyn's case, excremental. The abjection here lies in a state of the rebellion of female flesh that exists within and outside of the woman herself, and Carolyn's bloody vomiting during her exorcism represents the "evil comes [that] from within" (Creed, 38-42).

Carolyn has become abject in the form of pollution, both in the pollution (excrements like vomit and blood) her now-possessed body creates and also the pollution of the house *into* her body, though, I would argue that the evil existed previously nowhere inside of Carolyn before the possession. Carolyn's body, instead of inherently being abject, becomes abject with the invasion of Bathsheba and the external changes the possession brings. Arnold defines the Good Mother in horror as a character rooted in nurture and devotion, someone who often "carries out the masochistic fantasy of self-sacrifice" (41).

Carolyn certainly represents said Good Mother, as she is patient and engaged with her children before she becomes possessed, playing games with them and consoling them, and it is during her actual exorcism that the memory of how much she loves her children overpowers the demonic force. The Good Mother, Carolyn, climatically challenges the film's Bad Mother, Bathsheba, by enduring pain and possession to save her children while the other readily sacrifices her own. Roger never has to be a Good Father, however, because as Arnold notes in her chapter, for the father figures in horror, "such self-sacrifice is not required" (41).

Carolyn was most easily invaded mentally and physically because of her womanhood, which mirrors Bathsheba's (in that it is defined by how she performs motherhood), and Carolyn overcame this invasion due to being the Good Mother. Carolyn instantly feels uneasy in the house, complaining of its cold temperature, and later telling her husband, Ed, and Lorraine that "something horrible" was happening. Lili Taylor was 46 at the time of filming, as was Ron Livingston, though the deterioration of her body aligns correlatively with her possession, beginning with the bruises, and then the pallid, bloodied mess she becomes during the exorcism itself. She must become as horrific and ancient as Bathsheba in order to combat the evil, and then release herself from that possession. Even after the exorcism, Carolyn is weak, tired, and sickly

looking. These residual effects further link the destruction of the body during possession to that of illness, or even aging itself. Perhaps, then, this is one of several components that instill fear in the audience as they observe Carolyn's behavior.

Berenstein notes that the characters of horror are terrorized in the narratives in order to "dislodge some of American culture's most treasured possessions, including heterosexual matrimony, the law, medicine, and science" (3). However, horror resolves these threats to culture by the plot's end, with an eerily ambiguous concluding image (like an inexplicably open music box in *The Conjuring)* that promises that order can once again be disrupted. Carolyn is the matriarch and the fabric of the American nuclear family that the film fractures before sewing back together again. The comfort, then, in the ending of *The Conjuring,* lies in Carolyn's power to banish Bathsheba, not for herself, but through her primary role as a caregiver. The film exploits the female role of motherhood as intrinsic to their drastic corrosion during possession and also its necessity to restore safe and proper order in society. The lingering discomfort of the narrative lies in the opening music box, one that belonged to a ghost of the house, as it suggests that mothers like Carolyn will have their weaknesses preyed upon again and another possession will, somewhere somehow, take place.

The Aging Mother's Legacy in *Hereditary*

Hereditary begins with the funeral of a family's matriarchal figure, where Annie tells the guests that her mother had was an impossibly difficult person to read, with "private rituals, private friends, private anxieties." Meanwhile, her special needs elementary-aged daughter Charlie sits in a pew, sketching her mother as an ugly cartoon, with, intentionally or not, gnashing teeth. Toni Collette, who was 46 at the time of filming, looks spent and older than she

does in any other role, bearing no makeup (or makeup designed to look like no makeup) with heavy bags under her eyes. She stands next Gabriel Byrne, who plays her husband Steve, and who was 68 at the time of filming, and their age gap, though not uncommon in Hollywood's casting of older men and younger women together, accentuates her drained look. This moment foreshadows a connection Charlie has with her mother, and her mother's mother. Charlie studies the body of her grandmother as she lies in a casket, utterly colorless and lifeless, even her clothes matching the same light beige of her wrinkled skin. Annie's mother, we will later learn, was the commander of a Hell-worshipping cult group who practiced dark magic in order to secure Annie's family as sacrificial pawns. Charlie is central to this plot.

Charlie takes her grandmother's death hard. She curls up in bed after the funeral, silently and stoically, and Annie attempts to console her, telling her "You know you were her favorite, right?" Charlie was, indeed, noticeably the grandmother's favorite, at least through the flashback narrative offered by Annie. In one scene, we see Annie, a visual artist, working on one of her tiny, wooden dioramas in which she creates the scene of her mother trying to take away Charlie as a baby to nurse her with her own breast. In another scene, in a therapy group Annie joins to cope with her mother's death, she tells her peers that she and her mother were mostly estranged, but when she gave birth to Charlie, Annie "gave [her mother] her daughter." We are unsure if she means the literal handing over of Charlie to be breastfed by her grandmother or something more metaphorical. However, Annie's excruciating guilt and discomfort surrounding this relationship is clear. The distrust the audience is urged to feel towards Annie's mother materializes with the realization of the dead woman's matriarchal scheme to weaponize Charlie to carry out witchcraft.

The first several scenes function as a grief routine, teasing out the drabness and monotony of going through a devastating loss, such as that of a parent. Annie tries to focus on work again. Peter (Alex Wolff), Annie's oldest son, and Charlie head back to school. Then, Peter drags Charlie along to a high school party, per Annie's request, which results in a climactic car accident. Peter leaves Charlie alone to go smoke weed, and then has to rush her to a hospital when she accidentally consumes nuts (she is highly allergic) from a piece of cake. While Peter intensely speeds down a two-lane road, Charlie sticks her head out of the backseat window, gasping for air, when her face collides with a light pole at 90 miles per hour and she is decapitated. Peter, in utter shock and denial about what has happened, slowly drives home, parks the car in the driveway with his little sister's body, bloody and headless, in the backseat. The next several scenes visually focus on Peter's frozen and perilous face but emphasize the sounds of Annie screaming and moaning ferociously as she discovers the body in the car. This incident ignites Annie's dramatic downfall.

