

"UNDEAD CELLULITE": FEMINISM, WESTERN CULTURE & THE ZOMBIE

THESIS

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by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

From the moment I was delivered from my mother's womb with female genitalia, I have tried to be a woman. A large portion of this has consisted in masquerade and performance. As a child, I played dress up. As a teenager, I flitted from stereotype to stereotype trying to embody womanhood in myriad ways. As an adult, I have set goals for myself and done everything in my power to achieve them, but I feel no closer to understanding or realizing what it takes to be a woman now than I did at age five standing in front of the mirror in my mother's pretty, red stilettos.

There is no adequate definition of womanhood in our culture, not one that reflects or counsels on the reality of existing in a female body and certainly not of existing in a female mind. Our minds and our bodies have been bound and gagged by social constructions of femininity as ideal beauty. Ideal beauty, as it is used here, should be read as possessing all the correct forms of physical features, mental attributes and sexual expressions.

In body, we are meant to be "tall, thin, white, and

blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly 'perfect'" (Wolf, *BM* 1). In mind, we are meant to do "what's in the man's interest, the family's interests or society's interests, not [our] own" (Cantor 45). If we are not perfect (or if we can't even affect perfection) in all of these ways then, we will be punished at home, at work and in the world at large.

When I was a child, my mother was called to my school by a teacher who wanted to discuss my "behavioral problems." She was told that while the way I acted "would be fine for a little boy," I was not a little boy, but a young lady and as such my behavior was absolutely unacceptable. Needless to say, as the daughter of a staunch feminist, I knew that meeting signaled the end of my education at a private, Catholic school.

As an adult, I visited the sporting goods section of my local Wal-Mart to pick up some supplies for an upcoming camping trip. When I couldn't locate a needed item, I went to the department's abandoned customer service desk to await assistance. As I waited, three or four men also congregated anticipating help. When the employee in question appeared, he assisted these men and promptly vanished without so much as acknowledging my existence. I was livid. I went to the front of the store and asked to

speak to the manager on duty. When I had related to her what had transpired, she placidly suggested that, as a woman, I should get used to such treatment. I was so completely surprised by her response that I walked out of the store in a daze without so much as another word.

This doling out of punishment for the woman who is perceived to have failed at womanhood, who has not acted in accordance with vain attempts to achieve it, has many representations in popular culture. This work focuses on the way in which women are punished for their noncompliance in horror cinema through rape, torture, dismemberment and death, and on one unlikely film which stands alone in its genre to subvert this notion.

The first time a peer asked me what I intended to write my thesis on and I responded that I wanted to take a critical look at a film called *Zombie Strippers! (ZS!)*, the reaction I received was: "People like you are what's wrong with the Liberal Arts program." I was shocked, but firm in my belief of the merit of my undertaking. Horror may be a marginalized genre and the zombie may be a marginalized figure, but women too are marginalized in this society.

The fact is that the marginalized is still a part of culture and no less deserving of scholarly scrutiny for having been pushed to the fringes. To put it another way,

"horror films are not 'culturally pointless'; indeed, recent work in the philosophy of horror has mined the genre for rich cultural and philosophical insights" (Shaw 263). It is precisely this type of insight, a unique look at the cost of ideal beauty, that I saw being played out on the screen when I watched *ZS!* for the first time, but my interest in cinema didn't begin here.

I have always been not only a film fanatic, but also a hardcore horror junkie. And over time, I found I was not alone.

There is ample reason for philosophers to become interested in horror films, for they raise a number of complex and interrelated questions that lie at the heart of philosophical aesthetics...Our fascination with horror cinema, and the pleasures we take in it, is in the end simply a natural extension of the philosopher's inclination to wonder. (Schneider and Shaw vii-ix)

That would certainly explain my interest in horror as a student of literature and philosophy (or conversely, explain why I chose to study literature and philosophy).

Since my childhood, Halloween has always been my favorite holiday; not just because I get to become someone else for a few precious hours and indulge in the sweets I

forbid myself the rest of the year and all without the anxiety of choosing just the right gifts for my loved ones; it's how acceptable becomes the thrill of being frightened, frightening, transgressive.

As an adult, I helped conceptualize, build and run a haunted house for five consecutive years. During this time, I got to scare the living daylights out of scores of people of all ages, races, classes and genders who would descend upon the grounds, waiting literally hours, sometimes in severe inclement weather, for their turn to be terrified and amused. We would fabricate a story about a serial killer named Horace Haven who many years ago terrorized our community, claiming the lives of fifty-seven victims with a rubber chicken and a plastic spork. Before the laughter had completely died out, a chainsaw would start up behind them. Mothers would trample their own children, a whole bus of cheerleaders would wet their spankies, and fully grown men would squeeze my hand as if I alone could save their lives. Maybe we want to be punished.

Women certainly punish themselves through starvation, isolation and self-mutilation as we shall see in Part II: You Crack Me Up. This concept, grounded in and building upon the works of Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf, is a look at

the fractured state of feminine identity in contemporary culture. It documents the damaging ways in which girls are turned into women and the persistence of our social inequality with men.

Part III: "The Horror, the Horror"...Cinema examines women's roles in the horror genre at large and how they continue to reflect fractured femininity and social inequity. It also looks at the zombie film as a vehicle for political commentary, which seems to have omitted gender from its narrative.

Part IV: "How Hideous You Are" performs a close reading of *ZS!* as perhaps the only positive instance of the zombie body as a gendered text. The discourse of the film holds a mirror up to American culture in order to dispute the underlying assumptions that support social norms and to subvert the paradigm of ideal beauty.

## II. YOU CRACK ME UP

If I were to ask ten different women for their definition of feminism, I suspect that I would receive ten different answers. The meanings applied to this term are deeply personal and reflect the ideological camp to which an individual belongs. For the sake of simplicity, the definition used here will be the most widely accepted of these variegated definitions: that it is "a movement for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men" ("Feminism"). Another question that would elicit a wide range of responses is whether or not this movement has been successful. While some would argue that feminism has made very little progress toward its goals, others would boast of its near-complete success. Of the three realms of feminism described above, two have been adequately achieved, but the third and most important has been neglected. Educational and political equality are evident in this society, but social equality has been overlooked. This oversight is causing physical and psychological devastation to our culture as a whole, but particularly for women.

The evidence of great strides toward educational equality is easy to see. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, girls are doing as well as, and in many areas surpassing, their male counterparts. For example, in elementary and secondary education settings girls are far less likely than boys to repeat a grade, be diagnosed with a learning disability, use alcohol or drugs, be victimized by peers, and drop out of high school (Freeman 2-3). In the postsecondary educational arena, women now make up the majority of students enrolled and the majority upon whom bachelors and masters degrees are conferred (Freeman 9). This information reveals a successful narrowing of the gap between the quality and quantity of the education women are receiving in relation to males. While there is always room for improvement in any enterprise, these results are positive in the extreme, normative to what is still a recent memory to many women.

With educational equity satisfactorily addressed, is it reasonable to think that political equity will fare as well? According to a 2006 Gallup poll, the majority of Americans seem to believe that it does. In fact, six out of ten Americans are ready to see a woman in the White House (Jeffrey M. Jones). If America seems dedicated and

responsive to the struggle for educational and political equality of women with men, then why are women still relegated to the role of object and denied subject status? The answer is that while educational and political equality have technically been addressed, social equality has not, and the gaps that are left in the realms of education and politics would close with attention to this matter.

Where educational and political systems are by their nature social systems, how does one untangle the specifically social inequalities and accurately analyze their effects? Possibly the best way to approach such an undertaking is to explore the theories and responses of women who understand that they have been indoctrinated by this culture and who actively seek to expose the unreasonable standards to which contemporary men and women are held. One such feminist scholar is Susan Bordo. Bordo, a professor of philosophy, has produced a subfield of women's studies known as Body Studies. Bordo has done some exciting work in Feminist Theory, moving the definition of the text from the page to the female form, arguing that "the body is a medium of culture" (165). The standards of our culture are emblazoned on the bodies of the women in our culture, effectively transforming women's bodies into cultural texts.

Society mandates, through media images, the form that the female body is allowed to take. Bordo states that "through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification" (166). This statement gives rise to the idea that society is, intentionally or not, forcing women into a position where they must tire themselves in an effort to keep up with its demands, thus neglecting higher intellectual pursuits. Wolf notes that as early as age thirteen "the labor-intensiveness of being a woman [is] beginning to become clear to us, and we [are] having flashes of boredom already" (*Promiscuities* 58). However, it is not exclusively diet, make-up, and dress that are strictly regulated. Arguably, some of the most insidious media images that contemporary women are subjected to are those that fall under the heading of pornography.

Pornographic images reinforce the idea that no part of a woman's body is private, sacred, or immune to the critical evaluation of others. The explicitness of these images makes it possible not only to standardize an ideal of beauty as to body type, but also serves to regulate the size and shape of the breasts, areolae, and vulva.

