Return of the Oppressed: Race and Gender in American Horror Films

by

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Scientists approach alien eggs, the cross of their openings evocative of labia - a vulva. A creature jumps out from the egg, violent and determined. It clamps onto a scientist’s face and slides an appendage down his throat, impregnating him with a monster.

A man dressed in an elegant fur coat approaches the camera slowly. He is tall, dark, and handsome - even beautiful. His voice echoes supernaturally, and as though speaking to a lover, he says, “Be my victim.” Tears streak down his face as he urges his target, “Surrender to me now.”

A girl, splattered with blood, stands in front of a softly flickering fire. She turns to leave, but stops at the sound of a whisper. “What dost thou want?” “What canst thou give?”, says the girl. The layered whispers come again: “Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?” “Yes” She says. A witch is born.

These scenes come from three films that are unique in the canon of the American horror genre: Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979), Candyman (Bernard Rose, 1992), and The Witch (Robert Eggers, 2015). Chosen because of their releases in three different decades, these three films show the political evolution of horror films across time. Specifically, it is the approach to race and gender within these films that is worth examining, especially when comparing them to other successful mainstream horror films produced in the United States since the 1970s. Further, through close analysis of these films and scholarly work, it can be revealed how these three films interact with popular horror film theories in ways that complicate and disrupt them. Film scholar Carol Clover’s theories on horror films, gender, and identification especially, can be complicated or undone by examining these three films. To explore what functions differently in these films, their context within the broader genre of horror must be established.
Starting with an Edison Studios production - James Dawley’s 1910 film *Frankenstein* - horror has been part of American cinema and has grown into a complex, established, and popular genre since then. It is also a genre that has cycled endlessly through many of the same tropes and themes, including the “final girl,” the expendable black character, and even Native American curses. These tropes have become so common and even crucial to the horror genre that there have been horror films, like Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), and comedy films like the Wayans brothers’ *Scary Movie* series (2000-2013), that were all created on the premise of parodying these tropes.

Many of these tropes began to form during the 1970s, an era during which the “slasher film” was born. Slashers, the descendants of films like Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 *Psycho*, were the root of the “final girl” trope. Final girl, a term coined by Carol Clover in her essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” originally published in the autumn 1987 issue of the journal *Representations*, describes a particular archetype popular in horror films – the young woman who survives until the end of the film, outliving her peers who fall at the hands of the villain. She is a character who is smarter than her peers, uninterested in sex, and is almost invariably white.

Perhaps the first example of the “final girl” is Mari Collingwood in Wes Craven’s 1972 film *Last House on the Left*. This was followed by a slew of final girls, including Sally Hardesty in Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and Laurie Strode in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) also has a final girl in Ellen Ripley, one that could be considered unique among the canon of final girls who have been part of horror films since the 1970s and up to the present day. Ripley, unlike the other final girls from the same era, has an antagonist that is not easily identifiable as human. Mari, Sally, and Laurie must all face
off against decidedly monstrous men. Ripley’s enemy, on the other hand, is not human at all – it is a parasitic monster.

_The Witch_, a much more recently released film, also has a final girl in the protagonist Thomasin. She does not battle a monstrous man, or even an inhuman creature, but rather her entire family and the – literally - Puritanical ideals that they preach and place upon her. Anya Taylor-Joy, who plays Thomasin, is considered a “scream queen,” a title bequeathed to actresses who frequently star in horror films, especially as final girls. Other scream queens include Jamie Lee Curtis, Sarah Michelle Gellar, and Emma Roberts. The very existence of this term hints at the importance of final girls in the horror genre - this type of role has become such a fixture since the 1970s that actresses have built careers on it. Whether this type of role actually indicates any kind of substantial and positive representation of women on screen is to be examined. On the other hand, it should be noted that while female protagonists have proliferated in the horror genre since around the mid-twentieth century, mainstream horror films have remained largely white in their casts and their narratives.

