

Carina Stopenski, Chatham University, USA

# Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre

## Abstract

This paper discusses affect and body horror through the lens of abjection, specifically how we react to viscera and extremes of the body. Body horror's usage of female protagonists creates a dichotomous space of both feminism and anti-feminism, agency and oppression. In this paper, the character archetype of the female mutilator is proposed as a foil to the final girl trope, one who takes back her power through explicit gore and violence. Using three key filmic texts (Nicholas Pesce's *The Eyes of My Mother*, Richard Bates Jr.'s *Excision*, and Lucky McKee's *May*), this paper approaches the concepts of abjection and the monstrous feminine as they converge at the feminine grotesque in order for the female mutilator to actualize her identity.

Keywords: affect, abjection, horror studies, film studies, body genres

## 1. Introduction

As a generic entity, horror forces us to evaluate the way terror impacts our bodies. The subgenres of horror propose a variety of emotional responses: unease, shock, disgust, anxiety. Whether the affect of horror impacts the viewer in the moment or long after watching, the audience is forced to address the way that emotion is manipulated through the destruction of the body. Body horror broaches complex feelings that we associate with humanity and what it means to disrupt the human experience. When the body is twisted and turned in ways beyond our understanding, or when viscera is treated as an aesthetic object, the audience is forced to confront the border between the human and the monstrous. The feminine grotesque in body horror creates an abject

space for the mutilated and mutilating body to flourish, presenting a feminine heroine that embodies voluntary abjection and elicits empathy despite her depraved tendencies.

Filmic representations of female bodies usually center them as the object of the depraved, exposed to a variety of tortures and destructions, but as we think more critically about the affect that horror causes, a female enactor of violence may become a feminist antihero. When viewing male killers and tormentors, we experience almost entirely negative emotions, mainly anger and disgust, because that is what we expect of the genre – the objectified woman and the antagonizing man. Even if the man has undergone trauma or has a nuanced character, we recognize him as a villain. When the one doing the torturing is a woman, our emotions grow more complex and we must confront our internalized biases about women's position in horrific narratives, especially ones that put the body on display. Therefore, this paper will discuss how the female mutilator, one who objectifies as opposed to being objectified herself, is a prime execution of affect in body horror – a character whom we should detest for her crimes against humanity but cannot help sympathizing with her plight.

## 2. Abjection, Others, and the History of the Monstrous Feminine

Many of the affective tenets of horror can be attributed to the scholarship of Julia Kristeva, particularly her theory of abjection. Kristeva's theory of abjection, defined as "the state of being cast off," asserts that horror is most effective when the audience fears Otheredness, either through the characters themselves or as a viewer threatened by isolation. By implementing disorienting tactics like "haptic aesthetics and body horror to undermine the eye's analytic and possessive power, denying the integrity and predictability of the filmed body as a self-contained, disciplined entity," the body horror genre generates affect through monstrosity as opposed to realistic terror (Beugnet and Delanoë-Brun 212). Inhuman threat, however, does not need to be something unrecognizably non-human. Kristeva's theory can be understood as a general fear of isolation, of confronting the unknown; therefore, when one is confronted with a body that has been outcast, the threat of that fate may render them uneasy. The aesthetics of body horror move the body in ways that are atypical of the traditional fleshy entity. When something so familiar, the human body, is

manipulated to the point of the uncanny, the audience may experience disturbance before terror because they need to register the body first.

Kristeva draws from psychoanalytic theory for these applications, but rather than using it to affirm fears of the unconscious, she uses it to discuss fears of the uncanny, particularly as they relate to the female body. Body horror scholar Xavier Aldana Reyes explains that in 21st-century body horror, “sadistic understandings of horror become difficult to substantiate when the sadism is not scripted directly onto the film itself. The fact that the main character, traditionally a woman, is meant to reproduce the shock or fear felt by the spectator further problematizes previous conceptions of alignment between monster and male viewer” (“Beyond Psychoanalysis” 5). The sadistic underpinnings of horror outweigh the masochistic ones, and the Otheredness of the feminine body is often assumed in horror. Otheredness is a forced experience, whereas Otherness simply implies segregation. In body horror, Otheredness plagues its female subjects as she is stripped of agency before being cast off. We understand that the female body is the one that will be objectified and spectacularized: no longer a subject in her own story, but a projection of the audience’s greatest fears and insecurities.