As women become less socially oriented and more

critically focused on themselves, to the detriment of their physical and psychological well being, they begin to lose sight of the social inequality that led them there.

Instead, women should be allowed the opportunity to determine reality for themselves in a meaningful way. It is clear that they are not free to do this if one examines the effects of cultural standards on the lives of contemporary women. Few women would wake up two hours earlier than necessary to apply cosmetics if society did not dictate the necessity of female adornment. Women would not spend exorbitant amounts of money on designer clothes when they could find durable and well-fitting merchandise at lower prices if our culture didn't popularize specific brands. Women would not opt for a salad with light dressing on the side while craving a cheeseburger and fries if magazines readily available in any grocery store didn't bear bold print headlines intimating that a moment on the lips is worth a lifetime on the hips. Women today are constantly inundated by messages of this variety. These examples only begin to illustrate how women's lives are affected by the internalization of mainstream standards of beauty in this culture.

In the attempt to chase and attain an ever-changing and impossible ideal, women become discouraged. They begin

to lose their sense of self in the race for perfection. Bordo believes that there are both physical and psychological repercussions to this. She asserts that "at the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death" (166). Women's mental processes, not only their bodies, are fashioned by the values of the dominant culture. How women perceive their own identities and the way in which they understand their environment is affected by social values. This is why I have repeatedly observed underweight women pinching at their midsections complaining of obesity. They are merely accepting the idea that no matter how much weight they lose, how much time they spend at the gym, it is not enough and never will be. Athletic centers and fitness magazines tell women that the regulation of body size and shape is not about being thin; it is about being healthy. However, weight loss through surgical transformation is a far more common avenue to achieve this ideal than proper nutrition and regular physical activity, and those who have been surgically transformed are treated as successful by both their doctors and their peers.

According to Bordo, it is the condition of subscribing to these societal values that has led to specifically female illnesses. These afflictions, as Bordo sees it, are

hysteria, agoraphobia, anorexia nervosa, and the newest of these: polysurgery addiction. While hysteria is largely a thing of the past and no longer classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, agoraphobia and anorexia still persist. The DSM shows that agoraphobia "is diagnosed far more often in females than in males" (APA 442). Additionally, "more than 90% of cases of anorexia nervosa occur in females" (APA 587). Polysurgery addiction has yet to be categorized as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association. However, in 2007 there were 11.7 million surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures, 91% of which were performed on women; the most popular of these procedures is liposuction (ASAPS). Bordo understands that these diseases "may provide a paradigm of one way in which potential resistance is not merely undercut but utilized in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations" (168). Bordo argues that all of these disorders signify surrender to society's norms.

On the surface, it would appear that an anorectic is doing horrible things to her body in order to achieve this ideal of femininity, but she is simultaneously making a political statement by drawing attention to herself by being sick. That is to say, in Bordo's words, that "through embodied rather than deliberate demonstration [the

anorectic] exposes and indicts those ideals, precisely by pursuing them to the point at which their destructive potential is revealed for all to see" (176).

It is the same with those who suffer from agoraphobia. By secluding herself from the world around her, the agoraphobic has relegated herself to an existence that is only functional within the traditional sphere of the feminine, the home. As she attempts to make herself more useful within the context of the home to compensate for her inability to act constructively outside of this context, she begins to trap herself within the confines of the role of the domesticated housewife, even if unmarried. Though anorexia and agoraphobia can both be seen as an attempt by women to make themselves somehow smaller either by reducing their physicality or mobility, that is to say by demonstrating that her "space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined," it is not a stretch to say that women who undergo surgical alterations may be attempting to protest in much the same way (Bartky 67).

The polysurgery addict's willingness to surgically alter her body could also be viewed as a protest of the social pressure to normalize. However, I would add to this



Figure 2.1 *Mirror, Mirror*: Kat, played by Jenna Jameson (right), attempts to repair her fractured self with a staple gun while Lilith, played by Roxy Saint (left), pierces herself repeatedly (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment).

that those who undergo numerous elective surgeries fall under the broader heading of self-mutilator as do the cutters and the tattoo/piercing junkies. This mentality is far from uncommon and is represented in the monologue "Marks" from Jane Martin's *Talking with...* in which the character Alain describes how she has been marked by life. The anorectic, the agoraphobic and the self-mutilator are similarly marked by life. Their marks replace their muted and silenced voices. Their marks ask, like a lot of one-woman Verizon Wireless commercials, "Can you hear me now?".

Bordo acknowledges that the end does not justify the means for women who protest in this way. She explains

that:

Functionally, the symptoms of these disorders isolate, weaken, and undermine the sufferers; at the same time they turn the life of the body into an all-absorbing fetish, beside which all other objects of attention pale into unreality. On the symbolic level, too, the protest collapses into its opposite and proclaims the utter capitulation of the subject to the contracted female world.

(176)

For example, one young woman, while going through a difficult period of adjustment, developed anorexia nervosa. At first, she was merely depressed and found that her appetite had waned. When unwanted weight started to melt from her body, she shifted from depression to anorexia. She monitored her food intake, exercised excessively, and stopped ingesting even the minutest amounts of food in front of others. She was reaching out for help and support by refocusing her internal agony into a disease with external symptoms. When her weight loss became apparent to the casual observer and not only to her bathroom scale, she was not urged to seek counseling, but rather congratulated on her success. When those who did inquire asked how she had done it, she dryly responded that the misery diet is an

extremely effective weight loss tool. Even then, those around her did not recognize her changing body as a disease to be cured, but saw it as enviable. This is the threat of the national standardization of the female body.

While I was visiting the home of several of my friends during a house warming party, it became necessary for me to seek out their facilities. I am always apprehensive when I am in a situation where I must utilize a restroom used only by men. I was fascinated with the condition of the walls in that room. Upon the commencement of their occupancy of this suburban abode, they made a decision to wallpaper that room with pages from *Hustler*, *Playboy*, and *Penthouse*. Of course, that meant that they had also had to, as a precautionary measure, put a limit on the length of time that any one person could spend in that room. I stood studying the barrage of images for a while, long enough that they eventually came to see if something was wrong. The three of them crowded into the room with me to observe my reaction to their idea of interior decorating. I continued my examination in silence, but my attention was redirected by a discussion that was initiated by one of the three. He was commenting on how uninterested he was becoming with media of this ilk. He cited the similarity of the subjects of the photography as the main reason for

this. He preferred variety. The other two echoed their agreement before the four of us rejoined the rest of the partygoers. Since then, I have heard many men express this same sentiment. From this, questions begin to arise as to why society would dictate a normalized body type at all. Women are led to believe that one reason that they should subscribe to these ideals is to attract the opposite sex or that they would be unable to attain companionship without internalizing these standards. However, this is clearly not the case, as is revealed by the experience described above and the fact that many women who have not achieved the ideal form are happily coupled.

The other reason to internalize these standards, as given by Bordo, is that conformity will allegedly aid in the female quest to gain access to the advantaged world of the masculine. However, this is equally untrue because, as Bordo notes, "women still earn significantly less than men for equal work" (71). Women continue to suffer from sexual bias and harassment in the workplace. In 2009, The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 12,696 charges of sexual harassment, with 82% of those charges filed by women (USEEEOC). In light of these startling statistics, I am very much inclined to agree with Bordo's assessment of these female "norms" as cultural

inventions.

The standardized female body requires women to embody an ideal that necessitates that they suppress their appetite for food. Bordo believes that this is a transpositional effect of the long-standing tradition to suppress female sexual appetite (8). Women's bodies are inevitably tied to their sexuality. If women are able to quell their appetites well enough to achieve the ideal form, then surely they must also be able to properly subdue their sexual urges. The conception of the female body as a sexual object is precisely what negates women as subjects. Wolf explains:

Women -- whether they are writing, fighting a custody battle, bringing an harassment charge, or just trying to do their jobs -- rightly fear that they, in many more ways than men, will be defined by their sexual experience, and defined negatively. (*Promiscuities* xxi)

How can women help but be defined negatively by their sexuality when their bodies are perceived as sexual objects, and too much or too little sexuality on their part is seen as negative by other women as well as men?

Women have been conditioned to compete with one another. As Wolf notes, "no one has shamed my body like

women have. The shaming experiences I have had...were from other girls first" (*Promiscuities* 45). While the shame that women put on one another is largely about physical appearance (i.e. clothes, hair, make-up, and the general condition of the body), sexual shame tends to come more from the culture at large. Wolf recounts the general sense that through being a *sexual* woman one could successfully maintain a romantic relationship (*Promiscuities* 19, my italics). However, it is a fine line that women must walk because penises are "represented to us as being our responsibility" and our sexuality, if in a culturally acceptable form, is allegedly capable of bringing us greater security and happiness with our mates (Wolf, *Promiscuities* 99). However, female sexuality is at best a double-edged sword because it is also endowed with the power to condemn us if it is in excess or deficiency relative to the perceptions of men and society. As Wolf notes:

The shaming of girls and women from acknowledging a sexuality on their own terms, or a sexual past, pressures them into a contemporary version of "passing." The need to pass for someone one is not creates a vulnerability to external anxieties about womanhood in one's private life -- as well

as a vulnerability *about* the fact of one's womanhood in the workplace. In other words, if one is allowed to grow up being proud of one's sexual womanhood as it develops day by day, one may acquire that "sureness" that Margaret Mead spoke of, and be far less susceptible to the blandishments of industries or ideologies that promise to bestow a sexual womanhood, as well as being less susceptible to the pressures that stand ready to stigmatize women for their sexuality.

