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Crimson Horror: The Discourse and Visibility of Menstruation in Mainstream Horror Films and its Influence on Cultural Myths and Taboos



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On August 7, 2016, then-GOP presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in an interview with Don Lemon on “CNN Tonight,” reflected on his recent performance at the first GOP primary debate. Lemon asked Trump early in the interview whether he thought there was an agenda by Fox News to target him. Trump quickly turned his critique to Fox news anchor and debate moderator, Megyn Kelly, who he labeled “a lightweight” who was “trying to be tough and be sharp.” In response to Lemon’s follow-up question, “what is it with you and Megyn Kelly?” Trump responds: “She starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. And, you know, you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever, but she was, in my opinion, she was -- off base.” After the interview, Trump’s comments were quickly condemned on social media by conservatives and other GOP candidates.¹ Despite Trump’s attempts to clarify that he meant blood was coming out of her nose, the implication that Kelly was menstruating was not lost on political commentators and other observers in the general public. Trump was disinvited to a conservative event by RedState.com editor, Erick Erickson, who reasoned: “I just don’t want someone on stage who gets a hostile question from a lady and his first inclination is to imply it was hormonal. It just was wrong.”² Though Trump has gained a reputation for holding misogynist and sexist opinions, Trump’s discourse is also significant because it highlighted the persistent social myth that menstruating women are dangerous and evil. Though some of the reactions from viewers sought to challenge the implication, the assumption that Kelly was hormonal or menstruating resonated with the public and reaffirmed a continued problematic association between menstruating women and their assumed behaviors and intentions.



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Trump’s discourse reminds us that, even in American culture, where the ideology and discourse of the second wave women’s liberation movement appears culturally acceptable and integrated into society, the menstruation taboo remains a persistent phenomenon. American society has treated menstruation as a fearful, threatening, and repulsive bodily act that “was banished to the private and domestic spheres.”³ Carly Woods explains, “The idea that the literal and figurative flow of women’s bodies needs to be contained is nothing new. Historically, menstruation has not functioned within the realm of choice—it was a shameful process that girls and women were taught to conceal.”⁴ Today, the association and depictions of menstruation as physically and socially threatening to women and the public

are continually produced in popular culture texts that threaten to implicitly discredit females on account of their bodies and biological functions. Rhetorical analyses of films provide attention to the knowledge, influence and ideological messages that are interpreted and disseminated in American culture. Films are a critical site for analysis since they reach large audiences and produce spectacles that teach individuals how to read and perform identities. I conduct close readings of mainstream films to illustrate the conditions and contexts responsible for illuminating the modern beliefs and logic of the American menstruation taboo. Specifically, I analyze scenes, discourse, and imagery from a variety of mainstream American horror films produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Although the discourse cannot single-handedly account for all beliefs and cultural reinforcements of the modern menstruation taboo, they provide a starting point for examination of the visual, cultural, and public artifacts that contribute to the continuation of the modern menstruation taboo. I contend that films discursively and visually connect the discourse and images of menstruation through three rhetorical strategies: first, they portray menstruating women as evil or terrifying; second, the representations of menstruating women draws danger to others; and finally, menstruating women are shown to be a danger to themselves through overt sexuality or social exclusion. Finally, I discuss the horror genre's unique capability of revealing menstrual blood to the public, and in doing so, solidifies the sight of menstrual blood to inherent, negative qualities in women. Before examining the texts, I first provide a brief review of the ideological importance of horror films as cultural artifacts.

The Significance of Films and the Horror Genre as Ideological Texts

Motion pictures are an influential and popular form of visual communication that make images and texts visible and reach various audiences and publics. For this reason, films and cinema are critical components of the Western public sphere. Furthermore, Shawn Shimpach argues that images, specifically film, become an entry into a public existence.⁶ Early Hollywood cinema led to the mass media audience recognizing itself as a collectivity rather than a group of individuals. By choosing to view a film, a subject becomes part of a public. Shimpach explains: "To go to the movies and enter into this category of the motion picture audience, statistics everywhere reminded, was to imagine oneself as one part of a collective whole."⁷ The existence of a public of a motion picture is significant for Shimpach because the film becomes a mass medium to learn from and a realm to enter. Watching



a film allows individuals to visualize the relationship between a private self and its publicity. Visual representation becomes a mode of public address that constructs the person as a social object. Thus, one's behaviors, activities and identities develop as one mirrors his/her self-definition and submits to public scrutiny. Shimpach explains: "The complex mediation of public presence and mode of address (both gathering and watching) represented by motion pictures provided an early template for modern mass media in which 'we go "there" to see each other seeing each other' offering an early form of precondition in which the media 'sphere' offered a 'collective image of the collective.'"⁸

Regarding the genre of horror films, critics have justified specific rhetorical analyses and attention to the classification, arguing that horror films reflect ideologies and respond to, reify, or "tap into broader cultural anxieties."⁹ Robin Wood contrasts horror films from popular mainstream films to highlight their ideological significance. Because he describes popular films as reflecting the "collective dreams of their audiences," he concludes that "it becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares."¹⁰ According to Joseph Maddrey, trends in horror films represent the corrosion of family, tradition, gender roles, the American Dream, race relations and other national ideographs and values.¹¹ He states,

Filmmakers have responded to cultural changes with cries of the damned, new hopes, and a self consciousness that seems to blur the line between film and society, fiction and reality. . . The horror genre is more popular today than ever, and as America continues to evolve through in the shadow of its past, audiences will continue to watch those shadows on film.¹²

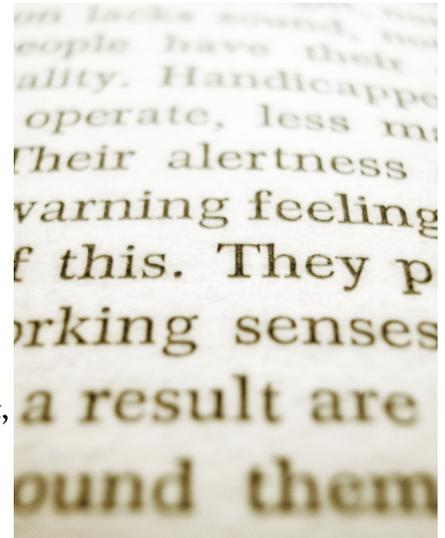
Shadows grounded in identity and power imbalances are recurring themes in the horror genre. In particular, the horror genre is recognized as a significant site for examining race, gender, class, and sexuality because the films establish constructed fears often associated with "othering" cultural markers. Carol Clover states: "the slasher film, not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience, than do the legitimate products of the better studios."¹³ While horror films speak



to patriarchal anxieties, according to Clover, they also constitute the potential shifting representations that reflect our modern understandings of otherness, but nonetheless impact cultural understandings of sex/gender.