Annie's possession manifests itself as a process of grief, during which she slowly and intensely withdraws from her family and her work, and bursts into moments of hysteria over the death of her daughter. She becomes, through this possession-grief metamorphosis, a monster. Possessed mothers, as we learned from *The Devil Inside* and *The Conjuring*, are bad ones, at least until they stop being possessed. Annie is no exception, though her character poses a nuanced perception of accountability in conversation with possession, and further, womanhood in conversation with innate violence. *Hereditary* departs from the type of female possession displayed in *The Conjuring* and *The Devil Inside,* in which mother is totally depleted by demonic possession or mother overcomes demonic possession for her children's sake. Annie is possessed

and becomes violent, though it is nearly impossible to tell which parts of her Bad Motherhood are inherited from possession and which parts were inherent due to unseen, hereditary things.

Annie's possession is staggered, subtle at times, and manifested in the ways she talks about her life in the past tense. For example, Annie has a sleepwalking problem, and describes how she once, when her children were younger, woke up having poured lighter fluid all over her sleeping son and herself, and lit a match. "I blew it out immediately, I mean, *immediately,"* she says. Yet this intrinsic desire to harm her son repeats itself during another sleepwalking episode which takes place inside of her own dream during the film. In the scene, Peter wakes up to her standing over him at night. In reality, that night at dinner, they had just had a huge argument in which Annie had screamed at Peter. In the dream, she admits to Peter that she never wanted to give birth to him, and attempted miscarriages, but nothing worked. As soon as the words leave her mouth, she claps a hand to her face, astonished at what she has said, as though someone else said it for her. Peter breaks down crying, yelling at her over and over "You tried to kill me!" until she wakes up in a panic, back to reality.

The night progresses with Annie forcing Peter and Steve to assist her as she contacts Charlie in the afterlife. Steve is incredulous and irritated. Peter is confused. Annie successfully gets Charlie's spirit into the room through a Ouija board and candles, and even embodies her, calling out "Mom? Mom?" as though she were Charlie herself. Steve and Peter, in this moment, are horrified, unsure if Annie has completely lost her mind or if she has actually summoned the dead. Steve sends Peter sobbing off to bed, and confronts Annie, demanding to know why she insists on frightening their son. Annie manically and quickly tries to tell Steve that she loves him but she understands now that she is a curse for her family, implying that she now fully

understands the supernatural influence of her mother and the inevitability that she will sacrifice her own children as the ritual insists.

She decides, in a self-sacrificial role of the Good Mother, to kill herself and severe the curse that will eventually kill Peter, too, in the name of Satan. Annie tries to throw Charlie's journal in the fire, which we understand to be a powerful relic holding the curse and therefore an object that, if destroyed, could kill Annie, as she is the embodiment of this curse. As soon as she tosses the notebook into the fireplace, Steve, instead, catches on fire and burns to death in the living room. Annie cannot save herself, nor can she save her family. The cult led by Annie's mother has possessed her in a way far more powerful than motherly love, and they will succeed in killing the whole family to satisfy their satanic sacrifice.

Peter comes into the living room and realizes his father is now dead. He then looks up and sees Annie levitating to the ceiling, who has now become expressionless and fully enveloped by the possession which now totally erases any life inside of her. Peter, either out of a desperate tactic to get away from his mother or to commit suicide, violently and fatally flings himself out a window. Then, he reawakens on the grass outside, though he is no longer Peter--it is now Charlie inside of Peter's body. Peter's tongue clicks--a tick that Charlie used to do over and over when she was alive.

Peter (Charlie) walks calmly across the yard and goes inside of the family's tree house where his grandmother and mother's decapitated bodies lay in a bowing position on the floor. There is a group of naked and mostly elderly people--other members of the cult--bowing down behind them. They are praying to Peter (Charlie). A woman tells her that she is now King Paimon, a king of Hell, who had to be inside the physical vessel of a man, which is why her embodiment of Peter was necessary.

This film, as convoluted and layered as its ending may be, is intentional in its positioning of evil motherhood as more powerful than good motherhood, and death as more powerful than youth, or even life. Annie's motherhood, as well her own mother's motherhood, is depicted through time as a violent and inescapable cycle.

These films conflate womanhood (or even personhood) with motherhood, possession with aging, and aging motherhood with illness and violence. They depict women who harbor evil within them and that evil threatens children and men around them. Clover tells us that "satanic possession is gendered feminine even when the portal is male" (72). This could not be more exact in the case of *Hereditary*, where Annie, her mother, and her daughter all participate to rid the family of Steve and Peter in order to achieve a satanic ritual. Annie, whose slow demise can be seen in her attitude but also in her dull, tired look as a middle-aged mother, is merely an apparatus to breakdown, inhabit, and then use to kill by her own mother. Aging matriarchy and self-serving motherhood function as threats to humanity in the film. Subtextually, I would argue this theme resides in all three films analyzed within this chapter.

