

The Monstrous-Feminine and the Politics of Trash in the Film *Excision*

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## Abstract

Richard Bates' 2012 film *Excision* presents the life of alienated and troubled adolescent Pauline in three narrative layers seen in her reality, her prayers, and her dreams. With these representations as well as in her interactions with men and women, Pauline manipulates elements of the abject to control the behaviors, attitudes, and reactions of those around her. When analyzed through the perspective of Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, wherein men and women in horror films shock and horrify for different reasons, Pauline proves to be a new sort of figure wherein elements of her monstrosity and horror are inextricable from one another.

## Film Summary

*Excision* details the life of troubled adolescent Pauline, as she navigates her life in American suburbia through her home, school, and psychosis. In her home, Pauline is set against her overbearing and traditional mother, Phyllis; her pushover father, Bob; and her ill and comparatively feminine sister, Grace. Phyllis, indeed, sends Pauline to counseling not with a therapist but with the family's reverend, as Pauline insists that she is mentally ill—something that is universally trivialized by her family and by authority figures at her school. At school, similarly, Pauline is juxtaposed with the acceptably feminine Natalie and Abigail as she seeks to lose her virginity to the popular Adam. In pursuit of this, Pauline tricks Adam into performing oral sex on her without revealing to him that she is menstruating, much to his horror.

As Grace becomes more ill, Pauline expedites her intention to become a surgeon by studying her sister's condition as well as the surgical process of the lung transplant that Grace will need. In the film's climax, Pauline drugs and kidnaps a neighbor as well as her sister and attempts the surgery during a psychotic episode, before the film's ending wherein Phyllis arrives home and discovers the two dead girls on makeshift operating tables in her garage, attended by Pauline.

## **Introduction**

Richard Bates' 2012 film *Excision* presents the life of alienated and troubled adolescent Pauline in three narrative layers seen in her reality, her prayers, and her dreams. In these threads, Pauline interacts with those around her in ways that consistently shock and horrify both these characters as well as the film's audience particularly through her fascination with blood, sexuality, and the abject. The genre of horror is widely accepted as a site for exploration of the subconscious due to their inclusion of and focus on these elements that are linked to psychoanalytical themes of sexuality, abjection, and death. In his study of the horror film genre, Noel Carroll explains the power of the genre to hold meaning, specifically that "within our culture, the horror genre is explicitly acknowledged as a vehicle for expressing psychoanalytically significant themes such as repressed sexuality, oral sadism, necrophilia, etc." (17). *Excision*, too, explores these themes through Pauline. In fact, the film, when examined in the context of Creed's theory of what she terms the "monstrous-feminine," reveals and critiques that which has the power to disgust, alienate, and horrify the audience when a female is the aggressor.

Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine posits that images of women in horror films are made to horrify and shock, and for different reasons than do men. Creed suggests that to apply the term "female monster" to figure of horror gendered female, however, implies a simple inversion of the male monster, whereas the term monstrous-feminine provides a venue for discussion of women's sexuality,

upon which so many of her horrors are built. Hence the monstrous-feminine, unlike the female monster, “emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (Creed 2-3). Creed’s theory relies heavily on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, or “that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules,’ that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order,’” which takes shape of the maternal, the “border,” and the feminine body (Creed 8).

The ultimate abjection, Kristeva argues, is the corpse, and the body protects itself from wastes like “shit, blood, urine, and pus by ejecting these things,” making the horror film the perfect environment for its literal representation of abjection, its threatened violation of the border, and for its representation of the maternal figure as abject (Creed 9-11). Creed employs this theory to study women in classic horror films such as *Alien*, *Carrie*, *The Hunger*, and *The Exorcist* with emphasis on specific facets of manifested abjection such as they manifest in a particular film. In *Excision*, Pauline functions as exemplification of the monstrous-feminine in all of its manifestations, particularly through her focus on and rejection of the maternal as well as with her fascination with abjection.

To position Pauline as the monstrous-feminine, the film follows Pauline as she interacts with the world and people around her be it at school, at home, or even in religious counselling. Primarily, Pauline interacts with her family as she tries to negotiate her environment wherein she is confronted by maternal rejection, paternal incompetence, and her sister’s illness. Apart from her family, her interactions with other people are largely limited by sex, meaning that Pauline speaks with or is confronted by one man or woman or a group of men or women, suggesting sex and

gender stratification. Studying the differences in these interactions allows for an analysis of Pauline's ability and determination to disgust, shock, and horrify that proves Pauline's embodiment of the monstrous-feminine and of abjection that makes visible the inextricable and constructed link between abjection and that which is of or related to the female, the feminine, and the woman.

Beyond the level of narrative, the film's casting suggests its attachment to horror and the monstrous-feminine. Director Richard Bates, Jr. comments, "We set out to cast against type with everyone." In fact, the only person Bates did not want to cast was the film's star, AnnaLynne McCord, thinking that she would be "offensive" to his audience because she is the star of shows like *Nip/Tuck* and the reboot of *90210*, who would view her cast type and McCord, by extension, unimportant and without value due to her characters' general superficiality (Williams para. 11). The first actor Bates cast was Traci Lords, for which he received much criticism due to her history as a porn star (Williams para. 10). Lords eventually introduced Bates to John Waters and sent him the film's script, with Waters eventually agreeing to be a part of the production on the condition that he not fly coach or have to shave his moustache (Williams para. 9).

After Waters and Lords, Malcolm McDowell of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Tank Girl* joined the cast. By his own admission, McDowell is known for playing villains (Soergel, para. 3-4), especially his role of Alex, the privileged, sadistic, sociopathic main character of *A Clockwork Orange*. Of these and other casting choices, such as Malcolm McDowell of *A Clockwork Orange* and Ray Wise of *Twin Peaks*, Bates explains that the film is a sort of "a love-letter to cult, art-house horror filmmakers and '80s teen comedy directors that sort of got [him] through [his]

childhood” (Williams para. 8). Each of these casting choices, in its own way, is significant to the film and its ties to horror. Lords is notable for her linkage to pornography and female sexuality. Waters is known for his replication of trash, which has at its heart abjection and gender transgression. McDowell is infamous for his portrayal of the male horror villain who threatens for all different reasons than does the monstrous-feminine, thus his character holds no power or control over Pauline in school as her math teacher.

Within the first half of the film, the 80s teen comedy homage is apparent as Pauline, an offbeat, alienated high school student, attempts to “get the guy.” Quickly, though, the film shifts to an inversion of this narrative formula as Pauline’s sleeping with Adam is neither justified nor excused by a shift to conventional attractiveness and femininity in Pauline, as is often the case in teen movies (Shary, ch. 2). Instead, the film shifts towards the grotesque and the carnivalesque as Pauline becomes a caricature of anti-femininity in Cotillion classes and in her dealings with the popular girl friend group where she invokes that which shocks and horrifies intentionally to alienate those around her and to protect herself. With this shift, the film presents an homage to trash cinema that goes beyond featuring the Pope of Trash himself, John Waters. Of the genre, Waters contends that “bad taste is what entertainment is all about. [ . . . ] Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humor, which is anything but universal” (2).

*Excision*, in addition, appeals to a sense of humor founded upon women in horror and the ways in which they are made and able to horrify. Within the genres of trash and horror, women predominantly horrify through their invoking Kristeva’s

abjection in some form, be it an image, a statement, or an action. Largely, these monsters' narrative connections to women's sexuality and biological functionality serve to remind men of women's power to create and, by extension, destroy life, thus threatening a disruption to the symbolic order (Creed 8). Pauline's fascination with menstruation as she, for example, sniffs her own used tampon provides an awkwardly comical moment wherein the audience's amusement is in conflict with their shock and disgust that ultimately results in the question of why this action is able to horrify and why menstruation is stigmatized.

By satirizing the teen movie before presenting a shift to the grotesque, the film implicates social constructions of normativity that privilege masculinity and demonize femininity, wherein Pauline, in the typical narrative formula, should come to embody feminine beauty and passivity to succeed. The grotesque refers to any art or media that is "characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions of the natural to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or character" (Harmon 223), seen in Pauline's fantasies most notably but also in her character and the film overall through her embodiment of the monstrous-feminine with her character's inextricable linkage to abjection. The satire of the teen movie serves to position Pauline's character in the often glorified position of alienated teen girl before presenting the grotesqueness of Pauline's character, which indicts realistic manifestations of subordinating femininity to masculinity, such as menstrual shame and the trend of slut-shaming. Through Pauline's understanding and channeling of the abject, however, she is able, to a degree, to control her life as she interacts with those around her and disrupt normativity as it is constructed around her.