Method

In this essay, I adopt an intra-filmic feminist approach proposed by Cynthia Freeland.¹⁴ The method provides a means for feminist critics to construct close textual readings focusing on gender representations in relation to a film's period or context, style, and tone. Freeland juxtaposes her method against the more popular psychoanalytical analyses that have been commonly used in film theory and criticisms. She proposes that critics ask intra-filmic questions about horror films. "My proposal for producing feminist readings of interpretations of horror films is that we should focus on their representational contents and on the nature of their representational practices, so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between sexes."¹⁵ Multiple elements, such as structure, representation, plot, and point-of-view are examined through the analysis. In particular, Freeland suggests that critics consider a film's gender ideology, for example, "How does the film depict/represent women – as agents, patients, knowers, suffers? or, What role do women play vis-à-vis in the film?"¹⁶ In addition to answering these questions, Freeland also suggests extending the analysis beyond these questions by looking at technical and filmic features (like editing, sound, and visual elements) and conducting "deep interpretive readings," to consider any gaps or implicit presumptions in the film subtext.



Analysis

Using the intra-filmic feminist approach, this essay analyzes seven contemporary horror and science fiction films to understand how the films depict menstruating women. Four distinct themes emerged about the role of menstruating women in our culture, including menstruating women are evil forces, menstruating women are dangerous to others, menstruating women are dangerous to themselves, and that menstrual blood is abject. Each theme will be developed and exemplified in the following sections.

Menstruating women as evil forces

No film is a better touchstone for the association of evil to menstruating women than the 1976 horror film, *Carrie*. Based on Stephen King's novel, the film tells the story of Carrie White, a high school student who is viewed as a social outcast and rejected by her classmates. In the opening scene of the film, Carrie showers in the girl's locker room after gym class and begins her first period. A repressed girl who is often misinformed by her fanatical, religious mother, Carrie knows nothing of menstruation and begins to panic, believing that the blood indicates a medical disorder. While Carrie grows hysterical in the shower, the other girls in the shower room begin to mock her by throwing sanitary pads and tampons at her while screaming "Plug it up! Plug it up!" Soon this scene is interrupted by the Physical Education teacher who helps Carrie clean up, properly educates her on the subject of periods and sends her home for the rest of the school day. In the principal's office before leaving school, Carrie shows the first signs of holding telekinetic powers which seems to have been brought on by her menses. In the end of the film, after experiencing endless torment by her peers, Carrie turns her telekinetic powers on her mother and hateful classmates, killing them all, and eventually, herself.

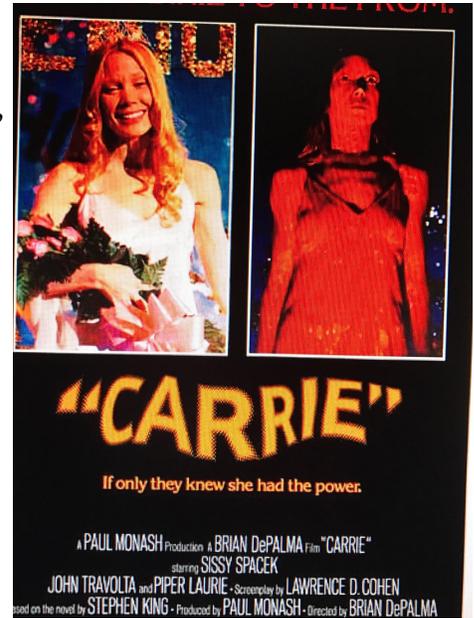


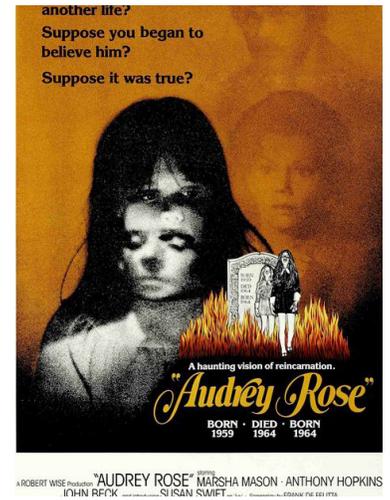
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Stephen King's *Carrie* is both a popular book and film. According to Karen Houppert over 1.3 million books were sold, and since 1976, with the production of the film, millions have viewed Brian DePalma's *Carrie*, making it one of the most popular and widely recognized revenge films in our culture.¹⁷

Carrie's opening scene, beginning with the onset of the main character's menstruation, explicitly connects telekinesis and mysterious powers to womanhood. Clover's analysis of *Carrie* illuminates the ways the film teaches audiences to fear and avoid the publicity of menstruation. Clover agrees that the source of Carrie's pain "soon becomes the source of her power: 'She also has a mild telekinetic ability which intensifies after her first menstrual period.'"¹⁸ For Clover, the connection between menstruation and evil or danger is apparent to the film's audience. Furthermore, just as Wood claims that horror films represent the unconscious fears of our society,¹⁹ the image of a monstrous, bleeding woman is representative of larger social subtext. Clover argues that Carrie is female "victim-hero . . . whose status in both roles has indeed been

enabled by ‘women’s liberation.’”²⁰ In other words, Carrie’s victimization, anger, and horrific revenge are all made possible by feminism; thus, our fear of Carrie represents society’s fear and resistance to the women’s liberation movement and the potential powers that can be held by women.

Like *Carrie*, the film *Audrey Rose* (1977) directed by Robert Wise, also connects the prepubescent young woman to strange, terrifying powers although the connection to menstrual blood is not as explicit as the references in *Carrie*. In the film, Ivy Templeton, a pre-teen girl approaching her twelfth birthday, is haunted by terrible nightmares that grow exceedingly worse around her birthday. Meanwhile, her parents’ lives are problematized when a mysterious man named Elliot Hoover, who has been following the family, informs Ivy’s parents that he has reason to believe the soul of his 5 year-old departed daughter, Audrey Rose, is reincarnated in the body of the Templetons’ 11-year-old daughter.



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Although the Templetons explain that their daughter experienced similar night tremors in the past near previous birthdays, the nightmares seem to grow exceedingly worse and more severe now that Ivy approaches her twelfth birthday. The fact that Ivy’s body is changing and growing remains a constant reminder throughout the film. In an early scene, the audience witness Ivy’s fascination with menstruation. The following dialogue occurs between Ivy and her mother, Janice:

Ivy: Um, by the way dear Jill O’Connor said that she started to, you know what . . .

Janice: No. What?”

Ivy: Menstruate.

Janice: Ohhh.

Ivy: And she’s only nine. Mom, do you believe it?

Janice: No, I think she is a fibber.

Ivy: She’s a liar.

Janice: I didn’t say that. Girls like Jill just like to fantasize.

