

Permeable Bodies

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Abstract

Permeable Bodies is a body of work exploring the potential for catharsis from trauma within the aesthetics of violence while unpacking notions of the house in horror.

The summer between my first and second year of my MFA many things happened. COVID hit, my partner and I bought a house and I found out I was pregnant. These mingled circumstances meant that I was to quarantine in my house in Pittsburgh for my thesis year. This provided a rich context for me to understand, embody and unpack the context of domestic within horror movies as well as how the female body is represented in horror through the tropes of Final Girl, The Bad Mom and horrors of pregnancy. My pregnancy opened me up to the reflections of myself that I saw in these representations and made me receptive to exploring the vulnerability of my painful history of sexual assault and its surprising impact on my relationship to the genre of horror.

Keywords

Motherhood, horror, house, depiction of violence, Final Girl, Bad Mom, women, embodiment, digital installation, film, Gynaehorror

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PERMEABLE

INTRODUCTION

I am obsessed with violence. I worked in a movie theater for seven years in my early twenties. I sold tickets and served popcorn; I was a projectionist while films were still on film, and, eventually, I became a manager. I've always loved movies, but that job immersed me in them.

My exploration into the topic of images of horror and violence began with a critique of the Western Canon of Art, which often overlooks depictions of violence against women. What does it say about our culture that a viewer can look at a work of art depicting a woman in agony and peril and only register a pretty object?

My research into classical works of art led me to question why some depictions of violence towards women were acceptable while others were not. My long history with movies led me to focus on horror films in particular. Contrasting "high" with the "low," my disdain melted into a celebration of gore and guts. I began to make work about how horror movies were fun, fake, and harmless. At first, in the process of exploring this topic, I felt a palpable disconnect between myself and the work. I myself have a painful history of trauma and assault. Out of self-preservation, I initially considered the horror genre from a safe distance.

E BODIES

As I continued this research, my work evolved into a more personal investigation into how depictions of violence can be cathartic, allowing for safe exploration of violence and healing from trauma.

I was surprised to find myself feeling empowered while watching horror movies when the gore is particularly gruesome. The horror genre has a simultaneous gravity and lightness with its over-the-top treatment of violence. It provided me some distance to reflect on some of my own horrible past experiences. Processing trauma through fictionalized imagery makes it easier to handle. The camp of spilled guts and projectile fountains of blood allow a person to consider violence through a protective layer of humor. Being able to laugh at what once scared me makes me, if only for a moment on my couch, feel a little bigger and badder. Through its simulated sense of empowerment, I feel burlier than the violence on screen. Horror exhibits an obsession with the spectacle of the destruction of the body. It asks, “Are you tough enough not to look away?”

When watching rom-coms, we understand that they are silly and fake while wondering if there is maybe a grain of truth to them. Why is it

that when watching horror, we don't similarly ask ourselves the same things? Comaroff and Ker-Shing offer an explanation in their book *Horror in Architecture*:

“Why spend time on horrifying things? Isn't life difficult enough? Antonio Rocco, as early as 1635, argued that we should look at the problematic subjects because they are instructive. And because their opposite, anodyne beauty, contains a dangerous surfeit of sweetness. Deviance teaches; charm will make you sick. Rocco claimed that horrors in particular- putrefaction, decay, distortion, and dissymmetry among others- are sites of fertility, change, and invention.”¹

In the summer between my first and second year of my MFA, I found out that I was pregnant. I found myself making more and more connections between my research and my own lived experiences. This evolution drew out a more nuanced and complicated picture of my role within the context of popular culture and my relationship with the aesthetics of violence. Rather than considering how horror functions universally, I narrowed my focus to how horror served me and why. Why did I find horror appealing on an emotional level when intellectually I felt that I ought to be repulsed? I wondered how much of my personal experience of horror was shared by others. Why do we consume horror, and what do the aesthetics of gore do for us? How is it that I, a feminist, a survivor of sexual violence, and someone once diagnosed with PTSD, could actively and enthusiastically seek out this genre? What is the potential for catharsis in horror?

In this body of work, I am not trying to scare the audience. I am revealing the potential for catharsis within the aesthetics of horror. Through juxtaposition and recomposition, I make the familiar horror genre unfamiliar, prompting the viewer to consider it with fresh eyes.

My pregnancy placed me in an “at-risk” category with Covid-19, and it became necessary that I complete my degree remotely from my

residence in Pittsburgh. The home is often a ubiquitous setting for any horror movie. I knew that I would be able to use this time generatively, utilizing my experiences as a woman and the house as a site to inform my analysis of gore. As the gallery is for art, the house is for horror.

I needed a way to disseminate this work, so I created a website, permeablebodies.com. The website is a representation of my home rendered in navigable, 360-degree line drawings. As viewers explore the house, they encounter hyperlinks that show the individual pieces within the show. The artwork has manifested in various forms, including photography, 3D models, and videos. This website provides accessibility to the genre of horror both in a practical way and on an emotional level. In the following text, I look at the definition of horror, unpack female tropes within the genre, and explore the function and role of the house within horror. I examine how these topics relate to my lived experiences and how I've represented these ideas through my work. Even if my audience doesn't have a taste for the camp of cheesy, sticky, corn syrupy horror like I do, they will at the very least walk away knowing that it's far more complex than big booby blondes and meeting a sorry fate.



DEFINING HORROR

The horror genre is not easily definable, and different sources can offer contradictory explanations. This is because beyond the typical subgenres of horror, (zombie, gore/body horror, paranormal/ghost/demons, slasher, etc.) horror often bleeds (pun intended) into other genres like, science fiction horror (*Alien*²), horror comedy (*Cabin in the Woods*³, *Tucker and Dale versus Evil*⁴, *Shaun of the Dead*⁵), horror and the psychological drama (*Silence of the Lambs*⁶, *Henry Serial Killer*⁷).

Noël Carrol, the author of *The Philosophy of Horror*, approaches the



definition of horror by first diving into what horror is not. He defines horror this way:

Generally, when the word 'horror' is used in what follows, it should be understood as art-horror.

This kind of horror is different from the sort that one expresses in saying, 'I am horrified by the prospect of ecological disaster,' or 'Brinkmanship in the age of nuclear arms is horrifying,' or

'What the Nazis did was horrible.' Call the latter usage of 'horror'
natural horror.⁸

Carroll explains that the kind of "art-horror" that he is talking about, necessitates monsters' presence. He discusses the importance of this:

What appears to demarcate the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as myths, the attitude of the characters in the story to the monsters they encounter. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances in natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe.⁹

What remains unsatisfactory about this explanation is that Carroll does not place the same kind of care into defining monsters. Carroll's definition would exclude the entire horror sub-genre of rape-revenge films. In contrast, Cynthia Freeland expands on Carroll's description in her text *Realist Horror*:

First, in realist horror like [the movie] *Henry*, the monster is true-to-life rather than supernatural being. *Henry* is a monster. Like many movie monsters, he seems all-powerful, unpredictable, and a source of hideous violence. His approach to his fellow humans is loathsome. He is nevertheless a possible being.¹⁰

By possible being, Freeland means that *Henry* is an actual man and doesn't possess supernatural powers. Freeland's modification of Carroll's definition is significant because it means the world as we know it can be horrific.

For my exploration of the topic, it is crucial to include the possibility of regular men within her definition of monster. The monster in a film does not have to be a fantastical being; rather, it is a force of cruelty that inflicts surreal violence. Freeland's expansion of Carroll's definition collides with my work through my fears and anxieties surrounding my pregnancy and the prospect of raising a white male in American

culture. My attraction to this genre are driven by my traumatic experiences with real men.

In past work, I've contextualized mythologies by linking their narratives to contemporary issues. During the Kavanaugh Trial and the height of the #MeToo movement in 2018, I made a piece called Judith in reference to Artemesia Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*¹¹. In that piece, I excluded the image of Holofernes because, in the original artwork, his death offers a conclusion and relief to the narrative. Instead, in my sculpture, Judith and her maid confront the viewer directly and ask them to consider their relationship with notions of consent. The #MeToo movement exposed the flawed narrative of the rapist as the scary man in the bushes. This contributed to rape culture in that people rarely saw the violence in the insidious behaviors within sexual coercion and problematic power dynamics. Through this body of work, I'm exposing and recontextualizing how the monstrous manifest in the mundanity of everyday life.

In her text *Recreational Terror*, Isabel Pinedo builds upon Carroll and Freeland's definition and focuses on how horror operates beyond the characters involved. By doing so, she goes beyond telling us who the monster is; she offers us a system in which the monster facilitates the violence they inflict. Pinedo invites us to imagine how the boundaries of horror can blur between fiction and reality by considering:

- Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world
- Horror transgresses and violates boundaries
- Horror throws into question the validity of rationality
- Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure
- Horror produces a bounded experience of fear¹²

In this thesis, I scaffold each of these definitions to build a framework for understanding how the horror genre behaves, focusing on the hor-

ror film and its function. Horror is not a “utopian form,” but I don’t think it’s pretending to be. The problematic qualities of horror are already widely discussed and understood, so that’s not where my interest lies. In this work, I look beyond superficial critique of horror’s stereotypes.

