INTRODUCTION

Carrie and the Boys

The hit horror movie of 1976, in fact one of the winners in a horror-happy decade, was Carrie. Directed by Brian De Palma and based on a novel by Stephen King, it tells the story, as King sums it up in Danse Macabre, of “a girl named Carrie White, the browbeaten daughter of a religious fanatic. Because of her strange clothes and shy mannerisms, Carrie is the butt of every class joke; the social outsider in every situation.” Actually, much of the torment Carrie comes in for has to do with menstruation. When she gets her first period in the locker room shower and doesn’t know what it is, the other girls scream with laughter and shout “Plug it up! Plug it up!” as they pelt her with tampons and sanitary pads. But the source of her pain soon becomes the source of her power: “She also has a mild telekinetic ability which intensifies after her first menstrual period, and she finally uses this power to ‘bring down the house’ following a terrible social disaster at her high school prom.” The disaster in question is a grim practical joke whereby she is led to believe that she has been elected queen of the senior prom, only to have a bucket of pig’s blood dumped down on her at the moment she is crowned. To which she responds with the force of her telekinetic will, causing the gym to go up in flames and her entire high school class with it.

With its prom queens, menstrual periods, tampons, worries about clothes and makeup, Carrie would seem on the face of it the most feminine of stories. For author King, it is also a feminist one:

If The Stepford Wives concerns itself with what men want from women, then Carrie is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women’s sexuality . . . which is only to say that, writing the book in 1973 and only out of college three years, I was fully aware of what Women’s Liberation implied for me and others of my sex. The book is, in its more adult implications, an uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female equality. For me, Carrie White is a sadly misused teenager, an example of the sort of person whose spirit is so often

1 The other mainstream horror hit of 1976 was The Omen. The low-budget tradition that year produced George Romero’s Martin and David Lynch’s Eraserhead.
2 Stephen King, Danse Macabre, p. 171.
broken for good in that pit of man- and woman-eaters that is your normal suburban high school. But she's also Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and, like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book.³

But where exactly is the horror here? If "women's liberation" is the fear, is Carrie its representative monster, and if she is, who is the victim, and who is the hero?

The answer would seem to be that, like Samson, Carrie is all three in turn. Throughout most of the movie she is the victim of monstrous schoolmates and a monstrous mother, but when, at the end, she turns the tables, she herself becomes a kind of monstrous hero—hero insofar as she has risen against and defeated the forces of monstrosity, monster insofar as she has herself become excessive, demonic. She has become, in short, what I shall throughout this book call the female victim-hero (the hero part always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity), whose status in both roles has indeed been enabled by "women's liberation." Feminism, that is, has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge.

But to whom does this tale appeal? King again:

And one reason for the success of the story in both print and film, I think, lies in this: Carrie's revenge is something that any student who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumb-rubbed in study hall could approve of.

Now although the "his" in King's brief analysis of Carrie's popularity may in principle refer to the universal subject, the "any student" in question here looks a lot like an adolescent boy.⁴ Pulling gym shorts down and thumb-rubbing glasses are things boys do to each other, not, by and large, things that girls do to each other or that boys do to girls. They are oblique sexual gestures, the one threatening sodomy or damage to the genitals or both, and the other threatening damage to the eyes—a castration of sorts. (Remember that Samson too, whom King invokes as Carrie's analogue, was bound, shorn, and blinded before he managed to bring the temple down.) The boy so threatened and so humiliated, King seems to be saying, is a boy who recognizes himself in a girl who finds herself bleeding from her

³ Ibid., pp. 171–72. See also Vivian Sobchack, "Child/Alien/Father," n. 4).
⁴ Fifteen-year-old boys, to be exact. "A film which appealed directly to the fifteen-year-olds that provided the spike point for movie-going audiences—and one with a subtext tailored to match—was the Brian De Palma adaptation of my novel Carrie" (King, Danse Macabre, p. 12).
crotch in the gym shower, pelted with tampons, and sloshed with pig’s blood at the senior prom.

What this “gym shorts and glasses” remark of King’s admits, glancingly but unmistakably, is a possibility that film theory, film criticism, cultural studies analysis, movie reviews, and popular political commentary seldom entertain: the possibility that male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with screen females in the horror-film world, screen females in fear and pain. That identification, the official denial of that identification, and the larger implications of both those things are what this book is about.

What horror, what viewers, and what sort of “identification” exactly? The compass of this book is rather narrow. I concern myself chiefly with American cinematic horror (a category I define somewhat loosely), chiefly with films from the 1970s to the mid-1980s (with some reference back to progenitors), and only with those subgenres in which female figures and/or gender issues loom especially large: slasher films, occult or possession films, and rape-revenge films. I originally planned to concentrate on low or exploitation horror (terms I mean descriptively, not judgmentally), but that proved both impractical and finally intellectually unjustifiable (the traffic between low and high is such that it is unnatural to separate them), and I have accordingly mixed the levels. As the following chapters will suggest, it remains my conviction that innovation trickles upward as often as downward, and that the fiscal conditions of low-budget filmmaking are such that creativity and individual vision can prosper there in ways that they may not in mainstream environments.