Horror scholar Barbara Creed is credited with coining the term ‘the monstrous-feminine,’ proposed in her 1993 book of the same name. She invokes Kristeva’s ideology in her discussion of the affect elicited from the monstrous, stating that viewership of biologically horrific media creates “a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat)” (“Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine” 71). The need to purge the abject from one’s consciousness proposes a dissonant reaction from the viewer: a paradox of affect that blurs the line between repulsion and fascination. Both Creed and Kristeva reference bodily wastes, corpses, and other decaying forms in their work as points of abjection. Othered bodies in horror, feminine ones in particular, have a legacy of being conflated with the monstrous. In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed includes the term ‘archaic mothers’ alongside descriptions of vampires, witches, and other supernatural beings in her description of the monstrous feminine. Derived from psychoanalytic theory, the archaic mother is depicted as “first nourisher and first seducer” in Freudian ideology,

making the horrific aspects of their existence all the more severe (Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*). To embody both the maternal and the sexual complicates a woman character and therefore causes cognitive dissonance for the audience in understanding her place. She is inextricably linked to the overtly female parts of her and cannot be separated from the horrors of the female body.

Kristeva and Creed both extricate the maternal body from the rigidity of the traditional, expressing femininity's link to viscera and grossness. Through menstruation and other bloodshed inherent to the childbearing body, the monstrous and the abject are directly related to the feminine. The castration fear typical of horror evolves as the archaic mother's monstrosity is made even more maternal: gore and waste only expelled from the monstrous-feminine, hyper-awareness of our fears of the feminine grotesque. In body horror, the "marked corporeal difference is always detrimental and unwelcome," and in terms of the feminine body, this could manifest itself in a variety of ways: deformity, mutation, transformation, among others (Reyes, "Abjection and Body Horror" 393). That which is a part of the monstrous-feminine may be recognizably human, but as she is further disrupted by her environment, her nature becomes more abhorrent and recognizable as horrifying despite not actually inducing fear. Reyes explains:

*... moments of disgust in film, especially where the catalyst is a female monster and their reproductive abilities, can be read as more than just instances of social convention, such as aversion to blood or mucus ... The female monstrous body in horror is intrinsically connected to patriarchal constructions of pregnancy, birthing and menstruation as dirty, but also to the fear of castration, since to become an adult is to enter the symbolic and thus the law of the father.*

*("Abjection and Body Horror" 396)*

To Reyes, to be maternal, to be feminine, already casts off the archaic mother and other female monsters in cinema because there is an immediate repulsion towards the bodily functions associated with them. When these wastes are coupled with the fulfillment of castration, a most effective form of gendered abjection takes place.

Kristeva and Creed's respective coinages of the abject grotesque and the monstrous feminine beg the question of how the aesthetic value of the feminine grotesque impacts the presentation of dis/embodiment in cinema. Abject feminine bodies complicate monstrosity: whereas Kristeva's

approach presents the abject as Othered and Creed's approach subverts the victimization narrative, the antagonistic nature of the feminine grotesque lives in a medial space between two disturbed embodiments, the tortured and the terrifier. However, both women present the abject body as nonhuman as opposed to inhuman – something that has been cast off from humanity entirely rather than one integrated into humanity but without the ability to recognize their Otheredness. The nonhuman body registers physical to the audience, something that they do not recognize as holding personhood. To be inhuman would still allow the character to be recognized as human in form but depraved in thought. In the case of the abject corpse, the dead body “protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these substances just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body extricates itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live” (Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine” 70). Kristeva's approach, more artistic in its description of monstrous abjection, centralizes the viewer as opposed to the socially constructed “we” of Creed's description. While Creed forms her theory around a collective “we,” women or woman-aligned individuals, Kristeva's first-person approach evokes a feeling of disembodiment:

*Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. 'I' is expelled. (3-4)*

Kristeva forces the viewer to insert themselves into the narrative of the grotesque and expresses that once corpsehood is attained, it is not only an ego death—it is the birth of inhumanity. Individuality is purged from the body just as any waste is, achieving the ultimate abjection. While “a good number of body horror features explore the grey area between the human and the non-human through the idea of life after death,” the voluntary engagement with the grotesque, the perverse, suggests the potential for artificial abjection, a forced Otheredness created by the objectified woman's engagement in depravity (Reyes, *Body Gothic* 65). When body horror is used in depictions of the grotesque, a liminality of personhood is formed. Rather than viewing these perversions of the flesh and corpse as Othering factors, Reyes argues that the nuances of the repulsive elevate the mangled body as a revolutionary tool in horror. The body horror genre

subverts the victimhood narratives typical of abject narratives, relying on the same monstrous tropes but reversing the process used to attain monsterdom. Instead of purging out wastes and becoming a carcass of the Other, explicit body horror gives agency to the mutating and mutilating body, consuming the grotesque as a form of agency over one's decaying form.

Body theorist Isabel Cristina Pinedo discusses this fear of the monstrous body further. She states:

*The anomaly manifests itself as the monster: an unnatural, deviant force. The monster violates the boundaries of the body through the use of violence against other bodies and through the disruptive qualities of its own body. The monster's body dissolves binary differences. It disrupts the social order by dissolving the basis of its signifying system, its network of differences: me/not me, human/nonhuman, life/death. ("Recreational Terror" 21)*

Pinedo articulates that difference equals Otheredness. The "us against them" dynamic that is common in horror is complicated by the binaries of beauty and ugliness. The monster is recognized as a creature we do not aspire to be; even if the monster is traditionally beautiful like a succubus or a medusa, it is the abject monstrosity of inhumanity that forces them to the ugly side. We fear that we will be perceived as nonhuman, which puts forth an interesting conjecture: do we risk becoming the object in order to consume manipulated bodies?

Audiences enjoy body horror because it is reinforced by the sadomasochistic desire to experience terror. As "people attempt to transgress the body's limits, ... [that] transgression is realized through the intense experience of pain," often at the expense of marginalized bodies on the screen (Keisner 419). Since it is unsustainable for the body to experience these perversions and depravities in the real world, the dissociation of the body from the mutilation creates an externally abject experience, casting oneself off in order to protect. We do not need to experience actual Otheredness to witness bodies destroyed and dejected, but viewing an abject existence elicits the same affect as if we were to experience it ourselves. It is not an empathetic viewing, but a perverse one rooted in experiencing unconscious sadomasochism.

### 3. The Feminine Grotesque in Film

Body genres often play with sadomasochistic pleasure, and body horror blends the elements of all three proposed 'body genres' familiar in the canon of film studies: pornography, horror, and melodrama. Body horror revels in grandiosity, a celebration of flesh, as it finds "strength in the way it goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function in biological species (not limited to human)" (Cruz 161). While this expanse beyond humanity typically refers to mutations, hybrids, and other biologically manipulated beings, it begs the question of whether or not we can categorize profoundly disturbed antiheroines in this same category due to their embrace of Otheredness. When we acknowledge that repulsion and decay is "a symbolic realization of a repulsive subject, and not an instance of addressing repulsive subject matter," we are able to construct the narrative of abjection as it pertains to Otheredness, not disgust (Marak and Strehlau 188).