Unsurprisingly, Waters considers himself to be a student of horror (29), for the ideological foundations of both trash and horror are inextricable, both challenging and subverting gender, sexuality, and systems of power and inequality. As earlier discussed, Bates casts many of his cinematic inspirations in the film, including John Waters, Malcolm McDowell, and Ray Wise. Bates also presents homages to other classic and cult films within *Excision* such as the locker room scene in which Pauline is confronted by Adam's girlfriend and her friend that recalls *Carrie* in its form and content—with less steam and considerably less nudity. Thematically, these films are strongly related through their ties to the teen movie and focus on female sexuality and menstruation as they pertain to power and access to it. However, while *Carrie* was constructed as a comment on patriarchy, *Excision* presents an argument wherein Pauline's power is not dependent upon her blood as is Carrie's. Rather, Pauline's power is based in her recognition of the power imbued in blood and the abject by society, which she then channels, thus *Carrie* serves to illustrate the power of blood while *Excision* comments upon it. With this, the film suggests that Pauline's power is not based in difference but rather in universality—that is, the universality and socially constructed shame, discomfort, and rejection of filth and abjection—wherein she may channel socially ascribed markers of difference into threatening disruptions of the ideas and lives of those around her to their ultimate disgust and discomfort.

In fact, women's power or disenfranchisement as it relates to their bodies in the context of patriarchal society is a common concern in horror, especially in modern horror. *Excision*'s release followed a new wave of horror that arguably began with the rape-revenge remakes of *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Last House on the Left* in the late

2000s (Mee 75). Carol Clover states of the rape-revenge film that it is a “marriage [ . . . ] made in movie heaven [ . . . ] for which the matchmaker was the women’s movement” (16). So, too, is the case with modern horror in the respect that these remakes and other horror films released mirror the shift towards progress in the feminist movement by moving past simple inversions of gender and sexuality. These remakes have created an audience for modern takes on the old horror and rape-revenge formulas for films like *American Mary* (2012) *Descent* (2007), for example, which demand an intersectional approach to their cultural commentary with their characters’ involvement with and alienation from STEM fields and their racial and cultural markers respectively.

While *Excision* is in the vein of horror classics like *Carrie*, *The Hunger*, and *The Exorcist* with its connections to women’s bodies and biological functions in its horror, films released near the time of *Excision* function to validate the film’s commentaries and suggest an important shift in the genre. *May* (2002) and *Alyce Kills* (2011) both deal with the dangers of obsessive female friendship as it leads to violence, reflecting a subconscious fear of female relationships as threatening to the symbolic order. In the same way that *Carrie* comments on patriarchy through a Samson-like character, these films reflect and comment upon the homophobic fear that female relationships have the power to destroy life and the symbolic order. The monstrous-feminine figure in each film, May and Alyce, is imbued with traits of the vampire, the witch, and, as earlier discussed, the looming and all-consuming archaic mother. Through these allusions, the films present caricatures of women as gendered

villains, communicating the film's attention to and mockery of gendered stereotypes such as that of the vampiric seductress or the scheming witch.

The Soska sisters' 2012 film *American Mary* relies on both the narrative of the rape-revenge film and the ideological principles of the monstrous-feminine when Mary drops out of medical school after being raped by her professor, becomes involved in body modification, and practices her new craft on her attacker as he is locked in a storage unit. Despite Mary's interest in blood and the witch image projected onto her—as a threat to health and as a healer—throughout the film, she is a sympathetic character as a result of her navigation of the misogynistic environment presented by the film wherein men and women are at odds. By presenting Mary as identifiable with the image of the vengeful woman, this film suggests the power of abjection through Mary's power gained through it—like *Carrie* through blood, which is her ultimate downfall as she lay dying in a pool of her own blood after being stabbed by the husband of one of her patients. With this presentation, the film not only comments on gender, sexuality, identity, and violence but also alludes to the very real alienation of women from the typically male-dominated STEM fields, to which Mary reacts with anger and vengeance before finally having to operate outside of it.

While modern horror films reflect issues raised also in *Excision* and seem to reflect new dimensionality found in feminism itself with issues such as the alienation of women from STEM fields and a second-wave understanding of the power and meaning of menstruation, a comparable handling of abjection can only rarely be seen in American horror. The German film *Wetlands* (2013) does not even belong to the horror genre apart from its dealing with abjection, which is certainly is comparable in

its exaggeration and centrality. The film's central character, Helen, insists from the film's beginning that her mother told her that "it's hard to keep a pussy really clean," leading her to turn herself "into a living hygiene experiment" (*Wetlands*). In fact, she offers in her narration that "[i]f you think penises, sperm, and other bodily fluids are gross, you should just forget about sex altogether" (*Wetlands*), framing the film's commentary on the body as positive and feminist in its sexually and body positive perspective. Despite her comfort and preoccupation with this idea, menstruation is far from her concern as opposed to Pauline whose primary concern is her menstruation. Rather, Helen's comfort with her body suggests the social construction of the symbolic order as it relates to sexuality whereas Pauline's interest in her body and biological functions suggests that the patriarchal social construction of the symbolic order denies women specifically power as it pertains to sex, gender, and sexuality.

While this film is German and not quite horror, it provides a challenge to the social construction of abjection and the binaries of good versus evil, moral versus immoral, and clean versus dirty, as do many modern horror films. In fact, these films' dimensionality results from female aggressors who represent the monstrous-feminine and seem to be indicative of a new trend in horror in which contemporary cultural discourse surrounding women's bodies is a central target. Her sex, her gender, and her sexuality are no longer the object of sacrifice, as in *Carrie* or *I Spit On Your Grave*, in order to justify her power. Rather, her power stems from her body which has been the target of criticism, social construction, and surveillance.

None of these women holds any one meaning to her films alone, including Pauline. Despite her confidence in her interests in abjection, she is not fulfilled by

them, nor is she ultimately empowered in the film, just as Carrie was not. Almost universally in these films and in modern horror, these women as representations of the monstrous-feminine are nothing consistently but dynamic as they negotiate their environments, which is precisely why horror and *Excision* in particular merit feminist study. As opposed to presenting gendered inversions in power dynamics or depicting violent revenge for an equally violent wrong, *Excision* provides a narrative of Pauline's negotiation of baffling social environments that alienate her from her body and identity. In response, she endeavors to control the surveillance she experiences with the power that those around her imbue in her body in its ability to shock and horrify them.

While I am arguing that *Excision* presents a narrative that transcends gender, Pauline's characterization demands a particular structure in my argument. With Pauline's occupation of a liminal space between gender identities to comment upon the effects of socialization based upon the social construction of gender and the body and the inherent power therein resulting from the value socially ascribed to gender, my analysis is divided by gender as a result of the theory itself being gendered. Pauline is able to horrify men and women alike in the film but in significantly different ways and for largely different reasons: her ability to horrify women suggests an inherently male perspective in socialization, and her ability and determination to horrify men suggests her rejection of the male perspective and alludes to her discomfort and inability to understand the demonization of women and women's bodies. Thus, *Excision* has a particular importance not only to the monstrous-feminine but also to horror in its shift towards dynamic representation of a female aggressor whose primary weapon is her

body. With this weapon, Pauline is provided the power to suggest a new self-consciousness and dimensionality to horror wherein gender is no longer a tool used to be inverted and cast upon a character to indicate their (masculine) ability to possess power. Rather, films like *Excision* seem to employ an inversion of that which is deemed good, normal, and acceptable to disrupt audiences' socialization.

With this analysis, I intend to show that the film *Excision* unites trends of feminist cultural analysis of horror where they intersect at women's bodies. In so doing, I hope to prove that the monstrous-feminine as embodied by Pauline and defined with the film's other characters suggests that the power socially ascribed to women's bodies and the natural processes and products thereof, through their discourse of shame and guilt, is indicative of the power women hold and are systematically denied by patriarchal social structures found in the film in places like the church and Cotillion. Ultimately, then, the film and my analysis of it proves that the monstrous-feminine as applied to modern horror suggests a more intersectional commentary within horror that presents dimensional positions of women and allies its concerns with third- and fourth-wave feminist issues.

