

WOMEN, MONSTROSITY AND HORROR FILM

GYNAEHORROR

ROUTLEDGE



ERIN HARRINGTON

Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film

Women occupy a privileged place in horror film. Horror is a space of entertainment and excitement, of terror and dread, and one that relishes the complexities that arise when boundaries – of taste, of bodies, of reason – are blurred and dismantled. It is also a site of expression and exploration that leverages the narrative and aesthetic horrors of the reproductive, the maternal and the sexual to expose the underpinnings of the social, political and philosophical othering of women.

This book offers an in-depth analysis of women in horror films through an exploration of ‘gynaehorror’: films concerned with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity, pregnancy, birth, motherhood and finally to menopause. Some of the themes explored include: the intersection of horror, monstrosity and sexual difference; the relationships between normative female (hetero)sexuality and the twin figures of the chaste virgin and the voracious *vagina dentata*; embodiment and subjectivity in horror films about pregnancy and abortion; reproductive technologies, monstrosity and ‘mad science’; the discursive construction and interrogation of monstrous motherhood; and the relationships between menopause, menstruation, hagsploitation and ‘abject barren’ bodies in horror.

The book not only offers a feminist interrogation of gynaehorror, but also a counter-reading of the gynaehorrific, that both accounts for and opens up new spaces of productive, radical and subversive monstrosity within a mode of representation and expression that has often been accused of being misogynistic. It therefore makes a unique contribution to the study of women in horror film specifically, while also providing new insights in the broader area of popular culture, gender and film philosophy.

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Film Philosophy at the Margins

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Film Philosophy at the Margins picks up on the burgeoning field of 'film philosophy' – the shift from film analysis and explication to bringing together film with philosophy – and coalesces it with films, genres and spectator theory which have received little critical attention. These films could be defined as marginal due to containing marginalizing representations of violence and marginal invocations of sexuality and queer performativity, showing the margins of bodily modification from disability to performance art, being marginal in their abstraction of representative codes or in reference to their address to the politics of social control, spectatorship and cinematic pleasure as marginal due to its unique status and quality, and many other interpretations of extreme.

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Introduction

Mapping the spaces/faces of gynaehorror

Defining gynaehorror

Women occupy a privileged place in horror film. The horror genre is a site of entertainment and excitement, of terror and dread, and one that relishes in the complexities that arise when boundaries – of taste, of bodies, of reason – are blurred and dismantled. It is also a site of expression and exploration that leverages the narrative and aesthetic horrors of the reproductive, the maternal and the sexual to expose the underpinnings of the social, political and philosophical othering of women. This is a consistent point of interest, even across the breadth of an already diverse genre and into that which might otherwise be deemed ‘the horrific’. As a provocation, I offer two articulations of cinematic horror that look to the same sense of female, reproductive horror, despite the differences in their content, their aesthetic modes, and their visceral impact.

Vigil (1984) – an atmospheric art film rather than a horror film, but no less horrific for this designation – centres on the subjective experiences of a young tomboy nicknamed Toss. She is growing up on a remote sheep farm but must deal with layers of psychosexual dis-ease when her beloved father dies in a shepherding accident and a stranger arrives, seemingly to take his place. The film is imbued with a sense of impending doom. The muddy, isolated farm itself is in a state of near-decay. The misty, grey-green hills around them are crumbling and cracking. The dark, imposing interloper, Ethan, who brings Toss’s father’s body back home – and then begins a sexual relationship with her disaffected mother – is an ambivalent, threatening figure associated with predation and connected, visually and allegorically, to the hawks that casually pick off the farm’s lambs. With her father gone, and her mother and grandfather only interested in their own affairs, Toss takes it upon herself to act as the protector of the land by standing vigil, applying her child-like sense of fantasy and mythology to a task of vast spiritual importance. Her puberty, though, is perhaps the true site of the film’s horror. The sense of sexual menace associated with the arrival of the handsome, enigmatic Ethan is uncomfortably expressed when Toss perversely suckles on his fingers as a lamb might suck at a bottle. When Ethan docks a lamb’s tail with a knife the blood spurts across Toss’s face, marking her as horrified wounded victim, a

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bloodied virgin, exposed suddenly and portentously to the grisly reality of the inevitable violence that accompanies maturation. Her mounting terror and confusion erupt during a powerful, almost apocalyptic storm when, wet and muddy, huddled in the shearing shed, she realises that she is bleeding from between her legs and wonders if she is dying. Toss's traumatic menarche breaks her vigil; her waiting is over; Ethan leaves the farm. Toss's final appearance, as her family finally packs up and leaves the oppressive valley, is marked by a deliberate femininity that she actively disavowed as a pre-pubescent child.

This same sense of sexual dread, and the overlay of horror and monstrosity both within and across the female body, is similarly present in the horror film *Inside/À l'intérieur* (2007), although in a significantly different and much more brutal manner. The film features a heavily pregnant widow, Sarah, who is terrorised in her home the night before she is due to have her labour induced. We ultimately learn that Sarah's attacker, a nameless woman in black, lost her own unborn child in the same car accident that killed Sarah's husband, and that her need is utterly straightforward: she wants to take Sarah's baby from her by force, even if it means cutting it out of her belly. After making her way into the house she attempts to stab Sarah's swollen stomach with sewing shears as Sarah sleeps, but Sarah wakes and the ensuing trauma instigates labour. The film overlays a nasty, increasingly violent cat-and-mouse home invasion narrative with a story of maternal obsession that pits Sarah's own blunted, depressed maternal ambivalence against the single-minded persistence of the woman in black. Throughout this, Sarah's unborn child appears as a computer-generated character *in utero*. His own escalating distress exacerbates the already frightening scenario, even as his status as a digital avatar unsettles the film's interest in flesh and blood and destabilises the coextensive relationship between mother and unborn. Others – the police, Sarah's mother, her boss – enter the house but to no effect, and they are summarily dispatched in unpleasantly visceral ways. The film's climax comes as Sarah, all in white, bloodied and exhausted, begins to give birth on the stairs. The woman in black, burnt and wounded from Sarah's defensive assaults, 'helps' her, cutting the baby from her with ghoulish care, and leaving Sarah dead, gutted, and bleeding out, before sitting quietly with the infant in the shadows. The film offers a distinctly feminine, reproductive horror story set within an oppressive domestic space, painted in shifting, shadowy shades of black, white and red. Its mirror-framing of victim and villain pits one expression of maternal drive against another, and asks us to consider how each woman might be an extension, or alternative resonance, of the other.

