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Monstrous Women: Costuming Horror Film in the 21st Century

By: Elena Johansen

Abstract: Horror, like fashion, appears to be an underestimated tool for understanding political and social change. Both subjects are habitually tossed aside as frivolous and senseless, yet, this article argues that both devices are approachable and digestible in a way that makes them significant. Women are often marginalized in film, a reflection of a larger social issue that manifests clearly in horror films where they are treated violently and exploitatively. This article investigates the costuming of women in a selection of horror films from the 21st century and how these costumes express and intensify the narrative by looking at the tropes of female monsters, specifically the man-eater. This trope is associated with sexuality, whether through the overt use of seduction or sexual organs used as weapons. How do costumes in these films work with or against the current narrative of women in society? Exploring the film industry in this context is essential given the industry's tendency to showcase public opinion in subtle or not so subtle ways. Ideas of the grotesque and its unquestionable connection to the female sex directly relate to these politics and social ideas, but also to horror storytelling and the mythology of monsters we observe throughout time.

Keywords: *Costume design, women in horror, costume symbolism, feminism in film*

Horror, like fashion, is an underestimated tool for analyzing culture. Both devices are approachable and digestible in a way that makes them significant. Despite, and probably exactly because of, the historically trivialized nature of both horror as a film genre and fashion, this paper investigates how they intersect, specifically in the case of female characters in the films. Women are often marginalized in film, a reflection of a larger social issue that manifests clearly in horror films where they are treated violently and exploitatively. This paper investigates costuming of women in a selection of horror films from the 21st century and how costume as a tool intensifies a narrative. These include the following films: *Teeth* (2007), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *We Are What We Are* (2013), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), and *Raw* (2016). In *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*, Alice Bolin writes about a trend she observes in American popular culture and media of the brutalization of women. In her introduction, she states “I have tried to make something about women from stories that were always and only about men”.¹ In the films explored here, the writers, directors, and producers reappropriate tropes that exist throughout film and storytelling history in order to rethink the power and position of women and their bodies. Specifically, I look at the trope, the man-eater, as a common portrayal of women not just in the horror genre, but throughout storytelling.

The Maneater: “This Pussy Bites Back”

Through iterations of the common trope of the man-eater, including vagina dentata and female cannibals or vampires, I explore the latest superfood trend: men. In this subgenre, the juxtaposition of modest clothing compared to risqué clothing, emphasizes the relation and

tension between innocence, excess, or indecency, exploring themes of puberty and maturity, girl-becoming-woman and self-determination, while accompanied by horror-appropriate ripped clothing and colors and textures that convey blood or internal organs. In *The Story of V: A Natural History of Female Sexuality*, Catherine Blackledge quotes a medieval text that states, “woman is not human, but a monster in nature”.² This is a concept seen throughout film history, from *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (1958) and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985) to *Queen of the Damned* (2002).

***Teeth* (2007)**

One version of the man-eater is the vagina dentata, a literal folkloric interpretation where the vagina includes a set of teeth that has the power to harm anything that enters it. The film that most (in)famously represents this trope is *Teeth* (2007), written and directed by Mitchell Lichtenstein. In the movie, a chaste Christian teenager, Dawn, navigates high school and the boys and men in her life. She eventually realized the secret power her body held after she was sexually assaulted: the vagina dentata. The so-called toothed vagina can be seen as a microcosm of the female body as a whole and challenges the idea of woman or the vagina as simply “a passive vessel.”³ However, the power of the vagina dentata is not always controlled by the woman who holds it.

A fear of female genitalia is evident throughout history and culture: Shakespeare referenced female genitalia as a “deep Pit” or “darke and vicious place”.⁴ A folkloric manifestation of this anxiety regarding female genitalia can be seen throughout media and storytelling and continues into the twenty-first century.⁵ According to Blackledge, the vagina dentata is not the only mythological concept that attributes supernatural powers to female

genitalia.⁶ Stories and traditions that manifest the powers of the vagina to ward off evil or cast out enemies are plentiful and date back to ancient times. For example, fishermen's wives would expose their genitalia to the sea to calm the waters before their husbands left shore.⁷ Alluding to the vagina in horror films can invoke ideas of power, pleasure, fertility, birth, life, and sin. The vagina dentata, as seen in the film *Teeth*, is a monstrous and supernatural female manifestation of women's power that is directly connected to their bodies. In other variations of the man-eater trope, whether they be cannibals or vampires, the consumption of man or flesh is often connected to the woman's body and specifically her sexuality. In some cases, the female monster is using her power of seduction to attract her male prey.

