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Towards a Feminist Historiography of Horror Cinema

Submission for *Horror Studies* – special issue on 1980s Horror Film Culture

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Abstract

Jackie Kong released four feature films between 1981–1987, including the horror films *The Being* (1981) and *Blood Diner* (1987). She directed all four films, while also working variously as screenwriter, producer and editor on individual productions. In this essay, I use Kong’s experiences of making horror films in the 1980s as a way of critically revisiting our histories of 1980s horror film culture. I offer a feminist model of doing horror film history: not only uncovering and illuminating the unknown or little–known work of women in horror film, but also critically thinking about the way we write our histories, and what this might say about our representation of personal, cultural, and national identities. Ultimately, this essay is guided by the following question: what might a feminist historiography of horror cinema look like?

Keywords

Jackie Kong, Women Filmmakers, Horror Film, Feminist Historiography, Blood Diner, The Being, Women's Film History

Towards a feminist historiography of horror cinema

2016 was an excellent year for filmmaker Jackie Kong. In June, she received a Etheria Film Night inspiration award, honouring pioneering women filmmakers whose own work has inspired the generations of women that followed. Two months later, Lionsgate launched the Vestron Video Collectors Series, a series of remastered Blu-rays from the cult 1980s VHS label. One of their first releases was Kong's horror-comedy *Blood Diner* (1987), and following the release, Kong set off on a nationwide '*Blood Diner* Insanity Tour', screening the film at theatres across North America. By the end of the year, she arrived at the Fangoria / Blumhouse podcast *Shockwaves* to discuss the new popularity of her final feature film.

Welcoming her onto the podcast, co-host Rebekah McKendry congratulated Kong on her recent Etheria award and noted, 'I'm thrilled. I don't get a lot of women directors on here!' They discussed her career making genre films in the 1980s, which notably included four feature film releases in four years. Kong wrote, produced and directed her first feature, the horror film *The Being* (1981) in 1980 at the age of twenty-one. In 1984, she then wrote, directed, produced and edited her second feature, the comedy *Night Patrol*. After *Night Patrol*, she signed a three-picture deal with Lightning Pictures, Vestron Pictures' low-budget genre division. She then wrote, directed and produced the comedy *The Under Achievers* (1987), and produced and directed *Blood Diner* before Vestron filed for bankruptcy. Kong's run of four feature films released in four years was achieved before she was twenty-eight.

However, *Shock Waves* also spent time discussing the difficulties that Kong has faced securing work. She explained that even though her films were 'number one in New York; platinum in the video market. Great reviews in New York, which is the toughest place to get a good review', still 'nobody offered me a job'. She made connections between her identity and the lack of work that she was offered. She discussed not only gender, as raised by McKendry

(also a horror filmmaker in her own right), but also the way that, as a young Asian–American filmmaker, her race and her age intersected with her gender. She revealed that she ‘grew up in a family where I felt I could do what I wanted artistically’, but ‘what I found out in the industry is that women, especially women of colour – have no opportunity’ (Galluzzo, McKendry and Kane 2017).

In this essay, I use Kong’s experiences of making horror films in the 1980s as a way of critically revisiting our histories of horror cinema. Here I am indebted to Jennifer M. Bean’s essay, ‘Toward a feminist historiography of early cinema’. She discusses the scholarly excitement generated by recovering the histories of women working in silent cinema but then cites an important note of caution. For Bean, the discovery of women filmmakers is ‘inexorably bound to a series of questions concerning the production of historical and disciplinary knowledge’. She asks, ‘how can we assert the presence of female film pioneers without simply amalgamating a revised set of early cinema’s finest hits, of remarkable “firsts”, of isolated, explanatory contributions?’ (2002: 2). Bean’s question has much to offer scholars of horror cinema working today. With the 1980s as our chosen period of study, we can ask, how do we create knowledge about this period of women’s work? Furthermore, how do we do this in terms of Kong’s multifaceted identity? As Bean suggests, when we do our feminist film histories, we need to find a way to move beyond a gender paradigm that ‘has never been comprehensive enough, never able to account for the production of whiteness or blackness – indeed of race of any kind – much less ethnicity, nationality, and the distinctions of class’ (2002: 2).

This essay then offers a feminist model of doing film history: not only uncovering and illuminating the unknown or little-known work of women in horror film, but also critically thinking about the way we write our histories (and in this case, our histories of 1980s horror film culture in particular). In short, I am using Kong’s career as a way of asking a much bigger question of our discipline: What might a feminist historiography of horror cinema look like?