Both of these examples – one a moody award-winning art film from New Zealand, the other an entry into the corpus of the New French Extremity – explore the same impulse. Throughout this book, I offer a schema of exploring and understanding the various social, cultural, political and biomedical layers of this reproductive, feminine, 'womanly' horror, as they exist in a heteronormative matrix, through the term gynae horror. 'Gynae' comes from the

Greek root for woman, but I draw from its more common association with women's (reproductive) bodies in a biological, corporeal sense. Gynaecology, for instance, is interested in the reproductive system: the vagina, the ovaries and the uterus; fertility, pregnancy, birth and abortion; menstruation; menopause and the cessation of fertility. Gynaecology also means, literally, the science or study of women, but here the female reproductive system is metonymic. It is a fleshy part that stands in for the complex whole, such that the molar configurations of 'woman', the 'feminine' and 'female-ness' have been historically and with great consistency associated with a degree of biological essentialism and determinism that both shapes yet sits counter to, and even suffocates, the lived experiences of diverse individuals.

Gynaehorror, as I will demonstrate, is horror that deals with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause. While my focus is horror film – the space in which such horror makes itself most visible, most fecund, even – this term is one that might be applied more broadly to connect visual representation and aesthetic expression to wider issues of sociocultural and philosophical analysis. This book offers a feminist interrogation of gynaehorror, but also offers a counter-reading of the gynaehorrific, that both accounts for and opens up new spaces within a mode of representation that has often been accused (and, in many cases, rightfully so) of being misogynistic. This is not to try to rehabilitate certain long-standing modes of imagery and narrative whose dominant register can, perhaps, be broadly coloured as anti-woman, but to explore the spaces between and within these modes that might offer more interesting ways of thinking through representation, cinematic expression, the reproductive and the nominally – and monstrosly – feminine.

This term and concept owes a particular debt to Barbara Creed's 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Creed's landmark work, which remains an enduring and influential piece of modern feminist cultural criticism, shifted attention away from the female victim and towards the then under-theorised female monster. She outlines in great detail the way that the horror of female monsters is explicitly gendered – that is, associated with monstrous expressions of femininity, the reproductive body and the maternal – in a way that is not the case for male or gender-neutral monsters. Utilising and critiquing psychoanalytic theories that explore the relationship between the mother, her child and the construction of the self, Creed offers a powerful account of feminine monstrosity that draws from Julia Kristeva's exploration of the function of abjection in her 1982 book *Powers of Horror*. In doing so, she links the abject's sense of liminal disgust, the breaching of boundaries both corporeal and conceptual, and the potential trauma of the child's individuation from 'his' mother to archetypal modes and expressions of female monstrosity that centre upon woman's reproductive functions. These include the figures of the witch, the monstrous womb, the possessed pubescent body and the archaic, all-engulfing mother. Creed's other

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contribution is a challenge to Sigmund Freud's reading of the 'horror' of sexual difference through an exploration of non-reproductive representations of the monstrous-feminine. In particular, she interrogates Freud's suggestion that a young boy will see his mother's genitals as horrific because her lack of a penis threatens both his literal and figurative castration, something that Freud expresses metaphorically through the connection of image of the female genitals to that of the fanged, serpent-haired Medusa. Instead, Creed argues woman is feared not because she is 'castrated', but because she is a potential (and powerful) castrator – the *femme castratrice*. She demonstrates how this figure of woman-as-castrator is borne out in rape-revenge narratives and in the figure of the emasculating, controlling mother, as well as through the metaphorical threat of the *vagina dentata*, the mythical toothed vagina. Throughout, Creed offers a significant feminist challenge to Freud's male-centric schema.

Creed's work sits alongside Carol J. Clover's lauded interrogation of gender, pleasure, and identification in the slasher, rape-revenge and occult genres, *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (1992), as one of the most influential works of feminist horror scholarship. Combined, the two perhaps set the original terms of reference for the discussion of women in horror film; as with anyone writing in this field, my analysis cannot help but be shaped by the impact of these works, although I do not delve meaningfully into the psychoanalytic theories of film, gender, interpretation and spectatorship that inform their analyses and that were pronounced sites of debate at the time. Instead of re-tooling Creed's schema of the monstrous-feminine, I take it as a provocation. It is contextual terrain that is both helpful and necessary, and work that I will necessarily continue to touch upon. This is to say that the work in this book does not exist to negate earlier appraisals of gender and horror, but to complement and expand upon them.

This project also gestures to other accounts of cinematic bodies and bodies of cinema. Recent scholarship has argued persuasively for an interrogation of cinema not just as a mode of representation, but as a medium that plays with time and space, with sexuality and eroticism (McPhee 2014), that intersects with and extends the corporeal limits body through the provocation of embodied reactions and interactions (Powell 2007). The multiple encounters and alliances that engendered through the relationship between cinema and the spectator forge a space of desire and excess that often escapes language (MacCormack 2008). As Stephen Shaviro (1993) notes, "film is a vivid medium, and it is important to talk about how it arouses corporeal reactions of desire and fear, pleasure and disgust, fascination and shame" (p. viii). To consider the horror film's imperative "to horrify" (Neale 2000, 86) begs the question of what it means to be horrified, to be moved, and to become a part of a medium that provokes and engenders powerful affective responses that last well beyond the duration of the film-artefact itself. It asks what it means for something to *be* horrific, and what such a designation might imply, reciprocally, about that which does not horrify. It asks questions about the ethics of the image. My own encounters with the horror films discussed herein

cannot, then, come from some sort of cool distance, and nor do I think they should. My engagement with expressions of reproductive horror cannot be divorced from the way I respond to cinema in embodied, emotional and psychological ways, which are shaped by things as diverse as my experience of my gendered body, my tastes and distastes, my mood and attention span, my capacity to take some sort of pleasure or interest in suspense and disgust, my life-history of viewing, the environment in which I might encounter a film, and even what I've had for lunch before watching something unexpectedly gory. This book does not attempt to offer a phenomenological account of horror in the vein of recent interesting work by film-philosophers such as Julian Hanich (2010), Dylan Trigg (2014), Anna Powell (2005) and Angela Ndaliansis (2012), but it is informed by a mutual interest in the way that films might express complex meanings and provoke complex interactions – interactions that are utterly integral to the way that cinema is experienced and comprehended.

The juxtaposition of Creed and Clover's work, alongside scholars who are exploring new avenues of film-philosophy, highlights a tension that I acknowledge threads throughout this work, but that I hope is provocative instead of problematic. A feminist analysis of female bodies and reproduction in film gestures towards binaries in a manner that can be seen, maybe cynically, as reproducing dualistic modes of representation and interpretation that are often enshrouded in a particularly polar notion of sexual difference and the positioning of woman as dualistic Other. This, arguably, is reinforced through the deployment of feminist theories that are interested in the construction and implications of such difference, let alone their impact upon film and other forms of visual media. This is also related to the insufficient nature of the language often available to us; consider the ocular imperative embedded in the word 'spectatorship', which inherently de-emphasises many of the ways that one might encounter media, and which distils the complex relationship between media entity and individual to the seen and the unseen, the gazer and the gazed-upon. This, perhaps, is a form of linear thinking but it is nonetheless of value. Moya Lloyd (2005) reminds us that "to invoke a stable subject as the active agent of politics is *not* to refer to a subject that precedes discourse or politics... [i]t is to understand the political effects this mode of subjectification generates" (p. 58); that is, this allegedly stable subject is a construct that is politically useful. An emphasis upon the lived, embodied and subjective experience of women, of diverse female subjects, requires an acknowledgement of the very modes of entrenched power that, in the west at least, have created long-standing, deeply felt inequities through the creation and normalisation of asymmetrical relationships between the one (the norm, the centre, the reasoned, the mind, Man) and the Other (the abnormal, the periphery, the uncontained, the body, Woman).