## CHAPTER I: PAULINE AND PAULINE'S PERSONAE

In the film, Pauline appears in three separate narrative threads: her fantasies, her prayers, and her public self—a self that is largely filtered by her own perspective and, possibly, her psychosis. In each of these threads, Pauline is represented by a particular persona that represents some truth of her identity mediated by the environment in which they exist: Pauline in her prayers, for example, reveals her socialization to fundamentalist religion despite her outward rejection of it presented through her communications with God in which her sincerity or her motives are not in question. With each of these personae, Pauline's character speaks to the film's presentation of the monstrous-feminine in Pauline by revealing her (failed) socialization and the power that she claims as her own through her reappropriation of elements of abjection as a means of controlling her own alienation and marginalization. With the personae's universal linkages to abjection, Pauline, in each of her forms embodies the monstrous-feminine through each persona's violation of the symbolic order in various manifestations.

Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine applies most aptly to Pauline's persona in her dreams through her very literal and blatant representations of abjection seen in her preoccupation with blood, death, and the sexualization thereof. However, elements of the monstrous-feminine are replicated also in her other personae, rather clearly in her public self through her blasphemous and shocking remarks and behaviors. In her prayers, however, Pauline's power to shock is more subtle and more targeted in the respect that this persona targets Christianity in particular, presenting a

more nuanced and dimensional exemplification of the monstrous-feminine and perhaps even suggesting a new trend in horror.

*Pauline in Her Prayers*

Certainly, Pauline sacrifices no opportunity to shock, horrify, and alienate those around her. In her counselling with her reverend, for example, she taunts Reverend William (played by John Waters) with blasphemous remarks and her own carnivalesque fantasies, such as her suggestion that Jesus Christ could be reanimated, before finally ending their counselling feeling that he is “repressed” and “unqualified.” However, despite her outward rejection of Christianity, she prays frequently in the film, totalling five sequences, suggesting that she has, at the very least, internalized some aspects of Christianity. In her first prayer of the film, Pauline qualifies her action, stating that she is unsure of her beliefs, but she feels that she must “get something off [her] chest.” Further, she concedes that she cannot form an informed opinion on Christianity, not having read the Bible in its entirety due to her inability to invest “that much time in a book that’s received so many mixed reviews.”

Unsure of her beliefs and despite her actions and bold, alienating claims to those around her who are largely religious, Pauline prays to God. She does not, however, seek any moral or spiritual guidance. Rather, her prayers reflect her concerns and provide a suggestion of her own moral code and her unfiltered and vulnerable emotional responses to the events of her life. She asks, at different times, that her relatives not be able to watch over her from Heaven, that God “save [God and her both] the trouble” of her being pregnant and having an abortion, that God give her the

ability to save her sister, and that He kill her mother. The personal God of Christianity, in this instance, becomes the only “qualified” recipient or critic of her actions. As in her fantasies, it is in her prayers that Pauline is unguarded and unwatched by those around her, revealing the difficulty of her mother’s disappointment with her, Pauline’s genuine love for and determination to save Grace, and even her discomfort with being watched, suggesting that her presentation in public is a performance whereas in her dreams she is genuine and uninhibited.

Actress AnnaLynne McCord and director Richard Bates, Jr. laugh in the film’s audio commentary over the choice made in post-production to blackout the background in Pauline’s prayer sequences, which were initially shot at the foot of Pauline’s bed. This choice resulted from elements in the background having been moved in production and, thus, moving position from shot to shot. Despite this, the lack of background images in these sequences, again, draw attention to Pauline’s security in being unmonitored and, thus, her honesty in her communication. Her honesty in these sequences, in fact, displays a site in which her monstrosity is not a part of a persona but rather that it is central to her character as seen in her familiarity and lack of humility in her communications with God, which functions ultimately to shock and horrify the audience as it would if another character in the film had overheard—with significantly fewer consequences.

### *Pauline in Her Fantasies*

In contrast, Pauline is at her most monstrous in her dreams as she explores what she terms to her reverend her “psychosexual fantasies.” In these sequences, as in

her prayers, she operates outside of the surveillance of others. Her desires and fascinations are presented in an unconscious environment where her deviance is uncensored and uninhibited by fear of judgment or even her own conscious will. This freedom is reflected in the literal environment in which they occur: a teal-and-white tiled room that is hospital-like in its sterility. In her dreams, Pauline exists as persona, existing in a realm of strangers who are silent creations of her subconscious, functioning only to act out her fantasies of her own sexuality and violence as well as her fascination with blood and the abject, before Pauline proper wakes with ragged breath, licking her lips, and smiling (or any combination thereof) in a state of post-climactic pleasure.

In the fantasy sequences, for instance, Pauline is fascinated with blood, the film's first suggestion that Pauline is linked with the abject is seen in the first scene where Pauline sits across from another Pauline persona as she chokes on blood seeming to be sexually gratified by it, or in the second fantasy sequence when she straddles a corpse on a morgue table. Kristeva's theory of abjection holds that "[s]ecretions mark the body, present it as imperfect, not fully symbolic, part of the natural world. Blood, as a bodily emission, is itself an abject sustenance" (Creed 61). More specifically, woman's blood, historically, has been represented as abject within patriarchal discourses for three reasons: "woman's menstrual blood threatens 'the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference,' [ . . . ] woman's blood points to the fertile nature of the female body and bears witness to woman's alliance with the natural world, [ . . . ] [and] woman's blood, which symbolizes birth and life, reminds man of his capacity, even willingness, to shed blood, to murder" (Creed 62). Thus,

Pauline's fascination with blood, specifically her own menstrual blood, and the corpse, "the ultimate abjection" (Creed 9), suggest a preoccupation with the abject and, further, a preoccupation with women's connection to nature and the power of life and death.

With the film's ending revealing Pauline's supposed psychosis, it is logical and, certainly, easy to pathologize Pauline's dreams as simply symptomatic of her psychosis. Further, by viewing Pauline's fantasies as a part of her embodiment of the monstrous-feminine rather than as simply symptomatic of her psychosis, the fantasies, like the monstrous-feminine herself, allow for an analysis of Pauline that is not dismissive by its foundation upon her mental issues. Instead, Pauline can be seen as an autonomous figure and, more importantly, one whose actions and analysis proves her value to the horror genre, allowing her fascination with the abject to be worthy of study rather than ignored as "gore for the sake of gore" or as serving as mere shock-value.

Indeed, research does support such delusions and linkages of sex and violence with particular brands of psychosis and mental illness. Litman (2004), for example, characterizes Eroticized Violence Syndrome (EVS) as "sexual arousal or climax to controlling, terrorizing, humiliating, injuring and (or) destroying another person (sadism); . . . gender ambivalence-indifference;" and brain and hormonal abnormalities (217). Pauline embodies at least two of these primary characteristics, any hormone or brain abnormalities being unfounded in the film, with her parents' failure to send her to an actual psychiatrist to provide insight into these possibilities. Based on Litman's representation of EVS, Pauline's exhibition of characteristics of the disorder suggests

her sexual deviance and predisposal to sexual violence and aggression as well as a likelihood of recidivism (218).

It is just as likely, however, based on information provided by the film, that her deviance, in its representation and presence in her dreams, is a result of exposure to sexual media. Two separate scenes in the film occur in Pauline's sex education class, which is presented as ineffective or even as a joke when a student submits an anonymous question to the teacher as a joke at the teacher's expense. As Ybarra, Stratsburger, and Mitchell (2014) contend, "[i]n the absence of effective sex education, and after nearly a decade of federally funded abstinence-only sex education, the media have arguably become the leading sex educator in the United States today" (1239), which contextualizes the film's representation of sex education class as commentary on the larger issue of sex education classes as ineffective and even as a sites of misinformation for the students who must take them.

Even so, Pauline asks questions of her teacher with obvious sincerity, such as when she inquires as to whether a person can contract an STI by having sex with a dead person. Pauline's exposure to sexual media is founded in the film when Pauline watches pornography late at night while her family sleeps feet away on the couch behind her. As with her genuine interest and curiosity in her sexual education class, Pauline turns to sexual media to understand and contextualize her own sexuality in the face of her mother's religious and conservative views, her peers' vocal judgment and disapproval of her sexuality, and sexual media and education that is unrealistic and unreliable.

Pauline's viewing porn and its effects on her sexuality also prompt examination of the effects of pornography and exposure to sexual media on young women versus those on young men. Glascock asserts that while antiquated surveys revealed that men were more aroused by sexual imagery, more recent work proves that men and women are comparably aroused (43), meaning that Pauline's viewing porn alone is not indicative of Pauline's masculinity. Based on Glascock's research and the work of many before him, pornography presents a primarily male experience wherein males identify with the characters in power—those who are not degraded (51). However, women viewing the same content are presented with a conflict, as they must either identify with the aggressor (male) or the degraded (female) (Glascock 51). In the context of the film, then, Pauline faces this same crisis. When she has sex with Adam, she becomes the aggressor by tricking him into performing oral sex while she menstruates, and, in so doing, she takes on the typically masculine role. So, too, in her fantasies, Pauline's role becomes that of the aggressor as, in dream after dream, Pauline takes on the position of power by inflicting violence upon another person or initiating sexual activity with a passive being.

