



The Visual Language of Female Horror Characters

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this study was to present multidimensional portrayals of female characters in horror by applying feminist film theories, psychoanalytic theories, and visual analysis. Applying these theories in the context of visual analysis has been necessary to connecting the emotions depicted in the five horror movies analysed. The research was conducted as a means of connecting theories to reach a better understanding of female characters in horror.

The materials for this thesis were collected from books, articles, and papers. The following horror movies, focusing on the female characters were presented: *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017) and *The Love Witch* (Anna Biller, 2016). Scenes were picked out and presented from each of the five horror movies to be analysed, applying the theoretical frameworks and tools introduced.

A connection between feminist film theories, psychoanalytic theories, and the visual language of rebirth and fire as an element has been established as a foundation for the artwork part of the thesis created. The purpose of combining theories and visual analysis has been conducted to present the complex emotions constructed through visual elements in horror.

Through visual language, it was found that female characters in horror are given freedom for complex and interesting character development. There is a hopeful approach for more intricate depictions of women on screen, as the horror genre has gained popularity in recent years and will continue to do so in the upcoming years. Further open discussions about these topics could encourage more filmmakers to give their female characters more contrasting personalities and traits that contain material to be analysed from multiple perspectives.

Key words: horror, feminist film theory, rebirth, symbolism

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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the written part of this thesis is to present the way complex emotions are portrayed in contemporary female horror characters. The theoretical framework of feminist film theories and psychoanalytic theories has been applied for conducting visual analysis. With a focus on elements and symbolism, the aim has been to bring forth the many ways we can interpret visuals with the help of these tools and theories. Once we get past the shock value of horror, we can delve deeper into these movies, perhaps helping us to tackle our inner suppressed emotions. My goal with this thesis and analysis, is to further open a discussion surrounding these topics, perhaps with universal tools that we can all share and apply.

Through the construction of visuals and atmosphere on screen, as the next chapters will reveal, it is relevant to analyse psychological and supernatural themes in horror, which contain taboos at their core. Through understanding the effects watching horror has on us, it can be easier to grasp why movie enjoyers seek out the horror genre in the first place. As research shows, watching horror movies can have a cathartic effect for the viewer (Walters, G.D. 2004), and further recognizing the symbolism we can pick up on with the use of visual elements can help us to understand why that is.

Female characters within the horror genre have more freedom for showcasing a multitude of opposing emotions (Creed 1993), which further enhances our view on the way female characters should be more multidimensionally portrayed in film in general. The matters approached in horror serve as a reflection of our unconscious mind, setting the scene for engaging in harmless voyeurism (Mulvey 1975). Through this engagement, we are presented with disturbances that tackle our minds and therefore force us to look deeper within ourselves.

The theory of Destruction as a cause of coming into being, brought forth by one of the first female psychoanalysts, Sabina Spielrein (1912) has been a great inspiration for creating an overall connection of the matters presented, offering insights into making sense of the destructive components of the female characters

analysed. The same analysis has been applied to my own thesis artwork project, with depicting emotions visually by applying symbolism surrounding the theme of rebirth, through facing difficult emotions and releasing them through a performative fire ritual. The importance of constructing narrative within my thesis artwork project has been through intentional arrangement of visuals to establish a visual language. The connecting visual themes between the thesis artwork and the movies analysed have been the presence of fire, the colour red and ritual.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR

Before diving deeper into uncovering psychological themes in horror, it is beneficial to look at these firstly through the explanation of psychological horror as a genre, to better understand the tools used in creating atmosphere in horror. Psychological horror is a subgenre of horror that focuses on themes related to emotions, mental health, and different psychological states (Long 2021). With creating an unsettling atmosphere, the genre aims to present a less direct approach to horror, relying more on the use of symbolism and surrealist depictions of inner turmoil the characters are experiencing (Hellerman 2020).

The genre aims to challenge the viewer by creating discomfort through exposing emotions that are seen as unpleasant, which can reveal the darker parts of the human psyche that most of us may repress or deny. This idea is referred to in Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology as the archetypal shadow characteristics: suspicion, distrust, self-doubt, and paranoia of others, themselves, and the world. (Lofberg 2016.)



PICTURE 1. Alfred Hitchcock, Psycho 1960. Theatrical release poster designed by Macario Gómez Quibus. Source: Wikipedia.

The development of the genre began during the 18th and 19th century Gothic literature. Early Gothic fiction holds similarities to the psychological horror movie genre, in the way that the narrator is depicted as an unreliable source, who is simultaneously experiencing and projecting their own fears. Popular Gothic fiction writers, Edgar Allan Poe, Horace Walpole, and Henry James are often viewed as laying the groundwork for the genre (Long 2021). The genre continued to gain popularity in the 20th century through the fiction genre and in film, especially after the success of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the original poster of the movie is presented in PICTURE 1. An important aspect to be noted, is how the field of psychoanalysis has influenced the psychological horror genre, by exploring Freudian concepts of repression and the unconscious (Mahfuzh 2023). Psychoanalytic theories will be presented later throughout this thesis to further connect the elements that construct horror.

In his 2004 paper in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, forensic psychologist Dr. Glenn D. Walters identified the primary motivations behind watching horror movies: tension, relevance, and unrealism. Through suspense, terror, fears, and traumatic events, it ignites a desire to face a certain catharsis or emotional release. Using horror as a tool for growth and tackling our inner emotional conflicts has been regarded as having unique benefits to our mental health and overall well-being. (Walters, G.D. 2004.)

The horrific events we witness on screen can trigger our unconscious fight-or-flight response, such as increased heartbeat, muscle tension, sweat, quick breathing. This is the result of our sympathetic nervous system (SNS), pumping our bodies full of adrenaline and cortisol. The SNS will also trigger the release of endorphins, which produce feel-good effects. Once our brain has processed that the threats, we are witnessing aren't real, but constructed for entertainment purposes, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) will kick in. Our PNS response reverses all the physiological changes caused by the SNS, so in contrast this slows down our heart rate, relaxes our muscles and releases hormones to calm us down and make us feel safe. (Johnson, n.d. & Concordia University St. Paul, *Psychology of Fear*, n.d.)