The argument leveled against the horror genre can be traced back to Plato’s warnings about the dangerous effects of art. Plato cautioned that through mimesis, the public would not have the faculty to discern art from reality. This warning is echoed in claims against the effects of desensitization towards fictionalized violence and its impact on the public’s relationship to violence in reality. In contrast, Aristotle made a case for the notion of catharsis, believing that tragic theater functioned as a context for the public to exorcise antisocial impulses.¹³

Horror is often discussed using “top-down” language, as in, they keep making violent movies. However, I argue if there weren’t a market for this content, they would not produce the product. Here we can begin to explore what Carroll defines as “the paradox of horror.” What is the appeal of horror for audiences when, by definition, we ought to be revolted by what we experience on the screen? How do we understand this paradoxical attraction concerning the criticisms and classist “low culture” assessment associated with the genre of horror?

A key component to understanding the aesthetics of horror and its appeal is unpacking the disparate receptions between the abject in popular culture versus art. My reframing of the horror genre builds on a critique of the coded violence that a viewer can encounter within a fine art context. My work *Pluto vs. Leatherface* presents the viewer with a diptych featuring an image of Bernini’s *Rape of Proserpina*¹⁴ next to a still from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*¹⁵. The piece invites the viewer to consider the different cultural responses to each of these pieces of media. The violence depicted in *The Rape of Proserpina* is such that it goes unregistered for many viewers. The craftsmanship and the sculpture’s curves seduce the viewers, and they may never recognize the woman in peril before them.

In contrast, several countries banned *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for up to twenty years. I am struck by the cultural repercussions of encountering the image of a woman in danger and not registering the scene's violence. How can we explain the difference in the public response to violence depending on the type of media? Are we to understand that violent images are only safe when consumed by the educated (wealthy)?

I have also researched the role that the abject plays within contemporary art. Paul McCarthy's performance work falls within this category. I pride myself on rarely looking away from a horror movie (I often say the special effects budget is higher in my head anyway), but I find Paul McCarthy's performance work profoundly challenging to watch. Horror movies are particularly bound to tropes and as viewers, we often know exactly what to expect from the genre. Expectations become even more loaded when there's a certain amount of hype surrounding a movie. *Hostel*¹⁶ and *The Human Centipede*¹⁷ are movies that I avoided because of word of mouth surrounding them. However, when I eventually watched them, I was surprised by how palatable I found them. These kinds of movies move the benchmark for how sensational movie makers are willing to be. The standards for horror are constantly shifting and evolving. Images that once pushed the limits of the abject may now seem tame by today's standards. Much of what we fear is socially constructed. What does the evolution of horror and what we fear reveal about our culture as a whole?


In Maggie Nelson's text, *The Art of Cruelty*, she devotes much of the book to exploring the problems with images of violence. She spends a significant portion of her argument talking about the particular advertising for a movie she admits to not actually ever watching. However, she notably offers Paul McCarthy a carte blanche for the violence in his work.¹⁸ Paul McCarthy's work operates outside of this realm of expectation. The abjectness of a McCarthy performance remains unbounded by the expectations of the audience. The manic quality of his actions is

not reigned in by capital or typical run times or even the assurance that the pain you are watching is not real.

In my work, I extract depictions of violence from popular media and re-contextualize them as contemporary art. While McCarthy wields actual violence through the constructed context of art, my work differentiates itself by analyzing how simulated violence provides a platform of catharsis for the real violence of life. Nelson's implication that McCarthy's work has value whereas violence in popular media is actively harmful serves as another example of an assertion that depictions of violence are acceptable depending on their intended audience. Through my art, I claim that there is care and nuance to be found in the exploration of fear through popular media. By unpacking the violence, my work disarms it rather than glorifying it.



Figure 1. Paul McCarthy, *Piccadilly Circus*, 2013



GYNAEHORROR

Gynaehorror is a phrase coined by Erin Harrington in her text *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*. In the book, which captures the scope of female representation in horror, she states, "...I use the concept of gynaehorror to signal a sociocultural, discursive construction of female sexuality, subjectively, 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.”¹⁹ Harrington offered me the formula from which I was able to scaffold and structure how I saw myself reflected in the women in horror.

Gynae horror offers the different phases of a woman’s life within three critical categories:

1. Youth: The Virgin
2. Adulthood: Pregnancy/Motherhood

3. Old Age: The Witch

My initial exploration of horror attempted to explore the generalized effects of the genre on all audiences. It wasn't until I found out that I was pregnant during the summer between the first and second year of my MFA that I began to think more specifically about the representations of a woman's life as illustrated through tropes within horror because horror certainly has a lot to say about mothers. Stereotypes about women were one of the things I had taken for granted as one of the often-discussed, well understood, "bad" components of horror. Carol J. Clover describes the possibilities of womanhood as presented by the genre: "Taken together, these films offer variant imaginings of what it is, or might be, like to be a woman—to menstruate and be pregnant, to be vulnerable to and endure male violence, to be sexually violated."²⁰

Erin Harrington echoes and reinforces this sentiment in her text *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*:

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.²¹

What would it mean if horror told us all that we needed to know about women's lives? What can we understand about what it means to be a woman in American culture if the genre of horror was our primary source of information? Determining how horror functions for all audience members is far too varied of a question to answer, so I placed myself at the axis of my exploration of the topic, understood against and within how the genre presents women's experiences. Personalizing my

research forced me to reckon with the role that catharsis plays in my enjoyment of these films and the characters I recognized myself in. I've involved my body in some capacity for most of my practice because it is the lens through which I understand the world. My body informs how I think about safety, privilege, and gender. After centralizing my research into horror around my personal experiences, I found myself focusing on the Final Girl, a particular kind of virgin within the horror genre, and the tropes surrounding Pregnancy and Motherhood.

The Final Girl

A term coined by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, the Final Girl is often a character within a horror movie that the audience follows until the end, where she remains the sole survivor of the monster's tirade of violence²². She usually survives through her intelligence, purity, and vigilance (unlike her horndog friends, the Final Girl notices the breeches in normalcy set forth by the monster). In short, the movie cues to us as an audience that this girl is not like the other girls.

Clover marks the moment that the Final Girl begins to fight back against the villain as a turning point. At this junction, audiences who may have been rooting for the monster switch allegiance to her. Horror is justifiably critiqued for its sexism, so it's notable that the genre facilitates a convention that allows young male audiences to identify with a young woman.

Clover argues that in the final act, when the Final Girl accepts that becoming violent will be necessary for her survival, she, in a way, becomes the monster. This power and agency transfer is particularly evident in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*²³. Stretch, the Final Girl in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, survives in the end by taking the monster's chainsaw, gutting him with it, and pushing him off a mountain. In the movie's final scene, we see Stretch, triumphant, waving the chainsaw around

her head. Textually this is a direct reference to the end of the first film, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where we see the monster Leatherface perform the same action. Here we see it's no longer purely survival; it also seems to become about justice.

Much like anything in the horror genre, the Final Girl is a problematic hero. Arguably, she represents a victim-blaming argument; why don't victims of violence pick up the hatchet and fight back against the monster? Here we can see, when treated prescriptively, the Final Girl places unfair responsibility of defense upon victims. As a survivor of sexual violence, I see myself in the Final Girl's anger; however, her violence and retaliation are made safe through their boundness to film.

The Final Girl also represents a fantastical embodiment of rage, an emotion women are rarely entitled to in popular culture. I'm not going to gut anyone with a chainsaw, nor do I want to, but, damn, it's a relief to see someone else do it. It is here where we can situate Aristotle's argument for the idea of catharsis. In the *Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson contextualizes this argument through Freud:

Freud argued that our enjoyment stems from art's ability to offer—perhaps to viewer and creator alike—retroactive mastery of traumatic experiences that one's defenses failed to deflect adequately from the organism at the time of original impact or injury. The “compulsion to repeat” the trauma—be it in art, nightmare, or waking life—is the organism's attempt to master the surplus anxiety that the original incursion produced.²⁴

Within my work, I frame the Final Girl as an extension of myself. She operates in an alternative reality where I can imagine justice for my assault, hold anger for what I experienced, and share that relief with the viewer. I don't see the Final Girl as an example of what I “should have done” when I was 19; instead, she functions from a context of mythological justice. In the photograph, Final Girl, I've represented myself in her image. With my bloodied, smiling face occupying the whole frame,

I've cast myself as the Final Girl. Like Cindy Sherman's work, I've used my body to insert myself into the narrative of this media, giving visual representation to what I feel when I see myself in these films. While we both utilize cultural conventions to speak about stereotypes and womanhood, my work differs from Sherman's in the sense that I'm exploring the specific moments within popular media I recognize myself in. In contrast, she exploits visual cultural dialogues within our media to speak in generalities, divorced from personal history or narrative.

I situate the Final Girl within the contexts of deconstruction and feminism. It is unfeasible to define anything for all women, and in that sense the Final Girl is merely offered as a possibility, a figure of potential catharsis, should she work for you.



Figure 2. Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Stills #28, 1979.

Pregnancy and Motherhood

The horror genre has a lot to say about mothers—the monstrous maternal manifests through the trope of the Bad Mom. The Bad Mom can demonstrate being an unfit caregiver through her madness, oppressiveness, and, even when mothers aren't directly featured as the antagonist, they are at fault for creating the monster.