*(Promiscuities 229-30, author's italics)*

Traditionally speaking, the rite of passage into womanhood has been viewed as either the onset of menstruation, sexual initiation, or both. Two texts that are marketed to girls embarking on adolescence act to illustrate this point.

In Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Margaret waits for the onset of menses and the development of breasts to transform her into a woman. Blume's text epitomizes the way in which girls perceive their transition into womanhood as purely physical as we observe Margaret praying to begin menstruation and padding her bra with

cotton balls. Once Margaret reaches menarche, but before developing breasts, she proudly proclaims, "Now I am almost a woman" (Blume 148). The underlying assumption here is that these two physical aspects of female adulthood for Margaret serve to mark her transition into adulthood in general. As the onset of menses is an unstoppable force of nature, except in the rare cases of primary amenorrhea, menarche as a rite of passage is harmful in that it conveys the idea that acquiring womanhood is something external to the self and as such denies agency.

Sexual initiation as a rite of passage also tends to deny agency to women. In Meg Cabot's *Ready or Not*, protagonist Samantha Madison, who is otherwise presented as a self-possessed teen girl capable of advocating for her own interests, loses all agency at the moment of virginity loss. Her narration switches from active to passive voice just as she decides to commit to the act of consummation and Cabot no longer allows Samantha to say, but only to hear herself say; "And suddenly, I heard myself say" (289). This shift illustrates the loss of agency that makes her not a subject, but an object at the exact point of choice which transforms her into a woman, not under her own power, but through intimate physical contact with her boyfriend.

Alan Dundes makes a compelling case, albeit

inadvertently, as to how these types of female initiation rites can be damaging. In his essay, "Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety," Dundes reveals the ritual of Bloody Mary as a symbol of menarche stating that "it is enacted usually by an individual girl (or an all-girl group), it takes place in a bathroom, it involves a bloody image, sometimes a bloody self-image appears, and the ritual may conclude with the flushing of a toilet" (132).

Dundes finds links not only between folklore and the onset of menstruation, but also between folklore and sexual initiation. He believes that in folklore the loss of virginity is symbolized in the legend of the vanishing hitchhiker stating that:

A girl who hitch-hikes, that is, allows herself to be "picked-up" by a perfect (male) stranger, runs the risk of losing her virtue (signaled by the wet blood spot in the car's backseat, a well-known locus of teenage and even pre-teen necking and petting). (130)

The significance of female initiation rites appearing in popular culture as horror stories is a testament to both the fear of the rite itself as well as the loss of control which accompanies it. Sharon Thompson clearly demonstrates

this loss of control asserting that "asked to describe the circumstances of first coitus, many girls blink and freeze, dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a posthypnotic suggestion to suppress" (343). This pervading pattern of silence is due in part to the inadequacy of a language that does not readily lend itself to complex emotional expression about how women frequently "appear in multiple often contradictory roles, their representations *fractured* and framed by *conflicting* depictions indicative of the ideological struggle over who they are and what their futures can be," but it is also how "girls are taught to recognize...the sexual desire of boys but not taught to acknowledge or even to recognize their own sexual feelings" (Meyers 19, my italics, Tolman 325). This silence serves to reinforce the inequity in the male/female power dynamic and construct women as bad girls; a "neurotic, diseased, *fragmented* self torn by *conflicting*, perverted, or involuted drives, trying to achieve a sense of significant being through conduct which on the surface seems perverse," seems to make us bad girls (Harpham 466, my italics).

As Wolf has stated, "In our world, 'Demonstrate that you are a woman' means simply 'Take off your clothes'" (*Promiscuities* 135). This statement points to the

inadequacy of a culture that tells women that their femaleness has nothing to do with their character and everything to do with aspects of their physicality which they cannot control. Girls grow into women internalizing negative cultural conceptions of femininity that segregate us from one another and from aspects of our own self-constructed identities as we are labeled as either good or bad girls.

The virgin/whore dichotomy rigidly categorizes and defines us in ways that bear little resemblance to how we perceive ourselves and our female companions. Once we have been branded, regardless of which side, it begins to affect how we are treated and what type of behavior is expected of us. Wolf recalls having breakfast with her boyfriend and his fraternity brothers the morning after many of them had participated in a sexual assault. She remembers that "they did not hide the story from [her] or from the other girlfriend... [the girlfriends] would understand that what had happened to [the girl who was assaulted] had nothing to do with [them]" (*Promiscuities* 178). It is expected that "nice" women will not empathize with "sluts" because men fail to acknowledge the slut as a subject with any inherent humanity. When nice girls do make a stand for the slut in the face of indignant men, they are reclassified as sluts

themselves. This is a glimpse into how women are forced into competition with one another for their own social survival.

### III. "THE HORROR, THE HORROR"...CINEMA

As I discussed in the previous section, social inequality in contemporary U.S. culture has many symptoms that specifically affect women. In this section, I intend to look at how those symptoms are manifested in the horror film. Before we can delve into representations of women in modern horror, we need to better understand horror cinema more generally.

As it turns out, there is no such thing as "horror" cinema. Though many films in the genre designated as horror may act "as an astringent psychological preparation for (or reenactment of) real horrors," most audiences (fanboys and academics aside) will not delve deeply enough into the subtext to have these feelings fully realized within themselves (Shaw 262). If we dwell on the meaning of what we see on the screen, the film may be able to provoke the moral outrage that Robert C. Solomon feels is a prerequisite of "real horror," but more likely what we refer to as the horror genre is actually a cinema of the grotesque as what it does provoke is "disgust or horror," but often accompanied by "laughter and astonishment"

(Harpham 463). Solomon states, "We laugh at ourselves *after* we have screamed at the appearance of the man in the rubber Godzilla suit. We can even laugh at ourselves as we scream" (234, author's italics).

But it's not only our fear of a fictional threat that causes us to laugh. We experience humor in a film when the threat fails to inspire fear as well. As one scholar notes:

The problem is that the same audience that was once terrified by *The Exorcist* (1973) or even by *The Silence of the Lambs* soon becomes jaded and begins to anticipate the surface mechanisms of terror. Thus does the horror genre turn from grave terror to jaded comedy. (Hibbs 93)

Moreover, "the horror film in America has almost always been tied up with comedy...Abbott and Costello and the Three Stooges were sharing the screen with Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, and Lon Chaney Jr." shortly after the advent of horror cinema (Solomon 248).

However funny we may find horror films, in whole or in part, for many women it is still, with regard to the female form, an:

hysterical text or a theater of cruelty  
specializing in representations of the human

anatomy *in extremis*--in disarray or  
 deconstruction, in metamorphosis, invaded or  
 engulfing, in sexual difference, monstrous  
 otherness (Badley 26, author's italics)

Women seem to be especially sensitive to representations of the corporeal self as fractured, perhaps because it reflects the fractured nature of their psyches. These images are made even more disturbing because frequently these characters "appear to desire their victimizations" because they are acting in a sort of willing disobedience (Picart 41). What I mean by this is that a disproportionate number of horror titles are imperative instructions: *Don't Look in the Basement* (1973), *Don't Open the Door* (1975), *Don't Answer the Phone* (1980), *Don't Go in the House* (1980), *Don't Go in the Woods* (1981), *Don't Go Near the Park* (1981), *Don't Let Them In* (1999), *Don't Blink* (2007), *Don't Look in the Cellar* (2008) and *Don't Look Up* (2009) to name a few.

Whereas Carol J. Clover's *Final Girl* will obey the rules that control not just what she is allowed to do physically, but also where her gaze is allowed to rest, the other women in these films will act as they like and look where they may, effectively sealing their fates as *Chop Tarts* (non-Final Girls). The film restricts not only its

female characters, but its female cast members as well. Horror actress Barbara Steele says, "When I do [horror] films, I feel like I'm committing something against myself" (qtd. in Hogan 179). Even the female portion of the audience is compelled to acknowledge the negative effects of horror cinema. In fact:

Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulder of their dates. There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder.

(Williams 15)

There are a set number of roles for women in the horror film. They can be victims, victim-monsters or victim-heroes, but it is important to note the consistency and persistence of the application of the term "victim" to these women. They will always be victims first. Films such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), *The Crow* (1994) and *Stir of Echoes* (1999) all feature passive, female victims

who must be avenged posthumously by family, friends, a detective, a lover or a complete stranger. In films such as *Repulsion* (1965), *Carrie* (1976), *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), *Misery* (1990), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *May* (2002), *Catacombs* (2007), *Teeth* (2007) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) the woman is allowed to enact her own vengeance for the crimes committed against her, but it should be noted that she still must be tortured, beaten, raped, or punished in some other way first. Even then, the force of her wrath confers monstrosity and categorizes her as a victim-monster.