To constellate: academic histories

To explore Kong's work history, in the context of 1980s horror filmmaking and as a woman filmmaker, I draw upon Monica Dall'Asta and Jane M. Gaines' metaphor of 'constellation'. I am interested in their use of the verb to 'constellate', which they use as a way of connecting the women *they* are, working now, with the women they are studying. To do this, they gather their historical research findings on women filmmakers, disciplinary debates at the time of doing the research, and their own critical thinking and make connections across the three areas. As they explain, 'the present is itself historical. This is why it no longer makes sense to think of the intellectual history of our field – that of feminist academics and their discourse – as separate from the history of women of women who worked inside as well as outside... film industries' (2015: 22–23). In what follows, I attempt to 'constellate' Kong and her films in two ways. First, I demonstrate an absence of work on this filmmaker in academic scholarship *about* the 1980s, and academic scholarship written *during* the 1980s. I then consider the narrative histories of women horror filmmakers that have emerged in the popular press over the last decade or so and attempt to locate Kong within this arena. When these attempts to constellate ultimately fail, I raise six problems for horror film historiography to contend with. Finally, I create my own Kong constellation, a room of her own, built from my words.

The horror film culture of the 1980s has been written about extensively in the academy, but it tends to focus on just a few, distinct topics. The UK video nasties debate has been explored by Kate Egan (2007), while the slasher film cycles have been considered at length (Shimabukuro 2015; Taylor 2020; Trencansky 2010). Beyond these topics, much of the academic work on this period is led by analysis of male filmmakers, including John Carpenter (Mulvey–Roberts 2004), David Cronenberg (McLarty 2015), Tobe Hooper (Cherry 2021),

Stanley Kubrick (Mee 2017) and Sam Raimi (Egan 2011). To date, there is no academic essay, journal article or monograph dedicated to Kong and her films.

Next, we can consider the intellectual climate for women scholars writing about horror in the 1980s. This was an important decade for horror scholarship, both for the legitimization of the genre as a scholarly subject of study, and for the women academics who led the field. The key publications in this decade tend towards essays, and we read the early stages of horror film theory through journal articles and chapters in edited collections. In 1984, Linda Williams published 'When the woman looks'. Two years later, Tania Modleski published 'The terror of pleasure', and Barbara Creed published 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection' in a *Screen* dossier on horror. Carol J. Clover's essay 'Her body, himself', was published a year later, in the journal *Representations*.

In terms of approach, a number of these writers considered gender, which they tended to explore it through representations on screen rather than behind the scenes. Furthermore, as was typical for film scholarship in this period, most of these accounts were methodologically underpinned by psychoanalysis, which tended to make connections between the women represented on screen, and the imagined textual address to the (usually male) spectator. The choice of case studies also reflects the prevailing trends of the time. Modleski, and later, Isabel Pinedo in her 1991 PhD (published as *Recreational Terror* in 1996) considered 'postmodern' horror film in terms of American horror cinema in the 1980s. Creed leaned towards 1970s American cinema. Vera Dika's 1986 New York University PhD thesis (reprinted as *Games of Terror* in 1990) focussed on the stalker film, or what Clover would go on to describe as the slasher in her own work. It's worth noting that Dika recently made clear the distinction between the terms: "'Stalker'" indicates a spatial category, that is, the movement of characters through a space, while "'Slasher'" foregrounds a narrative action' (Dika 2021: 6). However you choose

to define the (sub) genre (or cycle), Clover, Creed, Dika, Modleski and Pinedo tended to prioritise 1970s and 1980s North American films.

So where is Kong in all this? Her history is told, long after the fact, through footnotes. Creed and Clover both expanded their 1980s essays into seminal monographs published in the 1990s. *Blood Diner* appears in one footnote in Clover's *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, when she notes that it is referencing *Blood Feast* (1963) (1992: 32). In *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed includes *Blood Diner* in a list of films that represent the eating of human flesh (1993: 9). In another 1990s monograph, Mikita Brottman's *Offensive Films: Toward an Anthropology of Cinema Vomitif*, *Blood Diner* appears in a list of 1980s cannibal films (1997: 182). Other than that, in the scholarship of or even in the decades that follow, there is nothing.

Contemporary academic scholarship does not develop this position. In Patricia Pisters' *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror*, *Blood Diner* is included in the (excellent) 'Pre-Millennial' filmography list (2020: 214). In Pisters' essay, 'Carrie's Sisters' for the *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine* collection, Kong and *Blood Diner* are included in a footnote listing 1980s women film directors (2020: 134). *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* is the only academic publication to discuss *Blood Diner*, as opposed to list, which it does as an example of a woman's approach to horror, with a focus on their depiction of gender on screen (Murray and Heumann 2016: 147, 166).

The only other places *Blood Diner* arises is in trade press filmographies, in fan-orientated books cataloguing 1980s splatter films.

I cannot find any academic references to *The Being*.