In the book *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, Sady Doyle expounds upon the role of the maternal in horror:

“Women are meant to completely efface themselves in motherhood; to live for, and in, and through their children. But this means that a bad child infects the mother with his own sins, and vice versa. In these stories, a woman who raises a monster is that monster. He would not exist, on any level, if not for her. In the real world, mothers are endlessly blamed for any and every bad decision made by their children: ‘Hitler’s mother gave birth to Hitler, and Stalin’s mother to Stalin,’ anti-feminist pundit Jordan Peterson writes in his manifesto *12 Rules for Life*.”²⁵

Through my pregnancy, these tropes have manifested in my anxieties surrounding parenthood. When I found out that I was pregnant with a son, I was overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising a white male in American culture. What can I do to ensure that he doesn't become a monstrous white supremacist Proud Boy?

Hitchcock's *Psycho*²⁶ offers us one of the most famous cinematic examples of Bad Mom, Norma Bates. The assumed murderer throughout the film, the end reveals the twist that she's been dead for the whole movie, which confoundingly never seems to absolve her of her guilt. The audience still holds her accountable because she created the monster, her son. Her story's most unjust component is that her voice is exclusively filtered through her son's psychosis, and she can never speak for herself. She is a charged absence, and I found myself motivated to



Figure 3. Production still from the Art21 “Extended Play” film, “Alex Da Corte: 57 Varieties.” © Art21, Inc. 2018.

give voice to the mother’s perspective through my work.

In my piece, *Frankenstein was the Doctor*, I position myself as both the monster and creator. Painted green and 39 weeks pregnant, I embody the characters Frankenstein and offer a new vantage point and re-contextualized narrative to speak about my anxieties of parenthood. This work anchors the mother’s perspective and provides the viewer with the voice of the monstrous maternal directly. In making this work, I considered Alex da Corte’s piece *Rubber Pencil Devil*²⁷, where he playfully restages and reimages the Wicked Witch of the West, hanging out with Oscar the Grouch singing into a fan. By offering the viewer a sympathetic eye onto a largely maligned and misunderstood character da Corte asks us to reconsider her narrative. A house just dropped on her sister; surely that would make anyone seek accountability.

Even as I reject most of these representations as unfair, they reflect the reality of the anxieties concerning my adequacy to parent. *The Babadook* (2014)²⁸ explores the guilt that single mother Amelia faces as a boogeyman appears in her home, representing a physical manifestation of her anger and resentment towards her difficult child. The

film bravely explores the possibility that, overwhelmed and unable to process the trauma of her husband's death, Amelia doesn't love her child. Culturally motherhood is understood to be something innate and a natural aspiration of womanhood. *The Babadook* offers the possibility that there are circumstances when loving your children can be very difficult. Rather than casting Amelia as the monster of the narrative, her unprocessed feelings of pain and guilt are what manifest as the monstrosity within the story.

In *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Films*, Harrington claims that the pregnant mother disappears in many ways. She loses her agency through pregnancy and is no longer what matters in the woman+baby+body equation. She asserts, "The result is that the woman's body becomes abstracted: she is a fleshy stand-in for an incorporeal spiritual battle that is greater than her. This emphasizes that the woman's body is not "hers" and hers alone."²⁹ Within Harrington's argument she articulates a fear of losing oneself to the identity of motherhood, the obliteration of the self. When a mother actively resists this dissolution it's often understood as selfishness.

*The Brood*³⁰ and *Possession*³¹ are two films that look at the pure destruction wrought by women driven to madness by the identity of motherhood. In each film this mania leads to the disintegration of their marriages as their respective husbands infantilize them in an attempt to manage and maintain normalcy through their spouses' hysteria. Crucial to the understanding of each of these films is that both Cronenberg and Zulawski drew inspiration from their own divorces. This is an exploration of the ways each film structures the family unit within the narrative of the monstrous maternal.

Set in cold-war era Berlin, *Possession* begins with scenes of desolate urban residential areas. Ultimately a film about division, there is a recurring shot in the film of two soldiers watching on the other side of the Berlin wall. This reminder of disunion echoes the crumbling relationship between husband and wife Anna and Mark, played by Isabelle

Adjani and Sam Neil. In our first introduction to the pair, Anna greets Mark as he arrives home from a business trip. In the film, the first lines we hear are the couple discussing Anna's apparent unhappiness with their relationship in cordial, cooperative tones. *Possession* is situated from the perspective of a husband trying to maintain his family life's status quo. When Anna calls Mark to inform him of her plans to "think about herself," it marks the beginning of our understanding of her as a Bad Mom. Within the film's context, thinking about herself manifests through leaving her husband to be with her lover Heinrich. Anna's separation sends Mark into a depression where we see him descend into a 3-week spiral in a hotel room where he is left shaking in bed and unable to speak. This undoing is a stark contrast to their initial conversation, where they discuss their mutual infidelity and express their general apathy towards each other. As if waking from a spell, Mark seems to recover consciousness and heads to the apartment that he and Anna formerly shared. There he finds his son Bob covered in jam and alone in a filthy apartment. Here we see as an audience the manifestation of Anna thinking about herself, which marks her unable to do her assumed duties of maintaining the household and caring for her son. Throughout the scenes in the film's first act, we see Mark and Anna match each other's energies. When Anna is manic, so is Mark; when one of them reaches a plateau of calm, so does the other. However, despite their mutual erraticness, Anna is cast as an insufficient caregiver, and it's clear that Mark must take over.

A major component to each of these films is the assertion of harm done when a woman does not properly mother. For the rest of the film after being cast out from the apartment that she and Mark once shared, we see Anna arrive at the apartment at random moments to haphazardly and ineffectually attempt domestic tasks, almost as if she was a child playing house. In her text *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, Erin Harrington explains horror's unique ability to unpack and address this idea:

“The anxieties, traumas, and slippages inherent within horror as a genre also marks such films as sites of discursive instability, in which complex and often contradictory ideas about the nature of motherhood, femininity, subjectivity and what it means to mother ‘properly’ are negotiated and interrogated. This is fraught territory: on the one hand, the notion of essential motherhood acts as a biological and cultural imperative that centers motherhood as an innate desirable and inevitable part of a woman’s life and experience. At the time time, there remains an extraordinarily powerful social imperative to women to conform to the figure of ‘ideal’ mother- that is, the fictional, aspirational figure of the self-sacrificing ‘good’ mother who performs her role in an ideologically complicit fashion, whatever that might be. This dissonant contradiction indicates that the ability to mother well (or, perhaps, appropriately) is anything but natural and instead must be monitored and enforced. An understanding of motherhood in a horror film can help interrogate what shifting meanings of and anxieties about motherhood are, without making any broad claims for what motherhood ‘is’ and ‘should be.’”³²

Possession begins by acquainting us to the characters at their most reasonable and relatable until the plot takes a sharp turn into mania. Contrasted against *The Brood*, Cronenburgh starts his film with Dr. Hal Raglan role-playing on stage a father-son relationship with one of his adult patients. The scene is odd and leaves the viewer in a lurch to comprehend the scene’s context. It could be theater; it could be performance art; it could be a dream, but we’re not sure. When we finally understand that we’re witnessing an exhibition of “psychoplastic” therapy, the context remains strange, aligning us as an audience with the film’s husband, Frank, and setting a tone for the rest of the film. The scene concludes with Dr. Raglan’s patient exposing his chest, revealing lesions to the audience, a literal externalization of his trauma. Both *Possession* and *The Brood* occupy themselves with body horror; however, they execute it in distinct ways. Cronenberg focuses on the

body's institutionalization, with Dr. Raglan, a paternal figure guiding Nola through her treatment. In contrast, *Possession* localizes its exploration of body horror through Anna's role as a mother. Both films ultimately link the site of body horror and the abject to the maternal body, specifically using the subject of birth in their most grotesque scenes.

In a flashback, we see Anna staring up at a statue of Jesus with a mixed expression of pain, fear, and anguish. She's barely able to speak, and her voice comes out garbled. The blue dress that she's worn throughout the film has become increasingly filthy as she descends into evil. Stranding in front of the statue of Jesus, her blue dress gains the added reference of Mary, the ultimate mother and the ultimate sacrificer, and a reminder of everything that Anna is not. The next scene is the most memorable of the film. While Anna walks through an empty subway station with her groceries, she transitions from laughing into a state of frenzy, where she begins to thrash around; slamming herself into walls. The scene climaxes with Anna crouched on the ground screaming with a mixture of blood, urine, and milk streaming from her orifices. The image embodies the abject feminine notions in horror as a small creature wriggles from between legs, apparently born from this moment. In my own experience of the film, Anna's screams caused my body to reflexively lactate, mirroring the maternal abjectness of the moment in a way that caused me to relate to the scene differently.