Anxieties of "an emasculating, castrating fearsome toothed organ" is a common refrain in storytelling.⁸ The stories and theories of such phenomena occur all over the world, from India, South Africa, and Japan to the writings of Sigmund Freud, many of which are outlined in Blackledge's previously mentioned book. Arguably, the manifestation of this anxiety is the symbolic equivalent of the mythological figure of Medusa.⁹ Even in the twenty-first century, explicitly calling attention to the vagina, as in the movie *Teeth*, is a defiant and political gesture. Although the main character's name, Dawn, seems to imply a lightness, sunshine and pureness of the morning, once she discovers her power, which she can execute at will, she embraces it by enacting a ferocity and revenge on men that have wronged her, including her stepbrother who assaulted her as a child and failed to save her mother from death. Dawn takes over a new meaning--an awareness. The use of costume in *Teeth* is key to showing the transformation. For example, Dawn becomes less concerned with an appearance of modesty and more aware of the razor sharp tool she carries around within her as the movie progresses. Along with the blood-red

colored purity rings she wore, initially we saw her donning skin-covering clothing often layered as if one T-shirt is not modest enough; instead, she wore a T-shirt over a long sleeve T-shirt or a long flowy skirt over thick leggings.

The outfit Dawn wore to meet her crush, Tobey, at the swimming hole was a loud, bright T-shirt that ironically says, “WARNING: Sex changes everything,” paired with heavily ripped jeans. These clothes seem to be a tongue-in-cheek warning and a foreshadowing of the sexual assault that will occur. Dawn and Tobey began kissing. As things escalated, Dawn asked Tobey to stop, which he refuses and in the process causes her to hit her head and lose consciousness. Tobey then raped her, and while the assault occurred, Dawn castrated Tobey with her vagina without realizing what she was doing. She appeared in this same outfit after the assault, and the camera focused on the heavy tears and holes at her knees and thighs; it then panned up to her shirt, her slumped over body, and finally up to her face, where she wore a pained expression that suggested she was in a state of shock. Eventually, we realized that the color of the purity ring she wore had turned pitch black. *Teeth* clearly fits within the rape-revenge genre, and in fact, Dawn exacted revenge *during* the act of rape. There are a few instances of castration in the film, and in one somewhat darkly humorous case, after Dawn’s heavily tattooed and thick sideburned stepbrother was castrated, his pet rottweiler named Mother, consumed the castrated penis in an act defying the age-old adage that a dog is man’s best friend. Dawn’s white nightgown, which she wore throughout the scene, somehow came away immaculately clean from the act, perhaps because, as Jonathan Faiers argues in his book, *Dressing Dangerously: Dysfunctional Fashion in Film*, stains can serve as markers of guilt, and through the omission of splatter Dawn is removed

of any guilt and even justified in her revenge.¹⁰ This, again, challenges well-established tropes about women by giving agency where it doesn't usually exist.

***Jennifer's Body* (2009)**

Another example of the man-eater trope, *Jennifer's Body* (2009), written by Diablo Cody, follows teenager Jennifer, who, initially thought to be a virgin, was sacrificed by a boy band travelling through the town of Devil's Kettle in a satanic ritual in hopes of making themselves famous. Instead of killing her though, something goes wrong and she came back from the dead hungry for (men's) flesh. In today's films, actors often bring added significance and meaning given their political and social views or prior film roles. Marketing and media attention in promoting these films paints a picture of the cultural and social setting at the time of a movie's release, and is cast with a lens on the political environment. With the casting of Megan Fox as the lead in *Jennifer's Body*, for example, we can see how this might work with respect to a woman's career. Just as Marlon Brando was "an obvious choice" for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) due to "his effortless, irresistible, insouciant sexiness," Fox, too, is often portrayed in film specifically for her body and her sex appeal.¹¹ As the female lead two years previous in the box office hit, *Transformers* (2007), Fox is seen as a sex symbol. Directed by Michael Bay, a notorious filmmaker for action-packed, explosion-heavy, white-male dominated plots, and single-narrative female characters, Gabriella Paiella aptly explains in her article for *The Cut*, that women in these films are "disposable, objectified, and preternaturally tan."¹² The casting of Fox in a film such as *Jennifer's Body* is an attempt to subvert the narrow vision and narrative that has been given to her by (mostly male) filmmakers throughout her career. Just as costume design has