Xavier Aldana Reyes remarks that theorists like Creed have provided important scholarship in terms of shedding light on subtext in horror. However, he also insists that, more simply, one could argue for a "masochistic pleasure in the projection of the self onto the victim body" (245). *The Devil Inside, The Conjuring,* and *Hereditary* center on possessed characters: older mothers whose mental weaknesses allows the invasion of a foreign power which threatens the lives of everyone around them, especially children. I agree with the suggestion of Creed and Reyes that the maternal body--in its most deteriorated state--represents a fear that is intense and also universal. There is something particularly unnerving about an older woman, someone with theoretically very little physical power, to destroy so many with so little effort. Perhaps this is

because we expect women to be weak and further weaken with age, but certainly to never use what power they do have to hurt others. In horror, these expectations are thwarted.

As we move further from *The Exorcist* and postmodern horror into the new era, horror has become more explicitly perverse, lavishing in the carnality it is to watch a woman such as Annie or Carolyn or Maria self-harm, attack children, and rot before our eyes. Reyes remarks that "fear and disgust are not always constructed around the image or notion of the monster" (248), but sometimes, that is exactly what fear is about--especially when that image is a repulsive mother.

Body (and Mind) Horror: Old Women Who've Lost Their Minds

The second chapter dissects the visual gore of the possessed female body accompanied by narratives on aging motherhood. Through the lens of physical deterioration, these newer films of the last ten years employ middle-aged motherhood as a vehicle through which they can tell stories of inexplicable evil and violence. However, the occult films of chapter two obsess over the transformation of the possessed person's body, but even more so, fixate on the effects of the possessed person's harm done unto others, particularly men. Those films are charged with contempt for female sexuality, motherly manipulation of children, and the aging and sickly female body as demonstrated through the archetypical display of possession in women.

This last chapter is concerned with films which construct elderly women (women in their 80s and 90s, maybe late 70s) as a focus of body horror, a subgenre which subsumes an obsession with the destruction of the human body. Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz, in "Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror," writes that body horror, which "showcases often graphic violations of the human body," is a trope of the genre which "finds strength in the way it goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function" (161-162). In some ways, all horror contains aspects of body horror, though I will utilize contemporary horror's adoption of this specification to insist that some films exploit old female bodies in a way that is unique to the subject of exploitation. Some films create very little characterization of a monster other than the grotesqueness of her own body and the physical violence she's willing to inflict on those bodies around her. These narratives are, in terms of female monstrosity in horror, the most visually-driven films.

This chapter focuses on *Drag Me to Hell* (Raimi, 2009), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Robitel, 2014), and *The Visit* (Shyamalan, 2015) to analyze the relationship between decaying female bodies and the violence they cause and endure. The senior female monsters of these films occupy a space within body horror which uses their bodies as both weapons and spectacles in order to carry out gory acts of brutality. Their personhood becomes dismembered from their physical selves. All of these films, while displaying compulsively brutal scenes which focus on their appearances, exhibit women whose behavior and personas are as extreme and frightening as what they look like. While the word "possessed" might seem the easiest fit for this category of films due to the women's demonic and inhuman behavior, I would argue that these films are void of the tropes related specifically to Satanism, Christianity/Catholicism, or exorcisms. They are not, in simplest terms, occult films. Instead, these women exhibit physical and emotional othering in which they do not connect in the most basic, human way with those around them, making their cruelty all the more frightening and relentless.

Unlike the overbearing, aging/dead mother characters of the first chapter, such as Norma Bates, and the demonically possessed mothers of the second chapter, like Carolyn Perron, these women are defined by their lack of motherly or grandmotherly roles, and thusly, lack of relatability to horror audiences who've been historically conditioned to identify women with maternity, as seen by the earlier chapters. Mrs. Ganush (Lorna Raver) of *Drag Me to Hell* has no interpersonal relationships within the movie other than that with her granddaughter and only exists to torment the protagonist and cast people off to Hell through her magic. Deborah Logan (Jill Larson) of *The Taking of Deborah Logan* has a grown daughter, but due to her dementia which morphs into full blown psychosis and violent outbursts, Deborah's relationship with her daughter is reduced to one of unfamiliarity between mother and child. Sarah, her daughter, now

cares for Deborah like a child, and the reversal of roles narratively erases Deborah's maternity. Nana (Deanna Dunagan) in *The Visit* is presented as a grandmother to the protagonist children, but they had never met her before the visit, and the children understand her to be estranged from their mother. However, we learn that Nana is an imposter of the children's real grandmother, and so, even in her falsity, she is no maternal figure. In each of these films, a woman is introduced as a maternal or grandmotherly figure, but we learn through vicious, antisocial, and erratic behavior that none of them earn redemption or the right to these familial roles.

They are characters who, due to their savagery and supernatural capabilities, have been stripped of maternity, if not womanhood (and I argue that the two function synonymously within this genre). These women are not meant to be relatable or recognizable, which is further perpetuated by their old age, which is what makes them such excellent villains. Pinedo argues that "the monster's body is marked by the disruption of categories" and preys upon the audience's inherent aversion to old age, especially that which is defined by femininity. Kathleen Woodward discusses Western philosophy rooted in gerontophobia in "Instant Repulsion: Decrepitude, The Mirror Stage, and the Literary Imagination," arguing that indeed the foundation of a repulsion towards the decrepit body is rooted in "the self-conscious knowledge of death that is given to us by language. Death is *embodied* in decrepitude" (47). Because of their age, these women are unexpected wielders of great strength and violence, and their semblances connote the aversion audiences are meant to feel towards them.