Directed in 1979, two years before *Possession*, *The Brood* is often referred to as Cronenberg's *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. In the text, *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films*, author Kier-La Janisse provides the context in which Cronenburgh conceived of the film, "inspired by his own custody battle with his ex-wife, who joined a religious cult in California and was planning to take their daughter Cassandra with her, before Cronenberg kidnapped the child and got a court order that prevented the ex-wife from taking Cassandra away."³³ Both *Possession* and *The Brood* conflate female rage with mental illness which subse-

quently leads to the dissolution of the family unit. It's notable that in *The Brood* Nola is actually in therapy with Dr. Raglan to heal from the trauma of childhood abuse at the hand of her own mother. However, it is through this act of self care that she is removed from the family unit, thus casting her as a neglectful mother. In therapy, Nola begins to process her rage surrounding her childhood abuse. The mothers in each film exhibit an almost animalistic quality. In *The Brood* this is most clear in the climax of the film when Nola rips open her external uterus and licks her offspring clean.

Notably, the children have relatively minor roles in these representations of the monstrous maternal. In *Possession*, Mark and Anna's arguments often come back to Bob's well-being; however, he is conspicuously absent during much of the film's chaos. In *The Brood*, Candace plays a much more prominent role throughout the film. It is her apparent anti-social behavior that prompts Frank to try to extract his wife from the institute in the first place. However, Candace's character lacks dimensionality and interiority. These movies are primarily about the dissolution of an adult relationship; however within this relationship, it's the women, whose role is mother, that drive the conflict in these narratives. In both films, each woman is absent from the family unit and motivated in different ways to find happiness.

Nola is a woman working through the trauma of childhood abuse and actively seeking help for it. Arguably, she has been taken advantage of by institutional science, as represented through Dr. Raglan. If we compare how Cronenberg frames Nola as opposed to Cameron Vale, the main character in the movie *Scanners*³⁴, Cameron also has a unique bodily ability that institutional science tries to study and commodify. He, however, is positioned in resistance to the institution and granted agency and control over his unique ability. Conversely, Nola is driven by rage. Her bodily abnormality manifests itself in a monstrous manner, and in this context, her husband Frank must resist the institution. Even Dr. Raglan finds redemption at the end of the film after he realizes his

experiments have gone too far. He then works to save Candace from Nola's Brood.

In both films, there are plot points where the fathers, faced with assuming the role of primary caregiver, have a romantic tryst with their child's teacher. In each movie, the teacher is kind, innocent, and sexually available to the father. In *Possession*, the teacher is played by Isabelle Adjani, the same actress who plays the starring role of Anna. When Mark drops his son Bob off at school for the first time, he mistakes the teacher for his wife. Since Mark assumes it's his wife in a wig, he tugs on the teacher's hair. By placing Adjani in both roles, the character of Bob's teacher stands in as the idealised version of Anna. The teacher in each movie is the representation of a "good woman." This is almost as if the directors both felt compelled to prove in some way to the audience that they don't have issues with women as a whole (just their wives). The teacher in *Possession* wears all white, an indication of her purity in goodness. This also provides a stark contrast to Anna's increasingly filthy blue dress, which becomes darker and darker with the film's progression. The teacher in each film is also receptive to the father's advances. In *Possession*, Mark very quickly sleeps with Bob's teacher and afterward appears to lose interest in her. In *The Brood*, the romance between Frank and Candace's teacher is cut short when Nola calls the house and the teacher happens to answer. The idea of another woman with Frank throws Nola into a fit of rage. She shouts at her over the phone and eventually kills the teacher with her brood. It's also remarkable how, in each film, the teacher is seemingly, unconditionally available to babysit for the dad as he engages in the action of the film.

Here is a different context where we can see that the availability of women within the family plays a crucial role in her "goodness". In her book *Dead Blondes and Bad Moms*, author Sady Doyle summarizes this idea nicely, "Women are meant to completely efface themselves in motherhood; to live for, and in, and through their children"³⁵.

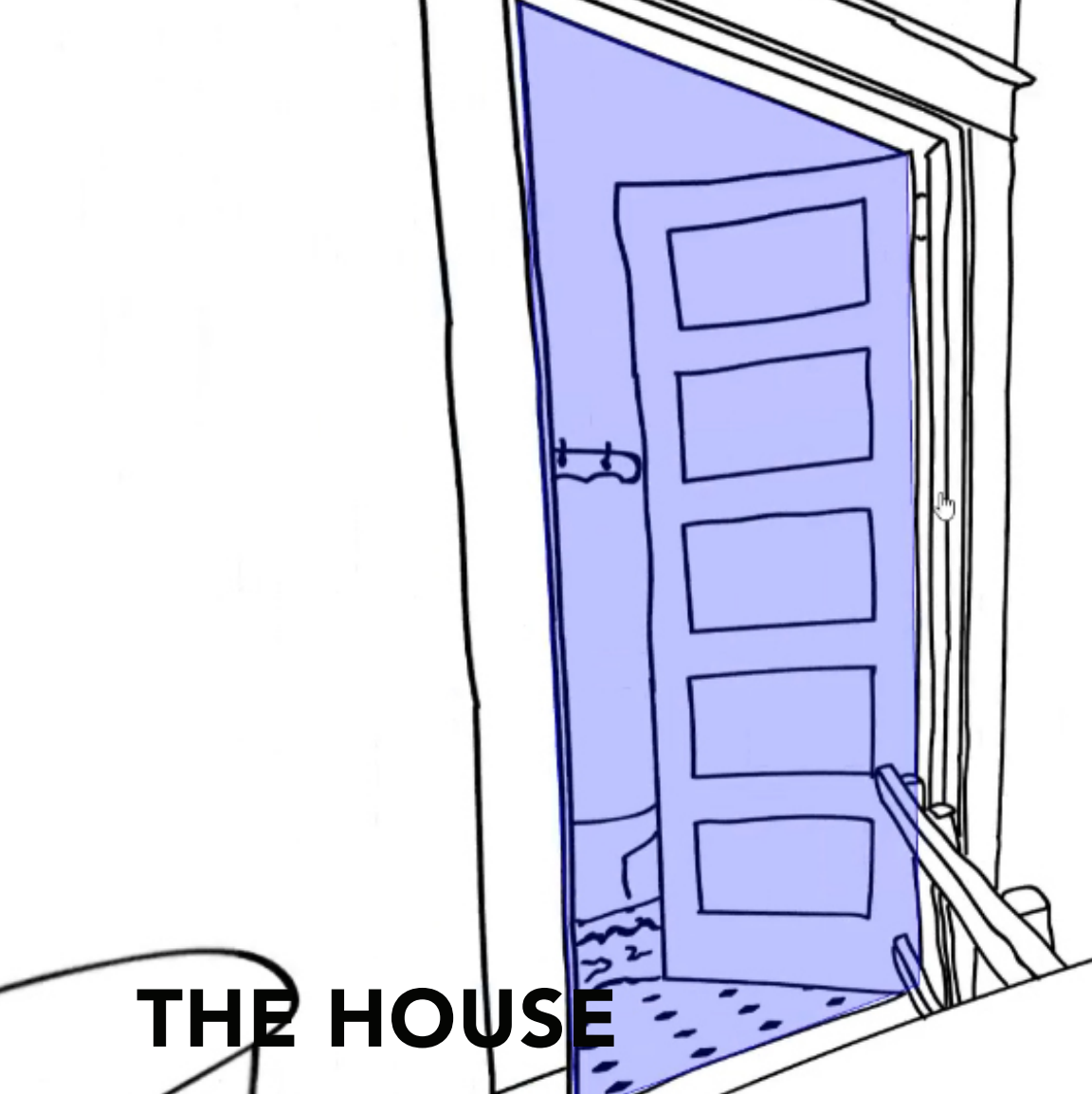
In their respective films, Anna and Nola both extradite themselves from their families in their individual pursuits of happiness. Their subsequent mania and madness is how we situate their maternal monstrosity; however, it is this initial abandonment that seems to cast them into the role of “Bad Mom”. Almost as a warning, it is when these women are outside of their family unit where they descend into madness and become unrecognizable to the men that they married. The men within these films are our protagonists; they are cast as reasonable men doing what best they can to maintain the function of their families. It is the trope of the reasonable man that places the dissatisfaction of these women into a realm of the unreasonable. This implication of maternal madness states that these women must be crazy and evil to seek fulfillment beyond their domestic lives, children and husband. Harrington further clarifies this point through the context of embodiment:

As such, I suggest that these films posit that the woman’s body is not just split or displaced but requisitioned so that she must necessarily submit and defer to another, internal and far more important Other. This is not an open or productive form or de-individualized subjectivity, or one that forms rich connections with others, but a competitive, antagonistic relationship that consumes one for another. Such a designation asks of each woman the mythic selflessness of the Virgin Mary, and sometimes invokes the Immaculate Conception through romanticizing the sacrifice that each woman must make to ensure her fetus’s survival.³⁶

For a sexual assault survivor, this adjustment of agency can be particularly triggering. So much about expecting a baby tends to focus on the joy and excitement about becoming a mother. While those expressions are authentic and valid, I think it’s also essential to create space and acknowledge the fear associated with such a massive change in a woman’s life. While horror movies about mothers can be extraordinarily judgmental of women, movies about the anxiety related to mother-

hood can also be cathartic expressions, externalizing and validating the concerns that might feel inappropriate to vocalize. In contrast to Norma Bates' representation, these mothers can articulate exactly what they want, even if they are demonized for it.

