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'Gothics and Grand Guignols: Violence and the gendered Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror'

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Gothics and Grand Guignols: Violence and the gendered Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror

Abstract

This paper discusses a feminine aesthetic of cinematic horror informed by ethnographic study of the female horror film audience. In particular, this analysis of audience responses focuses on genre styles or cycles, as well as key horror films, that are privileged by female viewers. This aesthetic includes uncanny and atmospheric images of horror and monstrosity, and offers a range of emotional affects around these images that primarily involve the shiver sensation, but can also include revulsion and disgust. These styles draw on a wide range of literary, theatrical and art traditions which have often been recognised as having female audiences, these include the Gothic, the melodrama, fairy tales, film noir, and Grand Guignol theatre. This aesthetic is not, however, wholly uncanny or suggestive in its aesthetic mode, and blood, gore and violence, all of which the female audience responds positively to, is central.

Key words: cinematic horror, aesthetics, emotional affect, female audience, responses

There is nothing in the findings of my previous research on the female horror film audience^[1] to suggest that women love horror any less than male viewers, but there are indications that patterns of female fans' tastes and preferences may be very different in some respects (though not all) to those of their male counterparts^[2]. In this paper I address one aspect in particular – that is, the role that horror film aesthetics play in the taste for horror, and to that end question to what extent (if any) female fans exhibit different responses to different kinds of cinematic horror^[3]. Popular perceptions of the horror fan – often assumed to be male – are frequently based around a strong interest in graphic horror and a deep knowledge of the filmmaking practices, especially the make-up and special effects, that create that horror. With so much variety within the genre, however, horror cinema offers audiences a particularly wide range of modes and aesthetics – the supernatural horror film and the gore film, for example, are very different in both form and function. Equally, we might then expect patterns of taste and preference to be as heterogeneous as the genre itself. In looking at the horror film audience (which is not nearly as homogenous as some commentators or even whole sectors of the media industries assume), we might therefore expect to find audience segments identified by particular tastes as much as by demographics.^[4] Certainly, there is already recognition of this in the literature. Noel Carroll, for example, recognises two types of viewer – the specialist viewers (fans) who seek out graphic examples of horror, and average viewers (his term for more casual viewers) who might find their curiosity satisfied by less-explicit horrors found in other genres such as fantasy (191-192). But even this division of tastes seems overly reductive, and such groupings may not be nearly as clear-cut as Carroll's argument suggests. A more nuanced account of the aesthetics of horror that engages with audience responses might better serve to underpin debates surrounding the horror film and its fans and followers.

To this end, the main focus of this paper is an exploration of the aesthetic and textual features of horror around which the taste, preferences and responses of the female audience are focussed. The key question here is why these women like these kinds of horror films or these traits of cinematic horror. Referring to a feminine aesthetic of horror is a reflection of a specific interest in the female horror film audience, and is not intended to discount the fact that at least some of the features of cinematic horror discussed in this account may be appreciated equally by certain groups of male horror fans or followers. The term 'feminine' is used not only because I seek to explore the question of why

the majority of female fans might prefer some modes or forms of horror over others, but also to indicate an oppositional aesthetic to that assumed as being of interest to a supposed male fandom (graphic horror and explicit effects as epitomised by the gore film), and there is no reason to suppose that all male fans dislike the suggestive modes of horror. Furthermore, use of this term also avoids focussing on any artificial distinctions between supernatural and gore films (no genre is either pure or static, and the blurring of forms occurs just as much within subgenres as it does between genres as a whole).

The discussion that follows emerges out of an empirical study of the female horror film audience. This study – to which 140 female horror fans ranging in age from their late teens to their fifties, though predominantly white and well educated, contributed via questionnaire, additional written material (letters, electronic mail messages) and focus group discussion – raises a number of contradictions, not least of which are the paradoxical responses to violent and graphic examples of the genre. The results of the original study have been reported elsewhere (Cherry), but, in summary, a model of feminine responses to horror opened up a number of key areas of genre and audience. The area of most significance here is the finding that suggested that female viewers broadly preferred Gothic, supernatural, psychological and other suggestive forms of the genre over splatterpunk, gore films and explicit forms. Most detailed analysis of the data, however, revealed that these preferences were not as straightforward as this might suggest. This paper engages with the complexities of these viewers' tastes, responses, and choices of viewing within the genre.

Since horror draws on a wide range of myth, folklore, literary, theatrical and art traditions, it is only to be expected that the horror genre has a lot to offer female viewers beyond the slasher and the gore film which in recent decades have been the dominant forms of the genre.^[5] Modes of horror with a female tradition include the Gothic novel (and its theatrical adaptations), various forms of melodrama, and Grand Guignol theatre – all of which horror cinema has drawn on at various times. Many recent transformations and hybridisations within the various cinematic forms of horror (including, for example, SF-horror hybrids, vampire films in which the vampire is cast as protagonist and/or sympathetic hero figure, and J-horror or other Asian horror cycles, all of which the female viewers themselves include in their viewing preferences) draw on these feminine traditions in horror, and accordingly appeal to female viewers^[6]. Specific elements include more and stronger representations of femininity, principally including developments in the characters of female hero and femme fatale/monstrous feminine, strong erotic elements or attractive hero-monsters, and rich, atmospheric or fantastical mise-en-scene and cinematography. In respect of the latter, there may be a Gothic or historical setting, but there may also be references to Gothic tropes and other forms of feminine horror in other non-historical subgenres such as the video sequences in *Ringu* or the 'old dark house in space' of *Alien*. Such feminine aesthetics are clearly a significant strain of horror cinema, reflecting the fragmentation of identity and gender of the Gothic, the aggressive and frequently sexually transgressive behaviours of the monstrous feminine and the morbid fascination with sympathetic or sensual monstrosity. Again, this can be taken to suggest a broad split between the gore/slasher styles and the supernatural/Gothic modes.