To constellate: popular histories

In their introduction to *Doing Women's Film History*, Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight ask us to consider methodological and conceptual questions about how to research women's history. They suggest that these questions may include 'how to identify women's often uncredited and undocumented participation in their respective cinema cultures; where, in the absence of formal archives, to locate previously unimagined sources of evidence; and how to reconceptualise film history in order to locate the impact of women in that history' (2015: 1–2). In bringing these important questions to horror scholarship, I want to now consider how we identify Kong's contribution in the 1980s, where we might find evidence for her work, and how we might reconceptualise our horror film histories to illuminate her films. Given Kong's absence in our scholarly archives, we have a need to analyse popular discourses around our subject, from sources such as broadsheets, magazines, and online news sources, film lists and reviews. This is necessary work to consider women's film history. As Katarzyna Paszkiewicz surmises so neatly in her essay 'When a woman directs (a horror film)', when we explore the women filmmakers, we have to think about not only 'industrial pressure and institutional discrimination, the commerce of auteurism and the public profiles', but also 'film reception and the discursive circulation of women's cinema in a wider sense' (2018: 50).

In 2016, I wanted to write a call for papers for an edited book collection on women working in horror film, an idea that eventually became *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (Peirse 2020). I couldn't find anything substantive in academic discourses, and so I turned to the online forums, lists and fan accounts around this topic. I soon discovered that there was a lot written online about the then-rise of women working in horror film in the 2010s. However, I was more interested in attempting to demarcate a substantial history for these women, one that did not reduce women's contributions to a contemporary phenomenon. I found the information I needed in a scrappy, piecemeal fashion online, in articles, listicles, filmmaker interviews, festival screening lists, film forums. Two of my preliminary sources

were Alison Nastasi's thoroughly-researched '50 must-see horror films directed by women', published in 2014 on *Flavorwire*, and 'ExperimentoFilm's outstanding 'Horror Films Directed by Women (1966–2022) list curated on MUBI.

I was keen to watch as many of these pre-2010 films as I could, but I ran into issues of access. A few of the 1980s films on these lists were, by the 2010s, relatively well known and available. *Pet Sematary* (1989), directed by Mary Lambert, has been regularly re-released by Paramount for home viewing over the years in a variety of formats, while *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), directed by Amy Holden-Jones, was released on Blu-ray by Scream Factory in 2014. However, many of the other films could not, in 2016, be accessed legally, or viewed online in good quality. I found Kong in Nastasi's list and was then delighted to discover that Vestron had – in that same year – released a brand-new remastered Blu-ray of *Blood Diner*. I ordered it immediately and set to researching a history of this new-to-me filmmaker.

This memory reveals the importance of the work of distribution labels and the usefulness of online fandom and curation for academic scholarship. However, it also raises historiographic issues. Since the 2010s, online 'listicles', of the '10 horror films you didn't know were directed by women', or '15 women who direct horror films' continue to grow. And, as they do, they cement a narrative which can be roughly categorised as follows: Women working prior to 2000s are early, isolated examples. Ida Lupino (*The Hitch Hiker*, 1953) is one of the earliest. Stephanie Rothman (*The Velvet Vampire*, 1971) is a 1960s and 1970s exploitation pioneer. The 1980s and 1990s are Kathryn Bigelow (*Near Dark*, 1987), Lambert, Holden-Jones, Katt Shea (*Dance of the Damned*, 1989), Rachel Talalay (*Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, 1991), Fran Rubel Kuzui (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1992) and occasionally, Antonia Bird (*Ravenous*, 1999) (see Kermode 2017; Li 2020). Filmmakers in the 2000s are working during a transitional period in genre filmmaking, as we move from a series of isolated examples (1950s – 1990s) to a breakthrough decade (2010s). The 2000s filmmaker roll call

includes Mary Harron (*American Psycho*, 2000), Marina de Van (*Dans ma peau / In My Skin*, 2002) and Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*, 2001) (see Thompson 2019). As noted, the 2010s is the ‘rise’ of the woman horror filmmaker, the beginning of an apparent, unprecedented ‘golden age’; whose numbers includes Julia Ducournau (*Raw*, 2016), Anna Biller (*The Love Witch*, 2016), Alice Lowe (*Prevenge*, 2016), Ana Lily Amirpour (*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, 2014), Jennifer Kent (*The Babadook*, 2014) and Karyn Kusama (*The Invitation*, 2015).

There are, with the benefit of a few years of hindsight, issues that arise with our women’s horror film history being written in this way, issues that I will discuss in the next section of this essay. Before that though, I want to ask of our popular histories, the same question that I brought to the academic histories: where is Kong? Often, she is simply not included: Kong and *Blood Diner* are infrequent visitors to these online histories. Kong was there in Nastasi’s article, where I first found her, but she tends to only appear in articles that make a deliberate effort to go beyond this now-established history. We are now at a point where we have established a narrative of what women-made horror looks like, and in these histories, Kong’s inclusion often only occurs as an added extra, the equivalent of the academic footnote. Kong is in the ‘10 incredible female horror directors you may not have heard of’ (Gisleson 2019). Karen Arthur (*The Mafu Cage*, 1978) and Kei Fujiwara (*Organ*, 1995) suffer a similar fate.