The Old Woman's Body as Shown Through *The Shining*

The Shining (Kubrick, 1980) is by no means the first film to utilize an old woman's body as a source of fear, but the infamous Room 237 scene certainly introduced a canonical use of an

old woman whose changing, aging body reveals her deceptive and malicious nature. In the film, Jack (Jack Nicholson), a failing writer, has come to a hotel resort in a remote area of Colorado with his wife and young son to be the winter caretaker and to start writing again. Although Jack and his family are alone in the hotel, his son Danny (Danny Lloyd) begins to have visions of two young girls who had been murdered years before in the hotel. Through cabin fever, the eeriness of the hotel, or both, Jack begins to drink too much and sleep too little. The scene of Room 237 marks one of the first hallucinations (or ghost encounters) which eventually drives Jack into insanity.

In the scene, Jack enters Room 237 of the hotel after having had quite a few drinks (served by a ghost/hallucinated bartender) and discovers an attractive, young, naked woman in the bathtub. They watch each other but say nothing. She carefully steps out the tub, parading herself slowly towards him, and after admiring her, the two begin to passionately kiss and embrace. Then, Jack looks up at her back in the mirror to reveal that her shape has changed into that of a much older woman-- skin wrinkled, flesh heavier and sagging. Her skin is covered in puss-filled greenish-grey sores, like she has been decaying in water for some time. The shots cut back and forth between Jack backing out of the room, horrified, then her (a now much older or perhaps dead woman) sitting under water in the bathtub, covered in these decaying spots, and her walking towards him in the room with her arms outstretched, smiling to show her toothless mouth.

This woman is a decoy, a taunting mechanism, maybe even of Jack's sickly mind. The image disgusts Jack, and therefore, is designed to disgust viewers, both in its exploitation of a naked, oozing female body and in the way she initially attracts and then repels Jack. He touches her back, shoulders, and face. He kisses her mouth, running his hands all along her nude body

while he does so. It is only once he sees the reflection of her in his arms in the mirror does he see her flesh begin to age. Her back begins to sag into pale, loose skin rolls beneath his palms and his face contorts in abhorrence. This exchange constitutes one of the core properties of the horror genre defined by Pinedo which is that horror "transgresses and violates boundaries" (17), especially those boundaries established by societal norms. Jack behaved, socioculturally, correctly in his instant sexual attraction to the naked, young woman. The realization that the woman has aged to the point of corrosion reverses these sociocultural expectations of Jacks, or any man's, attraction. Her body is not only no longer appealing in its oldness, but is also unappealing for its infectious sores, representing disease and death. The lines between sex and morbidity become blurred right before his eyes.

I reference this scene not to investigate the relationship between young men and old women (a forbidden relationship, clearly), but to exemplify the ways in which this representation of women succeeds in making an audience feel betrayed, disgusted, and afraid. Though it could be argued that *The Shining* is not a body horror film, this scene indubitably is. The changing female body in this scene and many others of post-classical horror speaks to what feminist theorist Rosemary Betterton notes in "Louise Bourgeois, Ageing, and Maternal Bodies," as "the ambivalent responses of fear and loathing" provoked by aging female bodies, specifically, as I will investigate in the following films, maternal ones (27). The old, nasty woman does not actually harm Jack, or even threaten him. This woman exists only for this brief moment, so she never speaks to the theme of maternity, however, her image is worth inspecting since women in horror, because of their bodies and accompanying violence, are frequently dehumanized and isolated from the film's society. Women, when the focus of horror, take form as the Final Girl or

the monstrous "Other," with few exceptions. It is as though their looks of aging women monsters are meant to emphasize that they are too scary to be real.

Mrs. Ganush as the Anti-Fairy Godmother

A film from chapter one, *Carrie,* serves to usefully situate womanhood as a bifurcated phenomenon which contextualizes horror's fascination with elderliness affixed to evil. In her article "Horror, Femininity, and Monstrous Puberty," Shelley Stamp makes several poignant remarks about aging womanhood and how this identity comes to be othered in the horror landscape. When discussing *Carrie,* Stamp states that "proper femininity is seen as a hopeless charade to cover the natural horror of matured women" (339). She refers to the 30-something-year-old gym teacher, Miss Collins (Betty Buckley), who disciplines Carrie's bullies and attempts to console Carrie after she starts menstruating unexpectedly, telling her that blossoming womanhood is a natural process. Margaret White, we know, attempts to indoctrinate the opposite sentiment in her daughter, blaming her for sinning once she realizes Carrie has reached mature womanhood. Miss Collins, in her youthfulness and alacrity, represents this charade of proper femininity that Margaret White's older, pious, feminine-hating character spurns.

This understanding of charade femininity and "real" femininity could be applied to the image of the woman from Room 237 in *The Shining,* whose youth disguises her true form until Jack has already lost himself in her embrace. This perceived relationship between false femininity--a youthful, attractive facade--and mature womanhood, an ugly truth, defines the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist of *Drag Me to Hell*. Mrs. Ganush, said antagonist, is the caricature of an old grandmotherly figure: she wears a bonnet and shawl, shuffles around with a hunchback, and has greying hair and false teeth. The conflict ensures once

she meets the protagonist, Christine, a perky blonde working as a banker. Mrs. Ganush, whose accent and name indicate that she might be of an Arabic or otherwise Middle Eastern descent, is instantly made foreign when contrasted with the warm, beautiful, white American Christine[5]. Mrs. Ganush is so impersonal and sequestered that we understand nothing about her and therefore never expect her not be a real grandmotherly character--or a real human-- at all. Her terrorism and her Otherness solely define her.