Indeed, as suggested by the discussion of the film types preferred (shown in Table 1), the female fans state that they tend to prefer films which create particular modes of emotional affect (the shiver sensation) associated with the uncanny, over others (such as revulsion) experienced when viewing graphic horror films (which as **Table 1** shows, they are more likely to state a dislike for). Furthermore, many participants in the study indicate that the gore and violence inherent in many examples of the genre is a barrier to their enjoyment of horror films. Dislike was often expressed for films that contain what they think of as excessive or gratuitous displays of violence, gore, or other effects used to evoke revulsion in the audience. The respondents' statements therefore indicate female viewers might be expected to prefer a mode of telling that left something to the imagination, as opposed to the mode of showing that Brophy (2) posits as an essential feature of the post-modern horror film.

Table 1: Horror film preferences (ranked by like)

Percent (frequency)

Figures do not include those who have not seen any examples of the film type

	like all/most	not fussed	dislike all/most
vampire	92.4 (97)	6.7 (7)	1.0 (1)
supernatural/occult	85.7 (90)	11.4 (12)	2.9 (3)
psychological horror/thriller	81.0 (85)	16.2 (17)	2.9 (3)
SF-horror	74.0 (77)	20.2 (21)	5.8 (6)
witchcraft	68.3 (71)	24.0 (25)	7.7 (8)
horror-comedy	59.4 (63)	18.9 (20)	21.7 (23)
other monster (eg werewolf, mummy, Frankenstein)	55.8 (58)	30.8 (32)	13.5 (14)
zombie	54.4 (56)	27.2 (28)	18.4 (19)
serial killer	53.3 (56)	21.9 (23)	24.8 (26)
gore/body horror	44.9 (35)	34.6 (27)	20.5 (16)
slasher	25.0 (25)	21.0 (21)	54.0 (54)

Brophy's taxonomy includes realistic scenes of horror, destruction of the body and/or the family, and a perverse sense of humour as key characteristics of the contemporary horror film. As this suggests, explicit, detailed and often long drawn out scenes of graphic gore and violence have been an increasingly predominant element of horror over recent decades. Violence is a significant aesthetic in some of the most successful examples of recent horror cinema: the slasher film and serial killer films in general, zombie, body horror and splatter films, and various 'video nasties' including the recent cycle of explicit 'torture porn'. Moments of gore and violence are also prevalent in genre hybrids and other related genres such as science fiction. If female viewers do in fact reject these types of material and prefer modes of telling which suggest rather than dwell on the gore and violence, is there a range of horror cinema or films containing cinematic horror preferred by female viewers which are outside of, alongside or in opposition to core (masculine) forms of the genre? Are there in fact distinct masculine and feminine forms of horror – and if so do they exhibit distinctive aesthetics?

So what aesthetic do the female fans privilege? The styles or subgenres of horror that the female viewers in the initial study have stated a particular liking or disliking for is given in Table 1. The most liked types of horror are vampire, supernatural or occult, and psychological, while the most disliked are slashers, gore or body horror, and serial killers. From these preferences, it might be concluded that Gothic romances, ghost stories and psychological horrors are based on the uncanny, suggestive or less explicit modes which form the core of the feminine aesthetic.

The specific elements named in the qualitative data as being important in the types of films that these viewers prefer include narratives centred on sympathetic monsters and strong characters (especially if female) with a good dose of sex (implied or explicit) thrown in. Historical settings, sumptuous or elaborate costumes and mise en scene generally, atmospheric lighting and cinematography, together with narratives that dwell on the emotions of characters and hidden mysteries are also important. There is a general trend towards liking high levels of suspense, less enjoyment of graphic effects, and a relative ambivalence towards special effects in general; though they do like to see the monster, they also want something left to their imaginations (with several stating that this allows them to create **more** intense horrors in their own minds and to their own liking).