At the same time, such identity politics do not always mesh well with the reappraisals of subjectivity that have emerged in recent decades. These range from posthuman and poststructural accounts of the subject that look to multiplicities, emergences, transformations and provocative teratologies, to

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accounts of queer and trans* subjectivities and phenomenologies, to the destabilisation of the notion of human-centric subjectivity in Human Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies and some areas of ecocriticism. This might even extend to more oblique explorations of bodies in the more abstract sense; consider Jean-François Lyotard's offering in *Libidinal Economy* (1993) of a hypothetical, ambiguously sexed body, cut into a flattened band and twisted to form of a Möbius strip across whose singular surface desire circulates, intensifies and dampens, in a transformative figure of ontological playfulness that reframes libidinal impulses within groups and societies outside of gendered hierarchies.

Thus, in the discussions that follow, my identification, articulation and interrogation of such binaries serves to unpick their hierarchical, segmented logic. To draw from the conceptual tools and relationships offered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work on schizoanalysis in *A Thousand Plateaus*, such binaries indicate a mode of fixed, arborescent molar 'being' that operate in a different register to the rhizomatic, multiplicitous 'becoming'; as they suggest, where the tree 'is', in that it "imposes the verb 'to be' ... the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and ... and ... and ...'" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 27). This ongoing production can be linked to 'desire', a material flow that is the continual production of difference. A becoming isn't an end or even a means to an end, nor is it systematic and linear (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 24); instead, each 'plateau' of becoming is a change-event, or a snapshot of congruence. As Rosi Braidotti (2002) frames it, "The different stages or levels of becoming trace an itinerary that consists in erasing and recomposing the former boundaries between self and others" (p. 119). This erasure and re-composition makes 'becoming' an ideal way to consider bodily transformations and mutations in horror film, for it reframes 'the body' as an unstable category, not a fixed entity, and these shifts and metamorphoses as something potentially generative rather than negative and threatening. As such, becomings are inherently risky, for they challenge bodily boundaries and can unsettle "a coherent sense of personal self", but they offer the promise of "new forms of living" (Lorraine 1999, 183). After all, any consideration of the reproductive body-in-process cannot take as writ the notion that the body is a fixed, discrete and even hermetic entity.

Although the molar and the molecular coexist, one is not privileged over the other. Their relationship could be categorised as 'both/and', not 'either/or', and Deleuze and Guattari (2004) note that "Every society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously" (p. 235). The "great binary aggregates" such as sex (i.e. man/woman) are not pre-formed independent entities but are made up of smaller molecular assemblages, multiple molecular combinations "bringing into play not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but the relation of each to the animal, the plant, etc.: a thousand tiny sexes" (p. 235). The molecular and the molar are not distinguished by their size or shape, but by what they do and by the system of reference within which they are envisioned (p. 239); for example, Claire

Colebrook (2002) gives the example of ‘molecular experiences’ that “are then organised and extended into ‘molar’ configurations... Before there is a ‘child’ that relates to a ‘mother’ – before there are social selves – there is a pre-personal perception, the connection of mouth and breast” (p. 82). This is the point at which we might re-state the use-value of situating sometimes binary formations of sex and gender that might inform some feminist accounts of identity politics alongside a more expansive, molecular and productive way of considering bodies’ capacities and connections.

In this light, I offer the concept of gynaehorror, and the notion of the gynaehorrific, as something that is less linear, more granular, more discursive and more specific than pre-existing configurations of female, feminine and reproductive horror: gynaehorror as a type of signification and content, as an interpretive lens, and finally as a mode of aesthetic, cinematic expression and conceptual representation.

Firstly, gynaehorror, and the gynaehorrific, signals a certain type of specific content, a set of representations, and a matrix of signification that might act as generic markers. The (gynae)horror films I discuss in this book draw from a wide range of gynaehorrific constructions and scenarios, and in this usage I sit most closely to Creed’s work on the monstrous-feminine. These films include sacrificial virgins, menstrual monsters and ravenous succubi. They frame the vagina as vulnerable, but also as a site of terror: rotting and dying, or filled with teeth or snakes. They feature a variety of monstrous mothers, who range from the abusive to the psychotic to the vengeful, and who inevitably place their children in the danger from which they then must be rescued. They look to supernatural pregnancies, violent births, and acts of rape and sexual coercion. They interrogate a wide range of reproductive technologies that may victimise and fragment individuals, empower the unborn and attack and dismantle the coherency of the woman’s subjectivity, and render biological conception (and even gendered subjectivity, as it is currently framed) irrelevant. They highlight the way ageing women are presented as inherently monstrous – as witches, as demons, as insane, but also as productively transgressive. At the stranger end of the spectrum, they feature aborted fetuses who return to wreak revenge against those who aborted them, houses that detain and rape their occupants, and – as indicated above – ghoulish, improvised emergency caesarean sections. This is gynaehorror as a category that marks women not only as monsters, as with the monstrous-feminine, but also as victims, heroes and subjects in ways explicitly bound with their femininity, their woman-ness and their reproductive capacities, affects and potentials. To interrogate such representations, I often employ what might be thought of as orthodox modes of close reading and textual analysis.

Secondly, I use the concept of gynaehorror to signal a sociocultural, *discursive construction* of female sexuality, subjectivity and reproductive embodiment that marks the female body as always-already monstrous, no matter its age, and that suggests that female embodiment is failure and entrapment. Women and female-ness have been consistently framed historically as inferior to man.

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There exists a significant historical conceptual division between the masculine, rational mind and the body-as-feminine, which I outline further in Chapter Three. In addition, women's subjectivities have historically been pushed to the margins of western philosophy, which theorises the male body-and-self as the ideologically-neutral, default subject-position (Battersby 1998; Irigaray 1985a; Irigaray 1985b; Young 1990a), and which in turn marks the body, for women themselves, as a 'problem' (Rich 1996; Young 1990b). In *Volatile Bodies* Elizabeth Grosz (1994) notes that in the West female corporeality is conceptually constructed in terms of viscosity and liquidity, flows and secretions. This ontological structuring of the female body is marked by a sense of uncontrollable 'seepage' that positions women's bodies as both passive and dependent, and unruly and disordered, but ultimately secondary to those of men, even though men's bodies are just as prone to said seepage (pp. 202–3). As Nancy Tuana outlines in *The Less Noble Sex* (1993), the

conception of the rational person is in complete opposition to all characteristics historically conceived as female and associated with woman – the body, emotion, and passivity. For centuries prior to Descartes and for centuries after, woman was seen as inescapably bound to the concerns of the body by her role in reproduction – her pregnancies, her lactations, and her menses. (p. 63)