I am not trying to perform elitist (and historically gendered) gatekeeping reminiscent of cult fandom (Hollows 2003; Read 2003). I am not suggesting that people are wrong not to write about *The Being* or *Blood Diner*. Nor, in the scholarly cases mentioned, am I arguing that these academics are neglectful for only listing Kong’s last film, rather than analysing it in any meaningful way. I do recognise that the 1980s holy trinity of Bigelow, Lambert and Holden-Jones are referenced repeatedly for good reason. Bigelow was the first woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director; Lambert directed a Stephen King adaptation for a

Hollywood studio; Holden–Jones directed the first instalment in a much–loved cult slasher franchise. Then, there are also practical issues of availability and visibility. As I’ve already noted, all three of Bigelow, Lambert and Holden–Jones’ films have been freely available for purchase in mainstream media outlets, and in a variety of formats, for some time. In contrast, *The Being* circulated briefly on VHS in North America and Europe in the 1980s, and then had a very limited DVD releases on small boutique distribution labels in the 2010s: until recently, you would need to be ‘inside’ cult film communities to be familiar with it. Until the Lionsgate remaster in 2016, the same applies for *Blood Diner*. Instead, my concern here is the creation of a ‘consolidated narrative of origin’ (Pollack 1999: 3–4). The academic and popular narratives forming around women horror filmmakers do a disservice to the breadth and depth of women’s work in horror film, in terms of history, nationality and identity.

To constellate... or consolidate (a canon): six issues

In ‘Film History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory’, Jane Gaines argues that ‘any new historical writing on women’ in the film industry ‘will also be an intellectual history of feminism and film theory—and the one will be written for the other’. She explains, ‘knowing what we know about the way the historically distant functions to legitimate the proximate, we know that the “historical turn” in film feminism is also even, and as much about, feminist film theory’ (2004: 117). This observation demonstrates the need for a self–reflexive turn in our work: the need to question how we work as scholars of horror cinema, and what it means when we write histories at a specific moment in time. I am inspired here also by Valentina Vitali who points out that ‘the historical specificity of film historiography would not, in itself, be a problem if those who practice it would always take the place and time from which they “do” history as the point of the departure of their inquiry. The problem is that they rarely do’ (2010: 141).

I've already mapped out how, in the 1980s and 1990s, horror film theory focussed on representation and spectatorship. However, in the new millennium, horror began to turn its attention away from gender. It diversified into three key directions: toward affect and trauma (Powell 2005; Blake 2013), toward issues of the national and transnational (Choi and Wada–Marciano, 2009) and – inspired by the new film history model – to archival and contextual accounts (Peirse 2013). At the same time, feminism grew increasingly interested in women's film histories. From the mid 2000s, there was 'a rapid growth' in research 'devoted to women's participation in the history of cinema' (Gledhill and Knight 2015: 1). With this growth in empirical findings about women workers came a questioning criticality of film history. As Gaines reveals, her monograph *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* uses 'the theories of history to trouble assumptions about *history*, the concept, which entails scrutinising historiographic method and admitting its shortcomings' (2018: 3, 5, her emphasis).

These disciplinary developments in horror film studies, and in feminism film history, have generated a new body of work on women in genre cinema. This development has gathered pace in the late 2010s and early 2020s, generating edited collections (Kozma and Freibert 2021) and monographs (Harrod 2021; Paszkiewicz 2018), as well as a growing number of publications dedicated entirely to women working in horror film (Heller–Nicholas 2020b; Luper 2020; Peirse 2020; Vosper 2020; Tortolani 2021; Wax and McKendry, 2021; McCollum and Clarke 2022). This is the context that I am working in today, and this is the context in which I will now raise six interconnected issues for feminist film history, for work on women filmmakers, and for horror film studies. Each of these issues will be illuminated through the absences of Kong in academic and popular accounts of horror film.

First, the focus on the 2010s onwards makes the work of filmmakers in the preceding decades, including the 1980s, increasingly invisible. For example, the Rotten Tomatoes' 'Best

horror movies directed by women' list nods to Rothman and Bigelow, but then skips to the 2010s.

The second issue is nationality of production. In academia, we are finally beginning to see a small amount of scholarship on contemporary women horror filmmakers that goes beyond the Eurocentric and Western dynamic, including research on Shuhaimi Baba and Zarina Abdullah (Izharuddin 2015); Mari Asato (Rodriguez Fontao and Zárata 2021), and Aparna Sen (Niyogi De 2020), as well as scholarship on Ann Hui's more recent films (Chan 2018). However, we are just at the beginning of vital work, and most of these accounts focus on contemporary filmmakers. In our popular histories of women horror filmmakers, there is an overwhelming focus on North American productions, with the occasional European (let's be honest: French) film included to assuage any concerns that emerge from an entirely anglophone canon. What would happen if we explored the films and filmmakers working before, during and after the 1980s, with a more global context? What might our horror film histories look like?