It could be argued that popular horror films addressed issues without directly being about them, using allegory instead - swapping out real world oppressors for monsters and serial killers. Adam Lowenstein’s 2005 book, _Shocking Representation_, develops the concept of the “allegorical moment” in horror films. This allegorical moment is defined as “a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined” (Lowenstein 2). Lowenstein specifically explores allegorical moments as they occur in horror films from different national, cultural, and historical backgrounds, arguing that this genre functions as a medium in which trauma can be represented and confronted, however abstractly that may be.
In *Shocking Representation*, Lowenstein investigates the allegorical moment as they occur in horror films of different cultures and historical periods, including George Franju’s *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), Shindo Kaneto’s *Onibaba* (1964), Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972), and David Cronenberg’s *Shivers* (1975). According to Lowenstein, *Eyes Without a Face* reflects the national trauma felt by France due to the Algerian War; *Peeping Tom* is described as a reaction to the trauma of World War II; *Onibaba*’s allegorical moments confront the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Lowenstein does not examine *Shivers* as a film that contains allegorical moments specific to any one national trauma, but instead analyzes it as an example of Cronenberg’s interrogation of “the constructions of the body that ground conventional narratives of trauma and national identity” (Lowenstein 146).

*Last House on the Left*, the only American film examined in Lowenstein’s book, is a retelling of Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring* (1960). Through analysis of the film, and its narrative’s allusions to the lingering trauma of the Vietnam War, Lowenstein finds several allegorical moments that explain the intense violence of the film as references to the Kent State shooting, violence against women, and the struggle between older conservatives and the younger counter cultural movement (Lowenstein 115, 120).

While there is merit to analyzing American horror films from the 1960s to the 1980s as confrontations with national and historical trauma, Lowenstein’s analysis provides a narrow lens of who has been traumatized and how. In *Last House on the Left*, for example, how does the rape and murder of two teenage girls reflect on the trauma endured by American Vietnam War veterans? Or the anxieties and fears of the American people, both those for and against the war.

The humiliation, degradation, and killing of the young women functions as a plot device that drives the parents of one of the girls to enact revenge on the drifters who killed her. Yet,
despite functioning as a catalyst for the rest of the film, the torture the young girls endure at the hands of the antagonists is made into a spectacle. Through a slow panning shot, audiences watch as one of the victims, Phyllis, urinates herself for the amusement of her attackers. In another, Phyllis is stabbed to death, with the camera framing just her lower half – focused on her thighs, her crotch, and her blood-stained underwear. One of her attackers begins to pull Phyllis’ intestines out barehanded to the sound of laughter.

This cinematic spectacle, along with the unfulfilled transfer of identity in slasher films, brings into question whose trauma it is that horror films supposedly confront. In the documentary, *The American Nightmare* (Adam Simon, 2001), several horror filmmakers discuss the intentional metaphors and allegories present in their work. George Romero speaks of allusions to the Civil Rights movement in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or the Vietnam War in *Dawn of the Dead* (1972). David Cronenberg speaks about his film *Shivers* (1975) and its relationship to his reaction to the sexual revolution and second wave feminism. John Carpenter, Romero, and Max Landis describe the traumatic fear they developed over paranoia of nuclear war.

However, even as the allegorical moments and confrontations with trauma are identified by the directors themselves, there is no addressing of who the “working-through” is meant for. Ultimately, the traumas confronted tend towards large scale traumas experienced by white, North American men. Makeup artist Tom Savini explains how he used his photographs of Vietnam War burn victims in order to design the special effects used in now iconic horror films. These images of burns, gore, and dismemberment, were not used to confront the trauma American soldiers had enacted upon civilians in Vietnam, but to create a source of audiovisual pleasure and fright for the audience. What is explored is not how others suffered, but how soldiers were
traumatized by having caused the suffering. The brutalization of the “other” is not only exploited by the filmmakers, it is reproduced and repackaged for consumption. Even beyond that, this trauma is transmitted unto an audience that may not even relate to the trauma of war veterans, but other white men who would internalize these representations of trauma. This is also assuming that audiences view these films through the lens of unpacking trauma, rather than as violent spectacles whose shocking images allow for thrilling physical reactions.

It should be noted while discussing the audiovisual pleasure the audience derives from horror films - and the possibly problematic implications of this – that horror films are not solely enjoyed by young white men. Instead, mainstream filmmaking crafts narratives with such an audience in mind. However, not all horror films were created with this audience demographic in mind, and in fact even as slashers gained popularity in the mainstream, niche horror films were made with black casts for black viewership.

As described by Henry Benshoff in his essay “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?”, there was an entire era of horror films that featured Black leads and narratives relevant to Blackness in America. In fact, Benshoff referred to this era from 1969 to 1976 as the “Blaxploitation film craze,” during which the “generic tenets of ‘normality’ and ‘difference’” were complicated by the films (Benshoff 31). Blaxploitation films, created during the years when ideologies of black nationalism and black pride became popular among African Americans, were films that generally depicted a “stronger, more militant image” of black people who defeated racist white villains (Benshoff 33).