These mythic and philosophical assumptions, attitudes and constructions in turn have a profound and insidious effect upon the way that the female body is discursively constructed in medicine, psychology and science. Psychologist and feminist theorist Jane M. Ussher, in remarkable works such as *Managing the Monstrous-Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006) and *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (2011), offers an in-depth, cogent and ultimately unsettling appraisal of how the taken-for-granted notion of female monstrosity operates in medical and psychological discourses, such that the othering of female bodies and experience is normalised, and the construct of woman-as-other is situated as a neutral baseline. It is not that sociocultural, political and biomedical discourses simply accept that women and their bodies are fundamentally unruly, in need of intervention and regulation, and dangerously unstable; indeed, the female reproductive body is specifically *made* monstrous and rendered mad, again and again, in a manner that significantly shapes women's own lived experiences of and knowledge(s) of their bodies and reproductive lives. Such productions of knowledge serve to illustrate a loose circuit whereby difference is expressed, co-opted, and expressed or created again, and the narrative structure of mainstream film, with its looping between order and disorder, is a helpful form through which to explore these relationships.

Throughout this book I look as much to the sociocultural work of scholars such as Ussher, who work to unpick and attack some of the taken-for-granted 'truths' about the nature of the female body, as I do the work of scholars of

horror, gender and film. I connect philosophical accounts of the reproductive body, their 'real world' complications, and popular cultural artefacts, such as horror films, so as to demonstrate how they all operate within the same conceptual, yet tangible eco-system. The notion of the gynaehorrific, then, is a way of situating the intersections of female monstrosity (and the misogynistic assumptions from which this springs) in a corporeal sense, through the long-standing dismissal of the relevance of the lived experience of the female body and the alignment of female corporeality with traits that are positioned, structurally, as negative and inferior. This, in itself, is a gynaehorrific construction, for by positing that the heterosexual male body is that which is normal, ordered and ideal, anything other to that takes on the mantle of the other and becomes explicitly gendered not just in and of itself, but in opposition *to*, but identifying and challenging this explicitly is a political act. Gynaehorrific narratives, then, can both interrogate or contribute to the making-horrific of the sexed, reproductive female body.

Thirdly, gynaehorror signals a value-laden mode of aesthetic *expression* and cinematic *representation* that denigrates the female body and defines it foremost by its reproductive capacities in a manner that is negative and damaging, although whether this type of expression is specifically misogynistic, or is a way of exposing misogyny, depends significantly on the film – and, perhaps, the spectator. My use of the term 'expression', in addition to content and representation, is intended to deliberately invoke the notion, which I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari (2004), that expression (or 'enunciation') and content cannot be treated as discrete modes, but instead have a reciprocal relationship (pp. 160–1; see also Shaviro 1993, 3). As Anna Powell demonstrates in *Deleuze and Horror Film*, the 'diagrammatic components' of style such as framing, editing, image or sound – that is, those "regimes of signs or forms of expression" that might combine and interrelate to form assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 161) – offer a particular sense of "cohesive force" within horror film (Powell 2005, 6), much as the genre itself is well-disposed to such analysis and experience. For my purposes, the productive interrelationship of gynaehorrific content, representation and expression may operate through imagery, framing and movement; through the use of sound, light and colour; through the fragmentation or the dissolution of the representational image of the body; through the audio-visual expression of a sense of reproductive dread and terror; or through the way that the female body is elided or rendered present-through-absence within the moving image. Of course, the viewer (and their body) is also drawn into these relationships given the experiential, sensory and affective properties of film (see, for instance, Ndalians 2012; Powell 2005; Powell 2007; Shaviro 1993; Sobchack 2004), although a deep appraisal of such relationships is secondary to my project here beyond its undeniable impact upon the ways that I have engaged with these films.

Many of the films discussed in this book offer images of the female body that are perhaps provocative in their grotesquery, such as in David Cronenberg's body-horror film *The Brood* (1979), the found footage horror *The Taking of*

Deborah Logan (2014), or the *vagina dentata*-themed horror-satire *Teeth* (2007). In many cases, I offer readings of these images that utilise the challenge that they offer as a way of re-thinking, or of thinking through, the body. In some cases, reproductive monstrosity takes on non-human, alien or animal forms, as in the science fiction horror films *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986), or in the eco-horror *Prophecy* (1979), which features a mother bear and her cub who have been mutated through the effects of industrial pollution. Such non-human monstrosities and their implicit association with a conceptual, constructed female-ness that connects human bodies to non-human ones, offer entry points from which we might think through our nominally molar constructions of the body and self of the woman-in-film. Other films offer scenes or images that are hard to read as doing anything other than exercising outright misogyny for the sake of gross-out shock value, such as a scene in *Contracted* (2013) in which a woman, who has been raped and infected with a type of sexually transmitted virus that makes her die from the inside out, has maggots collect within and then fall from inside her vagina. Such imagery and relations are easy to confidently read as identifiably gynaehorrific. This situates horror, aesthetically and narratively, within and around women's reproductive bodies, even though the interpretations and the effects of these images may vary. Such gynaehorrific bodies are marked by their sexed-ness, their reproductivity, their unruly fecundity and their maternal fleshiness; they 'do' the messy and reproductive, and their relations and capacities connect them in ways that move past categories of strict signification.

However, gynaehorror also expresses itself in less literal terms. It is also apparent in the way that the woman and her body itself is present, absent or fragmented within the frame. I discuss this in depth in Chapters Two and Three, in which I consider how the female body may be visually abstracted and displaced, linking the dissolution or fragmentation of the body-image to a destabilisation of the sense of the woman as coherent subject in a manner that marks such a dissolution as negative and reductive rather than an expansion of capacity and a new mode of being or becoming. This renders the moving image as more than an audiovisual allegory (see Powell 2005, 3), and operates in a manner that articulates (in the sense of making speech, as well as in the sense of joining together disparate parts) abstract meanings, ideas and affects. In the case of a film such as *Triangle*, a time-loop narrative that I discuss in Chapter Two, the temporal plasticity of film as medium becomes a key part of the temporal slippages within the world of the story, which in turn engage with issues of maternal guilt and trauma in a stimulating manner that asks us to think through issues of free will, responsibility and predetermination. The unsettled intersection between linear and non-linear storytelling, as we follow the protagonist Jess through her 'own' time loop and across the loops of other iterations of herself, is a queasy and uncertain exploration of how a person's actions and capacities define who they are more than their articulations of self-definition. Our burgeoning understanding of cause and effect within the loop troubles our ideas about the nature of love and culpability, and the

increasing violence of the action gives the impression of wounds that open, close and re-open in a never-ending, fatalistic circuit. What I will make clear, throughout, is that there is violence in the frame. The acts of cutting and editing, especially when done so to specifically deny the female subject-character her personhood or to render her no more than a collection of parts, is itself an insidiously damaging mode of representation and expression that normalises gynaehorrific attitudes and constructions of the body, even as such medium-specific expressions and modes of storytelling also offer nuanced ways of expressing the impossible tensions and contradictions within the discursive construction of woman as (reproductive) subject.