Many of these elements are present in one of the female viewers' most frequently listed favourite horror films, *Interview with the Vampire*. Figure 1 illustrates the Gothic aesthetic of this film: the mise-en-scene is based on rich deep colours, candlelight, lush sets and costumes, together with a sense of elegant decay in images of the cemetery, the crypt and the coffin, all of which appeal to those viewers with a dark or goth sensibility. It is also obvious from these images of beautiful, decadent, Byronic male vampires that this film fits neatly into fulfilling the pleasures of viewing queer sexuality and aberrant romance, as well as providing images of glamorous Georgian and Victorian female costumes and hairstyles to which some of the female fans aspire.^[7]

Figure 1: The Gothic aesthetic of Interview with the Vampire



Can it be said, then, that there is a clear split between masculine and feminine forms (or aesthetics) of horror? Certainly, many horror critics have split the genre – into pre- and post-*Psycho* (Wells 74-77), or more specifically with *Psycho* marking the transition of horror from external to internal origins (Wood^[8]), co-existentialist/integrationist (Carroll 191-192: as discussed above this division suggests the audience itself is split along these lines with average and specialised viewers), uncanny/horrific (Prayer 6-7: his proposed split is between the affective responses of awe and imaginative fear as against fear and loathing), uncanny/graphic (Freeland 215-272), as well as Brophy's distinction between modes of telling and showing. In some respects, the majority of these divisions fall into a clear set of binary oppositions as set out in **Table 2**. In some respects, this duality does seem to be reflected in the female viewers' stated likes and dislikes and preferences for suggestive modes. However, further analysis of the findings contradicts this straightforward split, and suggest that this apparent masculine/feminine binary should be called into question. Take, for example, the films that Freeland draws on (215-272). As she herself acknowledges, graphic violence and gore (albeit sometimes in different forms or not quite so foregrounded) can be as integral a part of the uncanny (*Eraserhead's* gruesome attacks on bodily integrity, the visions of blood and corpses in *The Shining*) as horripilation (being given the goose bumps) and atmosphere can be in the graphic forms (*Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* room of bones and *Hellraiser's* ethereal beautiful Cenobytes and Lament Configuration). And as Matt Hills argues (141) the “suggestive” and “creepy” versus the “gross” and “gore-splattered” aesthetics are, in any case, ideologically loaded and often contested. Closer analysis of the findings of the audience study further fractures the apparent binary – particularly since the female viewers themselves are in fact, despite their stated preferences for one form over the other, inveterate boundary crossers.

Table 2: Modes of cinematic horror

	SUGGESTIVE	EXPLICIT
	Mode of telling	Mode of showing
	Uncanny	Graphic
	Uncanny	Horrific
	Existentialist	Integrationist
Mise en scene:	Atmosphere	Effects
Mode of affect:	Shiver sensation	Revulsion
	The creeps	Gross-out
Subgenres:	Supernatural	Gore
	Gothic	Splatterpunk
		Body horror
Gender:	Passive	Active
	Feminine	Masculine

The implications of the division between the suggestive (feminine) and explicit (masculine) aesthetics of horror – that female viewers reject all explicit horror films – is not borne out in the films which the participants in the study claim as their favourites. The disparity between the styles of horror the female viewers state a preference for and the films they actually choose as favourites is one of the major contradictions to have emerged from this study of the female audience, and furthermore, analysis of the films that these viewers prefer or hold up as ideal examples of the type of horror they like suggests that the feminine aesthetic embraces (and thus perhaps operates in conjunction with) the masculine aesthetic (as opposed to being an alternative form standing in opposition to it). This contradiction in part reflects selective reading strategies giving precedence to specific aesthetic and textual features. There are clearly examples of an aesthetic which appeals to female viewers at work in horror cinema, but this aesthetic does not fall unproblematically into the category of the uncanny, and it cannot be linked solely with certain subgenres or styles of horror (although they may in some cases be a predominant aesthetic in many films in these categories). The detailed analysis of the female viewers' responses to horror (and to violence and gore in particular) which follows is employed to demonstrate how this might work.

As stated above, the preferred styles and subgenres of the female viewers are vampire films, the supernatural and psychological forms, suggesting that the Gothic, suggestive and atmospheric modes encapsulate a favoured aesthetic. As might then be expected, the most frequently disliked modes are gore films, body horror, slashers and serial killers, suggesting a rejection of a graphic and/or violent aesthetic. However, when we compare these stated preferences alongside the female viewers' favourite films – shown in **Table 3** – they select graphic and explicit films (or films which contain higher levels of gore and violence) rather more often than they do suggestive and atmospheric examples of the genre low in gore and violence. At least 12 out of the 20 most frequently cited films might be considered to contain continuously high levels of predominantly graphic aesthetics throughout; on the other hand, only *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *The Hunger* and *The Haunting* can be considered to be predominantly suggestive throughout. In particular, *Hellraiser* (the most frequently named film by these viewers) has been widely considered as a prime example of splatterpunk, the *Evil Dead* trilogy are considered the epitome of gore (the original was Mary Whitehouse and the *Daily Mail's* no 1 video nasty), *The Thing* is almost relentless body horror, *The Exorcist* is an infamously graphic example of the mainstream occult film. Overall, the majority of the most popular choices contradict the overt statements the majority of the fans make about preferred subgenres of horror and, more tellingly, the preferred modes of emotional affect. Such films foreground sequences of blood, gore and violence, all of which the female audience respond positively to despite their overt statements to the contrary.