This is why usually after a scary scene is settled, our bodies become more relaxed and attuned with these feel-good chemicals, and this is a major reason for horror movie enjoyers to keep seeking horror movies not only for entertainment purposes, but as scientifically researched, also for finding a way to settle emotions within us. (Johnson, n.d. & Concordia University St. Paul, Psychology of Fear, n.d.)

2.1 The evolution of female characters in horror

Psychological themes used in horror will be targeted specifically towards the depiction of female characters in horror. A brief look at how the horror genre has evolved over the years will be carried out, to present that a different approach to female characters/protagonists in horror movies has been evolving and paving a more hopeful path for the portrayals of female characters in recent and upcoming years.



PICTURE 2. Méliès' Georges, Le Manoir du Diable 1896. Theatrical release poster. Source: Wikipedia.

As presented in the original theatrical poster in PICTURE 2, “Le Manoir du Diable”, or “The House of the Devil” came out in 1896 and is one of the first horror films ever made (New York Film Academy, 2022). Most commonly, early horror films depict female characters as damsels in distress, waiting for the male protagonist to rescue them. This is problematic, because the female characters lacked any real substance and were simply placed within the plot for the male protagonist to “save” them or for the female characters to act as a sort of “anxiety” inducing element for the male. This trope continued throughout the 1960’s with Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) and *Psycho*. We cannot deny his impact on the way the genre has evolved, focusing on creating tension and atmosphere through audio-visuals, inspiring some of the most prominent directors of our times. During the late 1960’s and 1970’s, there were visible societal changes with the feminist movements, which then helped to shape a new way of depicting female characters within the genre, a great example being *Carrie* (1976) which truly focused on femininity in a way that was not explored before in horror, which resulted in a new trope, specifically the Final Girl trope. (Davis 2023.)



PICTURE 3. Don Sharp, *Kiss of the Vampire* 1963. Theatrical release poster. Source: Wikipedia.

Hammer Horror Productions and the exploitation films were of high success especially during the late 1960s- throughout the 70's (Ferris 2023). The female characters in these movies played a huge role in the production's popularity, because as mentioned previously, we were seeing a huge shift in women's rights and their roles in society. We could see more freedom of sexual expression through these characters, which pivoted a different approach to the way female characters can be portrayed in cinema, but specifically in horror. (Malevolent Dark 2022.) Many of the "Ladies of Hammer Horror" had empowering roles such as being portrayed as both villains or heroes, vampires, monsters, or witches, while embracing their sexuality and beauty (see PICTURE 3). They didn't merely serve as just victims who were going to be destroyed by the male protagonist, however, of course it is important to note that some of these movies were problematic as well, since the feminist movement hadn't come so far back then, but nevertheless, quite a radical shift to be considered.

It can be concluded there is a hopeful approach towards the way women have been depicted within the horror genre in recent years, we now have not only seen more multidimensional portrayals of female characters, but also female filmmakers who are paving the way for such portrayals to be seen and heard in contemporary horror. The movies I have chosen to analyse are to present that once we get past the shock value of horror and its imagery, which is indeed needed for the creation of unsettling atmosphere, we could uncover interesting themes. In concordance with Barbara Creed, through the gruesome imagery, the construction of multidimensional portrayals is revealed, perhaps offering viewers some deeper insights into themselves and the movies they are watching.

To further apply my analysis, five horror films with strong psychological themes that also contain occult, mysterious and supernatural elements will be presented, with a focus on the female characters. The first two movies are director Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) and *Hereditary* (2018), following up with the remake of *Suspiria* (2018) directed by Luca Guadagnino, *Mother!* (2017) directed by Darren Aronofsky, and lastly *The Love Witch* directed by Anna Biller (2016).

2.1.1 Visual pleasure and tropes

To follow up on the previous chapter, a necessary theory to bring up is the pleasure we experience by watching movies. When we watch a carefully constructed movie on a screen, there is a sense of separateness between us and the screen on which the movie is being shown on, and in that manner, we can engage in a harmless voyeuristic illusionary fantasy world. The world of cinema satisfies the need in us to experience pleasurable looking, therefore stirring powerful emotions in us. Cinema offers a unique perspective on the pleasurable act of looking, since through narrative, construction of time, space, and atmosphere it also shifts towards the way visuals should be perceived by the watcher. (Mulvey 1975.)

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion (Mulvey 1975).

The exploration of the way we perceive and look at moving images as stated by Mulvey is an important theory which carried relevant significance, as well as combining psychoanalytic theories, film and feminist theories to further reach understanding on these matters. However, with further research and analysis it is also interesting to recognize **how** we perceive outside of solely using the psychoanalytic theories applied in film theory, shifting our attention to recognition of symbolism and visual elements.

Within the horror genre, there is room for the construction of the settings in which phantasy is present. It draws upon the three primal phantasies: birth, seduction, and castration to construct its scenarios of horror. Primal phantasies and horror are related through the subjects explored, such as origins: origin of the subject, desire, or sexual difference. "Desire is for the unknowable terrifying other; knowledge of sexual difference invokes fear of castration and death". (Creed 1993.)

Tropes in female characters are still apparent in contemporary movies, therefore still problematic, due to their limitations of more complex portrayals in female characters. The most recent disguise of empowering female character trope is

that of the Heroine/Strong female lead. A strong female figure is presented in a movie as that of a woman who is confident, lacks in vulnerability, is tough, self-assured, and perhaps seeks to revenge. What this portrayal often eliminates is the emotional aspect of the character, the development, the backstory. (Ferrier 2023.)

A compelling character should be written more diversely, showcasing flaws, strengths, as well as facing various internal and external challenges, and this seems to be more common in male characters. An open conversation on these matters could further make the movie industry a more open and honest field. It is presented as if, completely excluding the vulnerability from a female character somehow leads her to be more empowering by not catering to the male gaze. However, simply being put in a position of only just being a strong and dominating female figure does also cater to the male gaze as well. (Ferrier 2023.)

To connect Mulvey's theory (1975), with female character tropes, it has been established already that a certain separateness from us as viewers is attained by engaging in the voyeuristic pleasure of watching movies. In concordance with Mulvey's analysis of the clear powerful effect watching movies has on us, the more important it seems to be to lessen the separating agent of placing female characters in stagnant stereotypical portrayals. The horror genre seems to be more progressive in nature, bringing to the forefront also the dark side of the patriarchal unconscious. (Creed 1993.)