These films include William Crain’s Blacula (1972) where an African prince is turned into a vampiric king, and the experimental horror film Ganja and Hess (Bill Gunn, 1973), wherein vampirism symbolized many things – drug addiction in the black community,
capitalism, and cultural imperialism. The protagonists of the film are vampires who are addicted to blood, and must feed this addiction by consuming from the black community, existing as both victims and victimizers. Paul Maslansky’s *Sugar Hill* (1974) is a zombie film wherein the zombies are the reanimated corpses of black slaves, whose victory the audience is meant to root for. These films were not mainstream, and are not considered part of the American horror canon. According to Benshoff:

> The American horror film often hinges on filmically constructed fears of the Other - an Other-ness both drawn from and constitutive of any given era's cultural history. As many theorists have pointed out, the generic pattern of the classical American horror film oscillates between the "normal," mostly represented by the white, middle-class heterosexuality of the films' heroes and heroines, and the "monstrous," frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers. (Benshoff 31)

This construction of the “other” within classical American horror films reflected not only the fundamental beliefs and ideas that powered mainstream American ideology, but also explains why Blaxploitation films were a subgenre set apart from the horror films that were already considered shocking or taboo. These films featured the legacy of slavery as their sources of evil. They also featured the “Other” as the starring cast, rather than as the constructed fear. Black casts took center stage, rather than the afflicted white middle class teenagers.

Although these Blaxploitation horror films were not created with entirely black production teams, and oftentimes had a white director, it is significant that filmmakers were aware of black horror fanatics and made films outside of the mainstream specifically geared towards black audiences. These films were considered niche, and were not the mega successes
on the level of *Halloween* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Instead of turning into classics, they became cult classics and hidden gems. Of course, the classical canon itself is not a naturally occurring phenomenon – it is manufactured by film distributors, and upheld by a predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual, male academia. Even outside of academia, film criticism, film programming, museum curation, and the popular press uphold this canon; the same set of films and filmmakers are presented and discussed, again and again.

To see a black or brown face in a mainstream horror film at all often meant seeing a character with little screen time and a brutal death. An example can be made of the highly esteemed film *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). Adapted from the 1977 Stephen King novel of the same name, the film features Scatman Crothers in the role of Dick Hallorann, a black hotel chef. In the novel, Dick Hallorann has a significant role and survives until the end of the narrative, even helping the protagonists escape the Overlook Hotel. In the film, his role is significantly reduced, and he is killed violently on-screen by an axe wielding Jack Torrance. Despite the lack of screen time and the appended death, Crother’s performance as Hallorann could be considered a major black role in mainstream American horror, at least until the 1990s.

The self-centering of trauma is not restricted only to allegorical depictions of the Vietnam War, or reactions to second wave feminism, but also applies to racial relations within America. Ariel Smith’s “This Essay Wasn’t Built on an Ancient Indian Burial Ground,” posted to online film journal *Offscreen*, takes the work of Michelle H. Raheja and applies her theory of invisibility/Hypervisibility to American horror films. The invisibility/hypervisibility theory, from Raheja’s book *Reservation Reelism* (2010) describes the abstract reality of Native Americans in settler filmmaking. While American Westerns may be the most obvious source of indigenous stereotypes, “images of Indians created for the benefit of the colonial gaze are hypervisual within
other types of genre cinema, such as horror films” (Smith). In describing these images as “hypervisual,” Smith is referring to Raheja’s theory of invisibility/hypervisibility. This theory refers to the absence of Native American actors and characters within cinema rendering them invisible, yet at the same time hypervisible, because they are present as an abstract concept.

In Smith’s example, settler genocide of Natives is ubiquitously used in genre films, including horror films. Films such as *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), or *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989) feature no Native Americans, yet the desecration of “Indian burial grounds” is what causes the horror in these films. Thus, Native Americans are not real, living people, but are rendered into a vanished race that enacts vengeance from beyond their mass graves.

This theory can also be applicable to African Americans in horror film, albeit with some tweaking. Black faces are more common in horror than Native faces, but they still exist in a limited way, meant to serve as stereotypes or tokenized representation before being killed off. In horror films Natives are killed off screen, centuries before the story has even begun. African Americans, on the other hand, are given limited screen time before being killed on screen.