Table 3: 20 most frequently listed favourite horror films

	Predominant mode
<i>Hellraiser</i> (Clive Barker, 1987)	Graphic
<i>Alien</i> (Ridley Scott, 1979)	Graphic
<i>Interview With the Vampire</i> (Neil Jordan, 1994)	Suggestive
<i>The Lost Boys</i> (Joel Schumacher, 1987)	Graphic
<i>Aliens</i> (James Cameron, 1986)	Graphic
<i>Bram Stoker's Dracula</i> (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992)	Suggestive
<i>The Evil Dead</i> (Sam Raimi, 1982)	Graphic
<i>The Hunger</i> (Tony Scott, 1983)	Suggestive
<i>The Thing</i> (John Carpenter, 1982)	Graphic
<i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (George A. Romero, 1968)	Graphic
<i>The Exorcist</i> (William Friedkin, 1973)	Graphic
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> (Jonathan Demme, 1991)	Graphic
<i>Nightbreed</i> (Clive Barker, 1990)	Graphic
<i>The Haunting</i> (Robert Wise, 1963)	Suggestive
<i>Hellbound: Hellraiser 2</i> (Tony Randel, 1988)	Graphic
<i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> (Wes Craven, 1985)	Graphic
<i>Psycho</i> (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)	Graphic
<i>An American Werewolf in London</i> (John Landis, 1981)	Graphic
<i>Army of Darkness</i> (Sam Raimi, 1993)	Graphic
<i>Evil Dead 2</i> (Sam Raimi, 1987)	Graphic

With respect to “new brutalism” in the cinema, Annette Hill observes that the response of her female viewers to films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Bad Lieutenant* run counter to traditional perceptions of women’s cultural tastes, and women as moviegoers. A similar phenomenon also seems to be occurring in the female horror film audience and I want to suggest that in terms of a gendered aesthetic, the viewers might express broader preferences along traditional perceptions of gendered taste, but their actual preferences and the types of cinematic horror they enjoy are evidence of more complex responses and reading strategies.

Of course, some female viewers do like gore and violence for its own sake. Others, however, tend to make more negotiated readings. What seems to be happening (as evidenced by the female viewers’ own explanations of this) is either that elements of any one film that fall into the preferred modes are being given precedence over less well-liked or disliked aspects, or that the gore and violence is not disliked per se, but is accepted or enjoyed if it is relevant and integral to the narrative. In the first instance, the presence of strong female characters, aberrant romance or sexuality, appealing monsters and other privileged elements make up for or elide the high levels of gore and violence. In the second case, it is only what is deemed to be gratuitous gore and violence or special effects sequences (that is, those which are seen as merely showcasing the filmmakers or technicians work or are included purely for shock value) which are rejected; where there is narrative depth or complexity in which the violence and gore are integral elements, it is unproblematic (or at least less problematical). In both cases, where there are interesting characters and relationships, exploration of emotional and/or erotic elements, and deep moral or ideological themes, gore and violence are accepted. In certain cases, they are also accepted when they are unrealistic, obviously over-the-top or to comic effect, though it should be noted that responses to realistic representations of violence, especially violence towards women, are split with some female viewers rejecting these for what amount to feminist reasons whilst others seem to find cathartic value in them. The overriding question in all this is whether the female viewers are self-censoring to a large extent when they do watch films with a gorier or more explicit aesthetic or whether they do in fact ‘enjoy’ (respond positively to) the violence and gore when they make up an integral part of a wider set of aesthetics (as opposed to the whole, or being showcased as ‘gore for gore’s sake’). It would be blinkered to suggest that there is any straightforward answer here, as the following analysis indicates.

One conclusion which can be drawn from this is that what women are stating as preferences and what they are actually responding to (and I will explore some of their specific responses in a moment) are contradictory because of the perceived masculine nature of the genre and discourses surrounding hegemonic and idealised models of femininity. Women’s responses to particular instances of violence and gore are a key issue here – the importance of these, their range, the contradictions and questions this poses are important for a feminist-informed critical approach to horror of which aesthetics can form one part.

I therefore want to focus on the way violence and gore intersects with the desired suggestive or uncanny aesthetic. In *Interview with the Vampire*, for example, the Gothic aesthetic is punctuated by moments of visceral horror (see **Figure 2**). The vampire film, despite being an overtly feminine style of horror in many ways, can be graphic and gory. Blood is an essential element, of course, and whilst there are many subtle vampire films (*Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, *The Hunger*) there are as many others that are far more graphic and violent in tone (*Near Dark*, *Blade*^[9]). The images from *Interview with the Vampire* shown in **Figure 2** depict the copious flow of blood from the breast (as opposed to a ‘tasteful’ thin trickle of blood on the neck), the cadaverous LeStat in his emaciated form, a bloodthirsty Louis feasting on birds, and the slicing in two of one of the vampires in Paris. These demonstrate that more explicit elements can be integral to the Gothic in the post-modern horror genre, but more importantly form part of an aesthetic tradition that appeals to female viewers. What we may be seeing here for example is the reworking of uncanny subcategories of horror to incorporate the gore and violence (the mode of showing) of the post-modern horror film. Unintentionally perhaps, this allows the female viewers to enjoy the graphic elements alongside the otherwise more comfortable (from a traditional perspective of women’s cultural tastes) uncanny aesthetics.