5 It has not been my concern to define horror or to adhere to the definitions of others (Noël Carroll’s in his Philosophy of Horror, for example). I have been guided for the most part by video rental store categorizations, which, despite some variation from store to store, seem to capture better than any definition I know what the public senses to be “horror.” The tendency to classify a plot as “horror” when it is low budget and “drama” or “suspense” when it is highly produced is a phenomenon I will take up in the following chapters (particularly in connection with rape-revenge movies).

6 For more historical and generic treatments of horror, see especially Charles Derry, Dark Dreams; James B. Twitchell, Dreadful Pleasures and Preposterous Violence; Andrew Tudor, Monsters and Mad Scientists; Carlos Clarens, An Illustrated History of the Horror Film; Ivan Butler, The Horror Film; Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror, and S. S. Praver, Caligari’s Children; R.H.W. Dillard, Horror Films; David Soren, The Rise and Fall of the Horror Film; and William Everson, Classics of the Horror Film.

7 In horror director John Carpenter’s blunt terms, “In independent studio work, often you’re out for a different purpose, and you can take more chances because you have less money at risk. Whereas, when you’re making a big studio film, even a medium one, you’re talking about $12 to 15 million dollars—well, the risks have to stop
pose, the independent, low-budget tradition has been central in the manufacture of the new "tough girls" that have loomed so large in horror since the mid-seventies: not only figures like Carrie, whose power somehow derives from their female insides, but the boyish, knife-wielding victim-heroes of slasher films and the grim avengers of their own rapes in films like Ms. 45 and I Spit on Your Grave.

To the question of who watches such films, there is no neat answer. Film audiences are in general less analyzed than television audiences, and because what statistical surveys there are tend to be sponsored by major studios and a fair percentage of horror is (or has been) produced independently, horror audiences are especially understudied. Horror movies tend to be made less on the basis of audience statistics than on the basis of hunch, imitation (hence the proliferation of sequels and rip-offs), and, in higher-budget cases, test audience results. To complicate matters further, many horror films have short theatrical runs, or no theatrical release at all, but return their investment on videocassette rentals, the audience for which is largely hidden from research view.

Still, what formal surveys and informal accounts there are bear out with remarkable consistency Stephen King's presumption that adolescent males hold pride of place. At theater screenings, in any case, the constituencies typically break down, in order of size, as follows: young men, frequently in groups but also solo; male-female couples of various ages (though mostly young); solo "rogue males" (older men of ominous appearance and/or reactions); and adolescent girls in groups. The proportions vary somewhat from subgenre to subgenre and from movie to movie (the more mainstream the film, the more "normal" the audience), but the preponderance of young males appears constant. Certainly boys are the unmistakable target audience of horror fanzines. Nor do videocassette rentals seem to depart significantly from the profile. In the absence of statistics, I have polled some sixty employees of rental outlets (half in the San Francisco area, half elsewhere in the country) about the clientele for certain films (Texas Chain Saw Massacre, I Spit on Your Grave, Ms. 45, Witchboard, Videodrome, and The Evil Dead), and they confirm to a person the young male bias. Three local outlets were generous enough to track for a period of about four weeks the rentals of two low-budget rape-revenge films, I Spit on Your Grave and Ms. 45. (The reasons because you need to make money back. It's just a fact of life in Hollywood" (Carpenter as quoted in Robert C. Cumbow, Order in the Universe, p. 194).

8 See Bruce A. Austin, The Film Audience and "Portrait of a Cult Film Audience." See also Twitchell, Dreadful Pleasures, pp. 68-71 and 307; Roger Ebert, "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Any More."
for my interest in those two films in particular will become clear in chapter 3.) Their results were consistent: Ms. 45 was rented about four times out of five by men, and its renters of both sexes were nearly all under the age of twenty-five; I Spit on Your Grave, much the grislier of the two, rented nine times out of ten to male viewers, mostly under the age of twenty-five but occasionally older. (The odd blip reported by one employee of "two women at least thirty" turned out to be friends of mine renting it at my suggestion.) The renter of a videocassette is not necessarily its only watcher, of course, and Berkeley audiences are not all audiences, but the numbers are suggestive, and they do square with the standard profile of theater audiences for horror.

I want to stress, before I pass on to other matters, that the bias of my book is even more extreme than the bias of the overall horror audience. My interest in the male viewer's stake in horror spectatorship is such that I have consigned to virtual invisibility all other members of the audience, despite the fact that their loyalty and engagement can be just as ardent and their stake in the genre just as deserving of attention. One of the surprises of this project has been the number of what I once thought of as unlikely people—middle-aged, middle-class people of both sexes—who have "come out" to me about their secret appetite for so-called exploitation horror, and I have developed a great respect, through conversations not only with them but with teenage fans, for the variety and richness of people's relationship to such texts. A study of horror film audiences per se would take into account the full range of their composition—not to speak of the range of experiences the same movie may offer the "rogue male," the adolescent boy, and the middle-aged woman. This book, however, is not about horror audiences per se any more than it is about horror per se. It is a book that explores the relationship of the "majority viewer" (the younger male) to the female victim-heroes who have become such a conspicuous screen presence in certain sectors of horror. That pairing has much to tell us, I think, about spectatorship in general, not to speak of the politics of representation, the politics of displacement, and the politics of criticism and theory.  