to consider the actor wearing the clothes, a role cannot be understood separate from the actor portraying it.¹³

Unfortunately, the marketing campaigns for *Jennifer's Body*, likely out of the hands of Diablo Cody, undermined the more feminist and nuanced film that it was supposed to be. As Emma Fraser points out in her article “Look of the week: the Horror of Dressing for High School in Jennifer’s Body,” “*Jennifer's Body* is a prime example of how a marketing campaign can effectively tank a project by dressing it up as something it is not.”¹⁴ Instead of translating the film’s more playful and radical interpretation of the flesh-eating femme fatale, the marketing campaign for the film instead exposed Fox’s cleavage and midsection without context or any nuance at all (see Figure 3). Despite this fact, both *Jennifer's Body* and *Teeth* have gained renewed interest in recent years likely because of evolving feminism and Me Too conversations. Famous singer-songwriter and activist, Halsey, sampled a line from *Jennifer's Body* in her recent album *Manic* (2020). The clip includes Needy telling Jennifer “you’re killing people” to which Jennifer responds, “No! I’m killing boys. Boys are just placeholders. They come and they go”¹⁵, a soundbite which more accurately takes on the intended anthem that underlies the film.

In considering costume design for the film, Jennifer was often dressed hyper-sexually with crop tops buttoned half way down, a heavily lipsticked mouth which she often bites on camera, exposed midriff, and low-rise jeans typical of the early 2000s. Jennifer’s best friend, Needy, on the other hand, was dressed modestly and was the opposite of Jennifer's exposed body: nerdy with beady glasses, messy untouched hair, heavy knitted sweaters, and mostly buttoned-up shirts. Jennifer and Needy parallel the common film noir element of Mary Magdalene and Madonna, and similarly resulted in the fatal ending of one; they even wear

matching friendship necklaces. This “doubling or mirroring of female characters” marking differences “along Madonna/Magdalen lines” or “ego/ego-ideal”¹⁶ can be seen throughout history in storytelling and within more recent popular culture examples like the characters Betty and Veronica from Archie comics and Kim Novak’s characters in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). In some cases, the destruction of one is necessary in order for the other to assume her identity.¹⁷

When Jennifer and Needy go to the local bar to catch the band’s performance, Jennifer was dressed in a low-cut, cleavage-revealing top, glossy lipstick, golden hoops, straightened hair, mini denim skirt, shockingly clean white puffer jacket, and red tights the color of menstrual blood. The tights, lacy and textured, gave the appearance of clotted blood running down Jennifer’s legs. This foreshadowed the kidnapping, violence, and initially presumed sexual assault that followed. The tights become ripped and any distinction between the blood now covering Jennifer and the actual material of her red tights ends up completely lost.

Jennifer’s Body ends with a prom scene, a seeming rite of passage for films about lost teenagers and their daunting lives. However, in this case, the trouble includes devil-worshipping and flesh-eating. Jennifer wore a floor-length white silk-like, spaghetti-strapped dress, much like the dress that Carrie wore to her prom in the 1976 eponymous film, except that Jennifer’s neckline came straight across her chest. The dress was paired with white gloves that reached almost to her armpits and was decorated with four black bands of lace horizontally right underneath her chest, across her knees, shins, and one final band brushing the floor. Normally, a delicate white dress like this alludes to innocence and chastity and possibly the marriage ceremony that accompanies it. In fact, the dress was less seductive than her usual clothing; the

neckline and black band appear to deemphasize her chest. However, we know from the very fact that the sacrifice was not successful, that she was not a virgin since a virgin was essential for the completion of the ritual. Perhaps these black bands of lace emphasized the absence of celibacy that pure white would otherwise imply. Additionally, the white dress and gloves clearly showed the blood that will eventually soak it.