Particularly jarring in terms of the feminine grotesque in body horror is the erotic feminine grotesque. As the feminine grotesque highlights the repulsive elements of female body and how it functions, the stigma of sex in cinema makes the image all the more scandalous for the viewer. Blending the horrific with the sexual is not a new concept, but when an abject feminine subject is posed as being a sexually active or even sexually desirable entity, the feelings the audience experiences are even more confusing. The combination of female reproductive organs with the grotesque is "a monstrous rendering and a caricature of female fertility and sexuality, where the female reproductive system is twisted into a revolting monstrosity spewing pollution and death," which is further complicated when the individual in question is consciously enacting violence through her gruesome genitals (Marak and Strehlau 195). The mingling of sex and death creates an ambiguous moral space in body horror, one that is even more abject when femininity is centralized.

The new contemporary wave of arthouse horror, with directors like Gasper Noe, Lars von Trier, and Ari Aster, has taken this boundary-pushing approach, "(re)writing the body as a mode of feminist empowerment, creating a subversive anti-aesthetic carved onto one's very flesh" (Kerchy 174). David Church explains that this is related to the 'post-horror' movement that focuses less on terror and more on other negative emotions like disgust and grief:



*Much as horror films may shift from narrative to atmosphere, it is precisely this ability for horror to shift fluidly from objectless affect to object-directed emotion (and vice versa) that ... allows the genre's traditional emotion (fear) to be shifted toward other negative affects in post-horror films.*

(18)

Church's stance affirms that the affect of body horror is vastly different from that of traditional horror. Contemporary horror aims to make its audience feel more than just terror, understanding that affect is complex and involves a variety of emotions constantly in transition as a film progresses. The feminine grotesque does just that, encouraging the audience to feel insecure, repulsed, and sad all at once.

According to Casey Ryan Kelly, monstrous bodies "are traumatic substitutes for what society casts out—the alien, abject, uncanny ... particularly attentive to the source and nature of bodily vulnerability, mortality, trauma, and death. Horror subjects audiences to both vulnerability through visceral experience and invites them to peer behind the façade of invulnerability: once inviolable bodies disarticulated, gored, and turned inside-out" (235-37). Body horror relies upon both action and reaction in its construction of narrative, and a reliance on how we perceive femininity in culture informs the vulnerability of the exposed female body. If the archaic mother is the foremost feminine influence in one's life, one that complicates our understanding of the "seducer versus nurturer" argument, the viewer may feel a perverse satisfaction in witnessing her descent or destruction, granting authority over the disciplining figure. Body horror manipulates the image of the maternal figure, and in turn manipulates our associations of women in the genre.

The feminine grotesque also employs tactics of the wet death in its depiction of monstrous bodies, "intent on imaging the mutilation and destruction of the body. The wet death transgresses bodily boundaries by devouring, penetrating or spilling the contents of the body through carnage. It shows the destruction wrought upon the human body so as to transform it into a monstrous spectacle," creating a dynamic where our internal bodies are unrecognizable to our external ones (Pinedo, "The Wet Death" 408). Audio gore and wetness are primary tools in evoking a negative affect from one's audience in horror, and new movements in the genre have prioritized this sensory experience alongside storytelling. In the new arthouse horror trend, gore is glamorized, stylized in



its presentation. As viscera is splattered across the screen and audio gore reverberates alongside dialogue, blending the putrid with the pulchrid, a woman villain is dichotomized as both terrified and terrifier, enforcing a binary that leaves little room for moral grey areas in body horror. When we manipulate the feminine grotesque to be more monstrous than erotic by featuring girls who embrace their ugliness and perversions as opposed to leaning into the seductive nature of women in horror, we are left with a trope that I propose as the female mutilator.

The female mutilator inflicts significant acts of violence and gore upon herself and others but is never aware of the perversion of her actions. She revels in filth and is aroused by viscera, claiming the bodies of other more humanized individuals in an attempt to resolve her isolation. In order to analyze this trope, three filmic texts will be used as case studies of the female mutilator: Lucky McKee's *May* (2002), Richard Bates's *Excision* (2012), and Nicholas Pesce's *The Eyes of My Mother* (2016). In all three films, the female main character is played by a traditionally attractive actress costumed to appear more homely, ugly, or disgusting; these main characters are antagonistic, calculated, and methodical in their dismemberment of other bodies. We should hate these characters for their depraved acts, but since they are so cast off from society, regardless of how integrated they think they are, we feel pity for them.