In this context it is worth highlighting that cinematic images of women's reproductive capacity, even in forms that we might think about today as benign, have often been controlled and eliminated. For example, representations of pregnancy and birth in American film were almost non-existent in the first half of the 20th century. This was, in large part, because of the impact of the rules supplied by the Motion Picture Production Code (Hayes 2009) in the United States, an in-house system of regulations adopted by Hollywood studios regarding morally acceptable and unacceptable content that was introduced in 1930 and came to be enforced stringently from 1934, until its post-War weakening and ultimate dissolution in 1967. Until December 1956 the Code decreed that scenes of birth, be they actual representations or even in silhouette, were unacceptable, and after 1957, this was amended to state that such scenes should be shown "treated with discretion and restraint within the careful limits of good taste" (Hayes 2009; see also Oliver 2012, 27–9), much as discussions of pregnancy itself were excluded from public discourse in the 1940s and 1950s (Longhurst 2000, 457).¹ Although the impact of the Code loosened significantly over time, leading to its ultimate dissolution and its replacement in 1968 – incidentally the year *Rosemary's Baby* was released – by a system of 'voluntary' film ratings through the Motion Picture Association of America, the impact of such strictures upon the representation of birth and pregnancy, as well as abortion and issues of 'sexual hygiene', was profound. Such industrial pressures, including the assumptions and attitudes that underpin them, inform gynaehorrific representations and modes of expression throughout the history of cinema. The nature of the taboo, the restricted and the deviant serves to highlight, even through visual absences or sleight-of-hand, what might be deemed challenging, disgusting or dangerous, and also increases the impact of films that breach these boundaries for the first time.

Gynaehorror from virginity to menopause

To account for the shifts in the representation and expression of sexualised, gendered female monstrosity, I offer an account of gynaehorror that follows the trajectory of the normative cisgendered female reproductive lifecycle, from menstruation and first sex, through to pregnancy and birth, to motherhood, and then finally to menopause and post-menopause. In doing so, I offer an

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account of ageing that highlights shifts in sexual experience, maturation and subjectivity, as well as in corporeal and affective experience. How might gynae-horrific narratives, texts or images chart anxieties about the nature of female subjectivity – of the seeming horror of sexual ‘difference’? How might they offer spaces in which to challenge negative constructions of the female body? After all, the experience of one’s own sexed, gendered, reproductive body, and the way that gynae-horrific discourses, images and narratives serve to shape our own experiences, provide us with narratives through which we might understand our own bodies and how they operate within the world.

This structural scaffolding is not designed to suggest that this is how all women live their lives or experience their bodies, that all women can or should have children (or even want to), that pregnancy and motherhood are and should be the centre of a woman’s life, that all women were assigned female at birth (or vice versa) or identify with binary gender formations, and so on. Instead, I am interested in the bluntly normative – the taken-for-granted sets of norms and ideals about the nature of sex and reproduction that accompany, and perhaps constrain, women as they age. Such a matrix of hegemonic normativity sets parameters of representation, which also act as constraints in terms of the cinematic representation (or lack thereof) of diverse intersections and expressions of ethnicity, class, appearance, sexuality, and gender identity and expression. I also wish to explore how and why, no matter a girl’s or woman’s age, female sexuality and the sexed female body is rendered monstrous in profoundly insidious and often blatantly contradictory ways. These horror films, then, offer a key site through which to unpack the nature of the gynae-horrific.

I have tried to offer a representative account of this subgenre, but what I have not offered is a representative account of women. Despite its many monsters and its numerous horrors, at present the horror genre is not a site that can be particularly praised for its social and cultural diversity, and it is important to flag that the women who feature in the films I discuss are overwhelmingly heterosexual and cisgendered – something I discuss at the close of Chapter One. More often than not, they are coded as middle class, whether or not they have any further degree of social, political, economic or personal agency. They are also, almost to a woman, white (or ‘European’). This lack of racial and ethnic diversity continues to remain pronounced throughout the genre, even in light more inclusive casting of individual titles, such as the 2014 adaptation of *Rosemary’s Baby*, a mini-series that cast black actress Zoe Saldana in the role of Rosemary. This is, perhaps, frustrating for the viewer – and certainly this viewer – but I posit that this overarching essentialism is nonetheless helpful from an analytic perspective. It means that as a corpus these collected films offer a degree of enlightenment regarding taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of femininity and normative female (hetero-)sexuality through their reproduction of a hegemonic bias towards a certain *type* of woman. This is doubly so if we consider the intersection of gynae-horrific attitudes towards sex and bodies with broader cultural and industrial

pressures and constraints on the casting of women, including the sorts of structural representations engendered, decision by decision, by filmmakers, producers and distributors. As film theorist Annette Kuhn suggests, if we accept the argument that

in a sexist society both presences and absences [of women in film] may not be immediately discernible to the ordinary spectator, if only because certain representations appear to be quite ordinary and obvious, then the fundamental project of feminist film analysis can be said to centre on making visible the invisible. (1994, 71)

In keeping with this sentiment I write as a cultural studies scholar, drawing from feminist poststructural and film theories, to interrogate not only apparently “ordinary and obvious” *representations* of women in horror, but to address significant absences alongside *expressions* of gynae horror, be they aesthetic, thematic or narrative.

To provide a baseline for this discussion, in Chapter One, “Roses and Thorns”, I offer an account of normative female sexuality, with an emphasis upon the ways that the horror genre expresses a fascination with the sexuality and sexualisation of women – particularly young women, the construction of virginity, and the act of first sex. It is telling that in his 2012 book *Horror and the Horror Film* Bruce F. Kawin regularly focuses his attention on a trope that, in his index, he calls the ‘unconscious woman’ or ‘the monster and the girl’, which features the merging of sex, desire and voyeurism (by both characters and the viewer) with horror. Very early in the book he highlights a scene from the B-movie *Tarantula* (1955) in which the eponymous giant spider voyeuristically spies on the vulnerable, normatively attractive heroine, who is undressing in her bedroom. Despite the almost ridiculous disjunction between arachnid–human relationships, the spider it becomes so excited and agitated that it destroys her house (Kawin 2012, 20–1). This connection between sex, desire and violence is, perhaps, a particularly apt representative account of a gendered power dynamic that recurs throughout the genre, and this is certainly an obvious relationship in the slasher subgenre. Indeed, as Andrew Welsh (2010) demonstrates in his intensive quantitative study of sex and violence in slasher films, women in such films are far more likely to fall prey to eroticised violence than men, and women who engage in sexual behaviour in these films are not only more likely to die than their male and female counterparts, but their death scenes are likely to be longer and more explicit. However, the interplay between female victimhood and the overt display of female sexuality is prominent beyond the monster movie and the slasher, for the sexualised, potentially reproductive woman is present in horror film as hero, villain, victim and monster.

