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Article:

Peirse, A. orcid.org/0000-0003-1032-9013 (2024) *Knit One, Stab Two*. [in] *Transition*, 11 (3). ISSN 2469-4312

<https://doi.org/10.16995/intransition.16419>

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The History of Horror Film is a Feminist Audiovisual Archive

Written by Alison Peirse

I love horror films. I love knitting. I love feminism. My academic research explores the representation of women both behind and in front of the camera, reflecting upon how, when and why women are written into, or excluded from film histories (Peirse 2020; 2022). The impetus for this particular project came out of a response to re-reading ‘When the woman looks’ (1984), Linda Williams’ canonical essay on horror film and gender. Here, I have brought together my three passions to ask, what happens when the woman knits? Or to be more precise: what happens when the woman knits *in a horror film*?

The answer to this question can be found in my video essay *Knit One, Stab Two*. It examines the representation of knitters and knitting, in over sixty horror films made from the 1920s – 2020s, from Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, North America and East Asia. My video essay is a supercut, a method whose critical and scholarly dimensions are now increasingly acknowledged (Garwood 2020). In the supercut, ‘extraction is both process and output, a method for discerning and demonstrating deep patterns within and across film/media texts’ (de Fren 2020). My supercut reveals that knitting is a marker of social and cultural identity (Pentney 2008). When a woman knits in a horror film, systematic social and cultural patterns are revealed that speak to issues of nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, and age.

Knit One, Stab Two forcefully demonstrates the monolithic representation of race and ethnicity, and of nationality. In her study of the online knitting community, Karen Patel argues that ‘whiteness is automatic’ (2020: 132). Here, the horror film reproduces this model.

In addition, the featured films are predominantly from North America, the UK, and Western Europe. As such, our horror knitters become a metonym for race and ethnicity representation, and for national film industry representation on screen. They demonstrate not only the dominance of the anglophone in our global understanding of horror film, but also the genre's preference for white characters – and the concomitant erasure of people of color – throughout more than a century of horror film history (Means Coleman 2011).

My supercut also has much to offer in terms of thinking through the intersections of gender and age. While I discuss a small subset of horror films that feature male knitters, they are very much in the minority. When there is knitting in a horror film, there is, almost inevitably, a woman wielding the needles, and, more often than not, a woman of a certain age. Early on *Knit One, Stab Two*, I reflect on a strand of horror films that feature young people using knitting needles as weapons, not least Laurie Strode in *Halloween* (1978). Nonetheless, the number of young horror knitters is small, and overwhelmingly, horror represents knitters as in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and older. As such, the horror knitter becomes the woman who you have been culturally conditioned not to be interested in: the aging woman, the background character, the person who watches the protagonist, but never plays the protagonist. Here, horror reflects society – and vice versa – in that knitting is associated with white, aging women whose whole world is domestic, an identity that has long been dismissed as lacking intellectual and political value. In illuminating the aging woman on screen, *Knit One, Stab Two* thus speaks to the growing body of feminist approaches to videographic criticism (Alarcón Zayas 2023; Bean 2023; Bird 2023; Fernández Romero and Zecchi 2024; Ford 2023; Fowler 2023; Grant 2023; Lacurie 2024; Laird 2023; Lavalette 2024; Peirse 2024; Tafakory 2023; Ways of Doing 2024).

However, there is more to this work than a reflection on representation. The primary aim of my project speaks to Katherine Groo's determination to 'remix' film history. Groo argues that 'the remix is a metahistorical work, a mode of historical expression that is fundamentally about film artefacts and historical telling' (2012). This project treats horror film as a feminist audiovisual archive, as a limitless bank of potential material to be deployed in the feminist remaking of our film histories. In so doing, it demonstrates the potential for videographic work to disrupt stereotyped representations of women across over a century of horror cinema.

I create this archive in two main ways. First, in the list of films at the end of the video essay, I reject the standard academic practice to automatically cite the director as author of the work. Instead, I choose to credit the most senior woman in a production role on the project. This video essay includes excerpts from sixty-six films, and you can see in my credits that only seven are directed by women. This demonstrates the male stranglehold on this most prestigious filmmaking role. This approach also illuminates the rarely discussed work of the woman set designer, costume designer, and art director, while also demonstrating how, time and time again, women are restricted to writer, editor and producer – roles which are designed to support the creative demands of the (male) director.

I then re-edit many of the films to suit my feminist predilections. *Bless the Child* (2000), *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), *The Crazies* (1973) and *Werewolves Within* (2021) initially present white aging women knitters as stereotyped 'dithering' and incurious older women, who are, in the words of knitting theorist Joanne Turney, 'valuable but not valued' (2009: 162). However, this dismissal of their identities leads the audience to be blind to their potential power, a blindness is shared by the younger (and frequently male) characters. This biased perception then costs these characters their lives, as these women rise up, with

murderous intent. In these four films, when the woman knits, she prepares to kill. Inspired by this, in *Knit One, Stab Two*, I respond to the subversive message of these four films. I re-edit the representation of *all* the women knitters in *all* sixty-plus films in the supercut. I zoom in on the knitting women to bring them to our attention, I change the colour balance of the image to bring them out of the shadows, I re-centre them within the frame, I slow down shots to linger on their faces, reversing and looping these often one or two second images so we stay with them for longer.

In short, my editorial practice utilises videographic methods to create alternative, feminist film histories. In so doing, it ensures that these women are no longer lost, in passing, invisible.

***Knit One, Stab Two* credits**

Written, Directed & Edited by Alison Peirse

Narrated by Tanya Vital

Original Soundtrack by _HEAVYLEG

Artwork by _HEAVYLEG

Spanish Subtitles by Valeria Villegas Lindvall

Bahasa Indonesian Subtitles by Sevita Amanda

Italian Subtitles by Matteo Pennacchia

Brazilian Portuguese Subtitles by Carlos Primati

Knitting Consultation by Helen Hands

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the numerous people who provided examples of knitting in horror films for me, to my videographic friends who gave me such brilliant feedback, to my fellow contributors and audience members for the ‘Acts of Videographic Speculation: The Aging Woman’ panel at SCMS Denver in April 2023, and finally, to Val for translating this project so beautifully.

This project was funded by the AHRC, project reference AH/W000105/1.

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Biography

Alison Peirse is a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. She researches horror film, feminist film historiographies, and videographic criticism. Her third book, *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (2020) was the subject of a screening

series at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, in the summer of 2022. You can find out more about her work at www.alisonpeirse.com.