Although the reference to Jill’s “fantasy” and Ivy’s desiring tone imply that menstruation is an anticipated moment in a young girl’s life, it is left unknown whether fear or excitement ultimately motivates the conversation. However, the context and plot of the movie more directly reinforces negative and worrisome characteristics around menses. First, the fact that Ivy’s nightmares are horrific and are referred to in both critiques

and the film as “childhood possession,” once again associates the prepubescent girl to images of evil and terror. Like Carrie, Ivy Templeton/Audrey Rose becomes a horrific character. Clover explains: “Virtually the first line of dialogue in *Audrey Rose*, a reincarnation-possession story, consists of young Ivy’s report to her mother that a girlfriend has just gotten her first menstrual period at the age of nine. Ivy herself is approaching her twelfth birthday, and within hours of the “menstrual” conversation with her mother she begins to exhibit . . . possession.”²¹ Ivy’s possession fuels feelings of fear, terror, and uncertainty in her domestic circle.

The science fiction/horror film, *Ginger Snaps* (2000), tells the story of the Fitzgerald sisters, Ginger who is 16 years old, and Brigitte, who is 15 years old. They are edgy teenagers who are obsessed with talk of death and even stage scenes of death for a class assignment. On the night of Ginger’s first period, a night which is also a full moon, Ginger is bit by a creature which has become known as “the Beast of Bailey Downs.” After the attack on her sister, Brigitte is convinced that the wild animal that has killed the pet dogs in the town is actually a werewolf. After Ginger’s body and temperament begin to change, Brigitte seeks the help of the local pot dealer to find a cure for her sister’s condition. With each day, Ginger grows more frightening and dog-like and even begins to infect others. On Halloween, Ginger is responsible for multiple deaths and eventually turns completely into a werewolf. Ginger’s rampage is finally stopped when, in self-defense, Brigitte stabs her sister and



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kills her.

After Ginger is attacked, a monologue attempts to disrupt the association between menses and monstrous behavior. In response to Brigitte’s expression of concern, telling her sister: “I want you to be okay.” Ginger responds: “I am! I just . . . I just got my period. Okay? Now . . . I’ve got weird hairs. So what? That means I’ve got hormones, and they may make me butt ugly, but they do not make me a monster.” However, Ginger’s period and hormones do exactly the opposite; they turn Ginger into a monster.

In a scene at school, following the attack on Ginger, ominous music plays on the soundtrack as an educational film that is shown in Brigitte’s and Ginger’s science class foreshadows both the danger that will affect Ginger and the trouble that will eventually come to others in the community. The science film’s narrator states: “Preying upon normal, healthy cells, the intruder gradually devours the host from within. Eventually, the invader consumes its host completely. And finally, destroys it.” In much the same way that

the virus is affecting Ginger, menstruating Ginger will likewise become the “open” intruder who is capable of destroying others.

First, Ginger begins to sprout hair and fur. Next, she grows a tail. With each day, Ginger grows more hostile, violent, and physically different. Brigitte responds: “Ging, what’s going? Something’s wrong. Like, more than you being just . . . female.” While this sentence draws attention to Ginger’s changes and their connection to the bite, it simultaneously implies that menstruation and womanhood is something that is “wrong” or difficult and problematic for women.

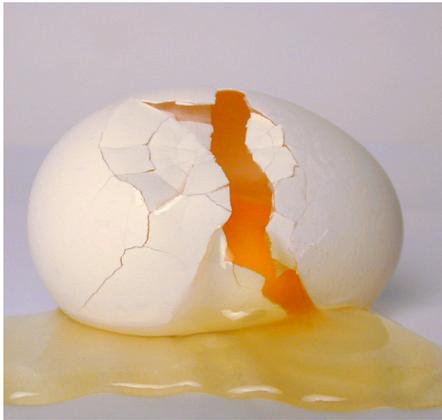
As she transforms into a dog or wolf-like creature, Ginger participates in multiple evil acts. Throughout the transformation, Ginger consistently uses one word, “wicked,” to describe how she is feeling and to enthusiastically respond to new experiences and opportunities.

The most recent example of horror film that reifies the connection between menstruation and the taboo is found in *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (2015). Set in New England in 1630 a devout Christian family led by William and Katherine are banished from their Puritan plantation based on differences in religious principles. They begin their new life outside the colony, on the entrance to wooded wilderness, with their five children, including Thomasin, their oldest daughter. They soon encounter mysteries and ill fate when Samuel, the youngest child, disappears and the crops begin to fail. By the end of the film, the family has lost two sons, Samuel and Caleb, who seem to have lost their lives to a witch in the woods. However, without proof of the witch, the family begins to turn against one another, first, suspecting Thomasin of witchcraft and, later, their twins, who they believe made a pact with the devil. After the deaths of her parents and the disappearance of her remaining siblings, Thomasin seeks out the witches in the woods.

In the film, numerous visual images connect Thomasin to the onset of her puberty/menstruation and the evil harming the family’s farm. For example, a focus is placed on Thomasin’s sexuality, emphasizing her budding breasts through the point-of-view of her brother, Caleb, who seems fixated on them. Other visual signs act as representations of sexual reproduction. For example, Thomasin finds a broken egg that contained a fertilized embryo. When she milks the family goat, Thomasin and her siblings witness blood rather than



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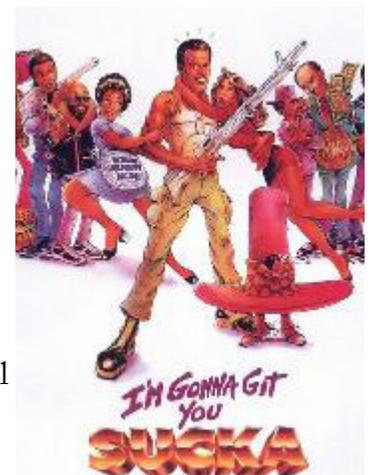


milk coming out of the goat's udder. The most explicit line takes place when William and Katherine discuss Thomasin and the impact that their banishment will have on her future. Katherine states, "List me, our daughter have begot the sign of her womanhood . . . She's old enough, she needs to leave to serve another family."

As additional problems take place on the farm, Thomasin is often blamed and singled out for failing to act or inciting the evil. Eventually, every remaining member of her family accuses her of witchcraft and assumes she is responsible for the death of her brothers. By the end of the film, Thomasin's entire family is dead or missing. Though the audience is left to believe that an actual witch, not Thomasin, is to blame for her family's ill fate, Thomasin seeks the spirit of Black Phillip, a force she also begins to believe is responsible for bringing the devil into their family's farm. The film ends with Thomasin hearing the voice of the devil coming from the family's goat, following him to the coven of witches in the woods, and joining them. Thus the film reinforces that the source of evil centers around the pubescent female. To further illustrate her significance, the film begins and ends with a focus on Thomasin. At her family's trial in front of the church authorities, the camera provides a close-up on Thomasin's face in the very first scene of the movie, and in the final scene of the film, Thomasin is shown naked, rising from the ground, revealing her as witch. As the trope shows, the pubescent, "open" woman is eventually revealed to have powers and evil tendencies.