To account for and broaden these constructs, in this first chapter I expand this focus on sex and sexuality to provide a detailed account of the way that taken-for-granted ideas about normative female (hetero)sexuality are

articulated, recycled and policed in horror film. While I offer a sociocultural account of such constructions, I also look to Luce Irigaray's critique of the way that female subjectivity is less constructed than it is elided in male-centric psychoanalytic articulations of the male subject, rendered both necessary and invisible. Here I suggest that female sexuality in the horror film is often presented in simplistic, binary terms. One hand, it is both fetishised and contained through the figures of the tenacious virgin-hero and the chaste, feminine sacrificial virgin, each of which shore up the explicit cultural association of virginity with reductive modes of femininity. These archetypes sit in clear contrast to the representation of virginal men, who tend to be presented in feminised terms as weak and emasculated, or as stern ascetics whose self-denial of sexual pleasure and other forms of eroticism or appetite is a measure of their masculine moral strength and thus a repudiation of the femininity that is central to broader understandings of virginity. On the other hand, the unbounded sexual threat of the mythical *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina, suggests that female sexuality, sensuality and eroticism is dangerous, voracious and monstrous, although this negative framing of such an open, desirous figure bears witness to the way that 'appropriate' (phallogentric, procreative) sexuality is policed. These paradigms serve to constrain and simplify broader cultural conceptualisations of female sexuality while nonetheless turning the body of the woman into an object that is either available for (male, masculine hetero-) sexual consumption, or that is deemed disgusting, terrifying and threatening to phallogentric domination. These constructs co-mingle in the horror-satire *Teeth* (2007), a film in which a chaste young woman discovers that she has a toothed vagina that functions as both a protective mechanism and a form of sexual weaponry. Here, I suggest that the film leverages these archetypes to critique facile, restrictive and often misogynistic understandings of female sexuality and sexual agency, with a sharp emphasis upon those that are propagated through American sexual education programmes that valorise and fetishise virginity, particularly the virginity of young women, and that emphasise abstinence and ignorance over awareness.

In the following two chapters I move from the area of critical sexualities to theories of subjectivity, an area of profound relevance to horror given the genre's interest in the nature of the boundary between 'self' and 'other'. In Chapter Two, "The Lady Vanishes", I focus on pregnancy, abortion and foetal imagery. There is a key sticking point in the philosophical consideration of female subjectivity that, beyond its own issues of gender and corporeality, has implications for the image of the female body on screen: the historic construction of the ideal subject of western philosophy is that of an in-divisible 'whole' individual who is implicitly male, young, fit and healthy (for whatever 'health' means). Clearly this sits at odds with the state of pregnancy, in which a woman moves from 'one', then 'more-than-one', to a forever changed 'one', if such terminology is even appropriate for a body-in-process. A helpful point of engagement is the work of feminist philosophers Iris Marion Young (1990b), Christine Battersby (1998) and Imogen Tyler (2000), who have each

accounted for alternative pregnant subject positions or reconfigured dominant modes of subjectivity.

I had, initially, hoped to find that the fleshy corporeality of the horror genre was a place in which alternative modes of being and subjectivity could be explored and considered, be it through narrative or through the representation of the body and self within the film-image – something that I consider through a discussion of the ‘spatiality’ of women’s bodies, and the long-standing gothic tradition of the conceptual conflation of women’s bodies with domestic spaces such as houses. However, I suggest that horror films about pregnancy instead set up a strong oppositional relationship between the pregnant woman and the foetus inside her, both narratively and through cinematic means, such as through framing, editing and the manipulation of off-screen and on-screen space. I argue that this schema has been popularly exacerbated through the ongoing development of foetal imaging technologies, which indicates a provocative intersection between the popular film, medical technology and philosophical models of the self and the subject, especially given the way that pregnancy itself is so often pathologised. For all their medical and social benefits, these technologies allow the foetus *itself* to be considered as an autonomous subject-entity that exists in competition with its mother, sometimes displacing her entirely. Horror films about pregnancy leverage this oppositional, antagonistic relationship to gynaehorrific ends, and demonstrate disquiet about how to best conceptualise, express and explore the uniquely temporal and coextensive embodied relationship between woman and foetus.

Roman Polanski’s 1968 film *Rosemary’s Baby* is one of the best examples of the dilemma of the pregnant subject in horror. Its protagonist, Rosemary, is impregnated by a demonic presence after her husband secretly barter her body away to a group of Satanists so that his acting career may prosper. Rosemary acts as the vessel for the Antichrist, and much of the film centres on the tension between the physical and emotional violation of Rosemary-as-subject, her role as unwitting maternal host and the needs of the gestating foetus. *Rosemary’s Baby* is, perhaps, the best-known gynae horror, and certainly a film against which others covering similar territory position themselves and are judged. Throughout this chapter, and this book more widely, I deliberately move beyond this film to consider how issues of pregnancy and subjectivity are expressed elsewhere in the genre. Instead, I interrogate how the pregnant body is positioned and imagined, and the manner in which the pregnant subject herself becomes abstracted, in the technohorror *Demon Seed* (1977), and in religious and ecological horror films such as *The Reaping* (2007) and *Prophecy* (1979) respectively. This oppositional relationship between woman and foetus is made most apparent in the aforementioned French film *Insidel’À l’intérieur* (2007), which offers a particularly unusual mode of representation in its inclusion of a computer generated unborn child, who appears as an *in utero* subject.

Stories about pregnancy and birth are well-represented in the genre, but there remains one particularly resonant taboo: abortion, a subject that is

conspicuous by its near-absence in Anglophone horror film. I suggest that the dearth of films that feature abortion is indicative of the fraught political nature of the topic, particularly in the United States, in that the heated, sometimes violent debate over a woman's right to choose is so deeply embedded within the topic that those few films that choose to include abortion seem compelled to either dance awkwardly around the issue or engage with it head on. A small handful of films about abortion offer a provocative account of the way that the subjectivities of the pregnant woman and the foetus are often pitted against one another. Their political manoeuvring, be it sophisticated or ham-fisted, offers an interesting perspective on the politicisation of gynae horror. Beyond acknowledging a few exploitation films that leverage the shock value of using aborted foetuses as vengeful entities, I close Chapter Two by comparing the self-proclaimed 'pro-life' American independent horror film *The Life Zone* (2011) to John Carpenter's contribution to the American cable television horror anthology *Masters of Horror*, "Pro-Life" (2007), which is set in an abortion clinic that is under siege by both militant anti-abortion activists and a demonic presence. Both demonstrate how the presentation of abortion in specifically American horror, at least, is irrevocably tied into abortion politics. I also outline how each film explores the subjective power and agency of pregnant women, which differs depending on the text's political position.