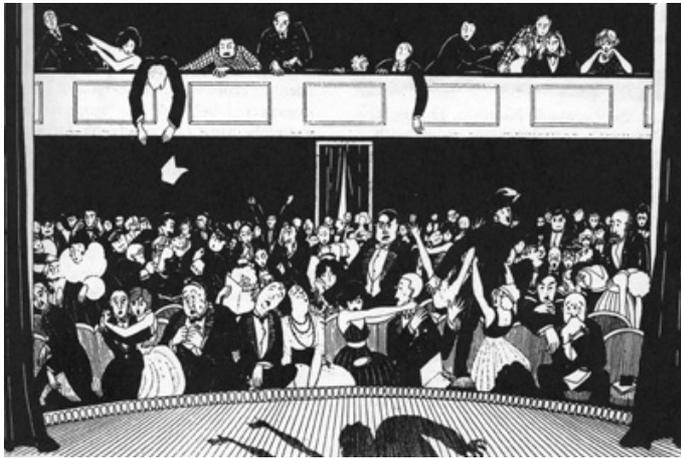
Figure 2: The visceral aesthetic of Interview with the Vampire



This is not a new phenomenon by any means; the mixing of comedy, melodrama, horror and violence was the defining feature of the Grand Guignol theatre programme. And it is telling that female patrons were prominent in the audiences at the Grand Guignol theatre. In fact, it was very popular with women (though this is not to say the Grand Guignol was an exclusively female entertainment any more than the post-modern horror film is an exclusively male form). Lester states that “its visceral powers seem to have been particularly attractive to society women, who flocked to each performance in great number.”^[10] Moreover, there are suggestions that the Grand Guignol was a dating choice for couples (much as Zillman and Weaver suggest the slasher film has been in more recent times): Gordon records that “Between sketches, the cobble-stoned alley outside the theatre was frequented by hyperventilating couples and vomiting individuals.” (162-163). Lester also states that “on average two members of the public fainted every night. Interestingly, it was mainly male playgoers who succumbed, probably because, unlike their female escorts, the men refrained from covering their eyes during the most horrifying moments.” However, the reason given here for it being mostly males who fainted – because they looked when women did not, may disguise the fact that looking away – if it is practiced by females at all – is a culturally and socially expected response (again see Zillman and Weaver). This may well also be a culturally-determined assumption about gender – **Figure 3a** shows a cartoon of the Grand Guignol audience which shows women looking at the stage regardless of whatever else they are doing. Clearly, women do enjoy being shocked and scared, do have a stomach for blood and for gore, and do embrace the horrific. *Interview with the Vampire* illustrates this in its own reproduction of a Grand Guignol-style theatre in the Theatre des Vampires in Paris; during Louis’s first visit, a woman in the audience stands up and calls out to the stage “Oh, yes, Monsieur Vampire, take me! I adore you!” As shown in **Figure 3b**, this minor character reflects the female viewer’s pleasure, with her arms thrown wide ready to embrace the horrors and a look of ecstasy or excitement on her face; after the vampire has berated her, she looks round at her fellow audience members with a satisfied smile. These bear up strong indications that the female fans love a mix of suggestive and explicit horrors. This parallel with Grand Guignol is evident in the aesthetics of several of the films preferred by female viewers and it is a useful frame of reference for defining the feminine aesthetic of *Hellraiser* (the most frequently mentioned film on the female viewers list of favourites).

Figure 3: Female viewers of the Grand Guignol

a) Cartoon of the theatre patrons;



b) At the Theatre des Vampires in [Interview with the Vampire](#)



Hand and Wilson's account of the traits of Grand Guignol can be mapped onto the most commonly reported preferences of the female horror film viewers expressed in the study (see **Table 3**). The bold and exaggerated aesthetics that these viewers enjoy include make-up to create the surface realities of horror, lighting to enhance effects, and sound effects designed to chill – all traits of Grand Guignol. As a librarian in her 40s says “I like atmosphere, sumptuous sets, scenery, costume - a total experience.” Another participant, a civil servant in her 30s, also draws a direct connection with Grand Guignol herself: “I like films that are very visual and in some way atmospheric. Quite a lot of them are bloody, but in most cases it is a stylised gore or Grand Guignol type of violence - too over the top to be taken seriously.” As outlined above the female viewers also like high levels of suspense, and this echoes Grand Guignol's dependence on suggestion and anticipation (a virtue out of necessity in the stage productions). What the viewer thinks she sees (and can embroider in her imagination) is frequently mentioned by a certain type of fan (those with more literary interests). It is a significant feature of *Alien* (the second most frequently cited film) that the viewer is frequently required to participate in creating the illusion of the monster which is often seen in shadow or in tight shots that reveal only fragments of the creature. Just as Hand and Wilson assert of Grand Guignol, the stylised and melodramatic modes of presentation are moments of economy and precision; the explicit shots and explicit gore do not overwhelm character and story (again, a trait the female viewers privilege). Just as Grand Guignol was a theatre of unseen horror (it was in fact far from the explicit gore fest or splatter show it is often imagined to be), the feminine aesthetics of horror are not necessarily based solely on physical or visual effects sequences, but on the setting up of audience expectations. Many of the female viewers (regardless of whether they dislike or embrace gore and violence) give more emphasis to their preference for horror and dread that is created through atmosphere and ambiance. They take as much (if not greater) pleasure or excitement in the anticipation than in the depiction of actual events. (This can also allow for both self-censorship and the testing of thresholds in different kinds of viewers.) Finally, combinations of horror and comedy, the erotic with the violent or the horrific, and the switches from horror to melodrama that typify Grand Guignols “hot and cold showers” of laughter, tears, terror