Images of woman as monstrous-feminine are intended to shock and repel using a monstrous figure within the female, while they also offer us insights into our attitude of ambivalence towards the elements of motherhood, being both nurturing but terrifying through the castrations associated with her body and the processes of infant socialization. Bringing forth the most painful of all separations, necessary for the child's entry into the symbolic order. (Creed 1993.)

2.2 Taboos: The hidden and the suppressed emotions

As established, the psychological horror genre often uses taboo themes like death, violence, family dynamics, mental health, occult, and sexual themes to name a few. By further looking into the movies mentioned, it is possible to find clear similarities between them, and to get a better understanding of how these taboo themes could in fact be useful tools in uncovering deeper meanings within the characters and the plots.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, taboos can be related to anything that stirs controversy amongst people, most of the times presenting these topics as forbidden, repulsive, or offensive. Usually, it is something that should not be spoken out loud or investigated. By bringing these taboos forth, and by understanding uncomfortable emotions that arise in us, we could get a better understanding of ourselves, and how we experience visual imagery, but also why strong visual images in horror carry various symbolic meanings within them. An important visual aspect that binds these movies to showcase femininity, pain and rebirth is through implementing fire and the colour red, both visual elements containing ambiguity in their dual nature (Cherry 2023).

The horror genre carries many subgenres such as: body horror, comedy horror, slasher films, supernatural/paranormal horror, and psychological horror (The Los Angeles Film School 2021). These subgenres can be intertwined with one another, combining different taboos which then shape the narrative and progression of the plot. The movies which will be further analysed fit into the subgenres of supernatural and psychological horror, intentionally picked to further bring forth the taboo themes revolving around womanhood, as also presented by Creed.

In subchapter 4.1 the movies mentioned previously will be looked at overall, tackling some common emotions and themes present, shifting the attention on symbols and their meaning. Before continuing further into visual analysis, it is beneficial to get a grasp on the manifestations of the self, to lay a foundation which we can build upon.

3 THE SELF

Psychoanalytic theories of development will be applied, as a tool to better understand the construction of the self on screen. The development of the self is an integral side in understanding and possibly analysing characters within psychological components in horror. The structure of the self, as defined by Sigmund Freud's model of the psyche in his 1920 paper *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are id, ego, and superego. Throughout the history of psychoanalysis, various concepts of the self have been presented. Understanding the structure of the self, played a central role in the theories of Adler, Jung, Horney, and Sullivan. The definitions of self employed by these theoreticians share the mutual understanding of it as "the subjective, creative, experiencing aspects of the psyche". (Tyson & Tyson & Wallerstein 1990, 118-120.)

The development of a sense of self begins during the mother-infant relational stages. The infant's formation of an integrated or coherent sense of self is a lengthy process that relies on being able to integrate "various kinds of unconscious, preconscious and conscious self-experiences and related self-representations". Bodily experiences of the infant are closely related to the caregiver or mother figure. Through the physical contact, biological needs and interactions established between the mother and child, the infant learns that pleasure and safety are experienced with the mother. The interaction between the caregiver and infant are continuously building a representation of the infant in relation to his surroundings, himself, and his objects. (Tyson & Tyson & Wallerstein 1990, 120-122.)

Within these theories we can get a better understanding of a character's development in the narrative of a movie. Not all characters are given a distinct background story, but by learning to associate different psychological aspects we can get a better grasp of the development within the narrative. It is also important to mention that we cannot always be certain of what the director of a movie truly intended to convey, unless stated so by him/her. Therefore, it can be challenging to ponder on what a character's childhood or infant experiences were like related to the environment, mother, or caregiver. By recognizing the depicted emotional states in the way, the characters develop throughout the movie, as well as the

narrative in visuals, we can target these factors in a more effective way. The aim of these theories is to make sense of the self and the human psyche, to uncover what has been suppressed and denied. With combining the theoretical frameworks of feminist film theories, as well as psychoanalytic theories through a fine art lens to further analyse any visual matter can bring up new perspectives.

By briefly expanding the concept of the self, the aim is to give the viewer of the horror genre a broader understanding of challenging emotions represented, to attempt to trace back the displays of said emotions to their cause of origin. In the next chapter, my direction shifts towards grasping the manifestation of polar emotions, desires, impulses, and inner conflicts that many of the female characters in the movies demonstrate. The monstrosity of these women, as related to the concept of Creed, could be further investigated with the help of psychoanalytic theories.

3.1 Destruction as a rebirth of the self

Further understanding of the destructive components of the self will be explained through a theoretical framework for more connections to be formed within analysis. Throughout this chapter I will refer to one of the first female psychoanalysts, Sabina Spielrein, whose paper "Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being" was published originally in 1912, and later in 1994 in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (Spielrein, 39, 155-186). It is through this paper that the death drive was originally proposed, and Freud later incorporated this into his theories.

The paper introduces the idea of creation by initiating discourse on reproduction, where a union of female and male cells occur. The unity of each cell thus is destroyed, and from this destruction emerges a new life. This is a primal instinct, essential towards survival while simultaneously destructive. "The individual must strongly hunger for this new creation in order to place its own destruction in creation's service" (Spielrein 1912, 156). Through the act of destruction and unity, there is no longer just one-sidedness, by joint forces it represents a merging of polars, as stated through a union of the female and male.

Spielrein states that the pleasurable experience of merging with another being is also accompanied by feelings of resistance, anxiety, or disgust, merely because of the destructive component that comes with the sexual instinct.

For the ego, this most dangerous phase of the drive for self-reproduction (transformation) proceeds with joyous feelings because blending or merging takes place in the beloved (= in love) (Spielrein 1912, 164).

In concordance with Spielrein, through her theory we can find that the nature of humans is naturally ambivalent. Presenting and examining the instinct for preservation, which is pleasurable at first, becomes unpleasurable. Abandoning oneself is a dynamic drive that strives for change, for a new form to take place within this said unity. The former condition of the person will not be intact; therefore, transformation always occurs.

Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being also incorporates how we perceive; how visual cues are processed and through observing gather meaning. The meaning of how we perceive is stemming from a primal experience originating in our psyche. As we break down and reproduce the elements of what we are perceiving, it becomes comprehensive in our mind, therefore various elements strive for unity (Spielrein 1912, 163-164). Through Spielrein's theory, connecting symbolism and visual language with the primal instincts in humans, this paper has been a great source of motivation for me to conduct further research throughout this thesis.

Connecting Spielrein's theory to visual analysis can be useful in grasping the destructive, monstrous motives of female characters, which can be manifested in various ways, such as self-destruction, destruction of one's environment or others.

The importance of the cycle of birth-death (rebirth) depicted in the movies to be analysed can therefore be seen that through a destructive force, the characters feel they have no choice but to transcend themselves to bring forth something new, perhaps within themselves or from themselves. As mentioned previously,

visually this could be interpreted through fire and the colour red as the main elements in the movies to be analysed. It seems that the terrifying notion of female characters in horror comes from the manifestation of their destructiveness and impulsiveness, rather animalistic, which can birth something even more horrendous, for example a monstrous figure (whether it is a baby, a new version of themselves, or an unknown entity, possession). Further investigations will be conducted into visual language, following a more in-depth visual analysis of the female characters.

4 VISUAL LANGUAGE ELEMENTS

Visual language is a form of communication, which relies on imagery to convey its message to the viewer. This is a universal language, as it can offer meaning without the need for a spoken language. As mentioned in previous chapters, the use of symbolism to decipher visuals is necessary, as it gives us more insights on what can be interpreted within the image, perhaps as we go into deeper analysis, we may find that the image which we are looking at has various meanings that can be deciphered. (Pantelić 2016.)

Recognizing the visual elements in the Arts offers us a way of reading into what we are perceiving, which further gives room for interpretation. Through various techniques used by visual artists, elements take their concrete form as visuals, which applies to all art forms. Formal elements are the basis of the language of art, and how they are organised together will determine the outcome of the artwork: movie, photograph, painting etc. The elements consist of: Line, shape, form, value/tone, texture, pattern, colour, scale, space, and composition. These elements also depend on the artform used to implement them. (Esaak 2019.)

Another important aspect to mention briefly before the movie analyses, is 20th century Swiss linguist and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of sign structure, that underlies modern semiotic analysis. Saussure's theory has shaped the understanding of how various signs can be studied and applied meaning to, which can help us interpret visual and linguistic codes used to convey messages (Britannica n.d. & Dewanti 2023). Saussure distinguished between the concepts of signifier and signified. He argued that signs in language and visual communication consist of the relationship between these two elements. "The signifier is the physical form of the sign, such as an image, word, or sound, while the signified is the concept or meaning associated with the signifier". (Dewanti 2023.)

In moving image or cinema, there are more variations of elements to be taken into consideration, however, looking at formal elements in art we can see that many of these artistic elements are applied to film or moving image as well. By grasping signs and symbols, visuals are constructed and given meaning to in our minds. Previously, we discussed the importance of atmosphere and use of strong

visuals to convey certain emotions, horror themes and psychological states, but before we grasp atmosphere, it is valuable to inspect the elements which build atmosphere in the first place. Therefore, once we recognize elements as the foundation of visuals, we can then apply our interpretations onto symbolism, to further enrich our perception and understanding of the emotional responses we have to visuals.

4.1 Visual analysis

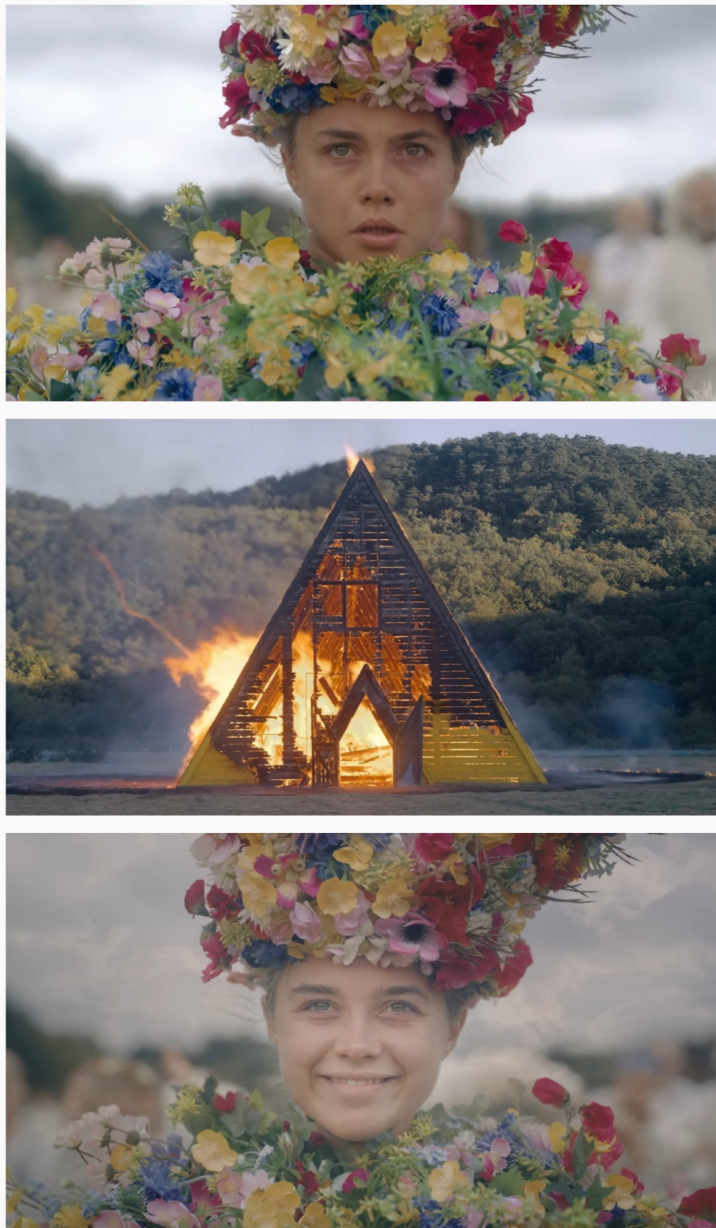
My aim is to analyse these visuals based on the elements we can notice within the imagery, while also implementing the analysis of the visuals with the use of the theories mentioned in previous chapters, striving for connections.