Clearly, horror filmmakers, in trying to address traumas both historical and recent, would often turned the victims into the victimizers. Perspectives on these traumas would be decisively white, focusing on the trauma that comes from waging war, or fear of supernatural reprisals from people massacred by their forefathers.

If horror has struggled for so long with violent racism and misogyny, how do three films of this genre – *Alien, Candyman, and The Witch*, try to subvert or change these problematic traditions? Through close analysis of scenes, referencing scripts, and engaging with film scholarship, this question will be answered in the following pages.
Deconstructing the Final Girl

Carol Clover’s 1987 essay “Her Body, Himself” analyzes the role of the “final girl” in slasher films from the 1970s and 1980s. Clover argues that the sole survivor of these films is always a woman but that her gender does not stop male audiences from identifying with her because she is a “masculine” female, and the killer is a “feminine” male. This identification of the heroine as a “masculine” female is rooted in her assertiveness, her intelligence, and often her use of phallic weapons when attacking the antagonist. On the other hand, the “feminization” of the male killer as described by Clover simply boils down to transmisogyny. Clover writes that “his masculinity is severely qualified” by being a “transvestite or transsexual,” which supposedly allows the male viewer to detach from identification with the male killer (Clover 209).

After detaching from an identification with the male killer, the male viewer then begins to identify with the heroine. The heroine is a woman who is “boyish”, in her personality and even in her name: “Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will” (Clover 204). This process, of detaching from the male killer and reattaching identification to the female survivor, will be referred to as “transference of identification”.

However, this reading does not thoroughly analyze the horror genre’s long standing issue with writing LGBT characters - especially transgender women - as violent killers. Transgender women are not inadequate men, and their presence in horror films is not an attempt to blur the gender roles within the film, so much as it is plain transphobia utilized to horrify the audience. For instance, Michael Caine’s character in de Palma’s Dressed to Kill (1980) is designed to be shocking and repulsive by simply being a transgender woman. To argue that characters like Caine’s function as damaged men rather than as transgender women, is to perpetuate dated
transphobic rhetoric and no longer holds up under years of queer theory and queer film theory – including works by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Henry Benshoff.

The second component of Clover’s theory about gender and identification in slasher films maintains that male viewers root for the final girl because of her gender bending “masculine” qualities. Not only does this include her bravery and intelligence, but also her aversion towards sex - penetration specifically - thus explaining that the other women of slasher films who have sex and then die on screen are lacking this masculine quality. What Clover’s essay does not fully address is why horror films largely shifted towards having female protagonists - albeit “masculinized” females. If before this wave of slashers, audiences were happy to watch films with male heroes, why did the heroine emerge? Clover asserts that this is because a female protagonist is allowed to express fear, sadness, and pain in a way male characters are not, and her masculine attributes allow her to emerge the victor, thus making her perfect for a male audience to sympathize with and root for. After all, this might be why the industry has “scream queens,” but no “scream kings.” Conservative gender stereotypes are upheld even as women take center stage.

These assertions rest on heteropatriarchal gender conventions that restrict women to the role of emotional creature, and men to the role of logical being, even if final girls blur or bend such rules. It could be argued that this means that audiences are more comfortable with women taking on “masculine” attributes, instead of seeing a man take on “feminine” attributes - emasculated men are of course, relegated to the role of villain. Women who are supposedly masculine because of their logic, disinterest in penetration, and names, become the ideal woman for a mixed gender audience to identify with, without alienating the men.
However, this does not account for the pleasure aspect of horror films. The audiovisual pleasure of watching a horror film is a great part of its popularity, as explained by Clover herself when she compared slashers and “meat movies” to pornography (Clover 188). According to a content analysis of four hundred and six scenes from ten slasher films, scenes showing the death of male characters lasted just under two minutes on average, while scenes showing the death of female characters lasted around four minutes on average, with more shots showing expressions of “fear, terror, and pain” (Schneider 238).

While it is true that a male audience may not want to identify with a killer - because of his “qualified” masculinity, his mental illness, his impotence, or his queerness - this does not mean that they identify completely with the final girl. The transference of identification is incomplete in horror films, and this is clear from the frequent and sustained scenes of female suffering in comparison to male suffering. It is even more so evident in shots of sexualized violence.