and titillation are reflected in the tastes of the female viewers. For example, horror-comedies are popular (as well as *An American Werewolf in London*, all three of the *Evil Dead* films are amongst the twenty most frequently named films), *Interview with the Vampire* is not the only frequently cited film to include a strong erotic romance (*Hellraiser*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and *The Hunger*), and there are elements of melodrama in several (*The Lost Boys*, *Psycho*, *Hellraiser* again). In the context of the viewers' wider tastes, an interest in genre hybrids and a tendency to look beyond the boundaries of the genre for desired moments of cinematic horror is also indicative of this pleasurable mix of affects.

Table 3: Traits of Grand Guignol

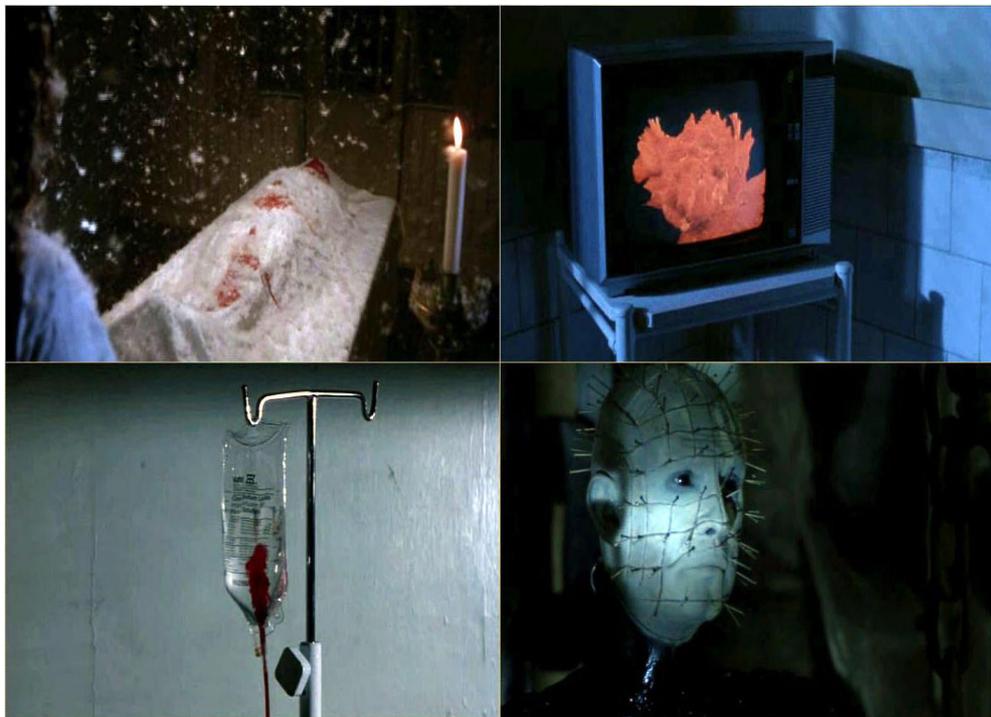
Grand Guignol	Female horror film viewers preferences
bold and exaggerated aesthetics	atmospheric, ornate, stylised or Gothic mise en scene
suggestion and anticipation	high levels of suspense, scariness
unseen horror	implied violence, rejection of gore or explicit effects for their own sake
combinations of horror, violence, comedy and the erotic	gore and violence in combination with uncanny/Gothic horror or over the top explicit effects in horror-comedy, a particular love for horror and the erotic

Hellraiser, the most frequently named film in the study, makes a good case study in this respect. In fact, Clive Barker's work in general has a prominent place in the female fan canon: Barker is praised in particular for the strongly feminine themes (these may be read as 'queer' in many respects) and the emphasis on the erotic qualities of horror and monstrosity. These correlate strongly with the female viewers' interests in horror: strong female characters (heroines and villains), sympathetic monsters and sexual or appealing monsters in particular, as well as the bold and exaggerated aesthetic of the film adaptations of Barker's work. This illustrates the way in which the feminine aesthetic incorporates elements of graphic horror. In fact, far from being women's horror as some of the female viewers claim (a psychiatric nurse in her 30s calls *Hellraiser* and *Nightbreed* 'girly horror'), Barker is considered a prime figure in the 'splatterpunk' subgenre and thus of masculine interest (see Kern). This is certainly borne out in the dominant visceral aesthetic illustrated in **Figure 4**. Amongst the graphic and often explicitly gory images, shown in detailed and prolonged effects sequences, are the body being reconstituted from blood spilt on the attic floorboards, the flayed Frank (seen feeding on one of his victims), the Cenobites slaughterhouse where they tear their victims apart with chains. However, in addition to the obvious attractions of such 'splatterpunk' moments (there are a number of gorily detailed set pieces spaced throughout the film – these sequences of heightened spectacle and emotion are examples of what Cynthia Freeland has termed 'numbers' (256-257)), *Hellraiser* also epitomises aesthetic and narrative qualities that the female fans love. These include feminine elements of both the family melodrama (the heroine distrustful of her step-mother and the wife's betrayal of her husband with his brother), the fairy story (the oppressive presence of the wicked step-mother and the 'princess' who seeks escape) and the Gothic (a white-clad heroine who haunts the corridors and staircases of a rambling house, a threatening monster in the attic, along with his lover – his brother's wife – whom we can consider as the madwoman). Reinforcing this, the atmospheric visuals include a dream sequence in which feathers fall onto a shroud-covered corpse, a television showing shots of flowers opening between bursts of static, blood billowing up into a IV drip, and the bizarrely beautiful appearance of the pierced flesh of the Cenobite Pinhead (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 4: The splatterpunk aesthetic of Hellraiser