The five movies chosen for analysis as stated previously are Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) and *Hereditary* (2018), Luca Guadagnino's *Suspiria* (2018), Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!* (2017), and lastly Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016). Through the psychological and supernatural genre, these movies focus on their female characters, as well as the depiction of difficult emotions such as trauma, pain, anger, and grief. The purpose of this analysis is to find connections between the themes depicted in these movies, as well as to further reveal the importance of visual language.

Midsommar is directed by Ari Aster, and it strongly depicts pain, grief, and trauma through the lens of the female protagonist Dani, who experiences the loss of her parents and her sister. Her only close connection remains her boyfriend, Christian. Together with his friends and Dani, they travel to Sweden, visiting their friend's rural hometown known for its midsummer festivities. However, ominous events unfold as this beautiful village appears to be a cult with intricate rituals and sacrifices.

The cult in this movie views death as something that should be celebrated and embraced by the community. They have specific life stages, which they also associate with those of the seasons. The beginning of the movie is striking in its shocking and straightforward depiction of death as truly horrific and traumatic, but in this cult, they honour death and do not see it as something to grieve, but to

celebrate, even in its gruesome nature. The vulnerable Dani gets seduced by this cult, and ends up participating in their rituals, finally being crowned May Queen.



PICTURE 4. *Midsommar*, directed by Ari Aster (2019). Final scene. Collage made of screenshots from YouTube.

Here (see PICTURE 4) we can see how Mulvey's theory (1975) of the different looks depicted on screen applies to visual analysis, how our gaze is shifted directly onto Dani's gaze, which holds strong emotions as she herself is gazing onto the source of her emotional reaction, therefore stirring an emotional response in us as viewers. It is a chain of communication between the landscape, the character and us viewers.

The beautiful flowers have taken over Dani's body, with the headpiece indicating a crowning of the cult's new May queen, as she has been given this title in the movie after winning the dance competition. The crowning and costume of flowers symbolises a celebration, which is contrasted by the temple burning down, a destruction of the structure which carried meaning for the cult. The lightness of the scene further enhances the vivid colours of the flowers; however, we still get a claustrophobic sense of Dani being completely swallowed, not having much freedom to move in this costume. In this instance fire is used as a symbol of destruction used for a ritual, where the cult's sacrifices are meant to bring forth something new, a rebirth. The destruction symbolised by fire also stirs the emotional response in Dani, at first through shock, but in the last image we see her smile, accepting and embracing the destruction.

The temple burning down, and Dani's emotional shift also signifies a complete transformation within Dani's character, who has endured pain and grief throughout the movie, this is one of the only times we truly see her smile. Is it madness or is it surrendering to the destruction? Applying Spielrein's theory (1912) to this analysis, we can see the momentum and space between Dani and the temple burning down as having birthed a new version of Dani. Through pain and grief, she has become a queen adorned in beautiful flowers amidst the destruction of the only connection she had left to her past, Christian, who she has decided to sacrifice. The contrasting emotions in Dani also correlate with the visuals, since we have opposites represented in both instances, which are quite hard to pinpoint exactly, since the emotions depicted are complex and can be interpreted in different ways. A sense of confusion, defeat and shock turns into acceptance, madness, and perhaps even joy.

Hereditary is directed by Ari Aster, and it centres around the trauma experienced within the family. The beginning of Hereditary focuses on a family who is grieving the grandmother's death (Annie's mother). As the movie progresses, the connection between Annie's mother Ellen, and the unfolding of horrific events becomes more apparent. As viewers we later find out that unknowing to her family, Ellen was the leader of a cult that worships Paimon, one of the eight kings of Hell,

where she was revered as Queen Leigh. Towards the end of the movie, it is revealed to us how each family member's fate has been predestined to suffering and trauma, which is depicted through the demonic possession of Annie and her son Peter, with the goal of "crowning" a new leader for the cult within the same bloodline, which ends up being Peter. None of the family members were willing to acknowledge each other's pain and grief, resulting in the trauma being repeated, unbroken through a new possession of Peter.



PICTURE 5. Hereditary, directed by Ari Aster (2018). Annie's possession scene. Collage made of screenshots from YouTube.

As Annie's and Peter's gaze meets one another (see PICTURE 5), we can see the terror and fear depicted in both of their eyes, as they are mirroring each

other's emotions. As mentioned, the development of a sense of self begins during the mother-infant relational stages, of how we experienced ourselves through the eyes of our caregiver (Tyson & Tyson & Wallerstein 120-122, 1990). In the movie we do get some insights on Annie as a mother, where Peter reminds her of having walked into his and Charlie's bedroom when they were children, Annie was sleepwalking and attempted to kill them by setting them on fire. Later, Annie is having a nightmare where she walks into Peter's bedroom recreating this memory of her sleepwalking, where she also says to Peter that she never wanted to be his mom in the first place, but that she does not regret it, stating that she was not trying to kill them, but to save them.

It is interesting to think, whether Annie was trying to save herself and put an end to her family's suffering by burning everything down, perhaps deep down she knew of the traumatic fate that was going to come onto them. She could not acknowledge the malevolent affect her mother had on her life, as it is also shared to us that Annie had tried to cut contact with her mother, but when she got pregnant with Peter, she felt that she could not do that. The traumatic events and secrecy within the family used to convey the inability to cut ties with the source of pain, can be seen as depicted through visuals in these images. The attic is dark, and in the scene, there are also flies flying around Peter as he makes his way into the attic.

An important aspect is the ray of light coming through the cracks of the roof, illuminating Annie's face, eyes, and part of her neck, as she tries to sever her own head. Through creating atmosphere, the remaining light entering in the darkness in this instance can signify to us a last "hope" in which Annie attempts to decapitate herself, as she uses a cord to sever her own head, which can be interpreted as a symbol of the familial lineage. Annie's possession can be seen as a succumb to the trauma and pain, not being conscious anymore or autonomous. The darkness has taken over her, which is part of the cult's plan of taking everything away from Peter, to be possessed by Paimon. The use of occultism and supernatural themes present in *Hereditary*, in my interpretation are merely a tool for conveying taboos, such as generational trauma, fear of motherhood, death and manipulation.