Drag Me to Hell begins with a scene of a Hispanic family going to the home of a Hispanic medium and asking her to save their ailing son. He has "stolen a necklace from a gypsy woman" and though the medium tries to save the boy from the gypsy woman's spiritual, incorporeal wrath, the floor consumes him in a bed of fire and he plummets downward the core of the earth in a conglomeration of flashy special effects and loud score. The curse she uses swallows the boy in the fire, and as the medium explains, drags him to Hell. In the next scene, we meet the protagonist, Christine Brown (Alison Lohman), a bank loan officer who is competing against another man in her office for a promotion to assistant manager's position, which has required her to become more aggressive in her decision making at work. The plot begins when Christine denies Mrs. Ganush, the decrepit little woman with rotten dentures and a frightening false blue eye, a loan on her house as a way to illustrate her assertiveness to her boss.

However, the denial humiliates Mrs. Ganush, who falls to her knees in the bank and begs Christine to extend her loan on her mortgage. She tells Christine that she can never live in nursing home, that she would never burden her granddaughter by moving in, and that "the sickness took [her] eye." Christine, though apologetic, remains conscious of her boss watching,

[5] This film is one of the few instances noted in the thesis where racial difference plays into antagonism, and the ethnic ambiguity of the villain here only plays into her Otherness. Although this thesis is heavily populated with white women, I recognize the weaponization, or otherwise exclusion, of minorities in American horror cinema.

and stands her ground, refusing to help the woman with a loan. Her grandmotherly and elderly excuses fail to persuade the young protagonist. Mrs. Ganush launches at Christine's throat like a rabid animal and security comes in to pry her away. Just as we know from Mrs. Ganush's necklace that the young boy had tried to steal from her, Christine robbed Mrs. Ganush of dignity, which ensues the woman to curse Christine with three days of supernatural torment followed by a final descent into Hell to burn for all of eternity.

The film instantly establishes itself as body horror once it shows the first close ups of Mrs. Ganush in the bank. Her skin is greying and spotted, her fingernails are dirty, long and jagged. She coughs up a yellow mucus-like substance and spits out and then re-inserts her false, blackened teeth. The very sight of Mrs. Ganush establishes her in opposition (and in the losing position) to the beautiful, sunny-blonde, youthful Christine. Her erratic outburst after being denied the loan reinforces her hideous, decaying features as representative of the evil she harbors, as does the following scene in which she attacks Christine in her car, ripping her earring out, throwing a cinder block at her, and attempting to choke her.

Arnold explains the image of the destructed body by reminding the reader that the abject, insisting that it "includes all things that serve as a reminder of the fragility of the body: corpse, blood, or the animal" (14). Mrs. Ganush's body is animalistic when she is furious, attacking with sudden violent movements (like when she emerges suddenly in Christine's car to choke her), but it is also decaying, oozing, and sickly. She represents of all that which the body can do to rebel.

Undoubtedly Mrs. Ganush, in both her abnormal acts of hostility and her degeneracy represents this theory of abjection. She exhibits the brittleness of the aging body as well as the fragility of the youthful body (Christine and the boy's) after she attacks them. Both Christine and Mrs. Ganush manifest abjection through grotesque imagery during scenes of confrontation. They

fight for blood, clawing at each other, lunging at each other's throats, and in Mrs. Ganush's case, swallowing the other whole.

Alana Prochuck argues in "Hell is Older People: Aging as the Ultimate Cinematic Horror" that "Mrs. Ganush is vilified for being both too helpless and too powerful" (67). The same could be said of all elderly women in this chapter, whose illness or oldness (sometimes, the two function synonymously) shocks the viewers when they realize the women are indeed perpetrators of large-scale violence. Christine, likewise, becomes punished for her polar traits of submissiveness, or even weakness, and then aggressive vengefulness.

Christine's boss and male coworker ask her to bring them sandwiches with condescending smirks, and yet she is asked to become more assertive at work, comparatively to men in her occupation. She tries to be likeable and proper enough for her boyfriend's mother, who hates her, yet the cake she bakes for their dinner results in a bug infestation, which Christine at first hallucinates and then, actually sees, as bugs begin to emerge from the dessert inexplicably. She is condescended to at work, alienated by her future mother-in-law, and denied credibility from her own boyfriend. Christine "cannot escape her own oppression," Prochuck argues, just as she cannot escape Mrs. Ganush (67).

Even, in the end, when she viciously digs up Mrs. Ganush's grave to try to end the curse, Christine is not rewarded for her initiative. The old, evil woman with the horrific appearance who tortures Christine, and the Hispanic medium and the Hispanic psychic Christine seeks out to help her all represent, in many ways, the Black Magic discussed by Clover. They represent the illogical occultism that cannot be overcome by the skeptical White Science, represented here by Christine's boyfriend, who insists that she is only traumatized after her assault at the bank, and that she needs rest in order to get back to normal.

Mrs. Ganush's character exploits sickliness and decrepitude to portray her evil supernatural powers, which allows the film to create a narrative of body horror which equates a deteriorating female body with the ultimate destruction of a young, healthy female body (and mind). The woman, if not entirely demonic, is at least sociopathic in her wielding of hellish curses, and her only aim in the film is to get her house back, and then to banish Christine to hell. When Christine goes to visit Mrs. Ganush's granddaughter, she is greeted with scorn, and taken to see Mrs. Ganush physically dead at a wake downstairs, and the granddaughter chastises Christine, blaming her for the old woman's unhappiness and death. This is the first scene in which Mrs. Ganush is positioned within a grandmotherly role and defined by a family member's love/grief for her, though, as a corpse in the scene, Mrs. Ganush never fulfills that relationship for us to see. Mrs. Ganush comes back to life (if she was even mortal to begin with) only to petrify the protagonist more and to carry out her curse.