In contrast, Needy wore a shockingly pink, 80s-esque, ruched and layered overwhelming monstrosity of a dress, a dress that will not show, as clearly, any blood stains after battling Jennifer. The best comparison for this dress is to understand it as the rather ugly step-sister to the 1951 Balenciaga Evening Dress recently featured at the MET's Costume Institute's "Camp: Notes on Fashion" exhibition.¹⁸ Balenciaga's black sleeveless dress with a sweetheart neckline and hourglass silhouette culminates at the bottom with an open chasm of interior silk pink ruffles as if the dress has been freshly cut open to reveal the fleshy layers within. The tiers of folds beneath and within the plain black exterior of the dress seem to reveal that which should not be seen. The hemline is cut much higher in the front than the back and is shaped from the front as if a very large open mouth. The layers of folds allude to rows of teeth, yet the color hints at the sexual organs that lay behind this shocking reveal. In a review of the Camp exhibit, Laura Jacobs, in fact, describes the "evanescence" of Camp like "the Cheshire Cat's grin."¹⁹ The Balenciaga dress fits this description well; it has a peculiar sneer revealing something almost sinister beneath the dress. This imagery mirrors Mary Russo's reference to Nietzsche's discussion of mythological figure Baubô in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* -- "the obscene crone impudently displaying her genitals like an ironic smile."²⁰ Ideas of the grotesque

and its unquestionable connection to the female sex directly relate to fashion history, horror storytelling and the mythology of monsters we observe throughout time.²¹

Needy's dress, which sat awkwardly on her teenage body, was hot pink with puffy sleeves and a heavily textured, almost ribbed torso. Despite the modesty of her outfit, her revealed legs and voluminous ruffles, like the Balenciaga dress, implied a sneak peek; the silk-looking sash that sits low across her hips, as if to almost cover her crotch, seems to conveniently protect her from that initial sexual suggestion and is kept in place with a large rose-shaped flower on her right hip. Though Needy's dress does not suggest anything sinister, it does allude to a peculiarity exemplified by the bizarre and out-of-date 80's puffiness and heavily teased hair. Needy looks out of place, as if she has been transplanted from a different era and even a different movie. The dress doesn't match her aesthetic, at all. It is an excellent example of Faiers' dysfunctional dress; a moment of "surplus" that appears "out of place" as "negative cinematic wardrobe."²² Does this seemingly anachronistic dress betray her otherwise unexpected and oncoming transition from innocent bespectacled and loyal best friend to the murderous, psych-ward patient she later becomes, evolving her personality with a new confidence unrecognizable from her previous persona? I suspect that the costume designer, Katia Stano, intentionally chose this curious ensemble to convey a sense of the uncanny that resides in the character. Perhaps it is an ode to the grotesque, which, as outlined previously, is so often associated with the feminine, and is a high fashion aesthetic that gained particular traction in the 1980s.²³

Although *Jennifer's Body* does not explicitly fit under the significant genre of rape-revenge, an abuse and violation of Jennifer's body clearly takes place, and is arguably evident in the film's title. The title was inspired by Courtney Love's band, Hole's, 1994 song by the same

name about a kidnapping of a woman.²⁴ This attempted murder of Jennifer echoes sexual assault to the point where I suspect the writer and director were explicitly drawing this connection. Additionally, the use of the phallic knife to sacrifice Jennifer drives this connection even further. The film, too, borrows tools from film noir including the use of Needy's voiceover in the opening and closing scenes and the juxtaposition of Needy and Jennifer's characters and appearance in the film, Jennifer being the femme fatale/maneater and Needy being the innocent, "good" girl opposite. In the end, Needy destroyed Jennifer, but in the process, was bitten by her, gaining her demonic powers and absorbing Jennifer's character and physicality into her own. This process was mirrored by Needy's changing appearance; the shedding of her glasses, the use of makeup and hairspray, and a more confident demeanor.