"Identification" is the subject of a voluminous theoretical literature. Following Christian Metz, commentators tend to distinguish be-

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9 For a succinct summary of the issues involved in studying the masochistic dimension of male spectatorship, see Tania Modleski's "Introduction" to The Women Who Knew Too Much, esp. pp. 9–13. I am in full sympathy with Modleski's insistence that discussions of male spectatorship not lose sight of the stakes for women and hope that my book has followed Modleski's example.
between primary identification (with the camera, wherever it may be and whatever it may be up to) and secondary identification (with the character of empathic choice). Both are fluid, character-identification on the psychoanalytic grounds that competing figures resonate with competing parts of the viewer’s psyche (masochistic victim and sadistic monster, for example), and camera-identification on the cinematographic grounds that the camera can entertain different positions with ease—not just character positions, but omniscient ones—and with different degrees of “personality” (the hand-held first-person or subjective camera thought by convention to be the most personal of all). Laura Mulvey has famously maintained that the cinematic gaze (constitutive of primary identification) is not gender-free but is structured by male or masculine perceptions, a fact revealed when the camera’s object is a woman. The cinematic apparatus, according to Mulvey, has two ways of looking at a woman, both organized around defending against her “castration” and both of which, therefore, presuppose a male (or masculine) gazer: a sadistic-voyeuristic look, whereby the gazer salvages his unpleasure at female lack by seeing the woman punished, and a fetishistic-scopophilic look, whereby the gazer salvages his unpleasure by fetishizing the female body in whole or part.

Needless to say, horror movies spend a lot of time looking at women, and in first-person ways that do indeed seem well described by Mulvey’s “sadistic-voyeuristic” gaze. But the story does not end there. A standard horror format calls for a variety of positions and character sympathies in the early phases of the story, but, as the plot goes on, a consolidation at both levels (story and cinematography), and in the final phase a fairly tight organization around the functions of victim and hero (which may be collapsed into one figure or, alternatively, split into many). Although the camerawork of Carrie repeatedly invites us to take the perspective of Carrie’s sadistic tormentors (a familiar feature of Brian De Palma’s direction), the majority position throughout, and certainly the position that prevails in the final phase, is Carrie’s own. (It seems clear on the face of it that involvement in her revenge at the end is contingent on an earlier involvement with her pain.) I shall be arguing throughout this book that by any measure, horror is far more victim-identified than the standard view would have it—which raises questions about film theory’s con-

10 Christian Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier” in The Imaginary Signifier. Among the commentaries on identification I shall be citing throughout, one summary, in non-technical language, stands out as particularly useful: that of John Ellis in Visible Fictions (pp. 40–50).

11 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”
ventional assumption that the cinematic apparatus is organized around the experience of a mastering, voyeuristic gaze. In fact, horror’s system of sympathies transcends and preexists any given example. Patrons of a slasher film or a rape-revenge film know more or less what to expect well before the film rolls, and at least one horror director (William Friedkin) has suggested that their emotional engagement with the movie begins while they are standing in line—a proposition that acknowledges the profoundly formulaic nature of the enterprise. And as anyone who sees horror at the right venue (designated mall or downtown matinees) can attest, horror audiences can be startlingly “competent” (in the linguistic sense) and startlingly public about it. As Andrew Britton describes it:

It became obvious at a very early stage that every spectator knew exactly what the film was going to do at every point, even down to the order in which it would dispose of its various characters, and the screening was accompanied by something in the nature of a running commentary in which each dramatic move was excitedly broadcast some minutes before it was actually made. The film’s total predictability did not create boredom or disappointment. On the contrary, the predictability was clearly the main source of pleasure, and the only occasion for disappointment would have been a modulation of the formula, not the repetition of it. Everyone had parted with his or her four bucks in the complete confidence that Hell Night was a known quantity, and that it would do nothing essentially different from any of its predecessors. Everyone could guess what would happen, and it did happen. In the course of the evening, art had shrunk to its first cause, and I had the incongruous sense, on coming out, of having been invited to participate in communion.

“This highly ritualised and formulaic character,” he concludes, “is the most striking feature of the contemporary entertainment film.”