Figure 5: *The uncanny aesthetic of Hellraiser*



It should not be assumed from this, however, that these atmospheric and splatterpunk elements are in opposition. In these explicit sequences of gore and violence interspersed by atmospheric aesthetics, the film recalls the Grand Guignol theatre. This aesthetic works in conjunction with the melodramatic romance between Frank and Julia as she betrays her husband and the strong presence of the Gothic heroine in Kirsty to offer a combination of affects similar to the “hot and cold showers” of Grand Guignol. In addition, the film contains in Julia a strong representation of the spider woman or femme fatale of film noir. As an obvious villain she is linked very strongly with violence as she dispatches the men she has picked up and lured back to the house by hitting them about the head with a hammer (see **Figure 6**). Although she appears very cold both as she kills and then wipes the blood from her face, and in her interactions with her step-daughter, she nevertheless appeals to some of the female viewers who comment positively on Claire Higgins’s performance. Overall, these elements of stylistics, mise-en-scene, atmosphere and motifs are

some of the main reasons the female viewers rate the film so highly. Several aspects of the visual and narrative style of *Hellraiser* stand out in this respect. A 20-year-old student thought that the suburban house setting was successful for stylistic reasons because “you’ve got to create horror with lighting, with shadows, with echo, with tight camera angles, and this is much more effective, much more long lasting, more disturbing”. A 28-year-old writer commented, “I liked *Alien* and *Hellraiser* because they’re so atmospheric and beautiful”, whilst a 34-year-old archaeologist described *Hellraiser* in particular as “very striking”. A 20-year-old student stated that she preferred “things like *Hellraiser* [because] the sets are wonderful, the costumes are wonderful, the Cenobites, Pinhead, is wonderful”.

Figure 6: The violent femme fatale in *Hellraiser*



The discourses employed here are not those stereotypically employed in discussions of horror cinema, particularly amongst critics of the genre and the type of fans who celebrate gore, disgust and violence. Rather, the terms used – ‘beautiful’, ‘striking’, ‘atmospheric’, ‘wonderful’ – indicate the morbid fascination with horror, death and monstrosity. The scenes of gore and the moments of heightened shock, disgust and nausea, thus serve to highlight the objects of this morbid fascination and the strong contrasts between the beauty and repulsiveness of the images, mirroring the pleasure and pain central to the discourse of the film. In particular, the morbid fascination with monsters and the sexual or erotic elements of horror are two of the primary appeals of the genre for its female audience, and part of this is undoubtedly the sexual allure of certain kinds of monsters – including Pinhead. It is also interesting to note that the same combination of graphically gruesome violence and lusciously poetic atmosphere that is privileged in *Hellraiser* is how Hardy typified the Gothic style of the Hammer studio. Hammer horror films (also reminiscent of Grand Guignol, and a style that *Hellraiser* deliberately pastiches) are themselves frequently mentioned examples of the preferences and formative tastes of the female viewers. Within *Hellraiser*, the gory and violent numbers, mixed with Gothic atmosphere and erotic elements within a family melodrama, thus serve to reproduce the ‘hot and cold showers’ for the female audience. For this reason, they can be claimed as both a prime example of splatterpunk (as Kern does) with high levels of gore and foregrounded effects *and* an excellent example of the hybrid feminine aesthetic.

These points are crucial since the aesthetics of explicit horror are not, in actuality, elements that the female viewers shy away from even if they state a dislike for them. In fact, the female viewers’ responses cover a wide range of stated opinions on gore and violence in the horror film. Consequently, they respond in many different ways to violence, gore and other graphic forms of cinematic horror, though this is rarely in the form of outright rejection or refusal to view. Responses range in extremes from “I enjoy the mindless violence” (a 20-year-old student) to “I like horror for the ‘scariness’, not the violence” (a library assistant in her early 20s) and “I hate blood’n’guts and acts of extreme violence in the name of entertainment” (a full-time home-maker and mother in her late 30s). There are clearly some female viewers whose tastes are similar to the accepted masculine pattern of specialist viewers – these ‘fan girls’ may be more involved or active in horror fandom and may well have a higher level of knowledge acquisition and a fan’s cultural competency in the genre; they tend to celebrate the violence and gore for its own sake and as the craft of the filmmakers and special effects technicians. At the other extreme, however, there are female viewers who