In many of the films featuring Bad Moms, the turning point when they begin to be "bad" is when they seek fulfillment outside of their homes. When they remove themselves from the family unit, they begin, by default, to neglect their domestic duties and children. In *Possession*, Anna asks her husband for a divorce and seeks sexual fulfillment on her own through her lover Heinrich. When her husband, Frank, returns to the apartment they once shared, he finds his son Bob covered in jam and alone in a filthy apartment. Here we see as an audience the manifestation of Anna thinking about herself, which marks her incapable of doing her assumed duties of maintaining the household and caring for her son.



THE HOUSE

My partner and I purchased a home at the end of last summer, and, much like a couple in a movie, we got an excellent deal on our hundred-year-old house. In addition to our new home, I found out that I'm expecting a baby in February. My pregnancy placed me within an "at-risk" category with Covid-19, so I was relegated to staying in my house.

While realizing I would be stuck in quarantine for the entirety of my thesis year, my new old house became part of my work. It was the site for all of my making, research, and installation. Not knowing what the



situation would be regarding COVID-19 in March for our thesis show, I decided early on to explore how I could virtually communicate the work. I wanted anyone in my position to be able to experience my work.

The family home is arguably the most common setting for a horror movie. Within my work, I explore the house in multiple ways. The house can be understood as a metaphor for the body, something that one inhabits. Within that sense, home invasion, or the home understood as a site of vulnerability, then becomes an allegory for assault. While

rape-revenge movies occupy a specific corner of the horror genre, the issues of safety and control that the horror genre explores universalize the experience of individuals who have experienced trauma.

The house can also be interpreted through the context of domesticity. Before the industrial revolution, the home was a place for both work and rest. However, when notions of “work” became situated outside of the house and associated with men’s labor, the activity located within the home had lesser value and became associated with the lives of white women. Layered atop these many meanings, our relationship to the home has undergone another major shift with COVID-19. With quarantine, the house simultaneously becomes both a prison and haven. Jeffrey Podoshen makes a similar observation in his examination of the home’s role in Wes Craven’s classic film, *Last House on the Left*³⁷: “...a key focus of the film is the interplay between the suburban house as both a safe space and a place of immense body horror. Craven shows us that there is no real safe space in the world no matter how far one removes oneself from urban decay or rampant criminality.”³⁸ In the film, two girls plan to head to the city, a cultural site of danger, for a concert. However, criminals who have escaped prison brutally rape and murder the girls in the woods yards from their home. Craven forces the viewer to reconsider the house as a situated site of safety and reckon with the notion that violence can infiltrate anywhere.

In the *Panic Room*³⁹, Jodie Foster stars as a recently single mom who purchases an expensive apartment with the money she won in the divorce. She and her daughter are forced to hide in the apartment’s panic room one evening when the previous tenant’s greedy grandson (played by Jared Leto) breaks in with a gang of thugs. The home becomes a character in the film as Jodie Foster has to outwit and thwart these men so she and her daughter can survive. Often in horror films, houses that are meant to provide their inhabitants with the most protection prove to be the most dangerous—reiterating the notion that nowhere is safe. In my piece, *Concerned Women Looking out of Windows*, I wanted

to illustrate the frequency with which women are shown as vulnerable within the home in horror. The frequent use of women looking concerned through windows speaks to a more significant idea that nowhere is safe.

By weaving together the experiences of vulnerability, pregnancy, and catharsis I encountered while watching horror within the family home context, I replicated my lived experience for viewers through my artwork. Each piece directly reflected moments in my life. Making this work allowed me to process some of my trauma, disentangle my mixed feelings, and share some of that labor with my audience.

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METHODOLOGY

Active Watching

For this thesis, I watched over 150 horror movies. I would play movies as I developed the work, while my 3D printer printed work, and when I got home from the studio. Immersing myself in these movies allowed me to notice patterns and consistencies between films and find parallels in films to personal lived experiences. I became attuned to common tropes or tricks of the genre. For example, I learned to expect when a



woman would look out of a window. It generally happens in the first quarter of the film, before any violence has occurred, when the woman is the only one to realize something is amiss. I also observed that smart women differ from smart men in horror in that their perception manifests as concern. You rarely see a man look out of a window because his M.O. is action not careful noticing.

Another component of active watching involved taking agency with narrative. An example of this is the first of the Rambo franchise, *First*

*Blood*⁴⁰. The film's antagonists, Sheriff Will Teasle and his men, can be understood as monsters of systemic patriarchy within this context. John Rambo's lethal defense against Teasle's unrelenting attacks echo the action of any Final Girl movie. Within this context, *First Blood* is a Final Girl narrative told in its final act. At the beginning of the film, the viewer learns that John Rambo is a Vietnam Veteran and the last surviving member of his platoon. When he learns of the recent death of his last remaining friend, he heads into the nearest Pacific Northwest town to get lunch before heading out of town. As he heads into town, Rambo is confronted by Sheriff Will Teasle, who tries to get him to eat lunch in a different town, believing that Rambo is somehow undesirable.

It is in their exchange that it first occurred to me that *First Blood* could be a feminist story. The power dynamics of the scene immediately reminded me of the years I have spent working in the service industry often encountering disrespectful older white men emboldened by the privilege they've experienced their entire lives. Rambo became an empty vessel for me to pour my feminist discontentment. In the past, when have I presented this argument, I have been accused of making a "Tootsie" argument, or, in other words, that the best woman for the job is a man. I reject this simplification. I believe that there is humor and agency in appropriating the figure of Rambo for my own purposes. Subverting the familiar narrative of Rambo forces the viewer to think more expansively about the trope of the Final Girl. Expanding the Final Girl's experience beyond strictly female characters offers an opportunity for more people to relate to or empathize with her.

This unorthodox positioning of Rambo's narrative is reinforced through the Anthropological study of Gapun people of Papua New Guinea. In a text titled *Rambo's Wife Saves the Day: Subjugating the Gaze and Subverting the Narrative*⁴¹ [...] authors Kudlick and Wilson talk about a group of indigenous villagers whose recounting of the sequel to *First Blood*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*⁴² contextualized the story of as a woman who saves the day despite her bumbling husband (Rambo).

The authors explain that in this particular community, telling a better story is much more important than describing events as they factually occurred. In this way, narratives become unbounded, and audience members become collaborators when they retell these narratives. In a way, I think contemporary art functions like this.. There is the “artist’s intent”, but viewers also expound upon what the work means to them. In this series of works, I position myself as both the artist and the viewer of horror.

Embodiment

My body plays a vital role in the production of my work. Self-portraiture and other representations of myself through performance and body casts serve to situate the artwork from my perspective and lived experiences. These traces of my body give clues to the viewer about the embodied experience within the content of the artwork.

Experiments in the studio

In my first year in the program, I spent a lot of time in my studio experimenting with materiality. I cast my body in an expandable foam thinking about the nature of movie props, collapse, and the production of a body that could withstand harm while still giving way to it. At one point, I had a production line of fingers, producing about a hundred pink squishy phallic fingers a day. This production and representation of my body then gave way to full embodiment through performance during my pregnancy later in my studio practice.

Self-portraiture

In the early iterations of this body of work, I attempted to generalize the experience of horror, which created an emotional distance in the art I produced. My interest in horror is rooted in a painful history of sexual trauma. This distancing was the result of my own feelings of self-preservation and fear of vulnerability. When I found out that I was pregnant, I could no longer ignore how my own personal experience was playing a role in this work. It suddenly seemed impossible that the work should focus on my relationship and interpretation of horror rather than the distanced generalization I had been attempting. This personalization manifested through self-portraiture, both in a literal sense as well as representationally through my home.

Pregnancy and Giving Birth

I considered my pregnancy to be fieldwork for contextualizing the representations I saw in horror. At first, pregnancy seemed like just a concept, something more real in film and images than as something occurring in my own body. Pregnancy redefined my relationship with my body. I often refer to my pregnancy as “fieldwork” for my thesis. I featured my body heavily in my work, but I also have dissociated from it. My body was purely the lens through which I understood the world, and, in that equation, the filtered information was the critical bit to which I gave my attention. My body was purely the meat vehicle that toted my brain around.

As I researched the object, I also embodied the object. Into my first trimester, I could no longer afford to ignore my body. At the beginning of my pregnancy, I spent the first few months with my head in a toilet as my belly began to stretch and swell. If I worked too long and forgot to eat, my nausea intensified, and I would be too weak to do anything the next day. Although I didn't feel any animosity towards the fetus grow-



Figure 4. From "The Drama of Life Before Birth," *Life Magazine*, 1965.

ing inside of me, I lacked the glow and excitement I saw in the portrayal of other expectant mothers. And despite my ambivalence towards my future child, I lived in fear of miscarriage. Whenever I felt any moisture in my underwear, I would quietly go to the bathroom and emotionally prepare myself to see a bloody mess in my pants... this, of course, never came to fruition.

Seeing my baby for the first time in a sonogram made the baby feel more solid. He was no longer an abstract idea as soon as I could see him. I remember being surprised at how little space he appeared to have in my uterus. After giving it a lot of thought, I realized my misconception had been born out of a photographic series I saw in *Life Magazine*⁴³. In these photos, you can see fetuses at varying stages of

development floating in a vast, black void as if they were in space or the deep sea. These photos lack any implication of the pregnant body and present the fetus as a miraculous, independent being blipped into existence. This representation of fetal independence made me wonder about the political repercussions of picturing a baby's development as separate from the body that houses it.