12 Derry, Dark Dreams, pp. 123–24. More on this in chapter 4.
13 Andrew Britton, “Blissing Out,” pp. 2–3. Britton here echoes the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture, especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s arguments in Dialectic of Enlightenment (pp. 120–28). It should be noted, however, that the characteristics which prompt Britton’s political contempt are by no means peculiar to “Reaganite entertainment”; they are the usual characteristics of orally performed “literature” everywhere: in Western tradition from the Greeks through the late Middle Ages and beyond, and in the Third World, and in pockets of the First and Second, in our own time. Britton’s description could very nearly stand as a summary of the aesthetics of oral literature, right down to the phrase “ritualised and formulaic.” So too horror’s habit of cross-referencing or “intertextuality,” which Britton finds solipsistic, narcissistic, hermetic, and banal (and Vera Dika, in her Games of Terror, finds “postmodern”); it too is a standard feature of oral cycles. As for the aggressive behavior of horror audiences, it is worth noting that according to historian Lawrence W. Levine,
Although many folklorists disown horror movies as products too mediated by technology, authorial intention, and the profit motive to be seen as folklore in any authentic sense, the fact is that horror movies look like nothing so much as folktale—a set of fixed tale types that generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes, and rip-offs.14 “Basically, sequels mean the same film,” observes director John Carpenter, who should know. “That’s what people want to see. They want to see the same movie again.”15 Audiences may thrill to the killer’s particular shtick (his hockey mask or knife-fingers or whatever) or to the special effect that shows the bloody stump up close—surface effects are the stuff of fanzines—but the structure, functions or subject positions, and narrative moves are as old as the hills.16 Much of the commentary on horror has concerned itself with mapping the cinematographic moves that are presumed to be constitutive of “identification”; horror movies rub our noses in camerawork. But it is important to remember that in a large or gross or deep-structural sense, the “identifications” of horror are already in place, installed long before the individual movie was even a glint in the director’s eye.17 Camerawork may play with the terms, but it does not set them.

The very fact that the cinematic conventions of horror are so easily and so often parodied would seem to suggest that, individual variation notwithstanding, its basic structures of apperception are fixed and fundamental. The same is true of the stories they tell. Students of folklore or early literature recognize in horror the hallmarks of oral extravagantly participatory audiences (shouting, throwing things) were the norm in all manner of performances (opercatic, dramatic, symphonic) until toward the end of the nineteenth century, when they were silenced and “sacralized” (Highbrow/Lowbrow).

14 The most complete folkloric treatments of horror movies to date are Twitchell’s Dreadful Pleasures and Harold Schechter’s The Bosom Serpent.

15 John Carpenter, as quoted by Cumbow in Order in the Universe, p. 68.

16 Interviews with horror filmmakers turn remarkably often on fantasies, dreams, and childhood memories, or mention myths or folktales or legends by way of establishing archetype (note King’s reference to Samson), or directly or indirectly reveal a dependence on Freud. Some filmmakers seem quite conscious manipulators, others unwitting purveyors, of the traditions on which their art rests. William Castle is evidently one of the latter: “I get calls from all over the United States, in fact I get letters from all over the world, from students who are studying film and have taken these films and are looking for hidden meanings. It’s a very strange thing. I definitely feel that possibly in my unconscious I was trying to say something... Truly, it is possible that deeply buried within my unconsciousness was the feeling of trying to say something” (as quoted in Derry, Dark Dreams, p. 112). Others, as I shall suggest in the chapters that follow, are rather more premeditated.

17 A recent essay by Anne Friedberg reminds us of the psychosexual processes that precondition our cinematic identifications (“A Denial of Difference”).
narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations. This is a field in which there is in some sense no original, no real or right text, but only variants; a world in which, therefore, the meaning of the individual example lies outside itself. The "art" of the horror film, like the "art" of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance, and it is understood as such by the competent audience. A particular example may have original features, but its quality as a horror film lies in the way it delivers the cliché. James B. Twitchell rightly recommends an

ethnological approach, in which the various stories are analyzed as if no one individual telling really mattered. . . . You search for what is stable and repeated; you neglect what is "artistic" and "original." This is why, for me, auteur criticism is quite beside the point in explaining horror. . . . The critic's first job in explaining the fascination of horror is not to fix the images at their every appearance but, instead, to trace their migrations to the audience and, only then, try to understand why they have been crucial enough to pass along.

That auteur criticism is at least partly beside the point is clear from interviews with such figures as John Carpenter (Halloween, The Fog)—interviews which would seem to suggest that, like the purveyors of folklore, the makers of film operate more on instinct and formula than conscious understanding. So bewildered was Hitchcock by the unprecedented success of Psycho that he approached the Stanford Research Institute about doing a study of the phenomenon.

What makes horror "crucial enough to pass along" is, for critics since Freud, what has made ghost stories and fairy tales crucial enough to pass along: its engagement of repressed fears and desires and its reenactment of the residual conflict surrounding those feelings. Horror films thus respond to interpretation, as Robin Wood puts it, as "at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences—the fusion made possible by the

18 As Morris Dickstein puts it, "The 'art' of horror film is a ludicrous notion: since horror, even at its most commercially exploitative, is genuinely subcultural like the wild child that can never be tamed, or the half-human mutant who appeals to our secret fascination with deformity and the grotesque" ("The Aesthetics of Fright," p. 34).