#### 4. Subverting the “Final Girl” through Depravity

In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, originally published in 1992, Carol J. Clover introduces the trope of the final girl in horror cinema with several significant elements, particularly ones that may overlap with those of the female mutilator. She notes:

*[The final girl] is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. (Clover 35)*

In this description, Clover expresses the importance of the final girl as a survivor, one who escapes the mutilated fate of her cohort and finds a way to emerge triumphant after killing the killer herself. The final girl's experience of terror is overcome when she is then in position of a phallic object, the weapon that will kill her male oppressor. She is desexualized in her plight and is able to attain hero

status, albeit through trauma. Clover states that “abject terror may still be gendered feminine,” so the final girl and female mutilator both serve as important subversions to the drama: the prior as a hero and the latter as an antihero, a villainous protagonist (60). Where the final girl works to escape terror, the female mutilator enacts it. They both gain agency, but the female mutilator attains it through taking as opposed to fighting back.

The female mutilators of the films analyzed in this article share a few key characteristics: these girls have all experienced trauma (either complex or otherwise) prior to the start of the story, they work to heal their loneliness and isolation through the destruction of others and the eroticization of viscera, and they are completely unaware of the severity of their actions until it is far too late. The new Gothic tradition, often co-opted by art house films, “has replaced the aesthetics of fear, violence and gore that marks the slasher, and the aesthetics of pain that marks torture porn, replacing it with an aesthetics of the Uncanny” by depicting the gore and destruction of humanity through stylized violence and femininity (Hawkins 3). Despite being from different subgenres of horror (May is a reworking of the Frankenstein narrative, Excision is satire, Eyes is an art house film), they manage to capture the same intricacies of the feminine grotesque while still eliciting sympathy for the antagonizing heroine. In these films, much of this is achieved through the body horror sub element of surgical horror. Reyes explains the trope:

*Surgical horror is a good example of body gothic because it foregrounds the viscerality of the body ... and explores the implications of its material reality. It displays the fascination and repulsion inherent to the messy nature of our biology. Corporeal transgression, whether it be through mutilation or the exploration of the limits of our bodies, also reveals, ... changes in social practices as well as our relation to technological advances and what they mean to human beings. (Body Gothic 150)*

All three heroines in these films employ tactics of surgical horror in their mutilation of others, displaying a profound familiarity with the body. The female mutilator is intelligent to a fault; she has a strong comprehension of the body as a corporeal entity but not as a spiritual one. As a viewer, we are obviously disturbed by viscera on film, but we are even more revolted by it when we watch the body methodically dissected, no longer “human” but instead a test subject. We dissociate the dissected body from having a soul, attaining corpsehood even if they are nowhere close to

decaying. To the female mutilator, everyone has the capacity to become a test subject because nothing exists beyond corporeality for her. In body horror, “[the] films tend to offer a medical or technological explanation for the corporeal phenomenon” of bodily transformation, but as the sterility of the surgical mingles with the aesthetics of art house horror, the space that the feminine grotesque exists in becomes more volatile (McGillvray 128). There is urgency associated with the medical, a type of intensity that feels atypical of the slow build of tension in traditional horror.

May, the earliest film analyzed here, is an example of the post-millennial body horror tradition, demonstrating a dramatic perspective that is motivated by terror and fear through suspense alongside the abjection of the main character. May (Angela Bettis) is a social outcast, an orphan, and she is misunderstood by the people around her. May’s insecurities manifest in a variety of physical actions, in how she speaks, and how she interacts with others. May threatens the viewer through our recognition of the outcast, the social pariah. May is a character who we are perturbed by, but we cannot help but feel empathy for her sad, lonely lifestyle. When she begins to engage in her spree of violence and murder, we have already built up an immense level of pity for her, with an inkling of affect rooted in a sympathetic approach. We witness May go through the motions of life, perturbed by her obsessive-compulsivity, lazy eye, and legacy of bullying. The body horror in May is the least stylized of all three films, but it is a testament to the development of the genre and the evolution of the female mutilator. May has developed cult status in the horror community that the other two films have not, so we can view it as a precedent for the other two films to follow, displaying the female mutilator, a narrative with an “unnatural ability to distinctively be a horror movie but not fit perfectly into any one category” (Larson).