The experience of birth contextualized this body of work more than I ever expected. One of the most notable parts of giving birth is the vacuum in my memory regarding the pain. When I developed my birth plan, I intended to give birth without medication. After experiencing five hours of contractions, I asked my midwife for an epidural. I initially held a lot of shame about asking for pain relief, almost as if I was "giving up" in a way. This reaction surprised me because I held no judgment about how a person "should" give birth.

After I received the epidural, all memory of the pain of contractions was gone. Even as my body continues to heal from giving birth, that pain feels disconnected from my son and the experience of labor. Losing that memory of pain unsettled me and made me realize how much I use the experience of pain, both physical and emotional, as information about the world. Without the memory of pain, my memory of childbirth lacks some embodied truth. My practice is in many ways about navigating and trying to digest and better understand those experiences. The disquiet that I felt at losing the memory of pain surprised me. I thought that it would be a good thing to avoid unnecessary pain, but maybe it's because losing those memories echoed the experience of PTSD after my assault.

Working in my home

I knew that I wanted to be intentional about my approach to working from my home through my pregnancy. I believed I could use my circumstances generativity to create exciting work that commented on

remoteness, the impact of Covid-19 on our experience of art and the world, and how it has impacted our idea of home. I saw the connection between my being relegated to my home and the house's role within horror. I knew that I could integrate my experience of pregnancy into my work and research into horror and relate being relegated to my home to the house's setting in horror. Because being quarantined in my home was a component of the embodied experience of my pregnancy, it felt crucial to include within the experience of the work. This sense of isolation and separation is communicated textually through how the viewer experiences the installation online. They navigate through the house as I experienced it, empty except for my partner. It was essential to create work that someone else in my circumstances could experience. I used the house as inspiration and as a digital installation site to house the work online.

Producing digital work

To communicate my quarantined pregnancy experience with my viewer, I created a digital installation that lived on a website. I experimented in a few different ways to produce a digital rendering of my home. My first test involved creating a scan of a room using an Xbox Kinect. The quality of this model wasn't outstanding, and I didn't pursue this option any further. The next test I conducted involved creating a photogrammetry model of the same room for comparison. I made a few different models using this technique, some of which were faithful reproductions of the room, while others looked more like organs or decaying ruins. These models' texture imbued them with some of the physicality and materiality I feared losing, working in an exclusively digital environment.

In the rooms, I experimented with placing 3D models I had initially intended on 3d printing. Putting the models in the digital spaces freed me to play with scale and monumentality. It also allowed me to alter

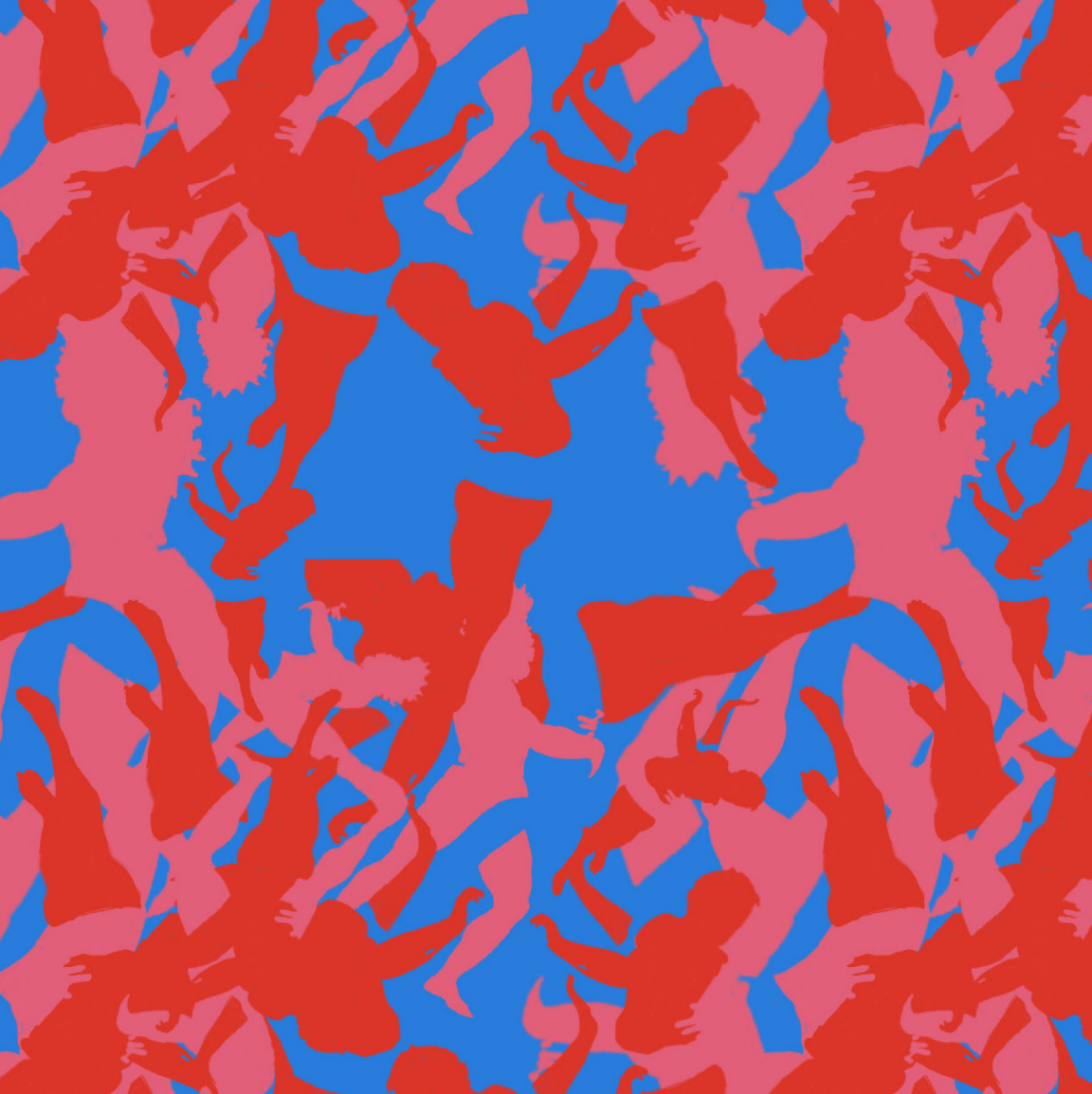
the context for the work. I could show the pieces within a domestic setting, released from a white cube gallery environment's reflexiveness. Creating the website allowed me to reconsider my relationship with accessibility, both physically and theoretically. The approachability and familiarity of interacting with a website lent itself to popular media as a topic in a way that a gallery space might not.

The third iteration of my experiments with digital renderings of my home involved creating a navigable tour of my home using a combination of 360 camera and a program called Pano2Vr that stitched the 360 photos. Google Maps and the 360 home tours that realtors utilized in response to Covid-19 restrictions inspired this process. With this iteration of the project, I liked how space operated as a digital installation, giving the viewer the agency to explore and navigate the room at their own pace. Eventually, I drew on top of the 360 images to create a more expressive space. These 360 line drawings ultimately became the structural foundation of the website. The viewer agency present in the work echoes the practice of active watching I employed through my research. Allowing the viewer to interact with the work independently can build personal sites of meaning as they encounter artwork throughout the house.



CREATIVE WORK

When viewers enter the exhibition, they see on their left a projected video of the website I created for the show. The projection operates like a trailer for the website. Viewers are invited to explore the website on their phones via a QR code. Further into the show, I installed the two self-portraits facing each other in conversation. If the viewer turns to their right and enters the glass atrium, they will see my video *Concerned Women Looking out of Windows* projected on the glass.



Website: permeablebodies.com

For the website, I created a digital installation of my home. It felt important that I develop a body of work that someone in my position could experience. Throughout quarantine, my relationship with my home has shifted, and I've thought a lot about the role of the home in horror and how that speaks about our relationship with domesticity. The title *Permeable Bodies* is about the destruction of bodies through-

out horror, as well as the unique access you have as a pregnant person to images of the inside of your body. Throughout pregnancy, a swollen belly serves as an invitation for yourself and others to consider the internal workings of your body in a way that rarely happens otherwise.

As viewers first enter the site, they encounter the title of the work, "Permeable Bodies," in a classic horror poster font. When the viewer turns around in the space, they see a line drawing of the exterior of my home. By clicking on the door, viewers can go inside the house. Upon entering, the viewer stands in the foyer. As they look around the room, they encounter a stack of boxes by the door, residue from all the things I bought for the baby throughout my pregnancy. If the viewer clicks on the window above the door, they encounter a diptych titled *Pluto Vs. Leatherface*. The title of the piece references the movie trope of two monsters facing off in the tradition of *Freddy Vs. Jason*⁴⁴, *Alien Vs. Predator*⁴⁵ or *Godzilla Vs. Mothra*⁴⁶. I situate Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina* against a movie still from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the diptych. I invited the viewer to contemplate their different cultural receptions. The violence in *The Rape of Proserpina* often goes unregistered for many viewers. They get seduced by the curves and the craftsmanship and never actually see the woman in peril. In contrast, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was banned in several countries for twenty years.