19 Twitchell, Dreadful Pleasures, p. 84.

20 "I was sufficiently interested in the picture's success to contact Stanford University Research Institute so they could find out why it was such a hit. But when they wanted $75,000 to do the research job, I told them I wasn't that curious" (as quoted by Donald Spoto in The Dark Side of Genius, p. 457).
shared structures of a common ideology." And just as attacker and attacked are expressions of the same self in nightmares, so they are expressions of the same viewer in horror film. We are both Red Riding Hood and the Wolf; the force of the experience, in horror, comes from "knowing" both sides of the story. It is no surprise that the first film to which viewers were not admitted once the theater darkened was Psycho. Whether Hitchcock actually meant with this measure to intensify the "sleep" experience is unclear, but the effect both in the short run, in establishing Psycho as the ultimate thriller, and in the long run, in altering the cinema-going habits of the nation, is indiscernible. In the current understanding, horror is the least interruptible of all film genres, and this fact itself bears witness to the compulsive nature of the stories it tells.

So too horror's cast of characters—or, more properly, its cast of functions or subject positions. Like the low-mythic tradition of which it is a part, horror is organized around functions that are understood to preexist and constitute character. Although a gorilla, a blob, a shark, and a motel attendant are superficially very different entities, they all do more or less the same job, narratively speaking, and they all end up at least temporarily evacuated from the operative universe. Likewise the categories victim and hero, roles no less prefabricated and predictable for their being performed by many or one, tall or short, dark or light, male or female. 

In fact, of course, males and females are not evenly distributed over the categories. The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in

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21 Robin Wood, "Return of the Repressed," p. 26. Horror itself repeatedly thematizes the dream. The newest wrinkle on the tradition is Wes Craven's Nightmare on Elm Street, in which it is the nightmare itself, shared by the teenagers who live on Elm Street, that is fatal. The one girl who survives does so by first refusing to sleep and then, at the same time that she acknowledges her parents' inadequacies, by conquering the feelings that prompt the deadly nightmare. On the workings of literary and cinematic fantasy, see especially Mark Nash, "Vampyr and the Fantastic," and Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy.

22 Tudor's Monsters and Mad Scientists, which charts the history of horror from 1931 to 1984 by charting the metamorphosis of the functional categories ("threat," "victim," etc.) is in its own way a folkloristic project.
a male. Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psychokiller. Jurij Lotman has suggested that there are really only two "characters" (subject positions or functions) in myth: a mobile, heroic being who crosses boundaries and "penetrates" closed spaces, and an immobile being who personifies that damp, dark space and constitutes that which is to be overcome. Because the latter is so obviously coded feminine, as Teresa de Lauretis notes, the former is perforce masculine.23 Horror is more complicated, but the general point holds: the perceived nature of the function generates the characters that will represent it, mobile heroism wanting male representatives, and passive dank spaces wanting female ones.

The picture grows even more complicated if we entertain the possibility that these films are informed by not one but two accounts of sexual difference, between which they slide uneasily. According to Thomas Laqueur's history of medical treatises from the Greeks to Freud, sexual difference as we officially know it—the "two-sex" or "two-flesh" model, which construes male and female as "opposite" or essentially different from one another (and which therefore underwrites psychoanalytic thought)—has not existed from time immemorial but is a relatively modern construction that sits, in fact, rather lightly on large sectors of the culture.24 To judge from a rich variety of medical, linguistic, pictorial, and narrative evidence, an earlier world construed the sexes as inside versus outside versions of a single genital/reproductive system, differing in degree of warmth or coolness and hence in degree of value (hot being superior to cool), but essentially the same in form and function, and hence ultimately fungible versions of one another. It is not that the male body has a penis, a female body a vagina, and the one-sex body both. It is that penis and vagina are one and the same organ; if one happens to extrude and the other one to intrude (in an inside-out and upward extending fashion), they are physiologically identical (and the same words did for both). Likewise, all humans have testes, the male ones

23 Jurij Lotman, "The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology," and Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in her Alice Doesn't. De Lauretis's essay is a must-read in this connection. See also her "Violence of Rhetoric" in Technologies of Gender and Claude Lévi-Strauss's "Structure and Form."

24 Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex. It has long been recognized that earlier eras had a rather different sense of sexual difference (and hence of homosexuality). The virtue of Laqueur's study of medical treatises is that it provides an explicitly corporeal model against which to read fantasy.
outside and the female ones inside (and again, the same words did
for both). So too bodily fluids: the genital fluid that in the coolness
of the female is normally red and manifest as menses becomes, in
the greater heat of the male, whitish and manifest as semen (and female
orgasm, understood as analogous to male ejaculation, was thought
necessary for conception). Needless to say, the “one sex” in question
was essentially male, women being “inverted, and less perfect, men”
possessed of “exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong
places.” 25 Or, in another formulation, “the men are men and so are
the women.” 26 The point here is not that there is no notion of sexual
difference, but that the difference was conceived as less a set of ab-
solute opposites than as a system of isomorphic analogues, the su-
perior male set working as a visible map to the invisible and inferior
female set. And as Laqueur has shown, a universe in which every
part and function of the one was understood to have its counterpart
in the other is a universe in which certain conditions could activate
menstruation in men or a traveling down of the sexual member in
women—eventualities richly attested in early materials. It is a uni-
verse, in other words, of slippage and fungibility, in which maleness
and femaleness are always tentative and hence only apparent.