In another film about cannibalism, *We Are What We Are* (2013), directed by Jim Mickle, the title seems to wittingly play off of the phrase "you are what you eat". An NPR review of the film explained how the film explores a twisted version of "putting food on the table."²⁵ In one scene, the Parker sisters prepared to butcher the woman held hostage in their basement for meat, marking her dead naked body with red lipstick which would later be separated into cuts of meat. As Rosie Mccaffrey wrote in her article for *Seventh Row*, about this film and another film about cannibalism, *Raw* (2016),: "women are bodies before they are people. They are murdered, and they sacrifice their desires, identities, and ambitions to meet the demands of society. Their bodies are sexualised, objectified, commodified, an ideological butchery — always for consumption, in one way or another".²⁶ She drew parallels to the "Headless Women of Hollywood" Tumblr page, which showcased all the different ways Hollywood promoted films by only showing parts of women's bodies, i.e. a movie poster with just a woman's chest, a set of legs, etc.²⁷

In *Jennifer's Body*, *Raw*, and *We Are What We Are*, bloodstains are an important tool in the costume design process. For example, predictably, Jennifer's dress became covered in blood in the climax of the film. To further Faiers' earlier analysis, though he does not focus on horror films in his text, bloodstains in any genre have an

...intrinsically show-stopping spectacular nature that misdirects the fictional viewer and cinema audience alike unto a unified condemnation of the bearer of the stain...Blood seen on a dress, the impact heightened by the contrast between red/dark and white/light ground the dresses, allows no room for doubt or any other possible explanation for the stain on the part of the spectator.²⁸

The red of the blood is the equivalent of the scarlet letter that marks the wearer guilty.²⁹

Ultimately, Jennifer's fate was controlled by the men that sacrificed her. The indication of guilt by the blood soaking her prom dress was indeed by her hands, but perhaps not of her own will. Whereas Dawn comes away spotless after castrating her brother, Jennifer does not come away unsoiled. Instead, the silk black bands across Jennifer's legs and the choker around her neck hint at the lack of freedom her circumstance presents; the costume design complicates any guilt that stains would otherwise imply. It is also worth mentioning the natural connection to be made between blood-soaked dresses (or other women's clothing) and menstrual blood, especially for female characters that have or are hitting puberty, i.e. the pig blood-soaked prom dress in *Carrie*.³⁰ In fact, in one hazing ritual in *Raw* that mirrors this scene from *Carrie*. A curtain of blood was dropped on a group of students, Justine then wore that blood-soaked coat throughout most of the film. Similarly, in describing the film *Ginger Snaps* (2000) about a girl turned werewolf, Bolin wrote, "we see all that is terrifying about puberty made gruesomely manifest....And the cycle of menstruation aligns felicitously with the werewolf myth."³¹ Bolin drew parallels across popular culture and media of the "calamity that sexual maturity can pose"

with other works such as Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999). This "feminine descent into insanity, into wildness, into what is morbid, dark, odd, and scary" is a common theme in the movies highlighted in this paper.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (2014)

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (2014) is a black and white film about a young female Iranian vampire, written and directed by English-born Iranian-American Ana Lily Amirpour. The film followed Arash, a young Iranian who took care of his addict father, and also an unnamed young, skateboarding, music-loving vampire (The Girl). The film shows the story of how they meet and how their lives are intertwined with a cruel local pimp and drug dealer, Saeed. Arash had an uncanny resemblance to James Dean, complete with sunglasses, cigarette, crisp white tee (sleeves slightly rolled) over faded blue jeans, and wavy, smooth dark-brown hair that lightly bounced as he walked. The Girl wore a short-sleeved, wide-necked striped shirt beneath a black chador, which hides her dark bobbed hair, dark eyeliner and lipstick.