Consistent with this idea, Pauline reacts with a negotiation of the gendered power structure presented in pornography by allying herself with the typically masculine position of the aggressor, viewing this power structure as immovable. Pauline assumes this masculine position but also literally assaults Adam with her femininity, as discussed earlier, by tricking him into performing oral sex on her while she menstruates—a fact that she withholds. With this, the film provides for Pauline a

masculine position of the aggressor while maintaining her femininity, meaning that she is a feminine female figure occupying a male space, making her monstrous.

While there is much literature on sexual aggression and coercion in men, there is comparatively little on sexually coercive females. Recent research, however, cites adverse home environments as a factor in the psychology of both male and female offenders. Also in both male and female offenders, research finds a link with “sexual preoccupation (almost continuous sexual lust and having watched violent porn)” (Kjellgren et al. 3354). Despite these indications of the prevalence of female sexual offenders based on evidence of probable exposure, criminal reports suggest only one to two female offenders for every hundred male offenders. Even more problematic are the conclusions drawn in Kjellgren’s research that suggest only underreporting as a factor (Kjellgren et al. 3354-60) rather than acknowledging also the effects of gendered socialization and the resulting gendered experiences as a factor, meaning that women could, in reality, offend less due to their frequent positionality in society at large as demeaned, degraded, and less than.

In Pauline’s fantasies, her femininity is exaggerated in her appearance, where she is highly made-up and wears a high-fashion wardrobe. This not only reaffirms her status as a woman in a male space of an actor and aggressor but also implicates the capitalist system that self-replicates within the porn industry itself as well as within sex relations, both of which, as a result, have at their centers exploitation (Lamb 316), as does Pauline’s sexuality within the film as a result of her internalizations of stereotypical power dynamics. It appears as if Pauline has this revelation herself as she cries during sex with Adam, indicating that she is literally harmed by this encounter

through the shattered image of what she imagined for her sexuality. Lamb, in her dealings with this idea, warns against “dangers presented to [young women] as opportunities” (317), which is to say that Pauline’s opportunity to be sexual as society both directs her and deters her, results in conflicting emotional responses that ultimately harm her, force her to protect herself from vulnerability and perceived weakness, and leave her to reclaim her powerful position by coercing Adam. To dismiss the complex implications of the film’s presentation of Pauline’s fantasy sequences, violent and deviant as they may be, as symptomatic of either her psychosis or the society within which her sexuality has come to be would ignore the film’s value to the horror genre particularly in the context of the monstrous-feminine by falling victim to the trap set by the film in its own suggestion of Pauline’s psychosis.

Pauline embodies Creed’s theory of the monstrous-feminine in *Excision* at the most basic level seen in her fascination (or obsession) with blood, which is a primary thematic concern of the film itself as well as a central element of her dreams in the fantasy sequences. In the very first fantasy, for example, Pauline sits facing another Pauline who sits choking with blood pouring from her mouth while the other is in a state of orgasm, which provides the film’s first evidence of Pauline’s sexualized preoccupation with blood and death, two forms of abjection and, by extension, why she horrifies her audience. These fantasies, ten in total throughout the film, present uninhibited and unapologetic representations of abjection that are inextricably linked to Pauline’s sexuality.

Pauline’s persona within her dreams differs drastically from that of either Pauline in public or Pauline in her prayers. In her dreams, she is highly sexual and

conventionally beautiful with high-fashion wardrobe, professional makeup, and Hollywood-quality wigs, and she is able to act out, without external inhibition, her desires to the fullest. In life, however, Pauline is loathed by those around her (a position that she exploits so that she may control the environment around her by being an agent of her own alienation. She is far from conventionally attractive with her ever-matted hair and her drab, ill-fitting wardrobe. Further, she is sexual only in her mind and in secret, both due to the deviance of her sexual interests and to her alienation, which, whether purposeful or not, functions to ostracize her from her classmates and potential partners, leading to an eventual secretive liaison (organized by Pauline) to lose her virginity.

Creed largely examines typified examples of the monstrous-feminine, such as her examination of *Carrie* as a literal witch or of *The Hunger* as a literal vampire film. In *Excision*, however, elements of the witch and the vampire, or more specifically the ways in which they horrify their audience, are coded into the film to suggest a collective monstrous-feminine wherein these collective patriarchal ideologies inscribed upon horror film archetypes are inseparable from the character's identity as a woman. Here, Pauline is a site for collection of the histories and myths projected onto women's characters in the horror film, when they are the monstrous-feminine, leading to her function as a collective horror to her audience. Pauline then has the power to suggest that if woman was once considered to be a witch due to, for example, her menstruation and, in turn, a connection to nature, or a vampire to replenish blood lost during menstruation, then she is inherently powerful because of it.

Creed relies on Kristeva's theory of abjection specifically as it pertains to blood both in her examination of woman as witch and in her examination of woman as vampire. While Pauline is literally neither witch nor vampire, her actions in her fantasy sequences suggest a connection to these horror film typologies. Thus, Creed's analyses of the witch and the vampire lend themselves to an examination of Pauline's character as a manifestation of the monstrous-feminine on symbolic and thematic levels.

Creed's analysis of the vampire is driven by the linkage of blood and sexuality (59), which is, at the most basic level, the primary thematic concern of the fantasy sequences. Creed examines the historical basis of many literary and cinematic representations of the vampire (male *and* female), such as Countess Elizabeth Bathory, a famous historical vampirical figure "who was accused of torturing to death over 600 young virgins and bathing in their blood in order to maintain her youth and beauty" (60). In Pauline's third fantasy sequence, she, too, crawls past numerous corpses to a bathtub of blood that she then enters in a clear reference to Countess Bathory. Beyond this basic connection, though, throughout her dreams, Pauline, like the vampire, is "driven by her lust for blood," leading to her violation of the "law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct" (Creed 61) by crossing the boundary between animal and human, living and dead, imbuing Pauline with the power to create and destroy, thus inciting fear, vigilance, and rejection from the world around her whose system she threatens.

Pauline's sexuality is certainly a central thematic concern of the film proper as well as its fantasy sequences. Due to the linkage of blood and sexuality seen in

Pauline's dreams, the film suggests that Pauline's sexuality is inextricable from her preoccupation with blood and death. Specifically, this contention is seen in the film in Pauline's sexual encounter with Adam, wherein the boundaries of reality and fantasy converge due to her fulfilled intention of losing her virginity while menstruating, unbeknownst to Adam. In this instance, Pauline's sexuality is not only linked to blood but it also functions as a weapon with which Pauline maintains control of the situation by assaulting Adam with the abject and alienating him from his own sexuality.

Typically in the vampire film, as Zimmerman concludes, the female vampire is coded lesbian as a means of alleviating male fears that "lesbian love could create an alternate model" (cited in Creed 60) to heterosexuality. In *Excision*, however, Pauline's sexuality is not coded lesbian. Rather, the film takes a different, more severe approach to a similar end (that of threatening the patriarchal symbolic order) by suggesting that Pauline has the power through her sexuality to overpower and even assault Adam with the abject, thus presenting a threat from within the heteronormative paradigm. By intercutting the real sexual encounter and Pauline's fantasy of it, the film imbues the situation with the symbolic power that asserts the importance of Pauline's menstruation and the ways in which it is used to maintain her control of the encounter through the horror created by her body, despite its being a natural, biological function. Pauline imagines and manifests male fears of the female and the feminine. Certainly, Pauline is not alienated from her body by the onset of menstruation as so many women report having been at menarche, or the first menstruation (Lee 351). Rather, she views her body and its functions as an inextricable part of her sexuality. She even seems to recognize the power that social stigmatization has imbued in menstruation through its

ability to horrify. Shuttle and Redgrove contend that the sudden transformation of female vampires is likely linked to the fact that “with the onset of menarche sexual desire is aroused and the clitoris is particularly energized [ . . . ] [and] that it is quite common in life for a girl to commence masturbating with her first menstruation” (cited in Creed 65). With this, Pauline’s sexuality and her knowledge of the power of her menstruation and her body reflect the social concerns reflected in vampire myths and representations of vampires in film wherein blood, sexuality, and the power of seduction are tools with which the vampire violates natural law of patriarchal order.