It may be true that a female protagonist allows for more emotional reactions that might garner more sympathy from an audience, it is also true that male characters being barred from expressing terror and pain makes them a poor choice for a protagonist that an audience can derive pleasure from watching in a horror film. Women’s death scenes last longer and are more intense. Scenes like the one where the heroine Stretch, of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), is threatened with a chainsaw placed against her crotch, would not be so easy for a male audience to derive pleasure from if the protagonist were a man. Were the protagonist a man, the very framing of the scene would not have been designed for male pleasure. In the scene, an overtly sexual tone is taken, with the chainsaw being pressed against the inside of Stretch’s
leg, and slowly sliding up until resting against her crotch. Her legs are framed as an object to be consumed and desired.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 1.** Lynda is killed in *Halloween* (dir. John Carpenter, 1978)

This kind of framing of sexualized violence would not have functioned if Stretch were a man, because to film a man with his legs spread, misted in sweat, flesh trembling against the phallic chainsaw, would have been unpleasant for the male audience. Such sexualized, violent images of male victims may have even been unthinkable for the male filmmakers. Violence against the final girl is not always, but often sexualized violence, and sexualized violence is framed to tantalize rather than horrify. There is pleasure to be derived from the aesthetic of bare skin. Cameras are angled so that legs spread apart by weapons are not grotesque, but almost inviting to the viewer. The monstrous man is grotesque, but the camera lingers on the victim’s breasts or legs in a way that is standard male gaze in cinema.

The aim of tantalizing rather than horrifying is clear even in the soundscape of these films. When Laurie from *Halloween* picks up the phone and hears her friend Lynda being strangled and killed, she thinks she is hearing an orgasm. Equating death throes with sexual climax, a woman’s death in a horror film turns the scene a thrilling combination of “meat movie” and pornography in a way that does not happen during the deaths of male characters.
**Alien and the Abstracted Enemy**

Now that it is understood how the final girl functions within horror films as a way to permit violence against women for viewing pleasure, under the guise of empowerment, or identification, or representation, Ripley’s somewhat unique position in *Alien* can be contextualized. Ripley is unique not only because of her characterization or personal narrative, but because of the antagonist she is positioned against. While the transference of identification is incomplete in other films, such a transference is actually impossible within *Alien*. As established, a final girl is not always hunted down by a man. The villain can be a cisgender man, a cisgender or transgender woman, a woman disguised as a man, or even a child.

In *Alien*, however, the villain is a nonhuman entity, an abstract and foreign almost-animal with no face. The titular alien - called a xenomorph, is not even of the same species as Ripley. There is nothing there for an audience to identify with, not even a mask like the ones worn by Leatherface or Ghostface or Jason, onto which an audience might partially project human emotion. There is no transference of identification in *Alien*, incomplete or otherwise. For the audience, there is only one choice - identify with Ripley, or with no one. There are no markers upon the xenomorph’s body with which an audience member can relate to or identify – it is eyeless, its head is oblong, its very birth was a violation of nature as humans know it. In the xenomorph’s murderous desires there is nothing identifiable for the viewer, not like there is when Leatherface caresses a woman with his chainsaw, or when Mike Myers watches a girl undress in *Halloween*.

However, the xenomorph being an alien does not mean that it is a creature that cannot be contextualized by an audience within their own real world. Technically genderless, the most
striking aspect of the xenomorph is the highly phallic overtones in its design. The phallus as a threat is present in the film even before the xenomorph’s first appearance. As described by line producer Ivor Powell in the documentary *Alien Evolution* (2001), “It could just as easily fuck you before it killed you, which made it all the more disconcerting.” Screenwriter Dan O’Bannon stated in the same documentary: “This is a movie about alien interspecies rape.” The xenomorph’s design was based on images from H.R. Giger’s 1977 art book, *Necronomicon*. Giger’s art book was filled with images of creatures that were strongly sexual in their design – humanoid but inhuman creatures, with bodies crafted out of phalluses, skulls, and breasts. This sexual imagery was carried over into the designs and symbolism in the film.