Finally, in *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988), a film that is technically a comedy meant to parody black exploitation films, a scene that mimics a horror film set-up again showcases the evil nature of menstruation. When Jack Spade declares revenge on Mr. Big, the powerful local crime lord responsible for the death of his brother, Mr. Big hires men to abduct Cheryl, Jack's love interest.

One scene encapsulates the association of horror films to the menstrual taboo by linking the over-the-top horrific visual images, sounds, and dialogue with the negative stereotype that menstruating women are evil and an individual to be feared. Cheryl leaves the diner where she is employed due to the start of her period and is shown walking alone on an inner-city street. Cheryl is unaware that two men named Willie and Leonard wait in a parked car for her in



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order to bring her to their boss. Leonard begins to follow Cheryl, eventually stopping her and informing her that she must come with him. When Cheryl protests and asks to be left alone, Leonard responds by yelling “Bitch, I said you are coming with me!” When Cheryl turns around, she looks like a woman possessed by a demon. Sinister music of tubular bells, similar to the music in *The Exorcist*, plays as part of the soundtrack. Low quality special effects are used to create the image that Cheryl’s eyes are glowing. The effects also create the visions that an evil spirit is inciting the wind to blow fiercely and that Cheryl is making snarling and growling noises. The dialogue continues:

Leonard: Oh, shit! You must have the devil in you!

Cheryl: No. Cramps!!!

Cheryl then grabs Leonard by the collar of his jacket, picks him up and throws him against the wall. She yells: “I asked you nicely, now I’m going to rip your balls off!”

Although humorous, the scene in *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* reaffirms an image of menstruating women as possessed and therefore evil. According to these cultural images, when a woman is menstruating, she is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a person possessed by the devil. Thus, the scene implies that menses is a force that possesses women; it takes control away from them and makes them vulnerable to demonic presences.

These texts show that horror films often portray menstruating women as terrifying and wicked, using common tropes such as possession or other demonic or unnatural characteristics. Not surprisingly, such qualities eventually give rise to representations of women harming others, which further incite fear, uncertainty, and distrust of a woman’s own biological functions.

Menstruating women as threats to others

The characters, Carrie, Audrey Rose/Ivy Templeton, Ginger, Thomasin, and Cheryl seem inherently evil because of the powers that accompany the menstruating/pubescent women. Each film plot reveals that the character’s evil qualities bring dangers to others.

In the film, *Carrie*, Carrie’s association to telekinesis and also her decision to use her power against her classmates and mother indicates that a menstruating woman should be associated with evil and is frightening/threatening to others. Clover continues to illustrate the anxieties that are perpetuated in occult



horror films, such as *Carrie*, by addressing the common female and male narratives found in such films.

Clover explains:

When Carrie's mother links menstruation to the supernatural, she articulates one of horror's abiding verities. At the very least, a menstruating woman is a woman 'open' . . . 'Menstruation,' a British gynecologist once wrote, 'is like a red flag outside an auction sale; it shows that something is going on inside.' In the world of occult horror, in any case, menstrual blood would seem to have little to do with castration or loss and much to do with powerful things going on behind closed doors.²²

Clover shows that many occult horror films concern themselves with penetration or colonization of the female body or its orifices. Thus, the female body is constantly "open" which allows it to be invaded while also allowing horrific fluids and offspring to flow out of it. Furthermore, the "open" woman is still portrayed as a threat, especially when the invisible elements of the female body become visible by entering the public sphere.

Ivy/Audrey Rose's nightmares are frightening, uncontrollable and both dangerous to others but also herself. She destroys her room and home, physically endangers her mother, and burns her own hands on a cold window pane, actions which never occurred prior to this moment in her life. Once again, the prepubescent female's body is turned into a mystery since there appears to be no medical explanation for the change in her behavior. Ivy's "out-of-control" tendencies can also represent the assumed state of women suffering from Premenstrual Syndrome. PMS is typically considered threatening according to Houppert; "there is data to show that most women and men in this society believe that women have adverse behavioral and emotional effects from the menstrual cycle, especially premenstrually."²³



In *Ginger Snaps*, Ginger grows increasingly violent and eventually physically transforms entirely into a monstrous werewolf. She kills the neighbor's dog. She starts a fight with her classmate, Trina, for bullying Brigitte. Later, Ginger enables Trina's death. On Halloween, she eventually kills the guidance counselor, the school's janitor, and seduces Brigitte's friend at the Halloween party and eventually kills him as well. In the final scene, she attacks her sister, which shows the complete loss of her compassion and care for every other

person except for herself.

Ultimately, the “curse” affecting the Fitzgerald family is not pinpointed strictly on Ginger. Rather the film provides the subtext that women are generally “guilty” for evil acts. When Ginger’s and Brigitte’s mother, Pamela, eventually discover that the girls are responsible for Trina’s disappearance, she tells Brigitte that she plans to fill the house with gas, light a match, leave town and “start fresh” with the girls. She even admits that she intends to kill the girls’ father because he will hold her responsible for the girls’ troubles if she lets him live.

Pamela: He’ll just blame me. They all will.

Brigitte: This isn’t your fault, mom.

Pamela: Yes it is.



Though Pamela Fitzgerald has nothing to do with the actions leading up to Ginger’s infection and action, she blames herself. Though we never learn Pamela’s reasoning for holding herself accountable, the dialogue expresses a belief that women are contributing influences to the evil affecting communities.

In *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka*, the scene on the street contributes to the audience’s humorous reaction because it misleads the audience to think that Cheryl is the individual in danger. Imitating the stereotypical exploitation film in which the woman walking in an urban street alone at night is typically at risk of danger, the scene violates the expectations of the audience. Cheryl is not the one who is actually in danger; because she is on her period, she is actually the person who Leonard should fear. Thus, the film warns men to avoid the menstruating woman and to resist a woman’s empowerment. When Willie arrives and knocks Cheryl unconscious, he tells Leonard that it was a good thing he came to his aid and got the “bitch” off of him.

Leonard denies screaming:

Willie: I heard you screamin’ from all the way over there, and . . .

Leonard: I wasn’t screamin’, all right?

Willie: But I heard you . . .

Leonard: I wasn’t screamin’! I was whistling!”

Willie: You was whistling: ‘Willie, help get this bitch off of me?’

Leonard: Yeah!