In the same way that vampire myths projected onto female bodies are driven by manifestations of patriarchal anxiety, so too are the myths of woman as witch. Joseph Campbell, in his study of the history of women as witches, concludes that women’s association with witchcraft resulted primarily from “their mysterious ability to create new life” (cited in Creed 74-75). Witches were not initially seen as agents of the devil as the Christian Church later argued. Rather, they were thought to possess terrifying powers. In fact, Campbell notes that girls who had prophetic dreams at their menarche were frequently thought to be witches, showing the linkage of women’s bodies and particularly their blood to the supernatural. Further, the crimes of supposed witches were largely sexual, such as “copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men’s penises” (cited in Creed 74-75).

Again, just as Pauline is not a literal vampire, she is not a literal witch.

However, as her narrative develops, particularly her fantasies, many of the elements of the mythical and cinematic witch manifest in her actions and dreams. As mentioned earlier, women’s sexuality is at the foreground of witch myths and histories. Horror

films in which the monstrous-feminine takes the form of witch reflect this trend, often imbuing its characters with “supernatural powers and a desire for evil,” while the witch’s historical function of “healer and seer have largely been omitted” (Creed 76). In Pauline’s fantasies in general, it is her sexuality and her deviance that is the focus as opposed to her goal to become a surgeon or to help her sister seen through her preoccupation with blood that manifests in her sexuality as well as in her normal behavior, such as when she finds and dissects a bird.

The film goes beyond Pauline’s menstruation and sexuality, though, to complete the linkage between Pauline’s monstrous-feminine to suggest a connection to her biological capability to bear children: Pauline’s own performance of woman as monstrous womb. Even beyond the physical, sterile, and contained environment of the fantasy sequences which invoke an image of the womb, the film’s fourth fantasy sequence presents Pauline as a maternal figure when Pauline begins to suckle the figures in her dream. In witch mythology, a telling sign used in the investigation and conviction of a witch was the presence of an extra nipple somewhere on the body, ostensibly used by witches to suckle their familiars or even the devil himself” (Creed 74). The presence of an extra nipple somewhere on the body of a supposed witch invokes Pauline’s biological function as a woman, linking her to the maternal, an important element of abjection, which is even consistent with the film seen in Pauline’s fantasy wherein her projections suckle at her. “[Woman’s] ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay and death,” and, in turn, reminds man of his mortality and the weakness and deficiency of the symbolic order (Creed 47).

Throughout the rest of the film, specifically in the public and prayer threads of the narrative, Pauline is distanced from the maternal by her rejection of her own mother. In her dreams, however, she comes to be associated with it, suggesting that her biological capabilities are inextricable from her identity. Abjection, as it is seen in the maternal as but one element that suggests the fragility of the patriarchal symbolic order, is in turn irrevocably attached to all of the social constructions that make her a woman including her biological functions, her secondary biological sex characteristics, and her performance of femininity (or failure therein).

In the abortion fantasy sequence, which follows a prayer sequence wherein Pauline expresses her fear of being pregnant, the film at once aligns Pauline with the maternal and distances her from the idea of motherhood. In a fantasy that seems to invoke all conservative, Christian misconceptions of abortion, Pauline's persona literally extracts the fetus from her body with her bare hands before handing it to a physically equally-heightened, caricatured abortionist who places the fetus in an oven until it explodes. As is the case with many horror films, this sequence presents the womb as a place that is at once familiar and unfamiliar by, as Creed states, "the presentation of monstrous acts which are only half glimpsed or initially hidden from sight until revealed in their full horror" (Creed 54-55), seen not only in the act itself, which seems to be at its most revolting before she even hands the fetus to the man in her dream, but also in the final fantasy sequence blurred with reality wherein Pauline performs surgery on her sister.

Pauline's fantasies, then, have a function beyond that of horrifying or shocking the audience. In fact, in addition to the sequences that incorporate elements of the

vampire or witch, within the narrative of her dreams is reflected her desire for power and control over her own life. First, a persona of Pauline excises the tongue of a female figure while another of the same figure bleeds from her mouth as if her own tongue had been ripped out, reflecting Pauline's own voicelessness and subsequent powerlessness within her home and social environment at large. In two sequences that follow, as Pauline explores her deviant desires and preoccupations in all aspects of her life, she is presented as a sort of hero or idol in her dreams as she is surrounded and celebrated by her projections, her literal, physical elevation to a higher stature than her projections, reflecting her growing comfort with her identity and determination to save Grace despite the cost.

This final sequence reveals Pauline's abjection in full: the film presents her as abjection embodied through the scene's visual references to the fantasy sequences and through her abilities to take and create life. However, this scene reveals Pauline's psychosis in full, while the film had previously only toyed with the idea through Pauline's own tongue-in-cheek remarks or her mother's frustrations. Her psychosis, rather than excusing or providing justification or explanation for her actions, may present a new category of abjection, a development of the monstrous-feminine that reveals the fragility of the symbolic order.

With the completeness and complexity of Pauline's embodiment of abjection, the film stands as a purposeful and self-conscious replication of Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine. Because the representation is so self-conscious and exaggerated to the point of caricature, the film stands as feminist through Pauline's continual violations of the patriarchal symbolic order which serve to consistently undermine

gendered relations and sex differences as horror films so often do. In fact, with Pauline, Bates presents an image of socialization and of active violation of this socialization wherein the justifications behind the laws are presented as ridiculous, such as that seen in Pauline's violation of gendered norms even in her everyday dress, which prompts alienation and aggression as well as policing, by her classmates. Pauline as the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience not only for her deviant sexuality or preoccupation with menstruation. Rather, she horrifies because she is the manifestation of failed or ignored socialization: operating outside of any social construction of right, good, moral, or acceptable. Her deviance takes the literal form of psychosis, as a condition that is undetectable, a silent threat to patriarchal structures, a condition that *is* abjection.

### *Pauline in Public*

Pauline enacts and becomes abjection in her subconscious, but her challenge to and violation of the symbolic order in public functions differently, in the respect that it is as much a coping mechanism for Pauline as it is natural to her. Rather than exploring abjection, her sexuality, and all that she is taught is unnatural and abnormal as she does in her subconscious, she manipulates her interest in abjection to alienate those around her in public as a means of controlling their disgust and shock. With the legitimization of her interest in abjection and her inability to understand its stigmatization seen in the film's prayer and fantasy sequences, Pauline subverts that which would mean her own marginalization (her interest in her body's functions) and manipulates it in such a way that she makes it her weapon, deploying it when she feels

that a situation and another individual's opinion of her is beyond her control. In this way, Pauline maintains her power over others through her control over their anger and discomfort as a means of avoiding rejection.

At school, for example, Pauline's primary interactions are with two young women belonging to the popular clique ("the Plastics") and with Adam, who is in a relationship with one of the two women. In her dealings with the Plastics, for example, Pauline feels the full force of surveillance by the confrontation of privileged, normative, elevated femininity. The most telling encounter occurs after Natalie has learned that Adam cheated on her with Pauline. Feeling threatened by Pauline, who has managed to challenge the hierarchy and the symbolic order through her having sex with Adam despite her non-normative gender presentation and her failure to adhere to the social order, Natalie confronts Pauline. Pauline responds to her confrontation with figurative and literal "shit" talking, first suggesting that Natalie's "vagina looks like a diseased ax wound" and then urging the Plastics to "[m]ake it quick," as she needs "to take a shit." As the Plastics leave, Pauline shudders and begins to tear up, showing that she is far from immune to the harshness of the opinions of those around her. By shocking and horrifying them, though, Pauline is able to stave off their surveillance as a sort of defense mechanism wherein she saves face and feels and appears to be in control of her life.

Within her family, on the other hand, Pauline's dynamic is far more complex. Pauline's conflict within the family corresponds to the theory of abjection as well as its manifestation in the concept of the monstrous-feminine wherein the mother represents the ability to create and, in turn, destroy. According to this theory, the

maternal represents a threat to life, power, and the symbolic order, threats that are replicated in those biological functions of women that remind men of this threat to their power (Creed 27-29). Thus, Pauline, despite her own connections to the maternal biologically, rejects her mother as well as the maternal, seen in her abortion fantasy as well as her prayer in which she insists that her only option if she were pregnant would be abortion. Her mother insists upon trying to enforce femininity upon Pauline most notably through Cotillion classes. Pauline, in turn, responds to this with anger and resistance as she pierces her nose and even induces vomiting (on one of the Plastics) in order to escape classes, while her sister Grace is ready and willing to learn and perform femininity.