When the viewer exits back into the foyer, they can go up the stairs or enter two rooms ahead of them. Up the stairs, the viewer has the option of entering three different rooms. Through the first door on the left is the bathroom. Once inside, the viewer has the option of clicking on the nozzle of a spray bottle; this will link them to a video of a piece I made called *The Hallway*. The construction of *The Hallway* mimics the narrow drywall corridor of a movie set piece, built at a foot and a half-width that barely accommodates an average female frame. I intentionally exposed supporting buttresses and drywall to disarm the viewer for the violence to come and create a contrast between artifice and spectacle. As the viewer steps up to the hallway, a sensor triggers

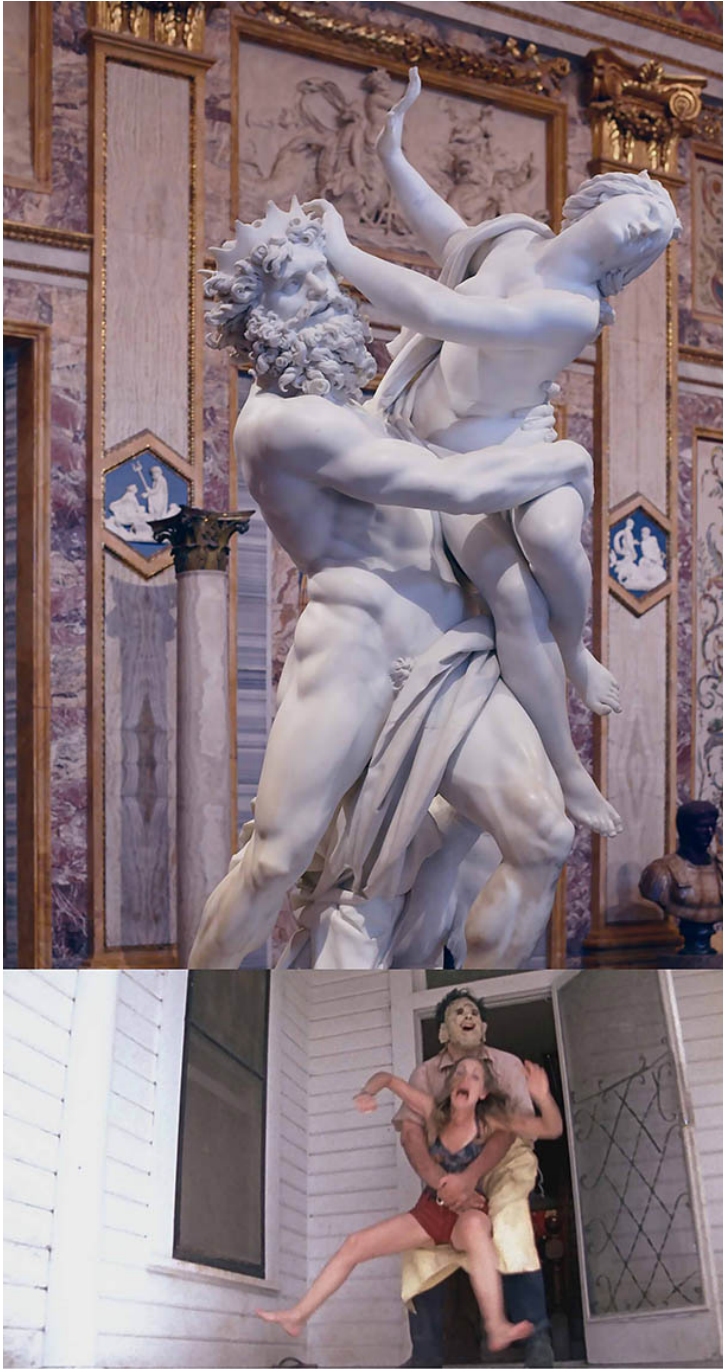


Figure 5. Pluto Vs. Leatherface, Christine Bruening, 2020

a paint gun (the horror genre's jump scare) and loudly expels a stream of fake blood on the opposing wall, which accumulates over time.

When the viewer navigates back out to the corridor, they have the option of entering "the bedroom," the "studio then nursery," or the other "studio." If the viewer clicks on the door labeled "studio," they will find themselves in an office. By clicking on the office door labeled "Stamps Gallery," they will find themselves in a room with images from the installed version of the thesis show at Stamps Gallery. By providing photos from the physical exhibit in the digital show, I further collapse this hierarchy that typically favors the in-person experience.

As viewers navigate throughout the whole house, they encounter different photos, 3D models, and videos I've made over the past two years exploring the aesthetics of horror. By having the agency to explore the house freely, the viewer is able to take an active role in the work and embody the experience I had while quarantining through my pregnancy.

Frankenstein was the Doctor

This photograph is a self-portrait; I am nude and painted head to toe in green paint with a costume store Frankenstein hat on my head. In the image, I am 39 weeks pregnant. Depending on who you speak to when you say the name "Frankenstein," they will either think of the doctor or the monster. This conflation of identity also lends itself to a conflation of responsibility. Is the doctor at fault for his hubris for bringing the monster into the world, or is the monster at fault for his actions and violence? When I found out that I was pregnant with a boy, I was terrified about my ability to raise a white male in American culture. Throughout my pregnancy, I thought a lot about the character of Norma Bates in relation to this idea. The mother in the film *Psycho*, she is often cast as the monster despite being dead for the duration of the film. Even when this final twist is revealed at the end of the film, it never results

in a transference of blame. Despite being a corpse, the film implies she is still at fault for Norman, the real killer's actions, because of her lousy job at raising him. Despite the injustice I feel on behalf of Norma, it doesn't extradite me from the responsibility I feel not to raise the kind of man who will fade into the folds of toxic masculinity and violence in American culture.

The physical version of this piece is printed on a satin fabric. The folds from the image being shipped are still visible in the installation, a serendipitous kind of failure. The image includes a peek of an ironing board, a nod to stereotypical notions of motherhood.

Final Girl Photograph

The photograph's figure references the horror film trope of the Final Girl, a term coined by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. In the genre, we follow The Final Girl until the end, watching her endure unspeakable terrors at the hand of some monster until she eventually emerges triumphant. Typically she manages to survive by relying on her intelligence but eventually co-opting the monster's violence, thus, in a sense, becoming the monster herself in the end. We can ask when is or can violence be justified and who deserves vindication through the Final Girl? For this piece, I wanted the story behind the girl to remain ambiguous. We don't know if she is the monster or the Final Girl. We don't know if she is covered in her own blood or the blood of someone else. Is her smile sadistic, or is she relieved to have survived; by not providing all of the answers, the viewer is obliged to fill in the blanks themselves. This act of finishing the story ignites an internal consideration of biases and assumptions built from our visual culture.



Figure 6. *Frankenstein was the Doctor*, Christine Bruening, 2021.



Figure 7. Final Girl Detail, Christine Bruening, 2020. (Photo credit Sidney Church)

Concerned Women Looking Out of Windows

This video piece depicts 3 minutes of videos harvested from horror movies, concerned women looking out of windows. This piece illustrates the anxiety surrounding the notion of the home and the American Dream in horror films as well as the gendered vulnerability of women within the genre. Despite the fact these women theoretically have the protection of a house, security is fallible, and the killer always gets in. The repetition of the action serves to heighten the viewer's sense of tension. In the piece, the plot never moves forward, and these women are forever looped in a cycle of watching and hoping nothing is out there. When we consider this phenomenon within the context of the implication of domesticity and the notion that the home is "where a woman belongs" because it's "safe," the anxieties presented within these films throw a wrench in that idea and make it clear that women aren't safe no matter where they are. When we think about the house as a metaphor for the body, as something that one inhabits, we can consider the invasion trope within horror as a metaphor for assault. In the show, this piece is projected upon a window and only plays at night. The context in which the video can be viewed mimics the setting of the scenes. This parallel points to the reality of some of the anxieties presented in horror.

This exhibition and the work that it houses provide a platform for viewers to experience the systems of horror at a safe distance. By filtering the violence through my personal experiences, I'm offering the viewer a new possibility for understanding horror and the aesthetics of violence while maintaining enough breathing room and ambiguity so the audience may still come to their own conclusions about how horror may function in their own lives. This artwork serves to open a door and offer some shared catharsis and perhaps some new understanding between myself and the viewer.