Leonard’s denial reaffirms that the power of a woman should never overcome the power of a man. It is an



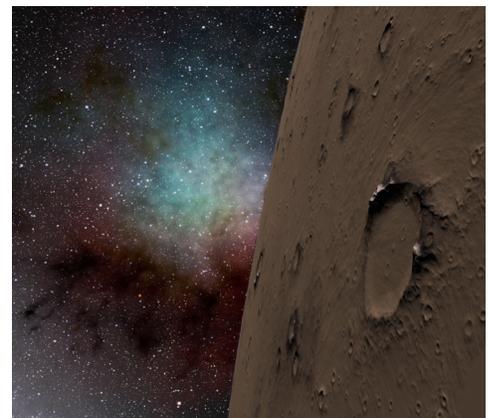
embarrassment to his ego, as the patriarchal male gaze found in films often locates women as the “weaker” sex. By attributing Cheryl’s power to menstruation, the film plays upon the taboo that women gain special uncontrollable and fearful powers and abilities with menarche, which, in turn, operates to disempower women. This is especially the case in the United States where the images of menstruating women are usually portrayed as evil and violent and never viewed as a source of good. Instead of acknowledging menstruation’s life-giving powers, menstruation, as shown in these films, is dangerous because it destroys and damages lives.

Such taboo beliefs are not only found in films, they are found in American culture. Julie Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily argue that practitioners of menstrual politics are convinced that women are naturally and permanently limited by menstruation. They state:

In this second wave of the American woman’s movement, at a moment in history when man has so mastered his universe that he is beginning to redefine even life and death, women are still hearing from people like Edgar Berman, a physician and Democratic party functionary, who announced in 1970 that he would not like to see a woman in charge of this country at a time of national crisis because her “raging hormonal imbalances” would threaten the life and safety of all.²⁴

Regardless of whether films directly inspire the opinions that motivate politicians such as Berman or Trump, the images clearly reinforce one another. Although it can be argued that the scene in *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* has the ability to reveal and expose the absurdity of the menstrual taboo through parody, I contend that the film’s text most overtly challenges the racial stereotypes found in popular films but fails to defy sexist stereotypes. Thus, the stereotypical image of the evil menstruating woman as dangerous remains intact.

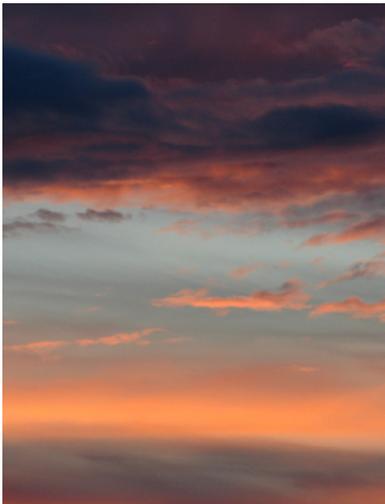
Even when menstruating women characters are not portrayed as inherently “evil,” they are still presented as dangerous to others. In the 2000 science fiction film, *Pitch Black* (2000), the first film in a trilogy based on the science fiction character Richard B. Riddick, survivors of a space transport vessel crash find themselves abandoned on a desert planet. In addition to lacking adequate food and water and worrying about Riddick, escaped convict and fellow passenger,



the ten survivors must avoid being hunted by the strange planet's flesh-eating inhabitants. The survivors soon learn that the planet's eclipse, which occurs every 22 years, is about to take place again, bringing the aliens to the surface to hunt and consume all signs of life. Led by authorized captain Carolyn Frey and the unpredictable Riddick, the 10 survivors search for an escape shuttle and try to avoid a brutal death.

In the very first scene, Riddick's voiceover presents audiences with foreshadowing. While traveling in the space transport we hear his inner monologue about the other passengers. He explains: "Smelled a woman. Sweat, boots, tool belt, leather. Prospector type." Riddick has two powerful and unnatural abilities. First, he has surgically-enhanced eyes that permit him to see in the dark, and second, he has an incredibly accurate sense of smell. In his voiceover, Riddick describes various observations about many of the passengers. He discusses what he hears and sees, yet when he discusses "the woman" he talks about what he can smell. Although Riddick may be capable of smelling men as well, he never admits it. Instead, he remains fixated on the "smell of the woman." Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen found that many women share a fear that they smell when menstruating.²⁵ The taboo is so prevalent, they argue, that companies successfully sell menstrual products to women by telling them that people will not "smell you" by the addition of perfumes and deodorants.²⁶ Although Riddick has a fictional and uncommon ability to smell, the film clearly links his capability to detect the scent of women to the fact that women menstruate.

When the survivors (now only seven remaining) realize that they are being tracked by the flesh-eat-



ing creatures, Riddick makes a plan but warns the crew, "These bad boys know our blood now." When the aliens attack again and the crew loses their power sources for lighting, Riddick informs them that the aliens are tracking the scent of menstrual blood flowing from a young orphaned or runaway girl who was passing as boy. He reveals his ability to sense the menstruation when a member of the crew suggests continuing onward.

Riddick: Oh, I don't know about that. That's death row up there.

Especially with the girl bleeding.

Johns: What? What are you talking about? She's not cut.

Riddick: Not her. Her.

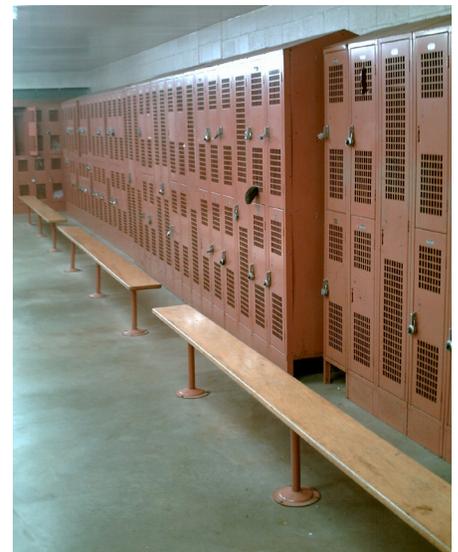
Johns: You've gotta be kidding me.

Riddick explains to the other men: "They've been nose-open for her ever since we left. In case you haven't noticed they go off blood." Riddick reveals that the menstruating woman is dangerous to the group

as a whole because the scent of her blood has attracted the aliens. This plays on the myth that women are capable of attracting wild animals due to their scent. According to Houppert, this belief is proven false by sound scientific studies and documentation.²⁷ Nonetheless, exposure to menstruation in this scene is reaffirmed as a threat to society. As such, the representations of menstruating women frequently accompany scenes and subplots that bring danger and threats to others. In addition to the dangers that others experience, the menstruating women find themselves equally vulnerable and at the mercy of their own physical qualities.