As the antagonist to our anti-hero, The Girl, Saeed wore a tracksuit, jacket unzipped exposing many tattoos on his chest, neck and face, including a broken heart tattoo on the back of his neck and "SEX" written across his throat, a rather easy target for The Girl's eventual attack. His gold tooth matched his gold chains, and his apartment was covered in mounted busts of deer, a large fish tank against the wall which he bangs on aggressively as he enters the room, and various tiger print home decor. These decorations imply a predator mentality, which Saeed desperately held onto until his facade was shattered by The Girl. The tiger head embroidered on the back of his jacket and the matching tattoo on his stomach further the facade that he is the

hunter, but we soon find out that he is actually the prey. As he attempted to seduce The Girl, she revealed her fangs. At first he was intrigued and played along with a phallic display as he let her put his finger in her mouth. When she bit it off, the allusion to castration is clear. The metaphor is proven further when she forces the bloody finger into his mouth.

After skateboarding down the dark and empty streets of the Iranian town of Bad City, chador billowing behind her like a superhero cape, The Girl ran into Arash, dressed as Dracula, trying to find his way home from a costume party, his vampire cape mirroring her floor length chador. In reviews of the film, her veil is often described as floating or ghost-like³² and the film is sometimes defined as a sort of “spaghetti western.”³³ In a Roger Ebert review of the film, Sheila O'Malley described the timeless appeal of vampire tales “where fear meets desire.”³⁴ She described the scenes of The Girl riding down the streets at night alone on her skateboard, saying that this image “does the job with more poetic satisfaction and truth than any explicit monologue about the repression of women could ever do,” precisely challenging the implications of the film title’s suggestion.³⁵

Despite the black and white nature of the film, which often blurs the “liquid black”³⁶ of her cape with the dark of night, The Girl’s striped shirt stands out and draws your attention. It is stark in its clarity. In her review, “Classic Horror and Modern Femme Fatale in ‘A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night,’” Trin Moody argued that the stripes of The Girl’s shirt “represent the equilibrium that The Girl presents to Bad City through her killings. She is equal parts good and bad, black and white, killing off the disease of the town while also being a disease of sorts herself. She is “bad” as she admits halfway through the film. She is Bad City.”³⁷ Similar to the man-eater tropes discussed, the monster in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the vampire,

subverts historical representations of the femme fatale and black and white tales of woman as evil. In fact, the film is partially a love story. The Girl saved Arash from Saeed and his family problems, and they drove out of Bad City together in his Ford Thunderbird.

Further Analysis

This idea of girl-becoming-woman seems to be a common theme in female monster movies, invoking the fear of puberty, the fear of woman's sexuality, etc. This fear can be associated with the fear of the (grotesque) woman as stepping "out of bounds" and forgetting her place. Russo shows a similar societal "uncanny...resemblance" between women and the grotesque³⁸ beginning with highlighting the etymology of grotesque and its associations with the "cavernous anatomical female body".³⁹ Russo explains the grotesque in relation to horror as "related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state"; she describes the uncanny grotesque as "monstrous, deformed [and] excessive".⁴⁰ She explains how the grotesque is fused with animals and objects⁴¹ and "emerges as a deviation from the norm", specifically the female body as it differs from the male's normal body.⁴² Because of this, the female body is always "in error" and can further be "marked by specificities of age, body shape, class, ethnicity, and sexuality".⁴³ Russo goes on to describe the "female hysteric" in this same realm as "ungrounded and out of bounds".⁴⁴ Russo draws connections to women and acts of spectacle, exposure, or stepping out of bounds with the carnival grotesque.⁴⁵ Granata also highlights the important understanding of the grotesque as outside the norm, and specifically as 'the other' which she mentions is an increasingly utilized theme in film.⁴⁶ In her analysis of turn of the century fashion and performance art, she traces the grotesque through high fashion and popular culture, including a deeper look into cultural icons such as Lady Gaga (more on this

later).⁴⁷ Kerry Mallan, in her article “Witches, bitches and femmes fatales: viewing the female grotesque in children’s film”, shows that “By transgressing the norms of femininity, the female grotesque refuses the limits imposed on her body and embraces the ambivalent possibilities such transgressions offer.”⁴⁸ Common historical representations of the grotesque female include Medusa, as previously mentioned, and the vampire woman (another example of the man-eater)⁴⁹, dangerous women that seek out and kill men and are often associated with the femme fatale. Also known as the seductress, the femme fatale lures men with her body and sexuality, typically coupled with a costume that is engineered to emphasize those elements explicitly.