Repeatedly, Phyllis places Pauline's sister Grace as more valuable and worthy of love due to her normative femininity. In scenes such as the very first in the reality narrative thread, for example, Phyllis snaps at Pauline to chew with her mouth closed, being that such social transgressions are not ladylike, before smiling to Grace and saying, "Thank goodness I have you." Pauline thus responds by controlling her mother's frustration, anger, and eventual loathing, clearly due to her fear of rejection.

In fact, the film's conclusion (and arguably Pauline's psychotic break) occur(s) upon her overhearing her mother's cry that Pauline is "impossible to love." It is at this point that the film shifts from Pauline's navigation of the system to her total excision from it. In their remaining interactions, Pauline alienates her mother as a result of her broken trust, and Pauline rejects her mother's attempt to bond. Finally, Phyllis resigns herself to Pauline's mental illness, and Pauline apologizes as she plans to save Grace, seeming to Phyllis finally to have become less difficult to handle.

With this, Pauline's rejection of the maternal ends as she moves to create life. In fact, as she does so, she stands in the womb-like environment of the garage. Solidifying her embodiment of abjection, Pauline represents a failed or flawed monstrous-feminine when she fails to create life, instead destroying two. Here, the film presents Pauline in an image of the archaic mother, "the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed" (Creed 27), ending in her literal embrace of the maternal.

Despite her ability and determination to horrify her audience both within the film and without it, the film imbues Pauline with moments of humanity throughout her narrative, suggesting a new dimension to her monstrosity in the respect that it cannot be simply dismissed as such. Rather, as with her psychosis and her rudeness in her social interactions, her monstrosity proper is symptomatic of the environment to which she reacts in each of its manifestations. Pauline's reality, like her dreams and prayers, presents a perspective of Pauline that ultimately suggests that she reacts to her environment with fear and her inciting fear and shock in those around her to avoid pain; she manipulates that which is socially constructed as horrifying to horrify others in order to avoid their policing her performance of social norms.

## CHAPTER II: PAULINE AND WOMEN

Beyond her own embodiment of the monstrous-feminine as seen through her personae, elements of Pauline's monstrosity manifest in her interactions and relationships with other characters. Specifically, with other female characters in the film, Pauline's monstrosity evinces itself as her character clashes with or relates to other women around her, such as her mother and her sister, respectively. This is not to say, though, that the traits she exhibits that are indicative of her embodiment of the monstrous-feminine necessarily make her revolting or shocking to her audience. Rather, these traits often serve to give a certain dimensionality to her character that works in conjunction with her ability to shock and horrify as a means of critiquing the socially constructed meaning of monstrosity and of that which is given the power to shock and horrify as both monstrosity and the abject are often of or relating to womanness and that which is marked as feminine or female.

With Grace in the film, for example, Pauline is often vulnerable and relatively honest, such as when she reveals to Grace that she intends to lose her virginity while she is on her period. While Grace is obviously shocked and uncomfortable with her sister's revelation, she neither breaks Pauline's trust nor judges her intentions and eventual actions. Instead, Grace supports her sister by listening, which allows Pauline to confide in and trust her. This relationship is certainly the closest one Pauline has with another woman in the film, as the others, like the popular clique and even her mother, often sit in judgment and seek to force Pauline into a more "appropriate" and comfortable image of femininity. As a result of this bond, Pauline fears her sister's illness and its threat to remove Grace from her life and thus seeks to become a surgeon

to be able to treat her sister. While this aim is clearly presented as misguided and impossible in the film with Pauline's poor academic performance and her psychological issues, she no less studies her sister's condition and even attempts to perform the surgery to save her life. Despite her failure, the storyline of Grace and Pauline's reaction to her illness presents a more positive image of woman as witch than is typical of the horror film that presents the positive side of the witch as a healer.

In the horror genre, portrayals of women as witches typically foreground their sexuality and present them as malign figures with an inherent and overwhelming desire for evil, while, as Creed notes, “[h]er other social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals” (76). In *Excision*, on the other hand, Pauline's monstrosity is at odds with her character in her motive to save her sister: while her act to save her sister failed and resulted in Grace's death, her intention to preserve her sister's life (albeit at the expense of another) are never in question. Rather, as a result of her psychosis, Pauline is deluded in her belief that she could perform a successful lung transplant on her sister without medical training and without confirmation that Kimberly's (Jump Rope Girl's) lungs would even be compatible with her sister's body.

Through this delusion and its result in the deaths of both Grace and Kimberly, Pauline's monstrosity is at once a point of contention with her intentions to preserve life as an image of a witch as a healer and also a representation of what Creed determines to be woman as monstrous womb. Certainly, this discord with Pauline's characterization becomes evident as the tone of the film shifts when Pauline tries on the mask connected to her sister's breathing treatment apparatus, which, as Pauline

removes it, is coated with the mucus Grace produced in breathing during her treatment. Soon after, Pauline seems to have a new resolve to negotiate her parents' and other authority figures' demands with her insistence at dinner that she "realize[s] it's not all about [her] anymore." Although her parents mistake Pauline's attitude as being indicative of her maturation (at least in part due to the little value they put into her insistence and indications of her psychosis), the film's shift in tone, wherein there is no more hint of humor or levity, indicates Pauline's being overtaken by her psychosis. Indeed, immediately following her insistence to her parents that she intends to make a change, in the film's final prayer sequence, Pauline thanks God for "providing [her] with the mental and physical strength to accomplish great things."

With the film's new brooding and menacing tone, the full power of Pauline's ability as the monstrous-feminine to destroy and consume becomes strikingly apparent, especially with her psychosis and its function to allow Pauline to act without inhibition. After incapacitating and kidnapping both Grace and Kimberly and neutralizing her father as a threat to the operation, Pauline creates her operating room in the garage of their family home. This environment, contained, dark, and secluded from normal activity as it is, serves as a representation of the womb, an image that is common in horror films with a figure embodying the monstrous-feminine (Creed 53). As Pauline operates, the bodies of both girls are concealed except for their faces which reveal their death. Indeed, this is common to womb-related environments in horror films in the respect that, like the womb, these environments are presented as a place that is "familiar and unfamiliar" through "the presentation of monstrous acts which are

only half glimpsed or initially hidden from sight until revealed in their full horror” (Creed 54-55).

The image of the womb as monstrous in the horror film gains its power to horrify from its ability to create life, which reminds films’ audiences of the fear of woman’s ability to consume and destroy. Creed notes that woman is linked to the abject through her body and its reproductive functions, which “place her on the side of nature rather than the symbolic order” (47, 50), thus making her a threat to its stability. The womb itself, in Creed’s analysis, “represents the utmost abjection for it contains a new life form” that, in its birth, will bring “with it traces of its contamination” in the form of blood, afterbirth, and feces (49). Thus, Pauline’s terrible, though misguidedly noble, actions as they unfold in an environment that invokes the image and cultural and social implications of the womb, not only solidifies her embodiment of the monstrous-feminine, but also presents Pauline as Samson-like and Carrie-like in her ability to destroy during her attempts to create. Being that Pauline is imbued with a power in her embodiment of the abject, her society and socialization has left her powerless to understand or control through its rejection of that which is female and of or relating to womanness and its promotion of a particular social construction of femininity.

Despite Pauline’s rejection of this construction of femininity, Pauline’s internalization of her society’s vision of femininity and pressure to conform to it is evident even with her sister, with whom she is able to be honest. In fact, when Pauline explains her intention to perform an umbilicoplasty on herself, Grace responds with an insistence that “[b]oys don’t care about belly buttons. They care about these,” as she

points to her breasts. Further, in her interaction with the young girl at Cotillion, Breanna, Pauline inquires as to what Breanna thinks “boys see in these overly made-up cumdumpsters” just before removing Breanna’s glasses and asking if Breanna has ever considered “having work done.” This suggests that while she rejects conventional femininity, she has internalized the pressures to conform, or, at the very least, is willing to profit from other women’s internalization of it.

Pauline’s internalization of the pressures to conform to stereotypical femininity is also evident in her interactions with the two women of the popular clique, Natalie and Abigail. Based on her interactions with these women, it is clear they they incite a sense of inadequacy in Pauline in the respect that they make her feel as if she herself needs to be fixed. Despite this, Pauline only reveals her discomfort or her being affected when they are unable to see; ostensibly, she reacts by channelling her ability to shock and horrify as a means of alienating Natalie and Abigail and maintaining her power in the face of their surveillance of her performance of femininity.