Suspiria is directed by Luca Guadagnino, and it is considered an homage to the original horror classic of the same name by Dario Argento (1977). The protagonist, Susie Bannion, a young American coming from a Mennonite family in Ohio, is admitted to the Markos Dance Academy in West Berlin in 1977. Gossip surrounds the academy, as it is uncovered that a former student, Patricia Hingle vanished after telling her psychotherapist that the academy is controlled by a coven.

More dancers seem to be vanishing along the way, and before their death, their dancing skills transfer onto Susie. The movie culminates with a ritual scene, where in the end Susie summons Death to kill Mother Markos, revealing that Susie herself is the true Mother Suspiriorum, claiming her rightful spot as the new leader of the dance company. Throughout the movie, we see glimpses of her past traumatic childhood, of her religious background with her family, but also the terrors and abuse she encountered from her mother, who often referred to her as something sinful that she birthed.



PICTURE 6. *Suspiria*, directed by Luca Guadagnino (2018). *Suspiriorum* scene. Collage made of screenshots from YouTube.

The final ritual scene (see PICTURE 6) shows Susie's transformation and rebirth into Mother *Suspiriorum*. The first picture is Susie's own mother on her death bed, she takes her last breath, as Susie takes on her new form and "births" herself through the opening carved out of her chest. The theme of birth and death plays out in these visuals, while also connecting to a sense of freedom that Susie is experiencing. We can clearly see pleasure and desire as the emotions which are strongest in this scene, even though she seems to be carving out her chest, it seems to be a pleasurable experience initially rather than a painful one, which connects to Spielrein's theory (1912).

One of the most significant visual elements that is noticed is the shifting from dark tones and hues in the scenes, to the strong and striking colour of red. It acts as an imposing atmospheric touch, dominating the scenes, as well as embodying the characters, in this sense, red is used as perhaps symbolizing power and passion as Susie transcends her traumatic connection to her mother and becomes a mother figure herself.

Occult and supernatural themes are present in this movie as well, which are used as a separating theme of the events happening within the dance academy, and the world outside. The visual use of dancing as ritual, sacrifices, red thread as costumes, dream sequences and telepathic communication in the coven perhaps shows a more complex depiction of the depths of womanhood. The realistic aspects of the traumatic effects of war that are happening outside of the dance academy are a good contrast in evaluating and questioning war and the effects it has on us. The connection between these themes can further be reflected upon as a question of power, domination, and worship.

Mother! directed by Darren Aronofsky, follows a young woman (Mother) who is the wife and muse of a poet suffering from creative block (Him). Their home progressively becomes filled with strangers who are actively destroying their home by breaking things, stealing, vandalizing, while simultaneously claiming to be devoted followers and fans of Him and his work. Eventually, Mother ends up giving birth, and the intruders ruthlessly kill her baby. Mother sets the whole house on fire, killing everyone else and herself, as Him remains intact. The movie ends with the surroundings being restored again, and the final scene depicts a new Mother waking up in their bedroom.



PICTURE 7. *Mother!* directed by Darren Aronofsky (2017). Final scene. Collage made of screenshots from YouTube.

Mother is burning alive (see PICTURE 7), as she has set the house on fire, destroying everything inside it, while knowing that she is going to be destroyed as well. Applying Spielrein's theory (1912) to these visuals, the coming into being in this instance is shown as Mother has lost everything, she sacrifices herself, so she can wipe out the people who caused collective pain, death, and suffering. Her expression shows resilience and strength, within her despair there is also a sense of embracing the destruction, like Dani in *Midsommar*. Fire here can be seen as a powerful and cathartic visual element, which shows the strength in Mother. A visual contrast between the fire and what follows, which are ashes, could be seen as a Phoenix rising from the ashes. As Him takes Mother's love, it

turns into the crystal that is restoring the home once again, birthing a new beginning.

There is a similarity between this movie and *Suspiria*, with the power of creation coming from the women as depicted through an opening of the chest. In *Mother!* however the scene is not empowering for the fact that Mother has suffered and lost plenty, without getting anything in return, lastly dissolving into ashes. While in *Suspiria*, Susie is the one that reveals her chest by ripping it open with her own hands. A more hopeful approach could be that Mother's essence lives on through the crystal which symbolizes new life, as we see its power to restore everything back into what seems to be its original state. This movie also depicts through its violence the catastrophe of war, and in a way through worship and obsession of Him, the people inside the house became blind to the violent crimes they were committing against each other.

The Love Witch is directed by Anna Biller, following a young witch whose name is Elaine, as she moves to a new city, hoping to rebuild her life after the death of her husband. Elaine uses magic and spells to get men to fall in love with her, which leads these men to their deaths. Elaine ends up falling in love with the local police officer, Griff who is investigating the murders. The intensity of their relationship slowly fades, when Griff confronts Elaine about discovered proof that she committed these crimes, stating that she should be held accountable. In the end, Elaine stabs Griff in the heart with her athame dagger, and she becomes more immersed in maintaining her fantasy.



PICTURE 8. *The Love Witch*, directed by Anna Biller (2016). Final scene. Collage made of screenshots from YouTube.

The use of colour, especially the colour red, set design, costume design and makeup specific to the 60s-70s era shines through the screen and transports us into Elaine's world instantly. The most prominent emotions depicted through visual language in this movie are love, desire, obsession, and sadness. The manifestation of Elaine's fantasies is apparent through her paintings, which often depict fairy-tale like imagery (see PICTURE 8). The way femininity and gentleness of the environment are constructed in this movie acts as a contrast from Elaine's murders. The binding elements of red and fire are present in this movie as well, with a brief scene in which we see one of the men fantasizing about Elaine, Elaine

is depicted as strong and womanly, walking through the fire. This could again symbolize the destruction and passion connected to fire. Throughout the movie we get a glimpse into Elaine's thoughts, the destructive and painful memories resurfacing from her past, as we learn that her father, as well as her previous husband and other men were the source of her insecurities and abuse.