Third, when 'older' (e.g. pre-2010) films are considered in academic and popular histories, there is an emphasis on films produced and / or distributed by Hollywood studios, such as *Halloween II* (1981) and *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982) (produced by Debra Hill for Universal Pictures) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Twentieth Century Fox). This decision minimises independent and exploitation cinema (not to mention filmmaking cultures outside of North America), where women were much more likely to be found in production roles. It is not a coincidence that women found more opportunities to work outside Hollywood, as 'the old belief that women were innately financially incompetent was a major factor in Hollywood studios' reluctance to trust women with big budgets' (Sheehan 2021: 487).

Fourth, the emphasis on the director is problematic. Scholarship on women's cinema has historically 'tended to neglect the authorship of women not working as directors' (Shearer

2020: 50), speaking to Geetha Ramanathan's point that feminist film criticism has 'inevitably shadowed' the 'male models of authorship despite our well-mean disclaimers of the same' (2006: 3). In other words, when we prioritise the director as the maker of meaning, as the first port of call for understanding the creation of a film, we become part of a decades-long tradition predicated upon 'the dominant straight-white-male auteurist paradigm' (Heller-Nicholas 2020a: 404).

Relatedly, and on our fifth issue, the directorial focus elides the important work of women working in other creative roles, such as writer, producer, editor, cinematographer, and production designer. This is a particular problem given that editing and screenwriting are the few industry professions where women working in Hollywood have been able to make some limited progress (Francke 1994; Hill 2009: 125). A recent *Rolling Stone* article referenced Hill as a writer-producer, but in many of these popular accounts, the director is the first, and often only, point of reference (Reilly 2016). I do acknowledge here that my own work on Kong – while she also writes, produces and edits – is primarily through her work as an American-born director and thus falls into some of these trappings. This is a common issue in feminist film history. As Priya Jaikumar notes, feminist film historians' attempts to document 'the contribution of women to the film industry represents not only an important attempt to write women's history but a rejection of the claims made by, or more typically on behalf of, one person—the male director—to have priority over the text', but, at the same time, 'the figure of the filmmaker (typically, but not exclusively, the director) has rarely been so central to popular film culture as it is today' (2010: 213). However, I do attempt to ameliorate this issue in the following section of this essay.

This brings us to my sixth and final point. When Kong states, 'we had to make our own path, there was no previous road', we know that the histories we are writing are failing our filmmakers (Darko 2018). This is about a personal politic. In a *Morbidly Beautiful* interview,

Kong revealed that in the 1980s, she faced ‘every possible obstacle, since I was a young woman of colour in a white, male–dominated field [...] No-one knew what to make of me. I couldn’t be categorised. They became confused by the gender and race issues I presented’ (Darko 2018). Kong’s comment points to the importance of creating an intersectional way of thinking about women’s horror film history, which recognises not only that ‘whatever the tribulations to which biological gender has been subject in social understanding, the category of “woman” is still discursively meaningful’ (Harrod and 2018: 6), but also that we need to complicate ‘the use of “woman” in mainstream or white feminist discourse’ (Francis 2010: 99).

While there are some women of colour filmmakers in these emerging women’s horror film histories, they are in the minority, a minority reflected in the predominance of bigger budget, more well–known productions, which historically – when they have included women – have demonstrated systematic preference for white women. Lambert remains the sole woman directing a studio horror production during the 1980s (and this is an important distinction: some studios have *distributed* the horror films after the expensive business of production is concluded, but it is rare in the 1980s to find a major studio *production* helmed by a woman). If we stay with American filmmaking, and if we stay with the director role, when I draw on research by Robin Means Coleman and Ashlee Blackwell, the earliest examples I can find of Black women directing horror feature films are Neema Barnette’s *Spirit Lost* (1997) and Kasi Lemmons’ *Eve’s Bayou* (1997) – both released a full decade after *Blood Diner* (Means Coleman 2011: 174, 182; Blackwell 2022). I am making a case here that when we do write our histories, we need to write them with an explicit *recognition* of these gaps, and a consideration of the structural and institutional discriminations that led to these statistics.

We then need to think about how these discriminations and inequalities feed into film history. In the 1980s, Black feminists challenged the prevailing thought of second–wave feminism in terms of its exclusionary practices. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar challenged

‘imperial feminism’ which they argued ‘a particular tradition, white, Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism in current political practice’ and ‘the inability of feminist theory’ to speak to the experiences of Black and working–class women ‘in any meaningful way’ (1984: 3–4). This imperialist model is precisely what we can see happening in our emerging women horror filmmaker histories, particularly in relation to issues of self and nation. So, when we begin to *consolidate* these women filmmaker histories – who is important in each decade, who did what, and – we need to do this with the complexity of production roles and of the identities of those filmmakers in mind.