As previously discussed, in the locker room, (in a shot that is eerily reminiscent of the opening scene of *Carrie*.) for instance, Natalie and Abigail present their most extreme surveillance of Pauline’s femininity due to the fact that they have just learned that Pauline slept with Natalie’s boyfriend, Adam. Natalie begins by asking Pauline if she “purposely leave[s] the house looking like a raging lesbian” before insisting that Pauline has “the body of a 10-year-old boy.” Pauline quickly counters this by explaining that Natalie’s is “a highly unfortunate opinion, especially considering [her] vagina looks like a diseased ax wound.” As Creed notes, especially within the archetype of woman as witch in horror, the witch is associated with a multitude of

abject things, including “filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews, potions and even cannibalism” (76). Certainly, Pauline continues to invoke abjection as a means of alienating Natalie and Abigail in their highly gendered confrontation of Pauline featuring heavy policing of her gender. Pauline, instead of capitulating, takes the offensive and insists that she fears she “might get a yeast infection just being in the same room as [Natalie’s vagina].” Finally begetting their retreat, Natalie wants one last dig at Pauline, who takes one last jab at Natalie herself in saying, “Make it quick, I gotta take a shit.” By channelling these forms of abjection in the forms of yeast infections and shit, Pauline is able to stave off their policing and their effects on her by protecting herself in a display of anti-femininity that channels that which makes Natalie and Abigail uncomfortable and disgusting, all before the shot revealing Pauline’s actually being upset as soon as Natalie and Abigail depart.

While Pauline is ever vigilant and on the offensive with Natalie and Abigail, there is one other person with whom Pauline tries to relate: Kimberly, the neighbor girl who jump ropes constantly throughout the film. Pauline makes several gestures of friendship to Kimberly, such as when Pauline and Grace play croquet and Pauline attempts to bond with Kimberly over jump roping and tries to make plans to do so sometime. Kimberly immediately rejects Pauline’s offer, despite Pauline’s legitimate effort to relate to her. This relationship, in fact, gives meaning to Pauline’s interactions with Natalie and Abigail in the respect that her need to protect herself and to alienate her peers as a means of saving face and maintaining power prove legitimate.

By the end of the film, Pauline lures Kimberly to her death with the promise of jump ropes. This act of luring Kimberly into her home before incapacitating and

harming her invokes yet another image of women in horror in the form of woman as vampire. In the 1970s, as a result of the women's liberation movement, the vampire film, as Creed notes, "began to explore openly the explicit relationship between sex, violence and death" (59). Pauline's violence linked to her sexuality through her fantasy sequences, but, further, her acts of luring, incapacitating, and harming Kimberly links her to the vampire. The vampire, like Pauline as a woman, threatens to (and eventually does) violate the border between the living and the dead and the human and the animal (Creed 61). By violating these dictates of the patriarchal symbolic order, Pauline is able to threaten its destruction.

However, more than Kimberly, Natalie, or Abigail, by far the greatest surveiller of Pauline's femininity is her own mother, Phyllis. Pauline is constantly set in stark contrast with her mother, who represents the perfect, normative performance of femininity, while Pauline becomes a negative figure that reminds those around her and the film's audience of her ability to destroy as well as to create (Creed 27). Phyllis does not only attempt to ground Pauline in femininity but also in religion, even in sending Pauline to counselling for her mental issues at church with their reverend. This religious setting imbued with Pauline's psychosis immediately recalls the theme of possession in horror. In fact, in her second and final session with Reverend William (John Waters) presented in the film, she ends the arrangement, explaining that she "refuse[s] to allow [Reverend William] to indulge in [her] psychosexual fantasies" any longer. As Creed notes, this religious theme and setting combined with the connections drawn between "feminine desire, sexuality, and abjection" suggest that possession and psychosis provide a site for more than a simple representation of

possession. Instead, Creed explains, possession, or in Pauline's case psychosis, "becomes the excuse for legitimizing display of aberrant feminine behaviour," which is presented as monstrous, abject, and, in certain ways, appealing (Creed 31).

Certainly, Pauline is in the league of these other possessed monsters with her linkage and attachment to the abject in its various manifestations, primarily shit, mucus (through Grace), and blood (Creed 38). However, the film, with Pauline's attachment to the maternal in the forms of her killing in a womb-like atmosphere and her connection to women's reproductive functions as seen in her fascination with menstruation, as well as in her relationship with her mother wherein her rejection of a maternal figure but her determination to create life in Grace becomes problematic, suggests the failure of the paternal order to ensure the separation of mother and child, which Creed notes constructs monstrosity's source (Creed 38). In fact, by refusing to operate within the patriarchal order, Pauline becomes horrifying and monstrous due to the fact that she represents a threat to it, an ever-present reminder of the order's own social construction and, thus, fragility (Creed 41).

It is Pauline's relationship with her traditionally feminine, fundamentalist mother, though, that gives value to Pauline's disruption by presenting that which is normal and comfortable and, further, putting Pauline in confrontation with a figure that attempts to force femininity upon Pauline. In reality, though, being that both Pauline and Phyllis are female, both are linked to abjection by being linked to the animal world through their ability to give birth, which attaches them to the cycle of "birth, decay and death," which "reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order" (Creed 47). In fact, each of these women with whom Pauline

interacts functions to present different aspects of the monstrous-feminine while also critiquing the ways in which normative femininity and surveillance alienate women from their own bodies and, in turn, each other. It is with Grace, exclusively, that Pauline's internalizations become clear, suggesting that her actions to alienate those around her function to protect herself from the pressures to perform her gender and from the repercussions of her failure to do so. With men, however, Pauline's interactions seem to prove less that she seeks to protect herself and more of that she rejects that which is male and privileged much in the same way that her society and culture rejects that which is female and threatening.

### CHAPTER III: PAULINE AND MEN

While Pauline's interactions with women primarily serve to highlight her deviance from femininity, with men, Pauline's monstrosity takes shape as it confronts those with the highest stake in maintaining the status quo. Pauline's attachment to abjection that defines her monstrosity and which threatens the patriarchal symbolic order, thus functions to remind men in the film (and those outside of it) of the fragility of the law by confronting them with that which they are not. As Creed notes, the viewing subject, which is largely assumed male, "is put into crisis" when "confronted by the sight of the monstrous" because the "boundaries designed to keep the abject at bay, threaten to disintegrate" (29). With each of the aspects of patriarchal society as they are embodied by the men in the film, Pauline's interactions and, certainly, reactions serve to present the monstrous-feminine in conversation directly with the sex whose power and stake in society is most threatened by her embodiment of the abject.

With her teachers (Mr. Cooper and Mr. Claybaugh) and her principal (Principal Campbell), who are significantly all men, for example, Pauline is in constant refutation of both their authority and their insistence on the necessity and naturalness of the social system as is presented in academia. In Pauline's math class with Mr. Cooper, for one, he treats her with obvious disdain as compared to his treatment of the properly feminine Abigail. In one scene, Mr. Cooper responds to Pauline's raised hand with aggravation and annoyance, while Abigail's raised hand and subsequent correct answer is met with excitement and approval. Further, when Pauline refuses to complete a math examination, Mr. Cooper condescendingly asks her for her reasoning in failing to do so. Pauline insists that her "ability to solve these

equations has absolutely no bearing on [her] future as a surgeon,” while Mr. Cooper responds that mathematics are, in actuality, inextricable from the accuracy and precision necessary to perform surgery. With this, Pauline rejects the standards and methods set out in our society to become a surgeon, instead relying on her confidence in her abilities. While this is certainly, in reality, driven by her delusions, her rejection of the patriarchal (as represented by the aged and unyielding Mr. Cooper) social structures functions to present her as abject in a new way—one that openly and actively resists her society even inasmuch as it defines the steps to fulfill her desired career path.

Further, while Pauline’s deviation and belief that she may still complete this goal are quite clearly impossible to both everyone else in the film (including her parents and Mr. Cooper) and the film’s audience, Pauline’s certainty not only functions to allude to the depth of her psychosis but also to present her as abject in the respect that she abandons accepted social structures, even those that are not rooted in patriarchal and dominating presumptions. Thus, Mr. Cooper’s privileging of Abigail over Pauline suggests not only that normative femininity is privileged by those with the most power in society but also suggests that Pauline’s deviance in every aspect of her life is a part of her abjection. This idea comes to fruition when Pauline induces vomiting in class in an attempt to avoid Cotillion later that evening, wherein she literally does so on Abigail in math class. With this, Pauline continues to channel her abjection as an assault on others: on privileged, normative femininity (Abigail) and on patriarchal social structures that marginalize her (Mr. Cooper).