Menstruating women as threats to self

Though it can be argued that horror films and the powers of actions such as telekinesis, possession or the attraction of wild, unknown beasts are fictional, it does not alleviate the discourse of the taboo. Even if men and women do not feel susceptible to such a danger when interacting with menstruating women, women and men will likely understand the horrors and dangers that are portrayed as realistic for women. In the opening scene of *Carrie*, women relate to the embarrassment and danger of social exclusion that occurs when menstruation is exposed openly to society. The girls in Carrie's gym class emphasize negative reactions of disgust and repulsion at the sight of menstrual blood. The girls' insensitive and nasty responses to Carrie's tears and screams reinforce the belief that menstrual blood is unwelcome even in a private space, like a women's locker room.



Carrie, a complicated figure, is clearly monstrous, but also simultaneously the victim of the monstrous acts completed by her peers.

Therefore, Clover contends that slasher films, like *Carrie*, indicate that both boys and girls can identify with screen females in fear and pain, as victim or avenger, rather than viewing the meaning entirely through the patriarchal male gaze. She explains: "The boy so threatened and so humiliated, King seems to be saying, is a boy who recognizes himself in a girl who finds herself bleeding from her crotch in the gym shower, pelted with tampons, and slobbered with pig's blood at the senior prom . . ."²⁸ Despite the identification, men and women view and learn firsthand the social exclusion and terror that results once menstruation enters the public sphere. *Carrie* provides the link and reifies the notion that menstrual blood is a mysterious, humiliating and scary experience, especially for women.

Women may not fear that the image of their blood will lead to their own death, as it eventually does for Carrie, but they will certainly understand from this film how exposure of menstrual blood can lead to the social death by exclusion. Similarly, men are not likely to assume that menstruating woman will kill them with telekinetic powers; nevertheless, the film teaches them how to respond to the women who identify with Carrie's embarrassment. Men react with the same repulsion and disgust to the sight of menstrual blood as the girls in the locker room scene. This fear, in turn, causes women to respond to their menses by hiding it from the public to avoid social exclusion. Yet this reaction makes menstruation's presence even more mysterious to men, thereby perpetuating the taboo.

Additionally, *Audrey Rose* plays upon another aspect of the taboo. According to critic, Adrian Schober, Ivy's body is overtly sexualized throughout the film and due to her impending start of menstruation. He states: "Significantly, Ivy is on the verge of her twelfth birthday – a week away, in fact. She is 'growing up,' approaching womanhood, hence the almost obligatory early aside reference to puberty as Ivy marvels over her friend Jill's premature start to menstruation (she is only nine years old)."²⁹ According to Houppert, the American culture, among others, has a "shrill history of fretting over sexual precocity in girls."³⁰ Countless images and stories reinforce the cultural myth that the sexuality of young girls is something to be protected and concealed. Although the beginning of menses is often connected to the beginning of a woman's sexuality and understanding of sexual relations, a young girl's sexuality has become increasingly problematic and dangerous since the average age of menstruation has rapidly decreased. Houppert notes that J.M. Tanner's 1976 publication of a study showing that girls were maturing at a younger age "hit a nerve" even though there is no link between early menstruation and early sexual activity.³¹ Houppert states:



Tanner's 'early menarche' theory, while of questionable accuracy, quickly became the jumping-off point for a new round of hysteria about sexually precocious girls. Beginning in 1976, the media latched onto the theory and spun dozens of alarmist stories. *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Nation* all wrote about Tanner's findings, asking what we were to do with this nation of

sexually precocious girls. In the ensuing years, the press recycled their story with predictable regularity.³²

Thus, Ivy, who anxiously awaits menstruation, seems to grow more sexual each day. The connection of Ivy's body to her sexuality is emphasized when Elliot Hoover is spotted watching and following her home from school. Elliot Hoover is dressed as the stereotypical pervert: he has a full beard, wears a long trench coat, and is described as having "a weird spaced out look about him." When a purse for Ivy is found in a bag of groceries brought home by her father, Janice Templeton becomes convinced that the stranger is "after" Ivy, thus mistaking Elliot Hoover as a pervert. Not only do the images and dialogue within *Audrey Rose* present menstruation as a potentially evil force, it also reinforces menstruation's association with the onset of sexual activity, which in turn draws risks to women.

The film, *Ginger Snaps*, seems to suggest that becoming a woman is as psychologically and physically troubling and dangerous as turning into a werewolf. The connection to menstruation and Ginger's transformation is explicit. The set-up of the attack begins with Ginger experiencing back pain, which her mother



first identifies as cramps. That evening, Ginger and Brigitte are on a mission to kidnap the dog that belongs to Trina, a schoolmate they dislike. When they come across the mutilated corpse of another dog, they stop to take it with them in order to trick Trina into thinking that her dog was attacked by the "Beast of Bailey Downs." While the sisters attempt to pick up the mangled and bloody corpse, Brigitte sees blood on Ginger's legs.

Brigitte: You got some on you.

Ginger: Nice

Brigitte: What?

Ginger: B . . . I just got the curse.

Brigitte: Ew

Ginger: Well, it's not contagious!

Brigitte: I know that.

Ginger: God. I mean, kill yourself to be different and your own body screws you.

But if I start simping around tampon dispensers and moaning about . . . PMS, just shoot me, okay?

This dialogue contains repulsion and a euphemism that encourages the hiding of menstruation. Ginger also implies that her own body has betrayed her, and, by asking her sister to “shoot her” if she starts showing signs of PMS, she equates gaining a menstrual cycle to a death wish. All of these messages frame menstruation as an act to be feared or avoided.

The film’s various imagery is certainly intentional and deliberately representational of menstrual blood. Ginger’s name and even her physical trait of red hair, represents an explicit connection to the red blood that comes with menstruation. Immediately after the discussion, Ginger is attacked by the beast, an action that is ultimately blamed on the fact that Ginger started menstruating.

Ginger: What was it?

Brigitte: I don’t know. A big dog, maybe?

Ginger: That’s no – what did I do? What?

Brigitte: Shh. I saw this thing once, on bears . . . it said a bear would like come after a girl on the red because of the smell.

The myth that the smell of menstrual blood lured the beast and resulted in the attack reminds viewers that ultimately menstruation is dangerous for women. Even if the act of menstruating does not result in an inherent monstrous transformation or harms others, bleeding women remain vulnerable to forces and dangers that can alter them and turn them into a dangerous being.