The fairy-tale dreamy aesthetic reflects Elaine's state of mind in a way that she is living in an illusion, a fantasy world which does not get disrupted even after she has committed murder. Her expression in the first image can be connected to that of Dani in *Midsommar*, as they have both let go in a way, whether it is acceptance or madness or both, can be left for interpretation. However, for Elaine we can see as she has killed Griff, she is transported back into her lively fantasy world where she finally gets to marry Griff, the visuals becoming hazy and foggy as to expose to viewers the distinction between reality and fantasy. In Elaine's finished painting's details, we can see she has re-enacted her own created scene in a way, perhaps signifying to an inner desire to revenge the men who have hurt her in the past, she finally gets to penetrate their heart, as they have done to her.

4.1.1 Connecting themes in horror

There are distinguishable connections to be made between these five movies, which all present different storylines. Using the theories discussed previously, and uncovering the visual elements within the plot, connections are easier to make, shaping a broader understanding of the female characters, their motives, and intentions. There are psychological aspects depicted in these movies, in the portrayal of mental illness, war, trauma, as well as supernatural themes which revolve around occult topics, such as witches and cults. The emotional difficulties the female characters go through are portrayed through these taboo themes as mentioned previously, which brings us closer to attaching narrative and visuals together. At the same time, we also feel unsettled trying to grasp what is real and what is not in these movies, which successfully showcases the vast complexity and spectrum of emotions.

As stated previously, the strongest visual cues that connect these movies are the use of fire and red surrounding these female characters. The use of these elements is striking in depicting and representing womanhood in all its essence. Through the artwork part of this thesis, it was found that the importance of using red and fire served a purpose in showcasing polar emotions such as pain, passion, anger, rebirth, and love.

To further explore the symbolism picked up through the visual analysis, sources and references will be presented in the next chapter, for a breakdown of the visual elements depicted.

4.1.2 Symbolism

As mentioned in chapter 3 and subchapter 3.1, we connect to how we perceive from our own interpretations which form already as infants through the eyes of our mothers, as well as from our memories which we associate with different emotions experienced in those memories, therefore we instantly give meaning to symbolism (Spielrein 1912). Visual images would be quite challenging to uncover without the language of symbolism and even spoken language, which further enhances our associations.

In *Midsommar*, the May Queen dress include some of the following flowers: meadow buttercups, forget-me-nots and sweet peas, some common symbols these flowers represent are humility, joy, friendship, love, respect, gratitude (Canale 2017; Kanuckel 2023; Goodwin 2024) In *The Love Witch*, we also see the rose, with its red or pink hues being used as a symbol which is most associated with love, romance, and desire deriving its meaning from myths such as Aphrodite/Venus or Cupid and Psyche to name a few (Bender 2014).

Fire as a symbol differs in its meaning through different religions, and it simultaneously represents wisdom and passion, as well as destruction and pain. In Greek mythology, fire is said to have been brought to humankind by Prometheus for humans to form civilizations. Out of the four elements of western culture, which are: earth, air, fire and water, fire is the only element that a human can create,

which therefore symbolizes a connection between mortals and gods. In Christianity, fire is depicted in imagery as God's judgement, both the fires of Hell, punishing humans for their sins or purging one of one's sins, but also used in rituals as a cleansing and purifying element which can bring forth transformation. In Buddhism, *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* (Fire Sermon), is about achieving liberation from suffering through detachment of one's senses and mind, as well as desires. It is said that everything within us burns: passion, delusion, aversion, and suffering. (Tearle 2021.)

The myth of the Phoenix, which has its original roots in Egypt, later influencing Greek mythology is associated primarily to the sun and focuses on its rebirth. After the Phoenix has completed its lifespan, it is said that the Phoenix would resurrect itself arising from the ashes. Alternatively, in Egyptian mythology it is said that the Phoenix would live for 500 years, after which its lifespan would end, it would then burn itself on the altar of the sun in the Egyptian city of Heliopolis and be reborn from its own ashes. The Phoenix is a clear symbol of rebirth and creation, with its life cycle always being renewed (Kapach 2023).

In *Hereditary*, a clear symbol in the scenes chosen as described previously, when Peter enters the attic, we can see a swarm of flies surrounding him. Flies are quite popularly used symbols, not just in horror movies but in art in general. They are quite often associated with death and decay in mythology. During Renaissance times people saw flies as having supernatural powers associated with evil and corruption, because of their seemingly spontaneous nature of being born from decaying fruit or rotting organic matter (Hickson 2020).

The use of the colour red, which is present in all five movies, grasps our attention immediately due to its long wavelength, which makes it the most visible colour within the colour spectrum. It is important to mention that the meaning of the colour red differs within different cultures. To connect psychological themes in this thesis, it will be analysed mostly from this perspective, however, it is important to be critical of colour psychology since the effects of how we respond to different colours are subject to personal, cultural, and situational factors.

In colour psychology, it is said that red is the most provocative of any colour, and due to this fact, it has more opposing emotional associations than any other colours. Red is universally attributed to feelings of passion, lust, and love, as well as power and anger. The duality of red also connects to that of the fire, due to the clear opposing emotions that these elements stir in us, therefore having various symbols. Red can be associated with danger because red is the colour of fire and blood. At the same time, red also stimulates excitement and energy, which is said to elevate our blood pressure and metabolism, increase our heart and respiration rate (Cherry 2023). Historically, red is also the first colour that humans mastered and fabricated, and one of the first to be used by artists during the prehistoric period. Red also has religious significance, as being the blood of Christ and the fires of Hell. In the Renaissance period, red was used in paintings to draw the viewer's attention to the most influential figures depicted (Braam 2024).

5 WOMANHOOD: Photography and moving image installation



PICTURE 9. WOMANHOOD Installation, 2024. Picture: Fofanova Victoria 2024.