In Chapter Three, "Not of Woman Born", I continue my discussion of subjectivity by shifting from the 'embodied' states of pregnancy and abortion to a consideration of 'disembodied' reproduction, that is, the way that the reproductive female body is compromised, elided or eliminated altogether in horror films about reproductive technology – what I term reproductive technohorror. Reproductive technologies such as *in vitro* fertilisation are radical in that they challenge the heteronormative, biologically deterministic procreative imperative that suggests that certain types of families are the 'ideal' family, for they open up new forms of family configuration. They alter the nature of conception and reproductive embodiment itself, by challenging what it means to be an efficient, effective or even necessary reproductive body or participant. They provoke questions about what bodies can and should be able to do, and how flesh and technology might (re)productively co-mingle. They highlight the degree to which we are always-already posthuman, and look to the new modes of being and becoming that might otherwise be engendered through the alliances and symbioses of flesh and technology. And yet, they are inevitably presented as ambivalent: they also inhabit a space marked by corporeal and ethical ambiguity, and as such they are a rich source and site of gynae horror.

This dis-ease is particularly apparent in 'mad science' narratives, stories like that of Victor Frankenstein and his monster, which explore the creation of life – from conception and sometimes through to gestation – outside the body of the woman and, thus, outside of the so-called 'natural order'. Here I recall Chapter One's discussion of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, for 'mad science' narratives situate reproduction within a molar, dualistic conceptual schema that is structured with regards to the historic association of science

with masculinity and nature and the fallible, imperfect body with femininity. As such, as Susan Bordo (1987) attests, empirical science and rationalism *themselves* are not objective, but are explicitly gendered acts of domination and dominion whose historical project is to tame the (implicitly female) universe (p. 111). In light of this association of science with masculinity, I look to the rare figure of the female mad scientist, who is most recently and notably visible in the science fiction horror film *Splice* (2009), in the hope that she might offer new ways of thinking through the gendered scaffolding of science and the techno-biological creation of life. Within the context of the technological inscription and reconfiguration of the body, especially the interface of flesh and machine, alternative models of female subjectivity are similarly present in the figure of the cyborg – a cybernetic organism within which organic flesh and inorganic, technological material are coupled. Given that it is a figure of persistent fascination within science fiction and horror, I discuss how the literal and allegorical cyborg offers potential emancipation from misogynistic techno-hierarchies. Nonetheless, (s)he remains largely bound up within some of the same strictures and structures that she might hope to escape, especially when issues of gendered representation are in play, although other forms of posthumanism perhaps offer more scope for exploration.

Horror films about pregnancy and reproductive technology may demonise, side-line or tear their female protagonists apart, combining and recombining their bodies in distressing ways, but the women in films about motherhood are treated as equally horrific. Where explorations of mothers and motherhood in film, including horror film, have largely centred on psychoanalytic accounts of the maternal (Kaplan 1992; Creed 1993), including through the archetypes of the self-sacrificing ‘good’ mother and the monstrous ‘bad’ mother (Arnold 2013), in Chapter Four, “The Monstrous-Maternal” I suggest that seeing horror films as a site of discursive tension offers a rich and complex way of interrogating broader social and cultural attitudes towards motherhood. This is apparent through what I term the ‘monstrous-maternal’, which I invoke to both acknowledge Creed’s work on the monstrous-feminine, but also to interrogate the discursive production of the monstrous mother and how this has (and hasn’t) changed over time. In particular, horror films that invoke the monstrous-maternal express ambiguity and anxiety over two dominant constructs of motherhood. The first, ‘essential’ motherhood, is the notion that motherhood is a biological and emotional necessity that sits at the heart of the female experience. The second, ‘ideal’ motherhood, is the imperative for women to mother in culturally, socially and historically specific and ideologically complicit ways. These categories are dangerous and reductive constructs, and ones that demand a rigour and a perfection that can never be attained. In keeping with the gynae-horrific demonisation of gendered, reproductive identity the monstrous-maternal suggests that there is something fundamental to motherhood *itself* that sparks and breeds monstrosity, and that this is something that women cannot escape; mothers are always-already monstrous, no matter how hard they try to mother ‘well’.

Horror films – as cultural artefacts, as well as sources of cinematic expression – are outstanding indicators of how competing, complex and shifting discourses of motherhood are expressed and challenged in popular culture. I use two sets of films to outline how the monstrous-maternal remains a gynae horrific constant, even as dominant discourses of motherhood have shifted. It is useful to consider psychoanalysis itself as discourse, and to do this I outline how a cluster of horror films from the 1970s, including *The Killing Kind* (1973) and *The Brood* (1979), actively invoke, recycle and sometimes critique relatively simplistic, popularly-received understandings of the mother in Freudian analysis. Films from the early 2000s shift away from pop-psychoanalytic models of motherhood and instead focus on the fallibility of the mother – particularly the single mother. These millennial mothers are seemingly trapped in a morass of conflicting messages and expectations, and films such as *Triangle* (2009) focus on the fallibility of the (single) mother and the pressures she faces due to the sheer impossibility of fulfilling the criteria of ideal motherhood. The monstrous-maternal persists between generations, too; the film *Grace* (2009) pits two mothers against one another as a young widow tries to deal with the visceral demands of her blood-thirsty infant at the same time as fending off the attacks of her oppressive mother-in-law. The juxtaposition of the two women offers a grim account of the way in which mothers are framed as always-already monstrous and never good enough – even if they literally give their blood and body to their child, perversely extending the corporeal connection shared during gestation.

The final chapter, “Living Deaths, Menstrual Monsters and Hagsploitation”, continues the trajectory of the female reproductive life-cycle through a consideration of the abject barren body – a term that connects multiple abject expressions of infertile reproductive horror. The horror genre is well-populated with sacrificial virgins and virgin heroes, with perilous pregnancies and terrible births, and with monstrous mothers of various stripes, but it is significant that there seem to be few, if any, horror films that directly engage with menopause, the process which marks the end of menstruation and of fertility and which signals the beginning of the post-menopausal phase of later life. This is particularly remarkable given the level to which menopause is pathologised in the West, in a gynae horrific construction of the female body that associates the effects of shifts in hormonal levels with disease, the symptoms of menopause with a loss of femininity, and the ever-unruly female body with madness and deficiency. This absence, I suggest, is both significant and compelling, for it implicitly asks why it is the horror genre fixates on and celebrates certain types of women, bodies and femininity, but not others; similarly, an absence of writing on topic marks this as a fresh site of inquiry. In this chapter I explore some of the modes of representation of older women in horror, first situating the cessation of menstruation against the horrific representation of menarche, its onset, for each process both calls attention to yet repudiates the reproductive ‘use-value’ of the female body. In films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Ginger Snaps* (2000) menarche is associated with an immense up-swell of

power and the emergence of a highly sexualised monstrosity. This paradoxically expresses the emergence of fertility and sexual maturation through an abject state in which the body is both visibly reproductive and unlikely to get pregnant, both of which are signified through the presence of menstrual blood. Comparatively, the end of menstruation goes unremarked upon. This is certainly connected to the way that, in general, representation of older women in film and television falls away, given broader negative attitudes towards women that side-line age in favour of youth. That said, I also posit that the pleasures and perils of ageing are expressed in other, perhaps more subversive ways, even if the specifics of menopause (and post-menopause) are absent.