The pervasive image of woman as monster, cannibal, castrator, devourer is not at all new or unique. Bordo describes this phenomenon best in her book *Unbearable Weight*:

Mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from the blood-craving Kali (who in one representation is shown eating her own entrails) to the *Malleus Malificarum* ("For the sake of fulfilling the mouth of the womb, [women] consort even with the devil") to Hall & Oates contemporary

rock lyrics: "Oh, oh, here she comes, watch out boys, she'll chew you up."...In the figure of the man-eater the metaphor of the devouring woman reveals its deep psychological underpinnings. Eating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act; rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male. (116-7)

Throughout history, women have been viewed as beastly, but this is never represented in horror cinema as a pure, undiluted monstrosity. It always has its source in some sort of victimization.

The final role, that of victim-hero, is similar to the Final Girl and as such is abundant in the slasher film, but it is not exclusive to it. Films in which the female character does not kill or kills only in response to an immediate and unmistakable threat to her very existence, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Alien* (1979), *Tremors* (1990) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), feature this type of character.

Hitchcock went so far as to make it a sort of formulaic directive to "torture the women," but the women are already tortured (qtd. in Doherty 197). What is true of Carole (Catherine Deneuve) in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) is true of all women: "victimized...by a cold, banal society which hasn't the means or inclination to treat its members with equanimity...Because she exists, she is in peril" (Hogan 88). Even if she is not victimized within the plot of the story, it is certain she has been victimized before the story began by virtue of her mere existence, by virtue of her womanhood. So, one can see that the woman with the fractured identity (i.e. the victim-hero and the victim-monster) frequently is allowed to live. However, the woman who is pure victim, whose identity is the most cohesive, must always die.

If it weren't enough to represent us as fractured selves from the outset, many of these films demonstrate the fracturing process, how we become separated from ourselves and from other women. In the mind/body dichotomy "whatever the historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women are that negativity" (Bordo 5, author's italics). We become increasingly aware of this negativity as we grow into adult women. We feel alienated by our bodies, that our bodies

are in some way betraying our minds when we experience the rite of initiation into womanhood as sexual initiation (*Teeth*) or the primary onset of menses (*Carrie*), when we experience a desire for food or sex (*Jennifer's Body*), when we feel trapped by our body's reproductive functions (*Rosemary's Baby*), or when we are sexually harassed (*Repulsion*). We feel alienated and betrayed when we compare our beauty to that of other women as though their possession of beauty diminishes our own (*Carrie, Death Becomes Her*). These incidents create cracks, minute (dis)ruptures in our identities and over time they add up and result in a fragmented self which is experienced as a loss of control. These fractures seem to reach their zenith during puberty and parturiency.

Linda Blair was fourteen when she played Regan in *The Exorcist* (1973). Before we come to see her as monstrously possessed, as victim-monster, we witness her being playfully chastised for eating cookies. We glean her desire for Chris (Ellen Burstyn) and Sharon's (Kitty Winn) beauty and we receive hints that she may be being sexually harassed by her mother's friend Burke (Jack MacGowran). These incidents lead to her very literal loss of control when she urinates on her mother's carpet and the fracturing of her identity which manifests itself as demonic

possession. After she has lost control, become possessed, her actions refer back to these earlier incidents. She expels the contents of her stomach, not only the stolen cookies, but any food which she had ingested, and she terrorizes Chris and Sharon both verbally and physically and she murders Burke. In the end, she is redeemed, but only with the help of a patriarchal figure who must punish her corporeal form to save her life. In other words, "male violence is inflicted physically on the young female body in a fashion that is only justified ideologically as the work of god [sic]" (Arnzen 111). Moreover, as victim-monster, she embodies all of the female illnesses previously discussed in Part II. She is confined to her room (agoraphobia). She ingests no food (anorexia). And lesions appear on her body through various, but always self-inflicted, means (self-mutilation).

Similarly, in *Carrie*, Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) experiences this fracture at puberty becoming a victim-monster. In this film, the fragmenting of the female identity is explicitly linked to menarche. It marks her transition into adulthood and turns her from an object of a sort of dismissive scorn to a formal competitor to her female classmates. Though arguably these "other girls" are "hardly more secure in their own sexuality," that is not

how it at first appears to Carrie or the spectator as "the film opens with a lingering, slow motion tour of the girls' steamy locker room as a dozen young Venuses towel and caress their bodies. This is Carrie's competition and it is fierce" (Hogan 270). Carrie is ignorant of how to defend herself against these girls who so clearly seem bent on competing with her. The two adult models of femininity for Carrie are her mother, who advocates concealing and/or denying all signifiers of womanhood, and her teacher, who promotes feminine adornment, masquerade and performance to enhance or celebrate the female body. However, "the culturally sanctioned femininity proffered by the girl's teacher is as repressive as her mother's fundamentalism" (Lindsey 288). And both of these messages conflict with Carrie's own view of her identity. The more she tries to adopt one view or the other, where neither represent or allow a true self, the more her psyche fractures and the more altered she becomes, illustrating how our "perverse social relations breed monstrosity" (Lindsey 280).

Breeding is itself an act of fragmenting the identity. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the pregnancy of victim-hero Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow) has been called "a metaphor for the perennially divided human self" and a remark "on the uncanny sense of 'doubling' and 'splitting' in

reproduction" (Fischer 413, 418). Rosemary seeks the help of other women, but these other women are not her friends. They are agents complicit in the fracturing of her identity. Hogan describes Rosemary as "victimized and objectified":

Her sexuality has been turned against her in a hellish manner, and she ceases to exist as a person. She becomes a mere vessel, a bearer of a male conceit. Most chilling of all is the implied notion that she is merely fulfilling her destiny. She was built for such work. Rosemary's final descent into numb passivity is awful only because it has such basis in truth. (80)

It is awful because it opens into our reality and reflects the roles available to women in contemporary culture.

Even Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of the *Alien* films, by refusing the role of mother and so embodying "the changing status of women in American culture and hence American genre films," still represents the fractured victim-hero now concerned by "the enemy within," which threatens her claim on her own identity (Doherty 181-2). For the majority of the film, she appears to us as a hero with a cohesion and strength of identity not usually found in the horror film, but as one scholar notes, when she disrobes at

the end of the film, it is almost a "tacky refutation of her character, as if Ridley Scott were telling us that, hey, look, in spite of Ripley's tough talk and actions she's just a girl with sweet breasts and pretty thighs, and aren't you scared for her?" (Hogan 117). And I think we are. We are scared for Ripley and we are scared for ourselves when we realize how counterfeit can be our status as subject.

Horror films have infiltrated almost every facet of mainstream popular culture and many horror films are blockbusters beating even romantic comedies at the box office. Last year *The Final Destination*, the fourth film in the series, "fended off a challenge from Sandra Bullock's" *All About Steve* ("Final Destination"). Arguably, the most popular form to rise from this genre (and from the grave) is the zombie film.

In 2005, audiences identified with Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*. Within the music industry, groups like Mindless Self Indulgence produce albums with titles such as *Frankenstein Girls Will Seem Strangely Sexy* and Insane Clown Posse is unabashedly taken with "sexy little dead chicks" in their song, *Headless Boogie* (Insane Clown Posse). Clothing retailer, Hot Topic, sees the Suicide

Girls' bet and raises it by peddling a "Zombie Pin-Up Tee." Publishers are cranking out titles like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection From the Living Dead*. And many urban cities are hosting annual "zombie walks." In fact, "the prevalence of the zombie in media ranging from video games and comic books to movies and fiction for kids prompted *Time* magazine, in its April 9, 2009, issue, to proclaim 'Zombies Are the New Vampire'" (Dziemianowicz 20). Of course, this list is by no means exhaustive and is only intended to illustrate the veritable explosion of the zombie into mainstream culture and how its renewed relevance could necessitate an evolution in the discourse on zombie cinema.

What is interesting about the women's roles in zombie cinema, though perhaps counter-intuitive, is that the role of the victim is almost entirely eliminated. As a woman is victimized by a zombie, she reanimates as a zombie thus becoming victim-monster. This can happen prior to our introduction to the narrative (*Dead Girl*, 2008), during the course of the film (*The Evil Dead*, 1981) or even after the end credits have rolled (*Dawn of the Dead*, 2004).

Though it is not always a certainty that order has been restored by the end of a zombie film, we do sometimes still get portrayals of victim-heroes: *28 Days Later* (2002),

*Resident Evil* (2002), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Dead & Breakfast* (2004) and *Fido* (2006). However, these roles are as available to male characters as they are to female characters.