Before delving into the genuine elements of body horror in *Excision*, we are immediately introduced to generic subversion via the protagonist Pauline (AnnaLynne McCord). The high school tropes present in the film already can evoke discomfort in the viewer, displaying hyperbolized accounts of the highs and lows of teen films, “... satirizing the teen movie before presenting a shift to the grotesque, ... [implicating] social constructions of normativity that privilege masculinity and demonize femininity, wherein Pauline, in the typical narrative formula, should come to embody feminine beauty and passivity to succeed” (Matheny 5). Pauline is an outsider at school, the bad

seed at home. She feels unwanted in all spaces so in dedicating all of her time to mastering surgical techniques, we see Pauline find solace in mutilation where she can nowhere else.

In *The Eyes of My Mother*, we are introduced to Francisca (Kika Magalhaes) and her rural lifestyle, living on a secluded farm with her mother and father. Her mother, a former surgeon, teaches Francisca the ways of butchering and preservation. When a strange young man claiming to be a missionary arrives at the farmhouse, he pulls a gun on Francisca and her mother, eventually brutally murdering the mother and leaving her limp, bleeding body in the bathtub for Francisca's father to discover upon returning home (*Eyes* 5:42-10:02). This leads Francisca and her father to chain the man up in the farmhouse as a hostage. Even after her father passes away years later and Francisca keeps his taxidermized body as a companion, the hostage, named Charlie, is kept as a tormented pet by Francisca. She also finds herself trying to recreate the family life that she had been deprived of, kidnapping another young woman named Lucy and subjecting her to the same fate as Charlie, claiming the woman's child as her own son.

How, then, can we view the female mutilator as a foil to the final girl? Simply put, the final girl endures her trauma during the film, whereas the female mutilator has already been subject to her trauma at the start of the film. She has already undergone a psychological transformation to the abject, either by a society that casts her out or by her own volition, and any reclamation of agency for her is essentially fruitless. Despite her plans to achieve some semblance of control and normalcy, she has already been transformed into the monstrous in the eyes of the other characters. They recognize her as the villain, she recognizes herself as a victim, and the audience recognizes her as something in between. Such a protagonist lives on the boundaries of what is expected of heroines, as no one is being "saved" here. May, Pauline, and Francisca had no chance at normal because of their circumstances, so they attempt to feel the next best thing: powerful. Rather than seeing a final girl outlast the killer in a slasher film, we watch a young woman whom society has failed torture her oppressors, and we cannot help but say "good for her" as she destroys her tormentors. Even if she achieves her tiny sliver of power through morally grey acts, the female mutilator is an underdog and is perceived by the audience as such. We will root for her regardless of how horrific her actions are because we understand how precarious her

position is in the world where she lives. While the final girl overcomes the terror enacted upon her via a murderer, the female mutilator must overcome a different beast: her own compulsions to kill.

## 5. Sympathy for the Female Mutilator

Even if all of these female protagonists have undergone such horrendous traumas prior to their filmic arcs, the trauma they enact on others directly opposes the submissive nature of women in horror. The trope of the final girl in horror exploits the female body, tortures her for the sake of demonstrating her resiliency. This trauma for the sake of plot stimulation is directly foiled by the female mutilator's existence. For example, in *The Eyes of My Mother*, an especially disturbing scene involves "the female protagonist sexually (attacking) her hostage after having pulled out his eyes," having also severed his vocal cords and removing his tongue to prevent him from screaming for help (Vivar 161). The sexual aspect of this assault is significant to note; in horror, the final girl is often raped, sexually tortured, and put on display as her clothes and flesh alike are torn and bloodied. Francisca's initial torture of Charlie began as a way to avenge her mother, but as she grows more fascinated with human anatomy and affect, she engages in rape and castration, aroused by Charlie's suffering.