This in turn speaks to the feminist critique of canonisation. In *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, Griselda Pollack points out that canons are ‘the retrospectively legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity’ and that the ‘inclusion of texts into the canon assumes quality and status and creates privilege’ (1999: 3–4). The privilege inherent here, in our combined horror history, is a predication for inclusion of the work of predominantly white anglophone women. This speaks to the need, in feminism film historiography, to enrich the possibilities and potentiality of horror film history, of finding places for not just ‘women’ (read: white women) but women filmmakers from a range of backgrounds, identities and nationalities. As Pollack concludes, if artists are left out of the canon or ignored ‘because they are women or non–European’ for example, then ‘the canon then becomes an increasingly impoverished and impoverishing filter for the totality of cultural possibilities generation after generation’ (1999: 3–4).

A constellation

What might a constellated history for Kong look like? To return to Bean, how do we explore her contribution – historically, contextually, theoretically – without narrativizing her an ‘isolated’, exceptional and ‘remarkable’ individual? As the previous section of this essay

demonstrates, this is a particularly important point given that she is a woman of colour. As Tressie McMillan Cottom points out, ‘any system of oppression must allow exceptions to validate itself as meritorious’ (2019: 52). To make this constellation, I am indebted to Maya Montañez Smukler’s *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema*. Her goal is ‘neither to rewrite the history of American cinema during the 1970s nor to construct a separate history of women directors of commercial films during that period’, but instead produce an ‘*expansionist and integrationist film history*’ that expands the existing historical narrative of the 1970s film industry’ and integrates ‘the contribution of women directors’ into this expanded narrative (2019: 15). Given that Kong was working in North America in the 1980s, I will set up her constellation within this cultural context, before branching out into a more global model of 1980s horror film history.

The 1980s is a crucial time for women working in horror film. It is when women entered executive-level development roles at production and distribution companies, including Sara Risher at New Line Cinema (the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Critters* franchises) and Illana Frank at Norstar Entertainment (producer of *Prom Night II: Hello Mary Lou*, 1987). Women entering these roles was important, because the executives were the people with the ‘power to green light films’ (Montañez Smukler 2019: 279). At the same time, women were setting up their own production companies. In 1980, Hill formed Debra Hill Productions to release *The Fog* (1980). In 1981, Kathleen Kennedy co-founded Amblin Entertainment and produced or executive produced a range of horror films across the 1980s and 1990s, including *Poltergeist* (1982), *Gremlins* (1984) and *Arachnophobia* (1990). Her films were then distributed by Hollywood studios including Universal Pictures and Buena Vista. In 1982, Gale Ann Hurd formed her own production company, Pacific Western Productions, and went on to produce a range of action, thriller and horror films, including *Aliens* (1986). In 1983, Julie Corman

founded New Horizon Pictures with her husband Roger, producing *Chopping Mall* (1986) and *Sorority House Massacre II* (1990), among many others.

There were also greater opportunities for women to gain hands-on production experience in the plethora low-budget, often straight to video productions that proliferated in the 1980s. The quick turnaround allowed the eager young filmmaker to amass several credits quickly, and (ideally) secure a more senior post with each new film. Kristine Peterson was second assistant director on Janet Greek's *The Ladies Club* (1986), first assistant director on *Chopping Mall* (1986), and then directed *Deadly Dreams* (1988). Rachel Talalay worked her way up from production manager on *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), to producer on the third instalment, and director for Freddy's fourth outing. Similarly, Hope Perello was a production co-ordinator on *Troll* (1986), an associate producer on *Catacombs* (1988), a producer and assistant director on *Puppet Master* (1989) and director on *Howling VI: The Freaks* (1991).

It was during this period of change in the industry that Kong wrote and directed her debut feature film, *The Being*, made in 1981 and released in 1983. Women directors increased in this decade. Filmmakers taking sole directorial credit around this time include Sheela (*Yukshaganam*, 1976) in India, Ann Hui (*Zhuang dao zheng / The Spooky Bunch*, 1980) in Hong Kong, Yang Chia-yun (*Sha chu chong wei / Exposed to Danger*, 1982) in Taiwan, Isela Vega (*Las amantes del señor de la noche / Lovers of the Lord of the Night*, 1986) in Mexico, and Bao Zhi-Fang (*Wu ye liang dian / Two in the Morning*, 1987) in China. In North America, women directors of horror films included Barbara Peeters (*Humanoids from the Deep*, 1980), Beverley Sebastian (*Rocktober Blood*, 1984) and Janet Greek (*Spellbinder*, 1988).