By its very nature, the zombie removes gender as a marker of identity, removes identity on the whole. Frequently viewed as a swarming horde, the zombie is consciously constructed to prevent differentiation between individual members of the zombie "race." The ideology of the zombie is almost always read with a political inflection. The zombie has been used to represent:

the destruction of human beings. This includes not only killing but the creation of conditions that materially or psychologically destroy or diminish people's dignity, happiness, and capacity to fulfill basic material needs. (Norden xiv)

Perhaps this is why some scholars feel that "in its history, and in its metaphors, the zombie is most often a slave," with those slaves possibly "overthrowing the more truly cannibalistic regime" (Lauro 87, Badley 75-6).

It's true that zombies have frequently been used to express dissatisfaction with the current political climate, as "a literary expression of political clashes and their effects" (Warner 25). Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*

(1968) can be read as a critique "of the family under capitalism" (Grant 202). In fact, "the individual under capitalism is often characterized as a zombie," as "the brain-dead, ideology-fed servant of industry" (Lauro 92). The zombies aren't what is attacking us from the outside, but what we all are on the inside. It is:

a more pessimistic but nonetheless more appropriate stand-in for our current moment, and specifically for America in a global economy, where we feed off the products of the rest of the planet, and, alienated from our own humanity, stumble forward, groping for immortality even as we decompose. (Lauro 93)

However, this isn't the whole story. Zombies are almost uniformly represented as bodies bereft of consciousness. They are "a recognition of ourselves as enslaved to our bodies" (Lauro 88). If the zombie "reveals much about the crisis of human embodiment, the way power works, and the history of man's subjugation and oppression of its 'Others,'" then why no gendered reading of the zombie (Lauro 87)?

Frequently for women, "our bodies are something that we may fear and reject, but from which we cannot part" (Lauro 101). This quote, taken from "A Zombie Manifesto: The

Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," echoes the theories espoused by Wolf and Bordo which we previously explored. And women, like zombies, are read as having "a fluid body that transgresses its borders" (Lauro 97). Lauro further delineates this idea:

If the contemporary zombie body is an indeterminable boundary, no site is perhaps more emblematic of that omnipresent permeability, and insatiable hunger, than the zombie's mouth. For it is always at the mouth that the zombie feeds, and it is where the physical boundary between zombie and not-zombie is effaced, through its bite.

(Lauro 99)

In case the image of the devouring woman has faded since our earlier discussion, let me be explicit: The mouth and the vagina are homologous. Vaginas adopt "the nomenclature and concept of lips (and teeth)" from the mouth (Miller 94). The zombie demonstrates a complete loss of control in its relationship with food, and the silence that so frequently typifies zombie personality is part of the same pattern of silence that affects contemporary women. So, it is not just we, the American people, who are the zombies. It is we, the women, who are the negative, the body, the indeterminable boundary, the monstrous Other consuming the



Figure 3.1 Hear Me Roar (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

flesh of the living in an effort to feel alive again, to heal our fractured psyches, to reclaim a whole and fully integrated identity. Perhaps it is this unfulfilled need for a reading of the zombie that causes me to feel so frustrated when I see writers dismember what is arguably the most famous quote from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*: "They're coming for you." Who are they coming for? The complete quote is: "They're coming for you, Barbara." It is the woman that "they" are coming for. This single instance demonstrates how the woman has been removed from her rightful place in the zombie discourse.

#### IV. "HOW HIDEOUS YOU ARE"

*Zombie Strippers!* For many, the title of this film alone may be enough to inspire eyes to roll. However, this is more than your average B-horror zomcom meant to enrage, shock and disgust (though it is this as well). It is a film rife with social/political commentary and references, both subtle and overt, to philosophers such as Sartre, Nietzsche, Socrates and Plutarch, as well as authors heavily grounded in philosophical thought such as Albert Camus, Jean Genet and Eugène Ionesco. Director Jay Lee brings a focus on gender to the forefront of the zombie film by endowing only his female zombie strippers with the power of speech, in order to make a powerful statement about the destructive nature of the concept of beauty. Newitz has termed this "zombie feminism."

Set in Sartre, Nebraska in November of 2012, *ZS!* stars *Nightmare on Elm Street's* Robert Englund as Ian Essko, retired porn star Jenna Jameson as Kat and goth rocker Roxy Saint as Lilith. The movie follows events which unfold after the release of a chemo virus developed by Cheneyco (a subsidiary of W. Industries) which has been developed to

reanimate the dead tissue of fallen soldiers. Kat, a stripper at Rhino's underground strip club is the first of the general population to contract the virus and thus turn into a flesh-eating zombie stripper. Instead of being repulsed by the reanimated corpse of Kat, the clientele favor her over all the other strippers. Each stripper of Rhino's must then decide for herself if she is to become a zombie super stripper or retain her humanity at the expense of her livelihood. The drama at Rhino's is framed by an account of the Z-Squad, government mercenaries hired to contain the zombie threat.

The opening sequence establishes context. Perhaps in itself a metaphor for the dark, swirling abyss that can lie beneath surface beauty, society is characterized as chaos veiled by a flimsy facade of control. This is evidenced by the juxtaposition of the term "failsafe" with a scene of utter mayhem inside a W. Industries laboratory (ZS!). The words "they're here," famous for announcing sinister forces, announce the arrival of the Z-Squad, indicating that the forces which frame the women, though seemingly coming to restore order/good, are not necessarily as beneficial as they might seem (ZS!).

Though not inherently evil, the Z-Squad does answer to the government, an entity represented as predicated on



Figure 4.1 Mount Bushmore (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

greed and bereft of ethics. Lee gratuitously drives this point home by smearing with blood the faces of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and Karl Rove (see Figure 4.1). The Z-Squad receives orders to ignore the problem and hope that it goes away, but one of them has been infected. Byrdflough (that's right, H5N1), correctly fearing for his life, abandons the mission and takes refuge at Rhino's.

Thus we are introduced to the women of Rhino's. As Kat (the star of Rhino's) returns to the dressing room from performing, the other women are engaged in critical examinations of themselves in their mirrors. When Kat enters, each of them redirects their gaze to her and

verbally asserts their identity. Sox (Penny Drake) and Lilith are Kat's followers. Jeannie (Shamron Moore) and Gaia (Whitney Anderson) are her competitors. Berenge (Jeannette Sousa) is the only one to resist defining herself through a comparison with Kat.

A new addition to Rhino's, Jessy (Jennifer Holland), "a beautiful young and innocent barely legal nymph waiting to be corrupted by a cruel world," is introduced by Blavatski (Carmit Levite) to the group (Lee 16). She tries to be friendly with the girls, but she is first derided and then ignored. We know she won't be accepted by Kat's followers or competitors until she chooses a side.

Ian, the owner, enters the dressing room and it's clear that "the girls absolutely repulse him" as he refers to Jeannie as a "walking herpie" and sprays her with lysol (Lee 20). He retreats back to the main area of the club and as Lilith dances on stage, he announces that for those "tired of the same old lap dance," the club is now offering "face-dances" (ZS!). Lilith returns his gaze, "her eyes searing into Ian" (Lee 22). She has clearly not consented to this. Back in the dressing room, Lilith throws herself into her chair and calls herself a "bitch" in the mirror while Jessy reveals to Berenge that she has only come to the club to earn money to pay for her Nanna's colostomy

(*ZS!*). Jessy's boyfriend, Davis (Johnny D. Hawkes), visits her in the dressing room to question her about the decision she's made. She dismisses him by indicating that she perceives that "there's more truth to the human condition in [her] taking [her] clothes off for emotionally stunted men so [her] grandmother can shit in a bag than [her] staying virginal and pure for [him]" (*ZS!*).

Jessy tries her best to dance for the men, but she can feel the force of their gaze; the way they see her and speak to her drives her to tears and she flees the stage. When she returns to the dressing room, Kat is waiting. Kat tells Jessy that she must be "a warrior. A soldier...fearless, uninhibited" because "it's a war out there" (*ZS!*). Though Kat is speaking in the context of what it takes to be a stripper, she is also speaking to what it takes to be a woman. It is immediately following this speech that Kat is tackled and for all appearances killed by Byrdflough (Zak Kilberg). He goes straight for her, ignoring the abundant male flesh in the club, because Kat is the product to be consumed.

When Kat reanimates, the first thing she wants to do is to return to the stage. With Saint's music serving as backdrop, Kat's dancing ability has become visibly more "intense" and "vibrant" (Lee 32). Everyone is transfixed.

The men in the audience are awed. Ian's countenance is best described as greedy. Jeannie looks more furious than ever and Berenge looks apprehensive. Kat stops dancing as she realizes her desire for flesh. She designates one man from the crowd, Jimmy (Adam Smith), whose name is slang for male genitalia, to accompany her to the lap dance room. As she eyes him hungrily, he is gripped by fear deciding "this isn't so much fun anymore" (Lee 34). He's correct. In the next instant, we hear a crunch which the following shot reveals to have been the sound of Jimmy's castration.