![Fig. 2. An image from Giger’s *Necronomicon* (1977), p 65.](image)

*Alien’s* sexual overtones and themes were visually apparent from the start of the film, and the xenomorph’s position as a harbinger of abstract sexual violence is clear from its first form,
hidden within the eggs on the derelict ship. The eggs, already vulvic in nature, were even more vaginal in their original form, as Ximena Gallardo states:

Giger originally endowed the *Alien* eggs with a “vagina-like opening” complete with ‘an inner and outer vulva,” but the director and producers of *Alien* thought it too obvious, especially for Catholic audiences. Giger, with a masterful stroke of hyperbole, doubled the vaginal opening so that, “seen from above, they would form the cross that people in Catholic countries are so fond of looking at.” (Gallardo 24)

The first alien to be encountered in the film is the “facehugger,” a creature that leaps out of an egg and latches itself to Kane. Its limbs, resembling bony human fingers, clutch Kane’s skull, and its tail curls tightly around his throat. In a later scene, during an attempt to remove the facehugger, medic and captain discover that the creature has a hidden appendage - one that it has forced into Kane’s mouth and slithered down his throat. The connotation of oral rape looms large over the scene, and is only reinforced later on during the infamous “chestburster” scene, which marks the xenomorph’s first on-screen appearance. Rape, typically understood to happen between humans – often a man assaulting a woman – is twisted here: a genderless alien creature attacks and orally violates a human man, who then gives birth to this child violently. Rape, of course, does occur between men, but the fear of becoming pregnant following a rape is one that is not experienced by cisgender men – this terror of violation and indeed, body horror, can be projected onto cisgender men and explored in a science fiction horror film.

The upending of expectations about sexual violence is not empowering, but it is subversive, and this is permitted because of the film’s thematic place within the realm of science fiction. Happening at the same time as this subversion, is the interruption of Clover’s proposed transference of identification. The antagonist’s arrival and appearance are constructed to be so
alienating that the audience is never given a chance to identify with it. It arrives via a grotesque birth that involves the mutilation and death of a male character, and appears in a completely non-humanoid form, lacking arms, legs, and eyes.

The scene starts off relatively quietly, threaded through with muttered dialogue between the crew members as they sit down and have a meal. Then, Kane becomes violently ill. The soundscape of the scene explodes with shouts and rattling, as the crew members try to keep Kane’s body still, believing he might be having a seizure. At this point the “birth” of the xenomorph begins, first with the loud hissing sound of the alien within Kane ripping through, and the sight of blood suddenly staining the front of his white shirt. The crew stops their shouting and movement, shocked at the sight and sound they have witnessed, before Kane begins to shake again and once more they try to keep him still.

When the alien is finally “born,” having literally burst through Kane’s chest, there is the distinct sound of Kane’s sternum plate breaking open, followed by the shrill, nascent cry of the alien. Blood sprays throughout the room, staining several crew members, and Lambert can be heard crying. The alien emerges from the cavity in Kane’s chest, and looks around the room at the crew members with a slow curiosity resembling a newborn child, despite its lack of eyes. There is no gaze to identify with, only the foreign, phallic monster.

When Parker picks up a utensil as though to kill the chestburster, Ash shouts at him “Don’t touch it!”. The alien lets out a distorted infant’s cry before slithering away with remarkable speed. Thus, the birth scene comes to an end, and the film’s style of horror comes into clearer focus. Starting perhaps with the vaginal imagery of the alien eggs, then continuing with the oral rape of the facehugger, and perhaps coming to a head with the grotesque chest
“birth” of the xenomorph, the horror of sexual violence is clear in the film, albeit abstracted by gender and even species.

Cisgender men are not equipped with wombs or vaginas, so Kane’s throat becomes the vaginal passage, the warm cavity of his chest becomes the womb. However, instead of being born from Kane’s mouth, the chestburster breaks Kane’s body and kills him by exiting through his chest. Thus, the horror of the abstract sexual assault and alien pregnancy is brought to a head, taking the idea of a natural birth and turning it into a scene of abject horror for the crew and the audience.

Now that the xenomorph has been born, focus should be given to its design. Just as the cinematography and soundscape have established that this antagonist is “other” in a way that is bizarre and impossible in the audience’s world, so does the character’s design. Even in its infant stage as the chestburster, the allusions to a penis are clear. It is a snake with a rounded head and silver teeth - a “phallus dentatus” - hissing and snapping and slithering off to grow into something much larger (Kavanaugh 94). A bipedal creature with coal black skin, the
xenomorph’s skull is elongated, the shape of it suggesting the image of both a snake, and a penis. When the xenomorph opens its mouth, a second mouth emerges, a call back to the face huggers appendage, and this too is phallic. Almost like a reference to the mythic “vagina dentata” the xenomorph’s double mouth stretches and surges and attacks, a barbed penis. The body of the xenomorph is heavy with symbolism. Ellen Ripley will be the only one to survive it, and she will be the one to kill it. Not simply a final girl who survives and escapes, Ripley is also the character to destroy the xenomorph before safely ensconcing herself in her hypersleep chamber to rest.