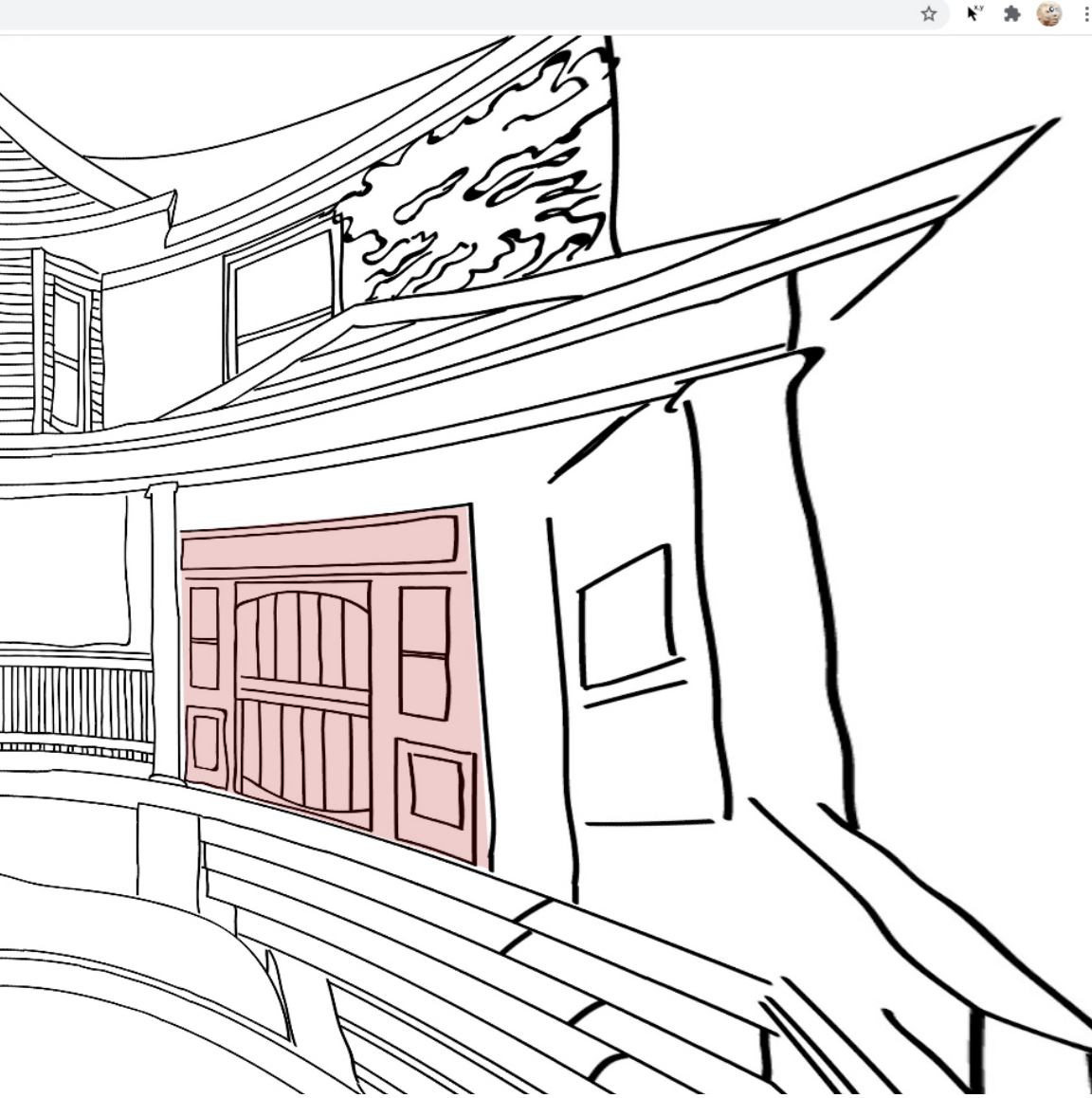


Figure 8. Concerned Women Looking Out of Windows (Installation), Christine Bruening, 2021.



AFTER THE DUST SETTLES: A CONCLUSION

The horror genre gets a lot of flack, I agree with much of it and think that the genre has much to improve upon. However, I'm tremendously grateful to have been given the opportunity to sit with horror these past few years and untangle why I find so much value in it despite all of its flaws. This body of work was made through a lens of tenderness with the intention of offering a different vantage point for a maligned genre and the characters within it. By recognizing myself in characters like the Final Girl and Bad Mom, I have examined and unpacked some



of the widely held stereotypes about women while reflecting upon some of the stereotypes I project upon myself. Horror holds value not despite its gruesomeness but because of it. By presenting audiences with some of the ugliness of the world we are able to digest it at a distance. The house in horror operates to remind us that what we hold as valuable in our lives is vulnerable. A home serves to protect but as horror reminds us time and time again, walls are fallible and the monster always gets in. However, what the Final Girl serves to teach us is that

horrible things are survivable.

Horror has allowed me to process and look trauma in the eye through the safe distance of theatricality. Through its camp and humor I've been able to laugh at the things that once scared me and in turn have found empowerment by no longer shielding my eyes from that which is difficult in my life. By discovering all of this for myself, I've been able to process those feelings through the work and share the catharsis I've found with the people who look at and experience my artwork.

Pregnancy played a tremendous role in the development and direction as an experience that will forever change my relationship with my body and the idea of home and introduced to me the notion of my body as a home. Becoming a mother has had a mammoth impact on my work in ways I never expected. Movies rarely explicitly show the harm of children; it seems to be one of the final taboos that many filmmakers are unwilling to cross. This may relate to their morals about representation or fear of audience reception. On the rare occasion that I would watch a movie that depicted infanticide, I treated the moment cavalierly, often bemused by the decision to cross a line so many are unwilling to. However, after my son's birth, the thought of watching harm come to a baby on screen deeply unsettled me (which, in turn, also unsettled me). His newborn fragility is such a tangible component of my everyday life. Watching anything that exploited a similar kind of fragility seems too real for my comfort.

The Scene That Plays After the Credits

Dear Evert,

As I write this, you're sleeping on my lap, and you're two months old. This is where you've been while I've written the majority of this synopsis and reflection of my work. You like to be held which is alright by me because I like to hold you.

When I found out about you it changed so much about everything. It was at the beginning of the pandemic when I learned you were coming to join our family. I had to make art in different ways so I could stay home and keep you safe as you grew in my belly. Becoming your mom helped me realize that it was important for people to understand why horror matters to me. I figured out that sharing with the people who looked at my art all the ways that I saw myself in the characters that I watched might help them too. I made work that anyone anywhere could look at and experience because being home growing you made me think about who could see my work in new ways.

I've thought a lot about what you'll think about what I've made. This year has been difficult, and one of the things that has motivated me is a hope that you'll be proud of me. Proud of me for all the times I kept working even when I was exhausted from growing you but also for talking about things that were hard. Now that you've been born I've been worried that people may look at this work and think that I hate you or perhaps that I'm a bad mother. Or even worse that you may feel unloved. Nothing could be further from the truth. I made this work out of a sense of compassion for others who have gone through what I've gone through and to share the anxiety I feel about being a mom. I'm still worried about how good of a parent I'll be and what that could mean for your life but I think all parents might worry about that. So far it feels like you've made my job pretty easy.

When you were just two days old we watched a movie called Deep Red. It's an Italian movie about a son protecting his mentally ill mother as she kills people and it cracks me up that that was your first film. I'm so excited to share more of these movies with you, and hope that you love them as much as I do so we can laugh together when heads explode and cheer for the final girl and see the humanity in the bad moms. I'll tell you about the things that these movies get wrong but I also tell you about what they get right and how that's made me feel better about things that were hard.

I love you in ways that are inarticulable,

Your Mom.



Figure 9. *Evert Sleeping*, Christine Bruening, 2021.

Notes

1. Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing, *Horror in Architecture* (s.l.: ORO, 2013).
2. *Alien* (20th Century Fox, 1979).
3. *The Cabin in the Woods*, n.d.
4. *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* (Eden Rock Media, 2011).
5. *Shaun of the Dead* (Universal Pictures , 2004).
6. *The Silence of the Lambs* (Orion Pictures Corp., 1990).
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9. Carroll Noël, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
10. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Philosophy and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
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12. Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997).
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14. Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Rome, n.d.).
15. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Vortex, 1974).
16. *Hostel* (Sony pictures home entertainment, 2005).
17. *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (Bounty Films, 2009).

18. Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: a Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).
19. Erin Jean Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynae-horror* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).
20. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (B.F.I. Pub., 1992).
21. Erin Jean Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynae-horror* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).
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23. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (The Cannon Group, 1986).
24. Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: a Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).
25. Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019).
26. *Psycho* (Paramount Pictures, 1960).
27. *Rubber Pencil Devil*, n.d.
28. *The Babadook* (Screen Australia, 2014).
29. Erin Jean Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynae-horror* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).
30. *The Brood*. (New World Pictures, 1979).
31. *Possession*. (Gaumont, 1981).
32. Erin Jean Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynae-horror*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

33. Kier-La Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women: an Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2014).
34. *Scanners*. (AVCO Embassy Pictures , 1981).
35. Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019).
36. Erin Jean Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynae-horror* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).
37. *The Last House on the Left*. (Hallmark, 1972).
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39. *Panic Room*. (Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2002).
40. *First Blood*. (Orion Pictures Corp., 1982).
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42. *First Blood: Part II*. (Tri-Star Pictures, 1985).
43. Lennart Nilsson, "The Drama of Life Before Birth," *Life Magazine*, 1965.
44. *Freddy vs. Jason*. (New Line Cinema, 2003).
45. *Alien vs. Predator*. (Twentieth century fox home entertainment, 2005).
46. *Godzilla vs. Mothra*. (Toho, 1992).

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