Ian and Blavatski digest this new development and decide that since Kat's dancing has not suffered, but been improved by her metamorphosis, they will turn a blind eye to her unusual appetite in the name of profits. In the interim, Lilith approaches Kat. She wants what Kat has and Kat is happy to oblige. Like Kat, Lilith immediately wants to dance and eat after being turned and like Kat her dancing has improved. However, Jeannie can't follow Lilith's "undead pizzazz" and is booed from the stage (Lee 42). Lilith returns just long enough to claim a victim. In the lap dance room, "he laps at her suggestively" before she "rips his head apart like ripe fruit" and devours his tongue (Lee 44). When Ian, Cole (Calvin Green), Paco (Tito Ortiz) & Blavatski come to survey the carnage, the lick

reanimates and attacks them, forcing them to lock him in the basement liquor cage (a fitting prison).

Zombie Kat and zombie Lilith share a mirror and are "fixated on themselves" (Lee 46). The script indicates that Lilith is piercing "herself with anything she can find," giving external symptoms to her internal struggle (Lee 46). As Ian closes the club for the evening, he locks the zombies in and the living out with "large chains" which he refers to as "beauty" (Lee 47). But not all the living left the club. Sox has stayed behind with Kat and Lilith. She wants to partake of their zombie beauty as well. Outside the club, Jessy tells Davis to "stay far away" from her (ZS!). She has seen the truth of what must be sacrificed in the acquisition of feminine beauty, "her innocence indeed lost" (Lee 48).

Kat, Lilith and Sox rule the club and their audience. Images of blood, decay and death are juxtaposed with Ian standing under a "waterfall" of bills (Lee 51). Jessy watches, recognizing that she will have to conform if she has any intention of competing with what the zombies offer. She expresses this to Berenge, speaking of her desire to achieve "that acceptance. That praise. The confidence in that. The sense of pride and self" (ZS!). Berenge doesn't accept this idea, calling it a "regression toward the mean"

(ZS!). Jessy is unaffected by Berenge's arguments. Her mind is made up.

As Jessy leaves the club for the evening, she meets Davis and describes to him how "blurred and skewered reality" has become for her (ZS!). Outside of Rhino's, we find that the Z-Squad has traced what became of Byrdflough to the club and they are gathering intelligence before they make their move.

The following day, Kat, Lilith and Sox dance in an "advanced state of decay" as their onlookers debate whether they are "hideous" or "beautiful," deciding on the latter (Lee 55). Berenge approaches Ian in his office to discuss the zombies who appear to be troubling only her. She tells him that they're "evil" and that they are causing her to have nightmares (ZS!). He is unmoved by her concerns and dismisses her harshly.

Jeannie, who has been plotting her takeover for some time, realizes that to become Kat's equal she must find "the source" (ZS!). She and Gaia locate the exponentially putrefied Byrdflough in the boiler room. Jeannie embraces her death, but the terrified Gaia breaks for the dressing room and, confronting her image in the mirror, berates herself as "pathetic. Coward. Worthless. Ugly. Fat ass" (ZS!). She finally proclaims, "I hate you" (ZS!). She

does her best to steel herself for the transition and gives herself to the zombies that have amassed in the basement liquor cage.

Berenge watches Jessy watch herself in the mirror. Jessy seems more confident than ever now that she has decided to conform, to submit herself to zombiedom "for the luxury of not having to think for [herself] anymore" (ZS!). Berenge is virtually the last woman standing and "doubts plague her" (Lee 61). She "looks at herself in the mirror" and "knocks all her make-up off the table, falling in a heap in her chair" (Lee 61).

Jeannie, "freshly zombified," taunts the dancing Kat: "Warriors, come out to play" (Lee 62). This allusion (*The Warriors* 1979) signals that the war for personal gratification has been officially declared. They rip, slash, wrench, dig and tear at each other. They fling not only insults, but projectiles at each other, both verbally and physically abusing the body of the other. They use their audience as an arsenal, dismembering the men, ripping arms from sockets to use as weapons. Jessy sees the life she has chosen and quickly recants. Everyone runs for cover.

Jessy and Davis take shelter in the boiler room. Davis tries everything he can think of to divest Jessy of her



Figure 4.2 She Slimed Me (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

virginity before they are found and slaughtered; Jessy, unmoved by his overtures, remains in deadlock with him until they are recovered by the Z-Squad. Ian, Blavatski and Cole are shut up in Ian's office. Gaia, who did not contract the virus in its pure form and so who did not retain her ability to think and speak, successfully mutilates Cole and Blavatski before being dispatched by the Z-Squad. Berenge is left alone with her thoughts and her mirror image in the dressing room. She wipes her face clean of all make-up and "in her natural state, more beautiful than ever" says to her image: "How hideous you are" (Lee 87).

As the Z-Squad quashes the mayhem in the club proper,

Lilith and Sox catch up to Ian in the lap dance room. Lilith sardonically tells him she wants to thank him for all he has done for her by giving him a face dance. She peels the g-string from her sickly skin and holds it in frame as a repulsive red sludge oozes from the fabric to the floor before slinging it onto the wall behind her, where it clings for a moment before yielding to gravity. She suffocates him in the leaking business of her disintegrating organs (see Figure 4.2).

The Z-Squad eliminate all the zombies but Ian, who is secured as a scientific specimen. They even execute Berenge who has decided to pretend to be a zombie to get acceptance. They are wrapping everything up when they come face to face with Chushfeld (Brad Milne), an employee of W. Industries. He admits that he released the virus on purpose because he knew it could be profitable to do so. Whether or not the Z-Squad has ethical issues with this, their job is done, it's time to move on. Chushfeld stays behind long enough for his plan to backfire. He is bitten by a severed head just before the end credits roll.

Frequently within the horror genre, "the spectator, coded male, was given a womb-like arena for projecting his desires onto a passive (female) screen object or for

assuaging fears of castration," but this is clearly not the case in *ZS!* where the fear of castration is played out on the screen for the spectator to behold in graphic detail (Badley 103). As Badley notes, "voyeurism is a metaphor for film. The medium is the message" (110). So, in a film such as *ZS!*:

The spectator is constructed in the place of horror, the place where the sight/site can no longer be endured, the place where the pleasure of looking is transformed into pain and the spectator is punished for his or her voyeuristic desires.

(Creed 57)

It is not just Jimmy who is punished when Kat castrates him, but also every male audience member who must cringe or turn away.

This turning away, failing to look/to see, is very much a part of the male gaze. When Jessy explains that she has decided to become a stripper so that she can afford a colostomy for her grandmother, we are being explicitly told that economic desperation is what has led her to this point in her life. This moment in the film reflects what many real men willfully ignore and they are able to do this because women's desperation is the status quo. No man can be expected to care *why* a woman is taking her clothes off,

only that she *is* taking her clothes off. Clover notes how this is characteristic of "the dynamic of males in groups—how they egg each other on to increasingly abhorrent behavior, and then, when they are brought to account, how they disavow individual responsibility" (144). You can ask a man if he could ever imagine using force to get sexual access to a woman and he will usually say no. You can then ask him if he feels it would be more acceptable if he gave her money afterward and he will still most often say no, but then you ask him if he goes to strip clubs or looks at pornography and he says yes. For him, there is a difference. He is not responsible for the circumstances that made the naked woman the object of his gaze.

The male spectators in the film ignore that these women are covered in blood, which compels acknowledgement of past horrors in the lives of many real strippers and porn stars. Dr. Mary Anne Layden notes that suffering sexual abuse as a child is practically a prerequisite for working in the sex industry and that somewhere between sixty and eighty percent of all sex workers have been abused. Because of this, around thirty-five percent tend to suffer some form of disassociation. Layden is quick to point out that "you have to know what the numbers of these are in the normal population to understand that these numbers are enormous,"

stating that in the general population this number falls to less than one percent.

Susan Gubar remarks:

If female reality is pretty grim, male illusions and standards are ridiculous...His passion for...purity, then is ridiculous in light of his own filthiness which...serves to deflate his rhapsodic language; we are meant to see how double his standards are. (382)

Lee uses the interaction between Jessy and Davis to make this point in the film. Davis quickly recants his religious beliefs (which are never really illustrated through his actions) when Jessy inquires, "What happened to all that purity you so needed of me?" (*ZS!*). Lee is indicting Davis, the audience in the club, and us as spectators for being complicit in the abuse of these women by being oblivious or ambivalent.