Although the one-sex model was displaced by the two-sex one in
educated circles in the late eighteenth century, 27 when the female sex
was in effect invented as “opposite” to the male, one-sex thinking
continued—and continues—to exercise a firm grip on the popular
mind. On the human mind in general, if we are to believe Freud’s
account of the one-sex imaginings that plague the subject as he or
she marches toward a two-sex maturity possibly never fully arrived
at. 28 The concepts of penis envy, phallic women, and anal menstru-
ation/intercourse/birth are all constructions of one-sex thinking, and
in such fantasies as the classic “a child is being beaten,” the fantasiz-

25 Ibid., p. 26. The rise of the “two-sex” model in the late eighteenth century
marked, in effect, the invention of a separate female sex.


27 Why then is something of a puzzle. Laqueur observes that the change was not
immediately motivated by any significant medical discovery; moreover, what we now
call ovaries continued to be called “testes” for more than a century after the “dis-
covery” of the egg (Making Sex, esp. pp. 149–63). In his review of Laqueur’s book,
Stephen Jay Gould suggests that “this transition is but one manifestation of the greatest
intellectual transformation in modern Western thinking”—a transformation that had to do
with “our most fundamental ideas about causality and meaning” (“The Birth of the
Two-Sex World,” p. 11).

28 Consider, for example, this male analyses’ description of intercourse: “It was
beautiful. She was very wet. I just slid into her penis” (Arnold M. Cooper, “What Men
Fear,” p. 127). Leo Rangell (“The Interchangeability of Phallus and Female Genital”)
cites a variety of such convictions.
ing boy’s identifications are so fluid that the question of whether it is in male or female form that he imagines himself being "loved" by his father is, for all practical purposes, moot.29 (The fantasy of being "beaten," in which beating is understood in sexual terms, is a crucial one in the study of modern horror films, and one to which I shall return in some detail in later chapters.) For Freud, the two-sex theorist par excellence, such thoughts were immature misconceptions bound, should they linger too long, to cause neurosis in the adult. That Freud himself was not free of one-sex reasoning, however, is clear not only from the extraordinary intellectual efforts he found it necessary to expend in constructing the sexes as separate but also—to take just two examples—from his apperception of the clitoris as a "little penis" and from what has been claimed to be his own fantasy of anal procreation.30

Its subject matter alone guarantees the cultural conservatism of horror. Stories of werewolves, vampires and other undead, and possession (by incubus, succubus, dybbuk, Satan) are stories that stem from the one-sex era, and for all their updating, they still carry with them, to a greater or lesser degree, a premodern sense of sexual difference. Horror may in fact be the premier repository of one-sex reasoning in our time (science fiction running a close second). The world of horror is in any case one that knows very well that men and women are profoundly different (and that the former are vastly superior to the latter) but one that at the same time repeatedly contemplates mutations and slidings whereby women begin to look a lot like men (slasher films), men are pressured to become like women (possession films), and some people are impossible to tell apart (the figure in God Told Me To who is so genitally ambiguous that the doctor did not know what sex to assign, the pubescent girl in Sleepaway Camp who turns out to be a boy, the rapist in The Incubus whose ejaculate consists of equal parts of semen and menstrual blood, and so on). The one-sex model is echoed not only in horror’s bodily constructions, however; it is also echoed in its representation of gender as the definitive category from which sex proceeds as an effect—and in its deep interest in precisely such “proceedings.” If such fantasies

29 Sigmund Freud, "‘A Child Is Being Beaten.’ "I present the boy’s case here (rather than the girl’s) both because it is the one relevant to this chapter and also because it is the one Freud regards as problematic. See chapter 4, below.

30 Laqueur, Making Sex, pp. 233-43; and Wayne Koestenbaum, "Privileging the Anus." The opposite is also true. If, that is, Freud’s two-sex story is contaminated by one-sex reasoning, his accounts of one-sex fantasies (penis envy, anal birth, etc.) are contaminated by two-sex logic and thus remain loosely governed by the familiar binary. Laqueur discusses briefly the politics of “representing one sex in a two-sex world” (pp. 122-30).
are regressive by the lights of psychoanalytic theory, they have a long and distinguished pedigree.

The reason that I have appealed not only to psychoanalytic theory but to a cultural-discursive account of one-sex thinking is that it suggests the kind of stories (reports, legends, anecdotes) such thinking has told and can tell—stories that bear a more immediate resemblance to the stories that horror movies tell than do the rather more unmediated or unsublimated or undisplaced scenarios of psychoanalysis, and stories that conjure a level of variation and permutation that go beyond Freud’s more synoptic style. Moreover, although some horror scenarios seem written directly out of Freud, and although all horror scenarios may be ultimately amenable to psychoanalysis, many horror scenarios have a pre-Freudian and premodern cast—a quality of “slidingness” that is more immediately apprehensible in the terms of one-sex reasoning than in the oppositional categories of psychoanalysis. Laqueur’s observation in “Representing One Sex in a Two Sex World” that “the body with its one elastic sex was far freer to express theatrical gender and the anxieties thereby produced than it would be when it came to be regarded as the foundation of gender” applies as well to a certain inappositeness between the one-sex world of horror movies and the two-sex framework we necessarily use to analyze it. Although the one-sex model and the repertory of one-sex fantasies that underwrite horror movies do not contradict psychoanalysis (psychoanalysis after all both acknowledges one-sex reasoning and seeks to explain it), they do add a dimension—an elaborate and low-mythic quality that is missing in the Freudian account.