The film reinforces additional myths associated with the menstruation taboo, connecting the onset of puberty and menstruation to an illicit and even dangerous sexuality, similar to the messages found in *Audrey Rose*. In multiple scenes before her first menstrual cycle and before the beginning of her transformation, Ginger resists advances from her classmates, including Jason McCartney, who openly lusts after her. However, soon after menstruating and physically changing, Ginger becomes more promiscuous. Brigitte finds her sister smoking pot with Jason and his friends. The next day, Ginger, who typically wears oversized sweaters, arrives at school dressed in tight, revealing clothing which shows off her curves and makes her the recipient to whistles in the hallways. Rather than resisting or fighting the attention that she is receiving, she struts and smirks as she walks down the school’s hallway and passing her male classmates and her sister. She is then shown making out with Jason on the school’s game field. In a discussion about her period with the school nurse, the association of menstruation to sexual advances is further reinforced when the nurse reminds Ginger, “You’ll have to protect against both pregnancy and STD’s now” and hands her two condoms.

On her date with Jason, Ginger ends up sexually and physically assaulting her love interest. When she returns to her bedroom crying, Brigitte assumes that Ginger has been the one who was sexually assaulted and follows her into the bathroom. To Brigitte's surprise, she finds her sister covered in blood and vomiting into the toilet. Ginger describes her symptoms as an "ache." She explains: "And I thought it was for sex, but . . . it's to tear everything to fucking pieces."

Ginger becomes increasingly disobedient and defiant. Her actions are juxtaposed against Jason's behavior. Though he is also physically turning into a werewolf, he is upset, fearful, angry, blaming Ginger for his condition and wanting to know how to stop the infection. Though both Jason and Ginger express fear toward their changes, Ginger seems to succumb to and accept her new condition more quickly than Jason. Her behavior becomes more overtly sexualized, and she seems to enjoy her newfound sexual liberation. Jason is not shown committing as many evil acts as Ginger. He is mostly shown expressing his fears and only starts threatening others when the virus takes control. When Brigitte eventually finds him and gives him the anecdote, he shows his vulnerabilities. However, Ginger seems more comfortable as a monster; on Halloween she embraces her animalistic instincts and physical transformations.

Brigitte: You like it.

Ginger: It feels so . . . good. Brigitte . . . It's . . . it's like touching yourself. You know every move. Right on the fucking dot. And after . . . you see fucking fireworks. Supernovas. I'm a goddamn force of nature. I feel like I could do . . . just about anything. You know, we're just about not related anymore.

With her transformation almost complete, Ginger feels less of a connection to her sister and her human qualities, and is accepting of the powers that accompanied her "womanhood" even though they ultimately lead to others fearing her, which, in turn, results in her own death.



Finally, the film reminds women that periods are an act met with dread and pain regardless of whether you are attacked by an animal. During their conversation at a drug store while purchasing a box of tampons, Brigitte asks Ginger “Are you sure it’s just cramps?” Ginger tells Brigitte that “the words “just” and “cramps,” they don’t go together . . . One day you too will know my pain.” Once again, Ginger reminds Brigitte that cramps and menstruation are both painful and something that causes misery.

In a scene in *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka*, Cheryl, while working as a server at a local diner, quickly waits on her numerous customers. As she serves their dinners, Cheryl reveals a pained expression of discomfort as one of her customers yells for a coffee refill. Cheryl ignores him and begins rummaging through her purse and holds up a bottle of “Midol 200.” Her inner monologue exclaims: “These cramps are killing me!” When her impatient customer continues to scream for his coffee, Cheryl slams a pot of coffee on the counter and is quickly approached by another server.



Server: Cheryl, are you okay?

Cheryl: I think I better go home. It’s my ‘time.’

Server: Girl, me, too.

Cheryl: I’m gonna go and lay down, okay?

Server: I know exactly how you feel.

Cheryl: Be strong.

Similar to the messages in *Ginger Snaps*, Cheryl’s declarative statement to “be strong” implies that menstruation is a difficult and negative experience and that women must have strength and motivation to get through the monthly occurrence. The server’s comment (that she knows exactly how Cheryl feels) further propagates the myths that menstruation is commonly identified as a monthly hardship among all women and that such “hardship” is experienced in the same problematic way.

In *Pitch Black*, when Riddick reveals the “bleeding” woman, he exposes the apparently male youth “Jack” as Jackie. This scene is significant because it characterizes menstruation as a trait that reveals a “true” gender and furthermore, reveals women’s weakness and inferiority. When Jack/Jackie is exposed she immediately becomes feminized. She begins to cry and apologize, explaining that she thought “it’d be better if people took me for a guy. I thought they’d might leave me alone instead of always messing with me.” Captain Frye also begins to act more feminine and empathetic after the revelation. She suddenly steps out of the

role as a captain and into a mothering role; Frye comforts Jackie. They seem to now share a special bond, yet they also seem to instantaneously become detriments to the group.

The scene in which Jack is revealed as a menstruating girl becomes a turning point in the film. Interestingly, Frye is also demonized along with Jackie, not because she is menstruating but simply because she, too, is a woman. When Frye learns that Jackie is menstruating she tells the others: “This is not going to work. We’re gonna have to go back.” Johns immediately challenges the captain, arguing that she made a bad choice by attempting to escape the planet and challenging her authority. Johns exclaims: “So I say mush on. The canyon’s only a couple hundred meters, after that it’s skiff city. So why don’t you butch up, stuff a cork in this fucking kid and let’s go.” When others come to Frye’s defense, Johns attempts to turn them against her by revealing that Frye contemplated sacrificing the crew when the ship was about to crash. Later, Johns recommends killing “the girl” as way to distract the aliens from the group. These elements in plot are relevant because they all occur after the menstruating girl is revealed. Jackie’s menstrual cycle seems to act as a reminder that menstruation debilitates women, further weakening Frye’s power as captain. In short, *Pitch Black* sends the message that women make better sacrifices than captains in addition to showing how a menstruating woman remains a threat to her community.



Representations of menstruating women reveal women as vulnerable to sexual attacks, injury, and death. It risks outing women, exposing their weaknesses and wrecking their political status. The final theme will illustrate that all of the aforementioned behaviors and characteristics are explicitly linked to the image of blood, and furthers reify repulsion to the act of menstruation.

Visualization of the Abject

Finally, the last common characteristic found in some of these films is an image and encounter with menstrual blood, one that often signals disgust and a treatment of blood as abjection. One brief scene in the parody horror film, *Scary Movie 2* (2001) epitomizes this reaction. In the scene, the heroine Cindy Campbell explores a haunted house in an attempt to explain the mysterious occurrences. While walking with her friend, Buddy, Cindy shouts “Look!” and points to bloody shoeprints leading down the hallway to a book shelf. Buddy replies in a repulsed tone of voice: “Dude! Someone’s on the rag!” The scene’s humor stems



from the misinterpretation of bloody footprints as something horrific caused by murder to something abject and repulsive caused by a woman's inability to conceal menstruation. Though blood, in some ways, is often visually displeasing, menstrual blood is particularly constructed and reinforced implicitly as inappropriate for the public and disgusting. Once again, a euphemism for the word is used in the dialogue, further inciting a type of discursive censorship. The films remind viewers that the horror genre, inherently determined to use shocking

and horrific images, cannot only show scenes with blood, often they specifically identify menstrual blood, making it one of the few genres or texts where visual blood can be identified. As such, the messages in the films to fear menstruation are made explicitly.