Ambivalence towards abuse is not the only problem though. Menstruation is frequently seen as a problematic aspect of femininity. This is represented in *ZS!* when Lilith brandishes her bloody g-string. Looking at other films from the horror genre, this motif becomes even more obvious. Though absent from Ira Levin's novel of the same name on which the film was based, the pertinent question in

*The Stepford Wives* (1975) is "do you bleed?". The main character, Joanna (Katharine Ross), asks this of her friend Bobbie (Paula Prentiss) after Bobbie has been replaced by an animatronic doppelganger. The answer, of course, is no. Bobbie's body no longer bleeds as a real woman's would because her husband, like all the husbands of Stepford, does not wish for his wife to be a real woman--monstrously other and oozing the lining of her uterus once a month. Looking more specifically at zombie movies, viewers recognize that references to menstruation abound. For example, the title of the film *28 Days Later* is an evocation of the 28-day menstrual cycle. One has to question how this idea figured in the casting of Saint as Lilith, a character whose very name conjures images of feminist rebellion. Saint's presence in the film draws on the iconography of the rock star, both sexual and subversive. Saint is best known for defiling conventions, as in her music video for *Firecracker*, during which she "naked in a tub, shoots period blood into the tub, the water quickly changing from clear to red" (Steininger). In this video, Saint denies men any kind of aesthetic pleasure in viewing her naked body and therefore stunts their ability to use her as a sexual object.

Men and women, both, have troubled relationships with

the female body. As Bordo remarks, "many men and women may experience the primary reality...as the elicitation of desire *for* that perfect body; women, however, may also be gripped by the desire (very likely impossible to achieve) to *become* that perfect body" (273, author's italics).

Linda Badley makes a similar observation in seeing the female body as being "perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self, as other or monstrous" (104). In *ZS!* the women are not merely objects to be gazed at by the men. In many scenes they are situated in front of mirrors and as such are frequently objects of their own gaze. Kat delivers her confident speeches to the other characters most frequently through a mirror, thus undermining the very surety she intends to exude. She does also look at herself, but most usually to apply make-up.

Lee's choice to place the movie within the framework of an admittedly dark interpretation of existentialist ideology is most apt when we look at the way the women gaze at each other. The Rhino Club becomes "a kingdom of nothingness plunged into intellectual darkness, convulsed with spiritual hate and peopled by inhabitants who curse God and destroy each other in their vain attempt to seize his vacant throne," as individual strippers and members of staff all scramble to claim power over one another, their



Figure 4.3 Sisterly Love (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

audience and themselves (De Marco 175). This is especially clear in the case of the rivalry between Kat and Jeannie and in Lee's references to Nietzsche. For, as Nietzsche's philosophy dictates, "the strongest and highest Will to Life does not find expression in a miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to War, a Will to Power, a Will to Overpower" (De Marco 41). The way in which Jeannie and Kat eye each other during the Zombie Super-Stripper Off typifies how females hatefully and suspiciously observe one another (see Figure 4.3). Most of the gazes that the other characters cast upon one another are imbued with fear, antagonism or envy.

Jenna Jameson, "tall, thin, white, and blond," is perhaps the most iconic representation of the ideal beauty

in contemporary popular culture (Wolf, *BM* 1). Meyers documents how "pornography negatively affects intimacy between couples and male expectations concerning women, in terms of both their looks and sexual performance" and how the explosion in breast augmentation surgery "reflects a growing demand for breasts that look like they belong to...Jenna Jameson" (8, 10). Jameson's pornographic body provides a woman with "the graphic details of perfection against which to measure herself" and introduces to the film "the anxious and minute scrutiny of the body as *intricately connected to female sexual pleasure*" (Wolf, *BM* 134, author's italics).

So, let's all hate Jenna Jameson, right? She couldn't possibly behold herself with the same cold countenance, cruel eyes and ego-shattering scrutiny with which we deprecate ourselves, could she? This type of mentality, usually associated with anti-porn feminists, objectifies Jameson as much or more than the male gaze ever could. It completely ignores the fact that Jameson is herself a woman, one who has undergone breast augmentation and who is not a natural blonde. The truth is that those who tow the party line of either anti-pornography or anti-censorship advocate a "depersonalizing of sexuality" which in turn advocates adherence to unhealthy cultural standards of

beauty (Rich 63). It may be simpler for a woman "to come to terms with how her male lover's pornographic fantasy is oppressing her in bed than to confront, yet again, how his actual behavior is oppressing her in the living room...or out in the world" (Rich 62).

If feminists are sick of being read as "a bunch of sex cops out to handcuff the body politic's cock," then it's time for us to adjust our focus on the larger realm of patriarchal control that denies women status as subjects (Rich 56). Pornography is not the problem. The problem is the absence of social equality:

As long as the economic forces and social choices that move these women into the commercial-sex world remain invisible, they themselves will continue to be objectified, mystified, and misunderstood by the very feminist theorists who...claim to have all the answers. (Rich 62)

Beyond the purview of and absent from my analysis is the way in which *ZS!* is also a work of political commentary. This may seem a damning omission as the film so readily lends itself to a reading through this lens, with its obvious connections to Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, which is first and foremost a work of political satire. And I must admit it is tempting to elucidate the

ways in which *ZS!* parallels *Rhinoceros* through its depiction of a Berenge(r) who comes to question her validity once she begins to feel alone and isolated by her identity, the trampling of a cat (Kat) by a rhino (zombie), and the inclusion of a character who speaks in false syllogisms (and frequently outright sillygisms).

Equally tempting is the possibility of exploring the three-fold setting of the film as, 1) being set atop the quasi-religious notion of doomsday in 2012, where the Bush administration is viewed in a post-9/11 atmosphere of uncertainty with regard to its competence; 2) being set in the Rhino Club of Sartre, NE neatly illustrating the relationship between Absurdism and Existentialism, where the former springs up out of the latter; and 3) being set in the dawning of a zombie apocalypse which casts society as a culture of death motivated by greed and personal gratification which turns Americans into slaves of the almighty dollar. However, the zombie as political commentary has been exhaustively analyzed. Now, the reign of the social zombie must begin.

As io9 blogger, Annalee Newitz, has stated:

Ever since Dr. Frankenstein reanimated a woman to serve as his monster's bride and she said no, the zombie woman has been a weird figure for female

resistance to control. Zombie feminism is an uneasy subgenre, daring to use freakish gore and death slapstick to pose questions about what it might take for women to become unrapeable. Or for men to see women the way women see themselves.

(Newitz)

Jay Lee's zombie strippers are meant to embody this kind of resistance to patriarchal control. He means to reveal the corrupt nature of a socially constructed female identity predicated on beauty that creates fractured, fragmented and silenced selves, not fully human because we are not allowed to integrate all aspects of our humanity. Perhaps for Lee's cannibalistic women, "what all that manducation is trying to achieve is to fill an absolute gap and give thought a substantial existence" (Doubrovsky 13). However, these are thoughts we are not supposed to have and certainly are not supposed to voice, a notion intimated by the subtitle of Wolf's *Promiscuities*, it is a "Secret Struggle for Womanhood." Although frequently "articulated speech falls apart and becomes once more a succession of syllables, cries and breathings," Lee endows his zombies with the power of speech, allows his women to voice their thoughts and reject the silence that typifies zombie personality (Doubrovsky 18). As a result, Lee shows how we

are split off from ourselves and from other women.

It has been said that "if our culture could make up its mind about sexual liberation, it would not need horror" (E. Michael Jones x). Perhaps this is why some feel that "stories of powerful women do exist, but they are always a retelling of the same story about the same evil woman whose destruction brings victory to a male hero" (Osherow 71). This is certainly not the case with *ZS!*. No male hero saves the day. The day is not saved at all. Not yet. And it won't be until our culture ceases trying to reify ideal beauty.

Lee engages in a brave form of filmmaking, for his "monstrous woman symbolizes the failure of culture, the failure of art, and the death of the satirist" (Gubar 383). As such, in "creating a fiction that projects male fascination and dread of women," he is embracing his own mortality as a satirist (Gubar 391). His monstrous woman is seen as beautiful, but it is the beauty of the lifeless doll that, try though it might, cannot compete with the beauty of vitality.

## V. CONCLUSION

Fracturing, silencing, and the loss of control are all ideas that are repeated over and over in the discourse on contemporary women. The reason for this is the way in which the concept of ideal beauty uses sex to sell beauty to women. We are afraid that we will never be good enough.

Our fears have been a perpetual source of inspiration for horror cinema. Many feminists find horror distasteful, but it is not because horror promotes acts of violence toward women. Rather, horror films reflect the brutality women face in their day-to-day lives. Social inequality does not exist as a product of horror films. Horror films exist as a product of social inequality.

*Zombie Strippers!* may be the first zomcom of its kind. It illustrates women's quests for ideal beauty as an exercise in endurance that destroys our sense of self. The importance of our sense of identity is continuously undermined by cultural standards that don't allow for a non-corporate(reality). It is my sincere hope that in exploring these issues I have created the potential for new ways to examine horror films and cultural doctrines that

zombify both men and women.

## APPENDIX

### E-MAIL INTERVIEW WITH JAY LEE

*JB: As J.S. Doubrovsky notes in "Ionesco & the Comic Absurdity," frequently for Ionesco "articulated speech falls apart and becomes once more a succession of syllables, cries & breathings." While this is certainly true of the rhinos in Rhinoceros & even of the zombies in most contemporary zombie films, you endowed your zombies with the power of speech. Was there a specific reasoning behind this decision?*

JL: I think the definitive word is "articulated". I do not find much of what was said and happened during the Bush administration as "articulated." In fact the two elements I added into my version of Rhinoceros were the "rhinos" talking, hence doing considerably more damage than mere grunts and breathings, and the abuse of capitalism, specifically Dick Cheney's version (a cut-out element of the film was the company responsible for the whole mess was



Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Cheneyco).