Returning to horror: if we assume, in line with one-sex logic, that the sex of a character proceeds from the gender of the function he or she represents, and that the gender of the function proceeds from real-life perceptions of social and bodily differences, then it follows that when we observe a consistent change in the surface male-female configurations of a traditional story-complex, we are probably looking, however obliquely, at a deeper change in the culture. There are in fact some remarkable developments in the sex-gender system of horror since the mid-1970s. Chief among these is the emergence of the girl hero, a development of which Andrew Tudor writes: “It is true, of course, that female protagonists are more significant in the modern genre, and that they are permitted more autonomy and resourcefulness than were the “heroines” of earlier films. The sole survivor of Halloween’s rampaging psychotic, for example, or of Alien’s

salivating monstrosity (both 1979 [sic]), forcefully played by Jamie Lee Curtis and Sigourney Weaver respectively, are afforded a degree of effective participation in the action all but unheard of prior to the seventies.” Tudor cautions against taking these strong girls to heart, however. “They and their sisters remain significant exceptions to the continuing pattern of male domination of the genre’s central situations. Women have always featured as horror-movie victims, and it is therefore to be expected that they should seem more prominent in a period of victim centrality. Whether that implies a new gender-structure for the genre is another matter entirely.”32 Tudor very much underestimates the number of such women in modern horror; at least two genres, rape-revenge and slasher, are organized around them, and to judge from such films as Aliens, Sleeping with the Enemy, and Silence of the Lambs, the phenomenon has moved to the mainstream. Well taken, however, is his suggestion that the new prominence of women is the structural effect of a greater investment in the victim function. For whatever reason, modern horror seems especially interested in the trials of everyperson, and everyperson is on his or her own in facing the menace, without help from “authorities.”

But by Tudor’s own account, it is not only in their capacity as victims that these women appear in these films. They are, in fact, protagonists in the full sense: they combine the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero. For reasons on which I shall speculate more fully later, horror cinema has traditionally and on the whole held those functions separate. That they should now be bolted together in the figure of a female is a development that Tudor’s structural argument does not account for. Here, I think, we need to take the films, and Stephen King’s remarks about women’s liberation, at face value. The women’s movement has given many things to popular culture, some more savory than others. One of its main donations to horror, I think, is the image of an angry woman—a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator (I stress “credible”) of the kind of violence on which, in the low-mythic universe, the status of full protagonist rests. It is worth remembering that the victim and hero functions are also fused in the so-called action film—but in the person of a male (hence the absence of any women to speak of). Like the tough girls of horror, Rambo and Dirty Harry undergo all manner of indignity before they rise to annihilate their tormentors. Crucial to such films, according to John Ellis, “is the notion of survival through a series of threats of physical mutila-

32 Tudor, Monsters and Mad Scientists, p. 127.
tion, to which many characters succumb. It is a phantasy that is characteristic of males.\textsuperscript{33} It is a fantasy equally crucial to horror film, the difference being that there it has remarkably often come to be run through the figure of a woman.

But what is to be gained, for the male viewer, by running it through a woman? (Let me put aside for the moment the issue of what “woman” might mean in this formulation.) Or, to pose the question another way, what difference between the action-film and the horror-film experience might account for the latter’s preference for a victim-hero in female form? One answer has to do with horror’s greater emphasis on the victim part of the story; for although male action films can indeed wallow in suffering, they also wallow in extended frenzies of sadism of a sort exceptional in horror.\textsuperscript{34} Another has to do with the nature or quality of the suffering, which is said to be based on castration anxiety in the action film,\textsuperscript{35} but which may be a far messier and less wholesome business in horror. So messy and so unwholesome, in fact, that running it through a woman may be the only way it can be run.\textsuperscript{36} Here we arrive at the politics of displacement: the use of the woman as a kind of feint, a front through which the boy can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and disavow them on grounds that the visible actor is, after all, a girl. Finally, there is the female body itself, the metaphoric architecture of which, with its enterable but unseeable inner space, has for so long been a fixture in the production of the uncanny.

Conspicuously missing from this analysis is any reference to the male viewer’s stake in the sadistic, voyeuristic side of horror—the pleasure he may take in watching, from some safe vantage or other, women screaming, crying, fleeing, cringing, and dying, or indeed the pleasure he may take in the thought of himself as the cause of

\textsuperscript{33} Ellis, \textit{Visible Fictions}, p. 44. (Ellis is writing of “war” films in the most general sense.) Action films tend either to reverse the terms sooner than horror films or, more typically, to alternate between the modes throughout. Extremely sustained and suspenseful periods of suffering and fear are more the stuff of horror than the stuff of action.