In an analysis of another monstrous woman film, *The Witch* (2015, dir. Robert Eggers), Ari Mattes wrote, “Horror narratives always concern the transgression or eradication of boundaries between inside and outside – inside the body, outside the body, inside the community, outside the community.”⁵⁰ Women who crossed the line need to be “controlled and tamed.”⁵¹ For the women in these films, becoming the monster and embracing the grotesque is a clear violation and also can be seen as an explicit attempt to gain back control and achieve agency.

When considering Anne Connor’s 2013 article, “Taking the Bite out of the Vagina Dentata: Latin American Women Authors’ Fantastic Transformation of the Feline Fatale,” a discussion of the common female character’s plight, eventual transformation, and chosen isolation, there is a striking resemblance to the story of Thomasin in *The Witch*, wherein a young woman unable to control the strict religious and puritanical world around her eventually witnesses (and contributes) to the death of her entire family; she leaves society to seek isolation in the woods by signing the book of the devil. Connor argued that “the restoration of normality is

impossible”⁵² because of the “hegemonic status quo.”⁵³ And so, the only option for these women is to transform and pursue a life of isolation outside of the system-- this could apply to all the monstrous women featured in this paper. Though Thomasin appeared distressed by the evil that befell her family, she eventually embraced her pact with the devil. Using Anne Koenen, Connor discussed metamorphosis as empowerment: “[I]n dramatic contrast to the motif’s use in men’s literature where [metamorphosis] signifies extreme alienation and a loss of control, change is interpreted as an access to power that in turn is seen as a source of identity.”⁵⁴ These kinds of transformations for women in film can either be a representation of total lack of control or a manifestation of power. Becoming the monster or animal can actually be symbolic of rejecting the “passive and nurturing” expectations of women.⁵⁵ This embracing of the monster form is true for most of the movies explored in this paper. In *The Witch*, Thomasin’s final shedding of her former life symbolizes her entering a new unholy world without any remnants of the world she’s leaving behind: completely nude, having discarded her clothing and her religion, she is now ready for a new kind of baptism. The ridding of the clothing of her old world and old self are the final gesture symbolic of regaining her own control and agency.

Final Thoughts

Whether through the use of red (either literal bloodstains or a symbolic wearing of red), rips and tears in fabric, and flesh-like ruffles and folds of a dress, costume design is an extremely effective and important tool for making women into monsters in horror films. Excess and exaggeration are essential elements in costuming horror and particularly useful for portraying the

female as grotesque. White in costume, often as a contrast to red, showcases innocence and in order to highlight the blood that soils it (or curiously doesn't).

A reclamation of narratives in these films allows room for agency in otherwise traditionally closed off spaces where men historically dictated who was good and who was evil. Instead, these women complicate those simplistic views and allow for reinterpretation. These changes are also likely occurring alongside changes in who is driving the industry. As more conversations occur about the need for diversity across all spaces and at every level in Hollywood, there does seem to be some headway. In a January article from this year, "Record number of 2020 films were directed by women, study finds", *Entertainment Weekly* suggests these changes might be taking place according to San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.⁵⁶ With changes in Hollywood underway, women and minority groups, either in front of or behind the camera, will undoubtedly reappropriate and reclaim common film tropes and stereotypes in an attempt to rewrite and retell previously incomplete narratives. It would be interesting to take a closer look at these same themes in a few years' time while considering if there has been a shift between films pre-Me Too and now, given that the movement really picked up momentum in 2017. With the recent election of the first female and person of color, Kamala Harris, as Vice President of the United States and rises in alt-right and xenophobic movements around the world, can we expect to see a shift in the popular culture and the larger zeitgeist of representation of characters that aren't cis white men? Just as the trope of the man eater echoes sentiments of a post-Access Hollywood tape environment, "this pussy bites back",⁵⁷ such stories present a powerful visual message of agency and change that show how integral horror films, fashion, and monsters both literal and

metaphorical, can be to grasping the socio-political climate.

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