I wanted the zombies to have their own version of "spin" and as a metaphor to speak for themselves as they sink deeper (I believe more irrevocably) in this newborn zeitgeist we seem to have been thrown into. Story-wise I also wanted to do something a little different with them, to play more with the genre and go against the trite and uncreative cliché zombies have become. George Romero says his zombie films aren't really zombie films, that the zombies are merely a nuisance. But when writing the script I was finding a wealth of material inherent and unspoken in zombies, so they spoke. It's funny you brought up speaking



Kat (Jenna Jameson) reads Nietzsche (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment).

and not reading. Someone forwarded me a blogger who hated the film because zombies were reading (as he wrote "zombies READING!!!???"). No mention of what she was reading, just that she was reading. I think this reaction made a better statement than I could ever have about the "zombification" of America's future.

*JB: There are many references in the film, both subtle and overt, to philosophers such as Sartre, Nietzsche, Socrates, Plutarch and even theosophical writer Helena Blavatsky as well as authors whose writings are heavily grounded in philosophical thought such as Albert Camus, Jean Genet and of course Eugene Ionesco.*

*It seems to me like this is pretty deep stuff for your average moviegoer and maybe especially for the zomcom demographic. How do you think the inclusion of these ideologies affected the way the film creates meaning for your audience? Do you feel as though people understood what you were trying to do?*

JL: I think more and more the realm of b-movies and grindhouse films and the world of cult cinema is becoming a social statement recognized by the pop-culture intelligentsia. I do not think that was the intent of the genre, but just the fact that the genre existed makes a statement in itself, thus providing a veritable goldmine of iconography to extract and interpret. The zombie film seems to be spearheading this new-found appreciation, probably due to the social statement *Night of the Living Dead* is now recognized as. I see, to a certain extent, some of these films coming into being not unlike the underground writers did such as Kerouac, Jim Thompson, Bukowski and the such.

Some of this new breed of sophisticated-lovers-of-bad-movies got the references in *Zombie Strippers!*, many average filmgoers did not, which is fine. That was one

thing about the film that was very much intentional, make it a shameless experience with or without the content. The ideologies are not there for everyone. But I do believe (and hope) that the references and social statements in the film will give it a longevity, that perhaps (and hopefully) there will be call to revisit the film for many years to come.

As for the specific references in the film, when I start early in a script I have specific characters to represent certain aspects of allegory and metaphor and I'll just call it what it is. Sometimes the name just sticks. But often in developing the script the story takes precedence and pushes aside a lot of the brooding writer's pained soul. What is left is the character name but the inspiration for it didn't make the cut so much. For instance Dr. Genet was all about lawlessness and disregard for social constructs, her personal goals more important than society at large. This is (slightly) more apparent in a shot that never made it in the film, it was supposed to go at the end of the credits, of Dr. Genet sneaking out of the compound with the briefcase of zombie virus. Too bad it was left out by the powers that be, she looked great in black spy attire. In fact, Dr. Genet's full name is Dr. Celine Genet. I think

you and I are the only ones that know that.

A lot of it is also just for me, just to keep myself inspired, focused or just busy. I like things in films to mean something, for the most part. So if I'm trying to say something I usually make some reference to it, often in the character's name. If people get it fine, if they don't that's fine also, but at least it's there. One thing is in defending the work. If anyone doubts that *Zombie Strippers!* is a philosophical parody and social statement I always have Rhino's and Ian Essko to come to my defense.

*JB: In Chushfeld's final monologue, he reveals the main theme of the film to be that contemporary American society is a culture of death motivated by greed and personal gratification with little room for decent people. Do you feel as though the movie industry, as an entity with the ability to comment on the shape of society, is exempt from that either/or of apathy and evil that is portrayed in the film?*

JL: No. What the film went through, ironically, was much of what the film was trying to comment on. Our producing partner didn't really get the film (an admitted hater of

horror movies and possessor of no sense of humor whatsoever) and he tried to re-edit it himself and make a "kick-ass zombie movie." What resulted was a horrendous piece of tripe that the studio heads walked out of when he screened it for them. In the end the social commentary was more entertaining, and so I don't think it was necessarily freedom of expression but what would sell more tickets. Then much of the humor and commentary was left out because they were afraid "Walmart wouldn't sell it," or so they assumed. These producers and studio heads are very much like politicians in the sense that they think they understand the public because they make money (or get votes), but in reality they're pretty far removed from the true understanding of their audiences. A film doesn't have to be good to be a success, just make money. So Spiderman 3 was a success but I have yet to meet someone who didn't hate it. And lo and behold the studio sets out to make Spiderman 4 the exact same way, and then they're surprised at the backlash and when things don't work out. And on top of that our producing partner, who is rich and bored, became incensed when we stopped kissing his ass. As a result he's been slandering our name and making things considerably harder for us in our other projects.

So by no means exempt, but I do believe film is more or less the last man standing when it comes to social commentary on a mass scale. Cable TV and, ironically, comic books seem to be doing fairly well in that regard but they don't have the mass audience film does, and the less people read the less impact literature has. The music industry has taken a huge hit and has become a machine of safe one-hit-wonders, independent music has become so saturated on the internet that it's become impossible to try and keep up with even a fraction of it, so no more Bob Dylans or John Lennons anytime soon. But film still has an audience and can, and does, make a statement from time to time.

But no, film, nor filmmakers, are immune, just that it and they are still somewhat art and artists and there is still some sense of integrity involved, more so than, say, politics or the military establishment.

*JB: For a movie called *Zombie Strippers!*, there is a distinct lack of shamelessness in the way the women are represented. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist of sorts?*

JL: I've never considered myself a feminist but I've been accused of it. Feminism these days I don't understand. Take for instance Jenna Jameson. I respect her for her success, I respect her for becoming a strong, independent woman who's made herself into an icon in our society and pivotal figure in our history. I also respect Emily Dickinson for the exact same reasons. I just don't judge Jenna Jameson based on puritanical "morals" I don't agree with. I don't necessarily think porn degrades woman, not anymore more than the Judeo-Christian values that reduce women to a second-class status. I think if someone believes Eve was the cause of all mankind's problems then they have a serious jump start on Jenna Jameson in the debasement of women. I feel that any woman who does what she wants to do, for whatever reason, and does it well should be respected (well, more or less). Modern-day feminism seems to disagree with me. Jenna Jameson has a natural talent (and some not so natural). So did Emily Dickinson. Who's to say which is more pro-women? Not me, that's for sure. And surely not a biased society based on misogynist "morals." The real question is - would Emily Dickinson have made an appearance in *Zombie Strippers!*, say, reading her poetry? I, personally, think she would have.

My mother pretty much raised me and my sister has been working with me as a producer for ten years now. So I think I see more of a struggle in women having witnessed it pretty much my whole life. I also feel the prejudices and fears of society have made women an underdog, and thus a more interesting character, and I'll shamelessly admit that of all the so-called minorities women are the ones I enjoy looking at the most. But on a more serious note I think I take women characters to the extremes, both in strengths and weaknesses, for both the depth of their struggles and the depth of the stories they can tell for me. And for the aesthetics. Maybe I see women as more human, even when they're zombies.

Here's a blog someone forwarded to me you might find interesting:

<http://io9.com/5053881/zombie-feminism>

*JB: With the disparateness between events in the script and their on screen counterparts, such as the final moments of Berenge, Jessy & Davis, ultimately, how well does the final release of the film reflect*

*your artistic vision?*

JL: The worst part of the final edit of the film, for me, is the resulting bad film making. I'd say in regard to what the film was supposed to be it's maybe 60% there, which is pretty good considering the low-end low-budget studio world we were dealing with. But the edit our producing partner worked on was my rough cut, so I think pretty much every scene can and should be cleaned up editing-wise. I think the hack-job they did to remove what they deemed unfunny or not Walmart-worthy threw the pacing off, something the studio guys had no sense of at all. Cutting out Paco's final speech makes his character completely unnecessary except for a few sight-gags. And the cutting out of Jessy and Davis' death and leaving out Berenge's mutilated face special effect causes the ending to make no sense whatsoever. All bad filmmaking. But I have to admit for the most part, beside the clumsy presentation, most of the statement came through - the overall tone, the parody, the campiness, the shamelessness, the over-the-top gore, the politics, the social statement. And I also have to admit some of the botched artistic vision was due to my own performance (though I like to blame the budget, schedule and specifically four members of

the crew). But though the film is only around 60% of what it should (and could) be I'm happy that the intent, aka vision, is a much higher percentage. And the good thing about being the creative part of a film, what didn't make this film I can always use for another one.

Essentially *Zombie Strippers!* is an offensive piece of trash, and damn proud of it. In that regard - mission accomplished.

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## VITA

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