The violence that Francisca enacts grows more emotionally removed as she picks up a young woman named Kimiko at a bar under the guise of a sexual relationship. Back at the farmhouse, Kimiko notices the bizarre nature of Francisca's actions and attempts to leave. Instead of showing a gory dismemberment or torture like that which we see of Charlie, the scene abruptly cuts from a fight between the two girls to a scene of Francisca scrubbing a pool of blood off of the floor and packing plastic-wrapped hunks of meat into the refrigerator (*Eyes* 29:00-37:57). Rather than seeing Kimiko as a sexual threat, Francisca sees her as a test subject. The interaction with Kimiko is the bridge between the revenge fantasy and madness for Francisca, whose morbid curiosity renders her unable to gauge the depravity of her action. Removing a scene showing Kimiko's murder displays how removed Francisca has become from the violence, unable to recognize it as anything significant unless it helps her achieve her goal of a family unit: Kimiko was not a viable option for a long-term partner, so she was sacrificed. In not seeing Kimiko's death, we understand that she was simply a secondary casualty of Francisca's madness, not a focal point of it. We should despise

Francisca for her despicable actions, but instead, we pity her. She lives a sad, lonely life where the only interaction she has is with the man who killed her mother. Francisca has been abject her whole life: she never even had a choice on whether or not to be cast out, and even if she tried to escape from her rural lifestyle, she would never be able to integrate into society after doing what she has done.

A similar instance occurs in *May*, when the eponymous protagonist visits the home of Polly, a young woman who she had a brief tryst with at the beginning of the film. As character after character rejects May for being “weird” and she begins killing them to stitch together the “perfect friend” from their body parts, she plans a visit to Polly to add her flesh to the collection. Polly is genuinely excited to see May and allows her inside, explaining that the moment where May had caught Polly having sex with another woman named Ambrosia was all for fun. Thinking that May is initiating kinky foreplay with razorblades, Polly beckons “please don’t hurt me” in a joke tone. May then slits her throat and leaves her to bleed out on the couch (01:11:10-01:13:20). May has snapped, and the killing spree that follows shows her behaving in an entirely different manner in the rest of the film. Rather than behaving in the chaotic, erratic nature that she has at the film’s start, she handles the forthcoming murders with a delicate hand in order to best preserve her specimens. She has become the archaic mother, birthing the flesh-stitched “friend” that she has named Amy by suturing together the skin of her victims. Using her prowess as a veterinary assistant, May handles this process carefully and the scenes where she engages in the surgical process are more artful than clinical.

Having gone through a variety of complex traumas regarding her disability as a child, May has a warped perspective on perfection. She is particularly self-conscious of her lazy eye and views herself as ugly. “May perceives perfection as something fragmented, unable to exist as a whole unless somebody assembles the pieces,” so her position as the female mutilator is one that is even more dissociated than Francisca’s (Martín Ayuso 222). May’s delusions lead her then to believe that her patchwork creature is alive and eventually force her to gouge out her own eye so the creature can “see.” She has killed several people at this point, but the viewer experiences sadness alongside their disgust—May weeps as she cuts out her eye, places it on “Amy,” and allows the creature to somehow wrap their arm around her in a hug (May 01:24:30-01:27:00). The film closes

with May relieved that her dream for the “perfect” friend has been achieved, but at what cost? To May, what she was doing was not taking life. She was giving it. Here, we see the elements of the archaic mother personified rather than as an intangible concept: May is both seducer and nurturer for “Amy,” as the creature has been constructed out of May’s former sex partners as a vessel for May to nurture.