prefer atmospheric scares and who may well find these in instances of cinematic horror outside the genre, but who are no less followers of horror. Between these extremes are many female viewers who qualify their preferences in some way. Some do not mind some elements but dislike others: a clerical officer in her 20s says “I dislike gore, though I don’t mind violence.” Others accept a certain degree of one or more explicit element but not when it is full on: a 40-year-old librarian says “I prefer subtlety to in-your-face nastiness” and a bar worker in her 30s says that “Fast cuts and implied violence are quite sufficient.” One or two draw the line at particular forms of violence: a secretary in her late 30s says “I really can’t stomach sexual violence.” Several prefer explicit elements to be there for a valid narrative reason, stating that: “I dislike gratuitous violence and gore for its own sake” (a 40-year-old writer) or “Only if it is relevant to the story and done well” (a teacher in her 20s). This range and variation is to be expected in a heterogeneous audience (and male preferences are similarly varied). This range illustrates a complex set of responses to violence and gore, but suggests that there are in fact specific ways of incorporating graphic aesthetics into the horror text which might appeal more to the wider female audience.

In summary then, female viewers say that they do not like gore and violence – or that they prefer an atmosphere of suggestion to a gore-splattered gross-out – but this is contradicted by their actual choices of preferred films. They do seem to be saying one thing – and what they do say is in accord with traditional perceptions of women’s cultural tastes – but this assumption must be qualified. Some forms of violence do seem more unacceptable than others – that is, more realistic forms of violence, and violence against women in particular. However, over-the-top violence and gore must be included as a significant characteristic of the feminine aesthetic. For the most part, it is a significant level of Grand Guignol elements in the text – rather than the traditional female Gothic alone – that provides us a more accurate picture of the feminine aesthetic. Not least because the blend of Gothic and Grand Guignol styles of post-modern horror provides access for female viewers when the predominant aesthetic is one that has increasingly foregrounded special effects in its ‘mode of showing’. This should not be taken as suggesting that there are not different modes of horror, rather that such forms of classification are inherently ambiguous, particularly when questioning what appeals to female viewers. Clearly the women’s preferences are not divided along any simplistic lines. Accordingly, we need to take into account the fact that the horror genre is extremely heterogeneous and horror texts offer a wealth of elements that appeal to women.

Cinematic factors such as morbid curiosity, the pleasure of viewing monstrosity and the erotic, and the appeal of viewing violence or gore for its own sake are important to the female viewers. Furthermore, elements of Grand Guignol and the Gothic operate alongside each other in key films which they express a preference for. Within this feminine aesthetic, those female viewers who find explicit horror pleasurable can thus find films with high levels gore and violence which also offer them the narrative complexity they also desire. This aesthetic also allows female viewers who are less likely to embrace explicit horror or enjoy modes of affect such as revulsion to watch gory or violent films; taking pleasure in uncanny and atmospheric sequences whilst selectively self-censoring the elements they dislike and comfortably testing their personal thresholds.

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Notes

[1] See Cherry for a summary.

[2] For example, female fans in general seem less concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and generic competencies that are often used as cultural currency within the fan culture. There is also a gender split between male and female fans in the selection of certain films as favourites, although they do also select other films in common.

[3] The term cinematic horror is used deliberately, following Steven Schneider's use of the term (146) to indicate instances of horror aesthetics across genres, styles and formats, rather than something restricted to a particular genre category (that is in any case extremely broad). Indeed, many of the female viewers seek to replicate desired modes of emotional affect outside the boundaries of the genre and find these in a range of films from Surrealist art cinema through adaptations of Shakespeare to examples of the gangster film.

[4] Whilst the genre does exhibit historical trends, fans often exhibit ahistorical tastes – that is, they have knowledge of older horror films and often chose to privilege types or styles of horror regardless of when they were made. It should also be noted that older styles or cycles of horror do come back into favour at times (as the supernatural has), or continue to be made albeit aimed at different audiences and accordingly marketed differently (for example, as psychological thrillers or melodramas).

[5] The supernatural is, however, in a resurgent phase. The fact that Hollywood producers now recognize the existence of a female audience for horror films in the wake of *Scream* and the recent cycles of more suggestive horror may not be purely coincidental.

[6] This is not to say that female viewers like these elements alone – viewing preferences are far more complex than this. Nor is there any intention to imply that these features are only enjoyed by female viewers, simply that these features are of particular importance in the taste patterns of the female audience.

[7] It is perhaps telling that *Interview With The Vampire* is often mentioned in terms of being an unsuccessful or disliked horror film by male horror fans since it is not deemed to be scary or horrific. See the discussion in http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.horror.movies/browse_thread/thread/4b228f3f86c0b9a7/296c7165d249e11b?lnk=gst&q=interview+with+the+vampire#296c7165d249e11b

[8] Though as Jancovich asserts this seemingly straightforward historical division is undermined by films such as *Cat People* which clearly locates the horror as arising within the family (79-80).

[9] Also mentioned and discussed by the female viewers as favourite or significant films, though they do not appear amongst the most frequently cited.

[10] One of the most famous Guignoleurs was Princess Wilhelmina of Holland.

Biographical note

Brigid Cherry is Senior Lecturer in Media Arts (at St Mary's University College, Twickenham)

Contact (by email): [Brigid Cherry](#)