Mrs. Ganush strangely appears in Christine's house in the following scenes, more than once attacking her with objects lying around and vomiting into her mouth, ripping her hair out, and at one point, shapeshifting into a handkerchief which forces itself down Christine's throat (but Christine saves herself by vomiting it up). These moments of explicit body horror engage with the limitlessness of Mrs. Ganush's physical form and the ingestion and regurgitation Christine must go through the get the woman out and away.

Mrs. Ganush not only wants to harm Christine, but to be inside of her, perhaps even become a part of her. Creed's analysis of Kristeva's abject explains that in horror, the pollution of woman's body can be "excremental, threatening identity from the outside" or "menstrual, threatening the body from within" (12). These intimate and repulsive interactions between the

two women display the excremental pollution of Mrs. Ganush's evil (as foreboded by the close up of her coughed-up mucus) into Christine's pure body, which gets sent to Hell anyway.

The Reversal of Motherhood with Deborah Logan

Arnold discusses the ways melodrama and horror alike situate mothers in positions of antagonism. Arnold states that the Bad Mother of horror corresponds to the Bad Mother of melodrama "but her cultural origins reach back to the very foundations of civilization (in early myths of the ancient world)" (112). The postmodern films studied in this thesis are riddled with Bad Mothers, and Mrs. Ganush is classified as the first aging monster who is not defined by maternity. *The Taking of Deborah Logan* features a Bad Mother character whose age and mental illness conjoin to erase her maternal characterization, but also her humanity.

Alzheimer's and senility force Deborah Logan into becoming the monster, though we never see her detached from and existing without this monstrousness. Like *Drag Me to Hell*, this film relies on body horror and the abject exploitation of Deborah Logan (Jill Larson) to force the audience to come face to face with the grotesqueness of a dying female body. Like *Drag Me to Hell*, this film conflates aging womanhood and maniacal behavior so that Deborah Logan's physicality works just as much as her demonic actions to scare the viewer. Each are equally frightening.

The film functions as a mockumentary (a mock documentary, or a fiction film in the form of a documentary) in which a psychology student working towards her PhD arrives to the home of Deborah Logan to chronicle the progression of her late-onset Alzheimer's disease. It begins with a voiceover and stock images, the last of which is an elderly woman in a hospital, paralyzed entirely with her mouth gaping and eyes wide open. This lingering image of an incapacitated,

lifeless Alzheimer's patient with a frightening expression confirms intentions of the documentarians, but also the tone of the film. The degenerative disease is instantly visually defined by and associated with dying women. The essence of Alzheimer's encapsulates body horror, through the ways it "finds strength and goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function in biological species" (Cruz, 162).

When first interviewed in the film, Deborah appears with her adult daughter, Sarah, who has come home to take care of her mother and supervise the documentary. Deborah, at first, is frail but still has some color in her hair and bright clothes, enough to display her at the peak of life before the narrative chronicles the slow demise of her body and mind through the film's narrative. Even in her first moments, Deborah exhibits a certain distance from reality. She stares into the camera with glazed over eyes. While looking at things in the house, Sarah has to remind Deborah of memories like her visit to Germany.

Alzheimer's, here, is presented as an absence of memory but also of the self, a loss of identification, and it becomes so that the audience then cannot identify with Deborah. The next several scenes enhance Deborah's strangeness by showing her holding a snake inexplicably in the garden, and later, screaming at a cameraman about her lost gardening spade, and her anger is so pronounced that the cameraman climbs onto the kitchen counter trying to get away from the vicious woman. Alzheimer's then becomes aggressive, and soon, violent, not just in Deborah's frenzies but in the rapid aging of and injury done to her physical body.

Clover writes about occult films and their focus on physical changes, stating that the filmmakers' interests lie not in the female body, necessarily, but the "transformation the body prompts in the male psyche" (88). While there certainly exists a focus of others' horrified reactions to the deterioration of an antagonized figure, I would argue that, at least in these films,

there is not just an interest in the female body, but an obsession with it. As Deborah Logan's Alzheimer's progresses, so does the atrophy of her body.

She is found by her daughter in her bedroom, scratching at her wrists until the flesh peels off and she drips with blood. Deborah peels her skin repeatedly in scenes: several times when she scratches at her neck and wrists to the point where she shed the flesh like a snake to reveal the bloody underneath. Her hair becomes more brittle, and we can see her waif-like body she has when she strips off her nightgown. In one of the final scenes, while Deborah has kidnapped a young cancer patient from the hospital to which she was admitted, Sarah and the filmmaker Mia catch Deborah with her mouth wrapped around the girl's head, like an inhuman, impossible depiction of a snake swallowing prey whole.

After a strange dinner in which Deborah reveals that a local serial killer himself was murdered (by whom, we can only assume she means herself), Sarah finds her mother on the bathroom floor vomiting up dirt and worms. The ghost of this killed serial killer, we learn by the end, is inhabiting Deborah's body in order to kidnap and kill the young child from the hospital. In this respect, the film has occult themes, and Deborah is understood to have become a supernatural extension of someone other than herself. She is herself, Deborah Logan, but also the ghost of the man who kills young girls, and the Alzheimer's version of herself. We only know her as the supernatural ghost and as a gnarly personification of mental illness, but never just as herself. Deborah was diseased before this possession, and her mind, because of its warped state, had already been eliminated, so her character cannot redemptively return to a state of motherhood or personhood.

Senility and False Maternity in *The Visit*

Mom (Kathryn Hahn), who has no name other than "Mom," is the working single mother of young Becca (Olivia DeJonge) and Tyler (Ed Oxenbould) in yet another mockumentary style film, *The Visit.* She's the first person you see on screen--in the middle of an interview conducted by her 13-year-old daughter, and explains how their father, a much older man whom she met in a Starbucks and who later left their family, is the reason she stopped speaking to her parents at the age of 19. Becca and Tyler, though they clearly are close with their mother, seem deeply affected by their father's rejection and absence. In search of a familial connection, and to better understand their mother, the children set off (to Mom's discomfort) to meet their grandparents and film the encounter. While they're gone, Mom plans to take a cruise vacation with her new boyfriend.