Women directors were more common when directing was just one of multiple production roles undertaken. Kong has carried out multiple roles on every one of her four feature films, and her contemporaries are no exception. In Brazil we find Rosângela

Maldonado, the writer–director of *A Mulher Que Põe a Pomba no Ar / The Woman Who Puts the Dove in the Air* (1978), in Taiwan, writer–director Ling Chang (*Lang nu bai mo / Wolf Devil Woman*, 1982), in New Zealand, writer–director Gaylene Preston (*Mr Wrong*, 1984), in former Czechoslovakia, writer–director Vera Chytilová (*Vlci bouda / Wolf's Hole*, 1987) and in Australia, writer–director Ann Turner (*Celia*, 1988). In North America, women in similar ‘director *and*’ roles include producer–director–editor Genie Joseph (*Spookies*, 1988), director–editor Nettie Peña (*Home Sweet Home*, 1981), cinematographer–director–editor Roberta Findlay (*The Oracle*, 1985), writer–director Carol Frank (*Sorority House Massacre*, 1986) and Doris Wishman, director–producer–editor of *A Night to Dismember* (1983).

Kong then wrote, directed, produced and edited her second feature, *Night Patrol*, released in 1984. This was the first time she was credited as a feature film producer. Women producers made inroads into genre filmmaking in the 1940s but were still very much in the minority in the intervening decades (Stamp 2020). However, producers Kanta Ramsay (*Purana Mandir*, 1984) and Anjali Ramsay (*Veerana*, 1988) buck this trend in India, as does Claudia Chung Chun (*Sien lui yau wan / A Chinese Ghost Story*, 1987) in Hong Kong, while Lily Yu Monteverde (AKA ‘Mother Lily’) founded Regal Entertainment in the Philippines in 1962, produced her first film in 1976, then produced or executive produced the Filipino horror franchise *Shake, Rattle and Roll* (1984–2014) from the early 1980s onwards. In North America, in addition to Hurd, Hill and Frank running production companies, we tend to find women producing individual films while working in multi–hyphenated roles, where producing is just one element of their job. These filmmakers include not only Kong, but also writer–producer Ruth Avergon (*Night School*, 1980), writer–producer–director Deborah Brock (*The Slumber Party Massacre II*, 1987), writer–producer Renee Harmon (*Jungle Trap*, 2016) and in the UK, director–producer Gabrielle Beaumont (*The Godsend*, 1980).

In addition, Kong was not alone in working as an editor on her second feature. Women editors were also growing in number during this decade, both inside and outside the studio system. Editors are particularly important to raise awareness of, as they undergo what Julia Wright describes as ‘a double invisibility’: women editors are ‘already invisible to film history by virtue of their “invisible art”’, and then they are ‘edited out of books that intend to bring visibility to the editing profession’ (2009: 7–8). In Hollywood, Tina Hirsch edited *Gremlins* (1984) in a joint production for Hurd’s Amblin Entertainment, and Warner Bros. Other important editors in this decade include Huguette Boisvert (*La nuit de la mort! / Night of Death*, 1980) and Marie–Sophie Dubus and Suzanne Lang–Willar (*Possession*, 1981) in France, and Rosanna Landi, who edited numerous Italian horror films (including *Zombi 5: Killing Birds*, 1988) throughout the 1980s, often under the pseudonym ‘Kathleen Stratton’. In North America, we can cite a large number of women editors working on horror films: Lilla Pedersen (*The Changeling*, 1980), Anne Henderson (*Terror Train*, 1980), Debra Karen (*Happy Birthday to Me*, 1981), Edna Ruth Paul (*The Evil Dead*, 1982), Millie Moore (*Halloween III: Season of the Witch*, 1982), Wendy Green (*The Slumber Party Massacre*, 1982), Sharyn L. Ross (*Sleepaway Camp*, 1983) and Kaye Davis (*Evil Dead II*, 1987).

Kong wrote, directed and produced her third film, *The Underachievers*, in 1987. Women screenwriters also increased during this decade. Like Kong on *The Being*, Amy Chan Suet Ming (*Wu gong zhou / Centipede Horror*, 1982 and *Gong gui zai / Red Spell Spells Red*, 1983), Judith Rascoe (*Terror Train*, 1980) and Ida Nelson (*Funeral Home*, 1980), all secured sole screenwriting credit. However, many more of the women writing horror in this decade were credited as co–writers. This raises valuable questions about attribution of creative labour, and the way that a ‘co–’ credit signals a reduction of authority and, concomitantly, authorship. Diane Johnson co–wrote *The Shining* (1980) and Janice Fisher co–wrote *The Lost Boys* (1987) for Warner Bros. There are far more of our women co–writers working outside the Hollywood

studios, including Suzanna Love (*The Boogeyman*, 1980), Diana Maddox (*The Changeling*, 1980), Carol Watson (*Friday the 13th Part III*, 1982) and Angela Carter (*The Company of Wolves*, 1984). Or we can look to Italy to Elisa Brigante (*La casa con la scala nel buio / A Blade in the Dark*, 1983) who wrote or co-wrote a number of Lucio Fulcio and Lamberto Bava Italian horror films in the 1980s (but has yet to become the subject of a scholarly article). Her elision is not just academic, it is also industrial: in *Quella villa in fondo al parco / Rat Man* (1988), she is listed on IMDB as co-writer, but with the note ‘uncredited’. Italian screenwriter Rossella Drudi (*Zombi 3*, 1988) is ‘uncredited’ on IMDB as story contributor or screenwriter on over 17 horror films made in the 1980s. The ‘uncredited’ tag on IMDB (which seems to occur particular for screenwriters, and particularly for women screenwriters) raises further questions for the allocation of credit in our horror film historiographies.