My installation for the Fine Art graduating exhibition (see PICTURE 9), consists of four self-portrait photographs, one experimental short film, one video installation and a spacial installation made of red thread. The installation explores a deeply personal connection to my grandmothers, who were young women during the Decree 770 in communist Romania. The decree of the communist Romanian government of Nicolae Ceausescu was personally sanctioned by Ceausescu in 1966. It restricted abortion and contraception, intending to create a new and large Romanian population due to the decrease of number in births after the 1950's. To enforce this decree, society was strictly controlled, contraceptives were removed from sale and all women were required to be monitored monthly by a gynecologist. Sex education was refocused primarily on the benefits of motherhood, including the ostensible satisfaction of being a heroic mother who gives her homeland many children. The decree was abolished on the 26th of December 1989, days after the Romanian revolution. From 1966 to 1989 during twenty-four years, over ten thousand women died from illegal abortion, although the number is most likely higher. With this project, my aim was to take a difficult topic which is deeply connected to my roots, and through creativity seek empowerment not only for myself, but also for the resilient women who underwent tremendous suffering.

By bringing traumatic events forward, I intended to use my art for the purpose of empowerment, transcending pain and bringing to fruition something cathartic for myself, while also honoring women's anger and passion. This process of research and diving deep into creativity was extremely therapeutic and beneficial for me. I have found that my analysis on female characters and horror inspired me to seek similar answers within my own self and my own art. Is there a way to embrace painful memories, emotions and collective traumatic events as a way for something powerful to be created? I see creative creation as a rebirth, and through my own experience of immersing myself into this project, there are clear connections to be made of the power of daring to look deep within pain, to come to terms with it in order to transcend it. The importance of symbolism and visual elements to convey emotions is significant, as I have discovered in my analysis of female characters in horror. The use of horrific and taboo themes act as a propelling notion for uncovering something new, birthing and giving new meaning to something that is difficult to face. The destructiveness felt in untangling difficult emotions, of putting myself in a challenging rollercoaster of emotions had the ability of pushing me forward, of giving me hope to keep going, because deep down I knew of the cathartic outcome waiting to be revealed through my artworks.



PICTURE 10. Unveiled, Self-portrait photography series 2024. Picture: Fofanova Victoria 2024.

My self-portrait series is the first artwork displayed as part of my installation (see PICTURE 9 and PICTURE 10). I have decided to use self-portraits in my works for the pure reason of acting as an image of a woman who is embracing herself, as a way to honour her ancestors that couldn't. Women during this time of

suffering and restriction had to stay hidden, were tortured and forced into having children, and could not express themselves. Through props, body performance and colour I wanted to convey these emotions as deeply as I could. Red for me as a symbol in this instance is used to show power, anger and passion, as a contrasting color to that of the cold hues also present in these photographs. The colder tones in the photographs are another way for me to portray the duality of emotions; hot-cold. The progression of my positioning within the photograph is intentional, perhaps as a way to show an undergoing transformation that can be seen through the narrative set within the artworks.



PICTURE 11. Installation view of moving image works *Rebirth* (projection) and *Reverie* (screen) 2024. Picture: Fofanova Victoria 2024.



PICTURE 12. Still from the experimental short film *Rebirth*, 2024.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, the meaning of rebirths has been at the core of my analysis in uncovering polar emotions depicted in female horror characters. Through my experimental short film *Rebirth* (see PICTURE 12), I wanted to bring together elements such as fire, red thread, warm tones, and cool tones to create a unity of visual elements. The depiction of a ritual through body movement and dancing with the red thread acts as a visualization for the process of letting go of pain. The purpose of the ritualistic performance is to show a progression of emotions, as well as a release of emotions.



PICTURE 13. Still from the moving image installation *Reverie*, 2024.

My moving image installation *Reverie* (see PICTURE 13) is a continuous slow-motion loop video of a distorted reflection as seen on the water. The use of water as an element for this work connecting to *Rebirth*, is once again for the purpose of combining polars together. Contrasting with the intense visuals of *Rebirth*, I wanted to combine a calmer and dreamier moving image work to offer a shifting perspective to the viewer. *Reverie* is the last artwork part of the installation, aiming to close the narrative I've constructed within this installation (see PICTURE 9). The red thread in *Reverie* is floating on the water, which as I try to grasp with my hands further distorts my reflection, and eventually, I end up letting go of the red thread and the reflection gets calmer once again.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of my research was conducted as a means of connecting feminist film theories, psychoanalytic theories, and visual analysis to reach a better understanding of female characters in horror. This has revealed to me that the use of horrific images in horror can act as a tool for us to attach meaning through visual elements and symbolism.

The purpose of analysing five topical horror films with psychological and supernatural themes has been to show that women can be multidimensionally portrayed in films, and horror does give more freedom for exploration of taboo topics, especially related to womanhood. Uncovering primal instincts through visuals could offer an approach for uncovering suppressed emotions within ourselves. My analysis aims to show the ways a female character should not be put in just one category but can belong to many simultaneously contradicting ones.

As I have noticed within my own artwork project, to combine taboo topics such as the research of the Decree 770 with my own personal connections to my grandmothers, has been expressed by using visual elements. My goal was to also showcase how difficult emotions can be empowering by transcending them to bring forth something new, in this instance through moving images.

Sabina Spielrein's theory has propelled me into connecting opposing emotions and themes, and I find her theory to have been the binding element of further interrelatedness between psychoanalysis and visual analysis.

Through the conducted analysis, my goal was to understand the meaning of symbolism and its relevance in the construction of our internal visual language. This also aims to further emphasize the desperate need of more intricately structured female characters.

From a female perspective, we are compelled to make sense of the characters development and storyline, but most importantly we also wish to find relatability. My question is: Why can't a female character be equally dangerous, troubled, attractive, strong, vulnerable, emotional, and empowered? Why is it sought after to compartmentalize and define female figures into specific boxes, as if more than one contradictory emotion or personality trait cannot exist within the other? Stagnant portrayals further leave us wishing for more context and does not serve the

viewer with answered dilemmas or relatability to the characters. We as humans are not just one thing, we do not fall into one single “trope” or category, therefore, further complex characteristics should be explored and applied onto film characters in general, but especially in female characters.

Through presenting five contemporary horror films with female lead characters, I do have a hopeful approach towards the future of filmmaking and for emotions to be portrayed in more multifaceted ways in female characters. I have reached the conclusion through exploring these topics, that there has been a constant evolving of female characters and their development within a narrative, especially with more female filmmakers coming to the forefront of the industry, as well as in the horror genre. More so, I believe that connecting feminist theories, film theories and psychoanalytic theories to those of symbolism and visual language have been successful and the connection between these methods should be further researched and explored.

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