

The language of rage¹

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ENG Abstract. This video essay uses multiple horror films in different languages from around the world to explore not only what rage looks like on screen, but also why, as women, we might feel the need to rage (Please view this video essay with subtitles enabled and wear headphones).

Keywords: feminism; feminist film historiography; horror film; videographic criticism; women filmmakers.

ES El lenguaje de la rabia

Resumen. Este videoensayo utiliza varias películas de terror de todo el mundo en diferentes idiomas para explorar no sólo cómo se representa la rabia en la pantalla, sino también por qué, como mujeres, podemos sentir la necesidad de expresarla (Por favor, para ver este videoensayo, active los subtítulos y utilice auriculares).

Palabras clave: cine de terror; crítica videográfica; feminismo; historiografía cinematográfica feminista; mujeres cineastas.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. References.

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1. Written statement

The first wave of women scholars writing on horror film emerged in the mid-1980s, with polemical essays by Linda Williams (1984), Barbara Creed (1986) and Carol J. Clover (1987), followed closely in the 1990s with book length studies by Vera Dika (1990), Clover (1992), Creed (1993) and Rhona J. Berenstein (1996) amongst others. In 2020, the second major wave of women writers on horror began. Between May and October of that year, I published *Women make horror: Filmmaking, feminism, genre*; Alexandra Heller-Nicholas published *1000 women in horror, 1895-2018*, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak published *Final girls, feminism and popular culture* and Patricia Pistors published *New blood in contemporary cinema: Women directors and the poetics of horror*. There have been important books on horror written by women in-between these waves (Means Coleman, 2011; Janisse, 2012; Arnold, 2013; Sen, 2017; Harrington, 2017; O'Meara, 2019), but it was in this concentrated, six-month period of 2020

that we saw a concerted shift in what women horror critics were studying, and how they were studying it. Notably, this shift was international: Rusnak in North America, I am in the UK, Pistors and Paszkiewicz in Europe, and Heller-Nicholas in Australia. While the first wave focused predominantly on studies of representation of gender and sexuality on screen, much of the second wave of criticism has chosen to take a more industrial or historiographic approach. It tends to prioritize the examination of women working behind the camera, non-anglophone cinema, and the legacy of the women theorists who inaugurated our field of study. A deep and complex body of feminist writing by and about women and horror has followed on from this initial second wave. This body of work is critical, political and frequently underpinned by a decolonizing ethos, and includes books by Rosalind Galt (2021), Lindsay Nelson (2021), Valeria Villegas Lindvall (2021), Alyse Wax and Rebekah McKendry (2021), Creed (2022), Victoria McCollum and Aislinn Clarke (2022), Olga Gershenson (2023) and Mary Ainslie (2024).

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And yet, despite this continual, exciting involvement of my field, when I reveal that I am a feminist film studies professor who studies horror, I am met with incredulity. For many academics, this genre remains disreputable on many levels. First, at the level of content: it is associated with violence and suffering inflicted upon the female-coded body, by a male-coded monster. Next, at the level of the filmmaker: it is associated with male filmmakers who are perceived to enact their violent fantasies upon women. These fantasies are then presumed to be made for the viewing pleasures of male audiences, who are –for some– almost entirely sadistic teenage boys. This perception continues, even though women filmmakers have been making horror films since before the inception of the genre as a critical, industrial or commercial category (see, for example, Ruth Ann Baldwin, screenwriter of *The werewolf*, 1913), even though we have a forty-decade legacy of academic scholarship by women on horror film, even though it is nearly three decades since Isabel C. Pinedo published *Recreational terror: Women and the pleasures of horror film viewing* (1997) and Brigid Cherry (1999) published her pioneering empirical studies of women fans of horror films. After revealing my love of horror, I always get the same old questions: «but why horror film?» and «what on earth could you (the insinuation: as a ‘woman’; an ‘educated’ woman; a ‘feminist’) possibly get out of it?»

I’ve written about my relationship with horror film before (Peirse, 2020) and here I want to utilise videographic criticism to express myself differently. ‘The language of rage’ is an audiovisual expression of how I feel when I watch horror films. Not all horror films, of course. Not all horror films create worlds that I want to escape into, or characters I want to spend time with. But the films that I include in this video essay all contain moments that accord with how it feels, to me, to move through this world as a woman. I connect with the negative feelings writ large across these women’s faces and their bodies, as they unwillingly perform the role designated for them in life. I recognise their wilful refusal to accept the choices made for them by a world built on insidious intersectional structural inequalities, and I revel in their decisions to rage, to not ‘accommodate’ those around them, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed’s wonderful *Willful subjects* (2014, p. 155). In my video essay, this none-accommodation is modelled by angry women with brutal, bloody results, but it is not physical violence that creates horror. Quite simply, these women refuse to behave and this refusal is what frightens people. But they don’t frighten me. These wild, wilful women are free to express their own rage at the world around them, through their bodies, in their voices. They are just one reason why I enjoy horror films so very, very much.

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² Please note that according to my feminist academic praxis, when I cite the films listed in my video essay, I cite the woman in the most senior production role on the film, rather than defaulting to the director.

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