Becca and Tyler hop off the train in a rural Northeastern town and are greeted by Nana (Deanna Dunagan) and Pop Pop (Peter McRobbie), who look, in simplest terms, like regular grandparents. Nana, in particular, has wiry grey hair, baked goods in hand, and sports a long skirt and a large sweater and a handkerchief tied just under her chin. When they get to the house, after stiff but kind introductions, she ties on an apron and begins hardily cooking for the children. Soon, Becca and Tyler catch Nana pacing around the first floor of the house in her nightgown (one that very much resembles that of Deborah Logan), wailing and making other strange, inhuman sounds. They see her violently scratch at the doors like an animal and inexplicably projectile vomit. When prompted to explain, Pop Pop tells the kids that she has dementia prompted by nightfall, and per instructions, the children should not leave their room after 9 P.M.

Nana's abjection, as mentioned earlier by Arnold's interpretation, is excremental (vomiting) but also animalistic (scratching and crawling). Nana's character, who was already a quiet one, becomes divorced from personhood in her barbaric behavior that the children were not

meant to see, but do anyway. Reyes suggests in "Beyond Psychoanalysis" that identification with characters who are physically undone in these films "is made because scopophilic pleasure happens at a sensual level, and then both the spectatorial and human body collapse" (246-247). Within this chapter, I argue that Nana's severance from humanity prevents us from identifying with her character in a psychological manner, so instead, the film evokes fear and fascination by "collapsing" the bodies of elderly women, making their physical selves disintegrate for the sake of spectatorship.

This sensual exploitation is enhanced in a later scene, when Nana joins in on a game of hide and seek without the children knowing. Becca and Tyler go underneath the house, going through the maze of the house's foundations, trying to catch each other. Nana suddenly appears, and begins chasing them around on hands and knees, until the children scramble out from underneath the house breathless and terrified. Becca and Tyler stare at her in horror once she reappears after them and then skips off, her dress ripped to reveal her naked backside. Towards the end of the film, Becca and Tyler catch her once more in the middle of the night scratching vigorously at the wall, except without any clothes on.

Why, then, do naked, oozing, elderly female bodies so often operate as the subject of body horror, when horror monsters, historically, have been known to keep their clothes on? Kathleen Woodward argues in "Instant Repulsion: Decrepitude, The Mirror Stage, and the Literacy Imagination," that "as we know, throughout Western history the elderly have been rejected as a class that consumes more than it produces" (54). Women, specifically, are Othered, and therefore they are no exception, in the notion that "Western society has repressed the ageing body" (44). Therefore, Pinedo teaches us in *Recreational Terror* that the monster of horror is always the "return of the repressed" (31).

When the body horror of Nana does not rule the narrative (nor the moments of body horror presented by Pop Pop such as the collection of dirty diapers discovered in the shed), the grandmother's disconcerting behavior does. The children catch her talking to herself while rocking in a chair, and she tells them that she has "the deep darkies" inside of her. We learn later that Nana, an imposter who (along with Pop Pop, the other imposter) has murdered Becca and Tyler's real grandparents after escaping the mental division of the local hospital. Nana, along with Pop Pop, is presumed to possess some kind of mental illness in addition to her senility, and so when she does things like tell Becca to climb inside of her oven, one can only assume it is "the deep darkies" inside of her that thirsts for homicide. Nana is characteristically reminiscent of the old witch of Hansel and Gretel fairytale, who captures two young siblings through deception and plans to eat them by baking them alive in an oven. Nana is a literary caricature, but she is also a representation of outrageous and dangerous behavior being dismissed as "old age" and senility by her husband.

Dolan argues that in Hollywood's current landscape, "very little has changed in representations of cronish old women of fairytale and fantasy genres-- the alignment of old age and evil still pertains-- while youth and age are in mutually exclusive opposition" (221). Nana's appealing quality as an old lady-- her position as loving grandmother-- barely excuses her strange and terrifying behavior. Down to her rural, frumpy clothes and constant baking, she mimics elderly womanhood to an archetypal degree, which makes more sense considering Nana is not really Nana, and in fact just a mentally ill patient who escaped and schemed to adopt the grandchildren as her own. She no longer becomes excused for her "senility," which is, in fact, mental illness, but also something perhaps much more sinister.

These body horror films engage in the physical exploitation of old age which functions simultaneously with a deviance from accepted maternal and social behavior and an intense display of violence. Deborah, Mrs. Ganush, and Nana carry their own individual facades which humanize them at first so that we have the doting grandmother of *The Visit*, the poor tenant of *Drag Me to Hell*, and the dying mother *The Taking of Deborah Logan.* Then, these sympathetic veneers melt away to reveal the true monstrous bodies on screen, bodies which carry out extreme violence and have extreme violence done unto them. The horror obsesses over aging female bodies, which often are stripped of their clothes and/or flesh, and the emphasis on physical sickliness aims to mimic a kind of mental illness clearly associated with this physical decline.

This chapter varies from its predecessors in that the female villains depicted in these films deviate from maternal roles--whether good or bad--and instead are denounced for their total lack of motherhood, which is to say in the horror genre, humanity. Arnolds notes that so much of feminist film theory emerged in the 1970s and permeated through the 80s and 90s, and as a result more horror films were made and more material centered on mothers (17). This deviation from the slasher craze of the late 20th century, then, perhaps speaks to the evolution of female monstrosity in horror film of the 2010s (though *Drag Me to Hell* was made in 2009).