Kong’s fourth, and to date final, feature film was *Blood Diner*, which she produced and directed, roles that she was carrying out for the third and fourth times, respectively. Throughout her four feature films, Kong has consistently hired women to work in her below-the-line crew, and not just in roles historically allocated to women. *Blood Diner* may have women leading Set Decoration, Costume Design and Make Up, but it also had Cynthia Chambers as Property Master, Lisa Harper as Key Dolly Grip and Linda Brown as Second Assistant Camera. This discovery aligns with recent academic research that has made direct links between women creators being more likely to hire other women for production roles (Lauzen 2021). As Kong confirms to *Morbidly Beautiful*, ‘my films have always had women behind the camera in key positions. They know their stuff’ (Darko 2018). In a *New York Times* interview, she states, ‘my behind-the-camera stuff was at least half women; my whole production staff were women; my dolly grip was a woman. I never saw that women couldn’t do the job. My set and cast looked like the UN’ (Haque 2017). Kong’s hiring practices thus speak directly to the central thesis of Dall’Asta and Gaines’ constellation: we are all involved in a historical production in which

women who dare to make works thought to be “ahead of their time” are in fact confirmed as “in” and “for” our time as well’ (2015: 22–23).

Conclusion: “the bone”

In 2022, discrimination remains an issue for Kong. She states that in the 1980s she was discriminated against for being so young, for being a woman, for being Asian–American. But now, she is too old: producers want a filmmaker in her 20s, and ‘they just don’t want to work with me’ (Genzel 2020). In the *Shock Waves* podcast, she goes further on how this now impacts her career: ‘I’m even gonna say right now, where is everyone? Why isn’t anyone offering me a job? I don’t see anybody saying, “hey Jackie, why don’t you direct an episode of *The Walking Dead* or a *Scream Queens*”’.

The main difference that Kong demarcates between the filmmaking culture of the 1980s, and the 2020s, is what she calls ‘the bone’. This is when women filmmakers are grouped together in a particular strand, or a block, at a screening. For Kong, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing it but that’s [being thrown] a bone’. She explains that ‘you’ve got some wonderful female directors out there. I go to the Etheria Festival and I am not seeing any opportunity for them to work beyond making shorts. And that’s not right, that’s a travesty, you know? And I understand because I’ve been there’. McKendry concurs, citing Fantasia Festival’s block of films made by women, and admitting, ‘I always kind of cringe. It’s a weird, double–edged thing’. Kong concludes, ‘that’s not a job. That’s not a career’.

Kong’s metaphor of the bone then demonstrates how valuable studying a historical period can be for connecting (and constellating) with the experiences of women working today, particularly in relation to the pervasive, on–going and intersectional inequalities of the film industry. At the same time, ‘the bone’ is just as applicable to who is included in popular and academic accounts of 1980s horror film culture. It is not enough to throw the women a bone

and cite Lambert as a director in a list of the best 1980s horror films; it is not enough to throw old films a bone and drop in a reference to *The Velvet Vampire* in a list of women filmmakers almost entirely composed of films made after the millennium; it is not enough to throw non-anglophone filmmakers a bone and reference *Trouble Every Day*; similarly a single reference to Kei Fujiwara's cinematography on *Tetsuo: Iron Man* (1989) will not allay doubts about a narrowness of a 'director' only lens.

I hope that my 'Kong constellation' offers a way of going beyond 'the bone'. This simple prose list is designed to raise awareness of individual women's work, a recognition that naming has power. When we bring to light these names and contextualise them within a varied range of filmmaking roles and cultures, we create foundations for future feminist historiographies of horror film that disrupt existing orthodoxies of the filmmaker as male and director as king. My citation of women's names also extends beyond filmmakers. In the 1980s, women scholars were at the forefront of horror film scholarship, but in the decades that followed, more and more male academics published in this genre, to the extent that it is normal now for our horror film edited collections to be populated predominantly by male scholars. To counteract this, in this essay I have followed Sara Ahmed's politics of citation. In *Living a Feminist Life*, she chooses not to cite white men, selecting instead sources that have 'contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind (2017: 15). Every academic source in this essay is written by a woman. There is a single source with a male co-writer.

Just as I am attempting to raise the profile of the women horror filmmakers working in the 1980s, I am doing the same with the feminist scholars in our discipline. I have done this to demonstrate how it is possible to write a comprehensive feminist horror film history using only woman-identifying scholars. This essay then, while exploring 1980s horror film cultures, is at the same time, about creating pathways of citation, both historical, and intellectual, in the hope

that others will follow. As Ahmed concludes, ‘citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow’ (2017: 14–15).

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