Hagsploitation films of the 1960s and early 1970s, which combine the chiaroscuro expressionism of the gothic melodrama with the raucous, splattery nastiness of the exploitation film, centralise older female characters and female relationships (let alone the larger-than-life performances of female actors, many of whom were or had been A-list actors) in a number of guises, from sensitive victims to ghoulish horror harridans. They offer one of the best accounts of the older woman and the abject barren body in horror, and their set of thematic interests and their tendency towards camp and melodrama certainly persist into other later representations of ageing women. The subgenre is interesting, too, for it implicitly engages with the cultural value of the ageing actress, and not merely the ageing character. Indeed, in many instances – as with the most notable hagsploitation film, the Joan Crawford and Bette Davis vehicle *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) – we are specifically asked to ruminate on the cultural value of the ageing female actor through the persistent placement of images of the younger past self in the vicinity of her older present self, which has the unsettling effect of exposing the hyperreal slippage between the diegetic and extradiegetic. In doing so, hagsploitation films interrogate the cultural role of older women through the lens of the horror genre by highlighting, to great and occasionally gleeful effect, the insidious, taken-for-granted stereotypes and assumptions about the nature of gender and age.

And yet, I conclude by suggesting that perhaps the most interesting contemporary media space for older women in horror isn't on film. Here I side-step somewhat to consider the horror anthology television series *American Horror Story* (2011–). Like other forms of so-called 'prestige' or 'quality' television, *American Horror Story* exhibits high production values and stars actors who are, in some cases, better known for their work in theatre and film, and thus contribute a certain cultural capital to the proceedings. The show serves as a gaudy, multifaceted exploration of the horror genre that draws as much from the tropes of cinematic horror as it does other forms of storytelling and myth-making, from television serials and urban legends to cultural sites such as freak shows. In particular, this camp, visceral and excessive series is important to this project for, more extensively than any current standalone films, it throws into sharp relief the 'horror' of the ageing body through storylines that

delve into sex, femininity, gender, age and excess, and that valorise the sexual, sensual older body. In each of these representations women behave ‘badly’, in an unsanctioned, disobedient manner that is not deemed to be age-appropriate, and although they may be demonised or denigrated, and even though these representations certainly aren’t without their own problems, their horror is potentially radical and productive. They offer a subversive challenge to misogynistic accounts of female worth and value.

Gynae horror in context

Although I anchor each chapter with detailed close readings of key films, my filmography is broad, and it is important to consider the implications of my criteria for inclusion. I do not intend to offer a full, wholesale survey of this area, but I have cast my net wide so as to be able to make some relatively broad claims. I have been flexible, even flippant, with my appraisal of what does and does not constitute a horror film; after all, as genre theorist Steve Neale (2000) has noted, “water-tight definitions” of horror are hard to come by (p. 85) beyond the aforementioned imperative “to horrify” (p. 86), and people’s encounters with horror films can differ wildly. I have taken the designation of ‘horror’ to refer to films that can be easily generically categorised as such, or that self-identify as belonging to the horror genre. In places I have also looked to science fiction, arthouse film, cable television series and ‘genre’ film – that is, B-movies or exploitation films² – that contain horrific content, scenes or themes of reproductive horror or expressions monstrous of female sexuality, be they aesthetic, narrative or thematic. As such, this book nonetheless offers the first comprehensive mapping of the culturally sanctioned trajectory of a woman’s normative sexual, reproductive development and maturation in horror, from virginity, menstruation and first sex through to menopause and post-menopause. These texts emphasise the notion of gynae horror – as generic descriptor, as discursive formation, and as mode of expression – as a way of casting light upon all the negative, damaging and often outright misogynistic attitudes that women’s bodies find themselves bound within, and of hinting how new, more generative and productive modes of expression might behave. If, as Annette Kuhn suggests, feminist film analysis works to render visible the invisible (Kuhn 1994, 71), then this book seeks to interrogate taken-for-granted representations of women in horror film and to enrich previous work in the area, as well as to shine light on areas, and absences, that have not yet been addressed within scholarly literature.

In addition, my approach has been inclusive and populist. I acknowledge that culture – as practice, as process and as cultural artefact – is a dynamic space of meaning-making, contestation and ideological struggle, a “participatory activity, in which people create their societies and identities” (Kellner 2003, 2). Films have not been selected on the basis of critical reception; indeed, a good number of the films I discuss in this book have been critically savaged and represent the sort of filmmaking and content that has contributed historically

to what genre theorist Robin Wood (2003) called the horror film's "disreputable" status (pp. 29–30). Some films have certainly proven themselves to be richer veins of gynae horror than others, but I have endeavoured not to reinforce explicit and implicit hegemonic hierarchies of taste, nor to cast a distinction between the scholarly value of so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Films that are well-crafted, thoughtful pieces of cinema-as-art are as valuable here as those that are messy, fragmented and ideologically incoherent; if anything, the latter are more revealing, given their perhaps kneejerk reactions to issues of gender politics, their emphasis upon bottom-of-the-barrel shock tactics, and their sometimes clumsy playfulness with the aesthetics of cinema. As a genre, horror also lends itself well to such a consideration, for as Ian Conrich (2009) remarks in his introduction to *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror*, "Such is the cross appeal of a core of contemporary horror that it can cater for both a subculture and the mainstream" (p. 3).

I also contextualise these films through an appraisal of other cultural texts and practices; for instance, in Chapter One, I connect horror films about virginity and *vagina dentata* to popular constructions and representations of virginity and female sexuality found in pornography, fine art, American in-school abstinence programmes and urban legends spread by American soldiers. Chapter Three charts some of the connections between the representation of reproductive technologies, including foetal imagery, in horror film, alongside contemporaneous engagements with these issues in the popular and scientific arenas. In this case I demonstrate how these horrific representations take on their own life, mapping lines of flight that dance beyond the interface between film-artefact and viewer, and become an important, populist interpretive lens, within public discourse. These acts of contextualisation are important to my broader analysis because popular films do not exist in a cultural vacuum; much as so-called 'low-brow' and 'high-brow' films can be analysed alongside one another, and indeed often 'do' the same work, it is important that films are considered (and contextualised) against other forms of cultural praxis, and that connections between seemingly heterogeneous media and practices are formed.

I have also deliberately looked beyond films that have achieved 'canonical' status so as to broaden and complicate the discussion of gynae horror, and in doing so I hope to offer unusual and provocative combinations, intersections and juxtapositions – multifaceted gynae horrific assemblages. I recognise and sometimes challenge dominant readings of films that are frequently cited or analysed, such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Brood* and *Psycho* (1960), but I also engage with a variety of sometimes idiosyncratic films that have not received in-depth scholarly attention, such as *The Killing Kind*, *Demon Seed*, *Prophecy*, *The Unborn* (1991), *Grace*, *Triangle*, *Teeth*, *The Life Zone* and *Inside*. In some ways my criteria have been very prosaic: is this a film that I, as a fan of the genre, am able to acquire and view? Have I recognised or responded to the sort of exploration or expression of the gynae horrific? I certainly do not