Women are no longer to be feared because of their motherly roles, but instead, are to be feared because of what they look like and how separated from society they are. Lianne McLarty argues for the latter use of body horror, stating that "progressive horror need not abandon the body as a site of the horrific, but it needs to suggest that the body is monstrous not because of what it is but what is done to it" (276). This thesis has examined representations of femininity as seen through the lens of aging maternity and, at times, criticized postmodern horror cinema for its scrutiny of and contempt for the aging female body.

Yet, I recognize that horror, in all its subgenres and forms, loves gore. At the base of all violence within horror is the innate fear viewers have of violence done unto themselves, and the multiplex layering added to this violence informs other kinds of monstrosity that society can recognize. I do not propose we desert elderly or aging women as antagonistic figures, but rather, ask ourselves why we so commonly find enjoyment or provocation in watching the deterioration of mothers who are no longer needed by their children, or women who are never mothers at all.

Conclusion

This thesis grapples with the complexity of creating female monsters who are at once human and also disquieting, exotic, and unhinged. I argue that these characteristics are exhibited through a close examination of women's bodies as they exist outside the realm of youth and conventional attractiveness. Furthermore, the villains of these chapters violate societal expectations of the women they appear to be: mothers, wives, and grandmothers. Here, I argue that the fear elicited by these monstrous women within the context of contemporary horror revolves primarily around appearance and physical repulsion which is meant to reflect and enhance their violent behavior as bad mothers, or more generally in chapter three, bad women.

While most monsters of American horror cinema have been coded either nonhuman/animalistic (and therefore gender neutral) or brutal males, I argue that Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* pioneered a subgenre of aging women to supplement the violence usually seen from others. Barbara Creed states that "woman is represented as monstrous in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions," which reflects so many of the women of postmodern horror when posed as monsters (7). I have aimed to show exemplary monsters from the 1960s through the 2010s as to be inclusive and diverse across horror subgenres whose violence, ugliness, and fear have been defined by their (often aging) motherhood. I have also included women who have young children, who still may be in the context of early motherhood (elementary-aged children), and women who appear to have children or grandchildren and then are shown to act entirely independent of this role or not mothers/grandmothers.

Womanhood and maternity are often presented as synonymous in this thesis for the purpose that womanhood and maternity are often criticized and utilized to evoke fear in the

horror genre in interchangeable and codependent ways. The women of chapter one's films are defined by patriarchal notions of the usage and performativity of motherhood and how its excessiveness can be detrimental to the child. Arnold claims that within this discourse, the solution in these horror narratives is that "the mother must be repressed" in order for the child to find "normative subjectivity" and liberation (94). Here, woman as mother is repressed, but so is woman independent of her motherly roles. There is no separation between her vicious maternal grasp and herself as a woman.

Horror's repression of femininity, in both maternal and aging forms, sequesters women monsters away from designated normality so that they become illusory, fictitious figures without their own agency and personhood. Creed speaks out about the mythical representation of women in folklore, who, of course, dishevel normality and patriarchal order. These women are cursed beings who use their specifically female characteristics to execute control over male populations. As Creed states, "the witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of symbolic order" (76). This symbolic order, one, of course governed by male normality and a resistance to paganism, become disrupted when women of mystical backgrounds, who are often more in touch with nature than male peers, use their literal blood and flesh to wreak havoc. While depicted as beyond or lacking humanity, or perhaps even mythologized and animalistic, these women are primarily the outsider to society.

This thesis examines how women whose youth may be waning or diminished operate within postmodern horror as that implacable enemy to order. Throughout the chapters, I discussed Kristeva's theory of abjection and the excremental and pollutive facets of specific female monster's maternity or womanhood. I explore the dichotomy of the Final Girl versus the archaic mother within horror, and how they each exist without sexuality in differing ways: it

empowers the Final Girl, it assists in defining the archaic mother's dramatic downfall. Finally, I consider motherhood as a pluralism within horror for femininity, and, as surveyed in the third chapter, the older the woman, the less female and human she becomes.

Pinedo's *Recreational Terror* accesses horror through the understanding of why we enjoy the unraveling of rationality in this genre, and how women in particular come to enjoy a type of narrative which often mutilates or demonizes female bodies. Throughout the twentieth century history of horror hits, Pinedo suggests in her introduction, their narratives do not welcome logic, and anything disorienting and frustrating that can happen must happen. "Horror is the site of collapse and social upheaval," she states, though audiences throughout the decades find unremitting catharsis of one kind or another from watching (5).

Pinedo's philosophies centralize the implication of this horror feature for audiences, and that the people watching must also be discharged from the comfort of normalcy, and discover the satiating feeling associated with that experience. Particular to postmodern horror, Pinedo asserts that rationality becomes the implacable flaw of those characters who try to control their violent and disorienting surroundings, and that those who stupidly try to invent a solution will die (24). The ways in which horror displaces its characters allows for the viewers to similarly be displaced from their comfortable positions. The intention of these films is to eradicate the assuagement of logical based thinking as a way to eliminate threatening situations. The harder and less predictable the escape from the horror, the more frightening the movie.

Physical abhorrence of female villains in post-classical horror films consistently and graphically mirrors vindictiveness and hysteria of these women. The films thusly function as texts which inflate the role of motherhood as an indicator of personhood, as well as the

uselessness of and/or aversion to women who are aging or sickly-appearing. They look disgusting because of what they do, and they do what they do because they look disgusting.

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