The objectively least traumatized and least disturbed of the three protagonists, though, is Excision’s Pauline. Though she is relentlessly bullied at school and has a tenuous relationship with her mother, Pauline has a roof over her head and a family unit present. Pauline’s embrace of the surgical horror element of body horror is quite a literal one: her dream is to enter medical school, mainly to resolve to find a cure for her sister Grace’s cystic fibrosis. Pauline is constantly bombarded with dream sequences that mix the erotic with the visceral, and she is viewed by her family and peers as a vulgar, unhygienic girl. This subverts the expectations of young women in the generic horror film, as “Pauline’s obsession with her own physicality seems to disrupt notions of femininity as passive and pure ... [she] negotiates not only the limits of her own body but also its place in the world and its relation to cultural constructions of female adolescence” (D’Hont 22). Some of Pauline’s heinous acts involve self-harming by carving a crucifix into her wrist, performing a crude abortion on herself and examining the fetus, and attempting to draw blood from her sex partner when trying to lose her virginity. To the audience, these acts are horrendous and taboo, but to Pauline, someone who has had to harden herself, these are just everyday incidents. Excision plays into the satire of the body horror genre because Pauline understands that the thoughts that she is having that blend sex and gore are out of the ordinary. She is a compulsive liar and combative, but she never claims to be an innocent victim in the film.

In fact, Pauline’s devotion to her younger sister Grace is one of the primary elements that separates her from disturbed loners, the voluntarily abject, like Francisca and May. While the prior two girls are preoccupied with satiating their need for companionship, Pauline’s depravity has a somewhat selfless source, wanting her sister to get better. Even if Pauline engages in behaviors that render her abject, leaning into grossness throughout the film, we feel a strong piteous affect for her since she desires for her sister to be well. Despite practicing surgical techniques over the majority of the film, the level of Pauline’s abilities is displayed at the film’s close. After drugging her



sister and a neighborhood girl in order to perform an amateur lung transplant, the audience witnesses Pauline slice open both girls and pull organs from their chest, casually stuffing the new lungs into each carcass. Unlike May and Francisca, who have surgical experience, Pauline's endeavors prove fruitless because of her inexperience. The lives of both girls are lost, and as her mother enters the room to see her covered in blood, Pauline realizes the gravity of her actions. They both let out a bloodcurdling scream and the film ends (Excision 01:11:53-01:15:54). Here, the audience empathizes with Pauline, watching her come to terms with her failure as she sobs. After being so removed from her emotions for the majority of the film, she is forced to feel in this moment, letting down the guise that she has painted to appear strong in the face of trauma.

While all three girls feel different levels of guilt or pain regarding acts of mutilation, we need to acknowledge that the breaking points for each of these young women comes with the torture or mutilation of another woman: Francisca with Kimiko, May with Polly, and Pauline with both Grace and the neighbor girl. The girls all realize that they are unable to be helped when it comes to their violent tendencies. Each of the films end before any of the girls can face repercussions for their actions, but in all of the films' culminating scenes, we see these antiheroines stricken with fear, anxiety, guilt, and grief towards what they have done.

## 6. Conclusion: The Female Mutilator as Affective Feminist Heroine

When we confront the insecurities surrounding the feminine in horror and embrace disgust, our social perceptions distort the emotions we associate with the genre. Body horror is paradoxical, both embodied and disembodied, both subverting feminist expectations and fulfilling them. Whether it be beauty, sexuality, action—the female mutilator laughs in the face of these standards, an island of her own in a genre that is constantly forcing women into submission. Horror is a sadomasochistic pleasure, and the female mutilator is the quintessential sadomasochistic heroine. She exists somewhere between self-hatred and actualization, with a vague interpretation of the corporeal. The female mutilator is a feminist icon in her own right—while her acts of violence may very well start off as acts of revenge, she is an equal opportunity murderer. In body horror, we fear the ways that we may become unrecognizable in our humanity, but these young women embrace

that distortion. The taste of agency that killing and torturing gives her soon just becomes a way to satiate her own perverse desires instead of as a way to attain vengeance. Mutilation of others and the self allows the traumatized female mutilator to come to terms with her Otheredness, and in the process, she frees herself from the threat of abjection: she casts herself out voluntarily before society can do so.

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