Similarly, with Principal Campbell, Pauline's school principal, Pauline's embodiment of abjection and psychosis are clear. In their first interaction, Principal Campbell is presented as jovial and absolutely out-of-touch. As Pauline drinks from a water fountain, Principal Campbell walks by and insists that she "save some for the rest of [them]," before laughing rather loudly at his own joke while Pauline stares blankly back at him as he walks away. With this, Principal Campbell is characterized by a sense of self-enjoyment and distance from the students which suggests that his role as an administrator has created a disparity between him and his students. Later, when Pauline attacks Adam, Natalie, and Abigail after Natalie and Abigail vandalize her house, she is forced to meet with Principal Campbell. In this meeting, Principal Campbell asks Pauline "have you no remorse?" To this, Pauline responds by insisting on her victimhood resulting from her chemical imbalance, which Campbell questions, being that this claim is unsubstantiated by her file. Pauline counters that if he gave her "five minutes with a clinical psychiatrist [ . . . ], [he would] have a doctor's note that will clear this right up." He laughs uncomfortably and dismisses her. With this, Pauline's psychosis is once again dismissed by an authority figure, who circularly reasons that without prior substantiation, her psychosis cannot be real. Instead, based on the discomfort she brings, she is dismissed in order to avoid the conversation, and she continues to embody abjection through her psychosis.

In her sexual education class, too, Pauline is not taken seriously. In one of the film's first scenes, her teacher, Mr. Claybaugh, has opened the class to questions, and Pauline asks if a person can "get an STD by having sex with a dead person." Her sincerity in this question, dismissed as it was, and the troubling nature of that sincerity,

should she have been taken seriously, would reveal the root of her abjection is her psychosis. Instead, though, her question is ignored by her teacher, and she is left to be laughed at by her peers and left with her question unanswered, which links her to abjection through her sexualization of the abject in the corpse.

Indeed, as previously discussed, instead of seeking legitimate therapy for Pauline for her psychosis, her mother sends her to religious counselling with Reverend William. Reverend William operates under the same systems and structures as Pauline's teachers in the respect that his conservatism and repression allows for him to see Pauline as troubled but leads him to treat her as a nuisance, meaning that Pauline is left without actual treatment for her psychosis. He does, though, see her as "a very troubled little girl;" however, either as a result of his confidence in the efficacy of religious counselling or his belief in the triviality of Pauline's illness, William never attempts to get Pauline into actual counselling. In her second and final counselling session featured in the film, Pauline terminates their sessions, insisting that Reverend William is "unqualified," making his role "unethical." William retorts that he has "it on the highest authority that [Pauline is] wrong," to which she responds that she refuses to "allow [him] to indulge in [her] psychosexual fantasies" any longer. With this, Pauline rejects religion and undermines the idea that it has the ability to overcome real physical and psychological manifestations of her psychosis, meaning that she disavows the belief that religion is the highest authority and that God is capable of conquering her issues. Thus, Pauline embodies the aspect of the monstrous-feminine that rejects accepted social institutions on screen as a means of shocking and horrifying her audience and those around her, despite the fact that her rejection stems

from a very real frustration wherein her psychosis is left untreated due to her mother's religiosity, which she then sees as an obstacle in her treatment. Certainly, with this, the film adds a dimensionality to the monstrous-feminine wherein Pauline does not act simply to horrify and alienate but rather she embodies the abject to protect herself from her environment, which has kept her on the course of violent and psychosis-driven action despite her repeated cries for help.

Perhaps the only male figure who attempts to understand Pauline and to give her credit is her father, Bob. Pauline and Bob relate to one another initially due to their mutually being rejected by Phyllis. Despite this, Bob's passivity and submission to Phyllis leads him also to reject Pauline. When she pierces her nose, for example, Bob initially chuckles, remembering having piercings when he was young too. Phyllis, angry that Bob is condoning Pauline's behavior, glares at him until he takes her side and insists that Pauline remove her nose ring. Certainly, this passivity complicates his membership to patriarchal society and his role as a patriarch. In fact, his continuous emasculation makes him a failed patriarch that is a source of humor in the film. Interestingly, though, as a result of this, Pauline never feels the need to alienate Bob with her abjection as she does every other man in the film. Instead, Bob is rather left alone by her, being that he, too, is powerless and operating outside of the socially constructed "natural" social order.

In perhaps their most direct interaction, Pauline, after having developed a cold sore, thanks Bob for having passed it to her as a child by performing CPR after she nearly drowns. Bob, however, stands his ground and reminds her of the events that preceded her infection. However, on a deeper level, this cold sore, which Pauline later

uses in anger as a weapon to infect a boy who has insulted her by kissing him, suggests that at least one form of her abjection is rooted in her father, meaning that abjection is not an inherently feminine and female designation. Rather it stems from her father—a literal patriarch—suggesting that, on a deeper level, abjection is created as an ideology that functions to alienate people who are deemed undesirable out of a fear that this undesirability is transferrable, meaning that as a society we must reject in order to protect ourselves. Pauline, however, picks up on this and then is able to channel abjection in order to protect herself from the surveillance and alienation of others.

In order to fulfill her own goals, though, Pauline has to compromise some of these boundaries, which she seems rather comfortable doing. Adam, like Bob, is emasculated early in the film. As Pauline sits on the bleachers, she overhears Natalie and Abigail gossiping about Adam, and how “Adam could not get hard” the last time they tried to have sex, which presents him as impotent and emasculated from his character’s introduction. Despite this, Pauline seeks him out to proposition him to have her first sexual encounter. To save face around his peers, he laughs at the idea, although, later, he calls her to set up the meeting. During their meeting at a hotel, Pauline retains a uniformly powerful and agentive position as she walks Adam through their encounter, despite her physical position of sitting on the bed while he stands, wherein she is literally positioned below him. Indeed, as they have sex, Pauline’s monstrosity is not absent from their encounter, especially when she tricks him into performing oral sex on her when he does not know that she is menstruating. Here, her psychosis and attachment to blood becomes a sort of “excuse,” as Creed would say,

for her monstrous behavior (Creed 31).

Certainly, the film itself, in a way, insinuates that her psychosis excuses her monstrosity when Pauline's and Adam's sexual encounter is blurred with the aesthetic of one of her bloody, violent, and sexual fantasy sequences. With her actions, particularly with regards to Adam's performance of oral sex on her, Pauline comes to embody the trait of the monstrous-feminine wherein she becomes the castrating woman in the respect that she undermines the power and comfort of his male position by confronting him with her menstruation and its determination as abject, thus emasculating him. Being that menstruation is socially constructed as unclean and disgusting, Pauline is able to channel it in order to disgust Adam and to reclaim and maintain her power in the situation (Creed 40, 62).

Universally, in Pauline's encounters with men, the film suggests that power is always at stake. Pauline is able to channel that which patriarchal society has deemed horrifying and disgusting based on its separation from maleness in its belonging to the female and the feminine in order to assert that the power that society has imbued in the female and the feminine to shock and horrify can be manipulated for her own power. Unlike with women, wherein Pauline uses her abjection and embodiment of the monstrous-feminine to protect herself and her position as nonnormative, with men, Pauline manipulates her abjection to place men at a lower position than her by asserting the power of her body and its functions as well as by rejecting social systems that marginalize and alienate them in their very structure.

## Conclusion

Although my analysis is solely through the lens of the monstrous-feminine and thus ignores the film's implications through other theories, such as that of Mulvey's male gaze or Doane's feminine masquerade, it suggests the importance of *Excision* both to horror and to cinematic representations of gender. With Pauline's multi-faceted representation and her interactions with men and women, the film suggests that her embodiment and manipulation of the abject function both to highlight its socially constructed attachment to the female and the feminine as well as to implicate Pauline's society for this social construction and its ability to alienate women from their bodies and identities. In the same way, the film utilizes elements of trash cinema, even featuring the Pope of Trash, John Waters, to suggest that these taboos function in similar ways to shock and horrify an audience, and, in so doing, to question why these manifestations of abjection are given the power to disgust and shock.

Because it is Pauline's body and its functions that are central to the film and the narrative, *Excision* suggests that the status of the female and the feminine as nonnormative rests solely in a social construction and one that functions to marginalize women. Further, Pauline's relation to individual elements of the monstrous-feminine, as, for example, the vampire or the possessed monster, suggests that trends in horror utilize gendered elements of abjection as a means of presenting women who can horrify. Uniquely, Pauline, as an embodiment of the monstrous-feminine functioning as a combination of these tropes, functions to represent new trend wherein aspects of womanness and femininity are inextricable from one another, thus suggesting a new trend in horror wherein various elements and social

constructions of patriarchal society work in conjunction to alienate and marginalize women.

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