\textsuperscript{34} On male suffering in action cinema, see especially Paul Smith, “Action Movie Hysteria.” The subgenre of horror that most closely approximates the suffering-revenge proportions of the male action film is the rape-revenge film—the subject of chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{35} So go the standard analyses of the action film; see also Ellis (\textit{Visible Fictions}, p. 44) and Smith, “Action Movie Hysteria.”

\textsuperscript{36} For a discussion, on the clinical side of psychoanalytic theory, of the ways that what is expressed as castration anxiety may mask anxieties of other kinds, see Cooper, “What Men Fear,” and Lane, “The Genital Envy Complex.” In the chapters that follow, I shall suggest that the flamboyant castration imagery of horror cinema has similarly been overperceived and underinterrogated.
their torment. I have no doubt that horror cinema offers such pleasures, and in the chapters that follow I will suggest when and why that dimension emerges and matters. I do not, however, believe that sadistic voyeurism is the first cause of horror. Nor do I believe that real-life women and feminist politics have been entirely well served by the astonishingly insistent claim that horror's satisfactions begin and end in sadism. As Stephen King's remarks on Carrie indicate, horror's misogyny is a far more complicated matter than the "blood-lust" formula would have it, and I suspect that the critical insistence on that formula constitutes its own version of a politics of displacement. If I err, in the chapters that follow, on the side of complication, it is because I believe that the standard critique of horror as straightforward sadistic misogyny itself needs not only a critical but a political interrogation.

This book began in 1985 when a friend dared me to go see The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. I was familiar with the horror classics and with stylish or "quality" horror (Hitchcock, De Palma, and the like), but exploitation horror I had assiduously avoided. Seeing Texas was a jolting experience in more ways than one. It jolted me into questioning for the first time the notion of the "male gaze" and its assumption of masculine mastery. It also jolted me into wondering about the notion of "exploitation" and the relation of that notion to film theory. Which led me to a video store the following day to check out three more movies on the basis of their box covers (screaming women, poised knives, terrified eyeballs). Some months and several dozen movies later I was writing an essay that was eventually published in Representations (1987) and which serves, in revised form, as the first chapter of this book: "Her Body, Himself." The other chapters were written between 1988 and 1990, during which time the genre continued, in its own frustratingly protean way, to change before my eyes. Chapter 3, "Getting Even," forms something of a pair with chapter 1, rape-revenge and slasher films being the premier examples of the female victim-hero complex. Chapter 2, "Opening Up," offers an unorthodox reading of a genre of which women have traditionally been at the center, though in no sense as heroes: the possession film. Finally there is chapter 4, "The Eye of Horror," which takes up not a genre but a thematics and speculates in more theoretical terms on just what horror's appeal is all about. I did not know, when I began this project, that it would take me in some of the directions it has: so deeply into the etiology of sadomasochism, for example, and into issues of male homosexuality. I feel especially tentative on the latter point, for I am fully aware that gay studies has emerged as a field related to but also distinct from feminism in the last few years, and
that its discourse has been almost as frustratingly expansive as horror itself.

Like many such stories, mine has something of the character of a conversion narrative. The initial dare took me into a territory I might not otherwise have explored, and against all odds I have ended up something of a fan. Like others before me, I discovered that there are in horror moments and works of great humor, formal brilliance, political intelligence, psychological depth, and above all a kind of kinky creativity that is simply not available in any other stripe of filmmaking; one of the benefits of this project has been the discovery of the unexpected gem. And although I now look forward to catching up on "good" movies, I will never see any kind of movie with quite the same eyes again. To a remarkable extent, horror has come to seem to me not only the form that most obviously trades in the repressed, but itself the repressed of mainstream filmmaking. When I see an Oscar-winning film like The Accused or the artful Alien and its blockbuster sequel Aliens or, more recently, Sleeping with the Enemy and Silence of the Lambs, and even Thelma and Louise, I cannot help thinking of all the low-budget, often harsh and awkward but sometimes deeply energetic films that preceded them by a decade or more—films that said it all, and in flatter terms, and on a shoestring. If mainstream film detains us with niceties of plot, character, motivation, cinematography, pacing, acting, and the like, low or exploitation horror operates at the bottom line, and in so doing reminds us that every movie has a bottom line, no matter how covert or mystified or sublimated it may be.

Certainly I will never again take for granted that audience males identify solely or even mainly with screen males and audience females with screen females. If Carrie, whose story begins and ends with menstrual imagery and seems in general so painfully girlish, is construed by her author as a latter-day variant on Samson, the biblical strong man who overcame all manner of handicap to kill at least six thousand Philistines in one way or another, and if her target audience is any high school boy who has been pantsed or had his glasses messed with, then we are truly in a universe in which the sex of a character is no object. No accident, insofar as it is historically and, above all, politically overdetermined, but also no object—no impediment whatever to the audience’s experience of his or her function. That too is one of the bottom-line propositions of horror, a proposition that is easily missed when you watch mainstream cinema but laid bare in exploitation cinema and, once registered, never lets you see any movie “straight” again.