In Volatile Bodies, Grosz uses Kristeva's notion of the abject to explain our resistance toward bodily fluids, like menstruation. Grosz argues that society codes the female body as uncontrollable because its leaks are unpredictable due to reproductive and hormonal changes. The clean, proper and obedient, law-abiding and social body emerges only after it minimizes abjection.³³ According to Grosz women's corporeality is culturally inscribed as seepage; thus, numerous horror films reify the association between women's bodies and the significance of their bodily fluids.

For example, in *Carrie*, the overwhelming image of blood present throughout the film encourages audiences to connect the onset of Carrie's powers with menstruation. Not only does the opening scene mark the onset of the telekinesis, but before the climatic ending in which Carrie destroys her high school and classmates at the prom, Carrie is covered with pig's blood. The cruel joke planned by a group of her peers again visually connects Carrie's evil and revenge to the ability that accompanies her menstrual cycle. In *Carrie*, visual images of menstruation are associated with horrific violence and dangerous powers, reinforcing the message that menstruating women are dangerous.

Similarly, in *Ginger Snaps*, menstrual blood is shown twice, both times as large amounts of blood dripping down Ginger's legs or onto the floor. Given the amount of blood that accompanies the horrific attacks from the "Beast of Bailey Downs" and eventually Ginger, each time blood is shown it is difficult to determine if the source of the blood is menstruation or an injury. However, the blood is frequently identified as menstrual blood in the films dialogue and discourse. As a result, each scene reaffirms the connections

between menstrual blood and the evil acts that follow Ginger's rage. Additionally, the film provides graphic details even when not explicitly showing blood. When Brigitte suggest that they visit the school nurse, they are presented with a detailed description, only seems appropriate for a horror film, since most details are not even provided in educational materials or other mainstream sources.

The nurse tells Ginger: "A thick, syrupy, voluminous discharge is not uncommon. The bulk of the uterine lining is shed within the first few days. The contractions, cramps, squeeze it out like a pump. In three to five days, you'll find lighter, bright red bleeding. That may turn into a brownish or blackish sludge, which signals the end of the flow." Both the imagery and discourse of the film emphasizes the abject images and qualities of menstruation that are socially taught to be removed or hidden from the public sphere. Images and words are graphic and detailed and, as such, reify their horrific nature.



Conclusion

Films are one of the many texts responsible for constructing the images of the menstrual taboo in American culture. This essay has shown that horror films portray menstruation in particular ways: it is evil, threatening and dangerous to others and to women, and an explicit sign of the abject that society must allow in only certain areas and reject in the public. Images and discourse about menstruation in films are exposed and simulated in order to teach society the parameters of the taboo and to assure that menstruation will only appear in the public in the form of simulacra. Images and visibility of menstruation and the specific



menstrual taboos are permitted in films, but frequently only in a "low body genre" like horror, which hinges on "the spectacle of a 'sexually saturated' female body."³⁴ Thus, the current discourse of the taboo is made accessible to the public but endorses concealing and restricting menstruation to the private sphere. The discourse and images that audiences encounter in regards to menstruation both create aspects of the taboo and also reaffirm cultural myths about menstruation. This visibility of the menstrual taboo allows it to perform in public culture

by producing negative consequences that affect women, including assuring that mostly men have control

and that women's bodies and biological functions remain restricted. Women are manipulated, regulated and policed which permits the continuation of patriarchal thinking.

The visibility of menstruation encourages performative gendered acts from men and women in the public sphere. Men and women are taught to show repulsion at the publicity of menstruation because it causes women to act evil or possessed, undermines women by portraying them as dangerous or a weakness, causes embarrassment or danger explicitly for women, and makes women believe their bodily function is dirty and "unclean." Although all of these characteristics of menstruation need not occur, women often performatively act or accept these to be true. As in the case of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), Houppert explains that numerous studies reveal that society believes negative effects of menstruation occur frequently, despite scientific studies proving otherwise. For example, one study concluded that "socially mediated expectations and beliefs determine the incidence of premenstrual beliefs."³⁵ Despite the increased awareness of the menstrual taboo and false assumptions surrounding PMS, people continue to justify the social role of women based on these biological functions. For example, Julie Holland argued in a *Time* opinion column that Hillary Clinton was at an ideal age to lead the nation because she was postmenopausal.³⁶ Although this editorial attempted to incite support for Clinton, its reasoning upholds the very taboo-inspired thinking that often stops women from advancing in society and earning support from others. Menstrual taboos continue to have material effects on the women who seek leadership positions because women are undermined and not supported for fear that their biological functions and hormones will negatively impact their self-control.

Due to the influence of the visual images of menstruation and the effects it has on women and their bodily and social experiences, it becomes critical to examine the importance of visual imagery and its influence on the public. When society and critics underestimate the power of the visual, false beliefs are unquestioningly perpetuated and oppressive images are continually disseminated. Additionally, failing to understand the significance of mediated images reinforces the dominant paradigm of patriarchy because few



find or create representations that challenge such beliefs.

Thus, it is necessary to demand positive images of menstruation in order to challenge the assumptions currently ascribed in the taboo. First, the trope of menstruation and female bodily actions as

evil are mundane and, as shown through this analysis, a dangerous representation. Thus, filmmakers should not rely on the imagery or use coming-of-age stories as plot devices. Second, writers, directors, producers and other media gatekeepers can choose to neutrally or positively portray the experience of menstruation and even change the meaning of menstruation by openly challenging the cultural attitudes that make up the taboo. The film, *A Walk on the Moon*, offers some positive images of menstruation that largely resists the hegemonic and culturally dominant messages of the menstruation taboo. Characters convey a positive reaction to the young protagonist's physical development, and the film even shows contained, minimal, and realistic "menstrual blood" that is notably less frightening or gruesome than the images that appear in horror films. Despite this positive representation, *A Walk on the Moon* still portrays aspects of the taboo including, feelings of shame, embarrassment and the myth that menstruation initiates early sexual activity. Films and other forms of media should restrict referencing the taboo or, instead, creatively appropriate representations of menstruation as a tool of empowerment.

This discourse will help women appropriate and change the meaning of menstruation.

As visual images reflect the resisting of dominant and cultural taboos, individuals can likewise shift their attitude toward embracing bodily acts and reinforce positive feelings toward menstruation. Empowering counter performances can operate to overturn the hegemonic presence of the taboo in mainstream American media.

End Notes

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²¹Clover, *Men*, 77-78.

²² Clover, *Men*, 77-78.

²³ Houppert, *The Curse*, 180.

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