In the xenomorph’s first appearance after the “chestburster” scene, it attacks crew member Brett, who has wandered off into a dark corner of the ship looking for the ship cat, Jonesy. In this scene, Brett is the only human face the audience sees. Huge and silent, the xenomorph appears behind Brett, who is none the wiser. Immediately the phallic intentions in Giger’s design are apparent, especially in a close up of the xenomorph’s head. It is incredibly fleshy and smooth, and seems almost soft to the touch, with thick saliva - actually KY Jelly - oozing out of its mouth (Gallardo 26).

When Brett finally rises and turns, the xenomorph’s face is shown in a tight close up, and as its mouth opens a second mouth is revealed. This is shown from Brett’s point of view, placing the viewer firmly within Brett’s perspective and giving them a strong moment of identification with this short-lived character. This inner mouth, like the exterior one, has glinting metal teeth. It is when the xenomorph attacks that the second mouth ejects, and the double layer of the phallus imagery is revealed. This second mouth, seen in movement for only a brief moment, attacks Brett’s face and leaves him screaming and bleeding as Jonesy watches with cool indifference.
Ash’s attack on Ripley mirrors this imagery, and the sexual overtones are brought in again via the pornographic images pasted onto the walls. As Ripley lies unconscious, haloed by images of nude women, Ash rolls up a magazine and then attempts to shove it down her throat. Starting with the imagery of the egg, from which the facehugger - with its violating proboscis - leaps, and then with the chestburster, and then the xenomorph’s second, internal mouth, up to Ash’s crude attempts to suffocate Ripley with a rolled-up magazine.

![Fig. 4. Ash attacking Ripley. *Alien* (1979).](image)

During Ash’s attack, Ripley wakes from unconsciousness and begins to fight back, despite being pinned down by the cyborg’s incredible strength. It is clear the magazine entering her mouth makes her unable to speak, but somehow other crew members are alerted and arrive on the scene, and struggle to subdue Ash. Ash, seemingly single minded, does not give up on this method of attempted murder, the magazine creaking under the pressure of his tight grip, Ripley’s hands entering frame as she claws at his face.

Ash’s true “otherness” is not completely clear until Parker finally manages to wrench Ash away from Ripley and attacks him so violently that his head begins to fall apart. White fluid
and wires burst out from within, Ash’s entire body jerking and twitching as he malfunctions. Up until this point, although Ash’s motivations seemed suspect, neither audience nor the characters were aware that Ash is not human. Here, the viewers are not given any tools that allow them to distance themselves from him, or make identification with him impossible.

Again, the transference of identification is interrupted, and made impossible. To view Ripley through the eyes of her attacker is not possible, and so she is not presented for the audience’s consumption. Ash is reduced to nothing more than a detached head with wires sprouting from it, spewing a mysterious substance from its mouth. Ripley, on the other hand, stands tall and triumphant, fully human, fully identifiable.

*Candyman and the double identity of Monster/Victim*

While *Alien* approached gender and subverted Clover’s theories about identification with the final girl, the 1992 film *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose) would further complicate matters with its use of race and racial violence as a theme. Here, the final girl does not fully complete her role, and the antagonist is not only easy to identify with, he exists in a role of double identity.

*Candyman* could be considered the first major horror film featuring a black man since the 1968 release of George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. *Candyman* is almost certainly one of the first horror films to address slavery and racist violence outside of the blaxploitation subgenre.

The film is concerned with the tied fates of Helen, a white graduate student in Chicago, and the Candyman, a supernatural being of urban legend who haunts the Cabrini-Green housing projects. Helen, as the female lead in a horror film, is positioned within the narrative structure as the would-be final girl. This would prime her for the transference of identification as described by Clover, but this process is troubled and disrupted by Candyman’s role as both “monster and
victim,” as described by Lucy Fife Donaldson in her essay “The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body”: ambiguous bodies in Candyman” (Donaldson 39). This double role, or double identity, is clear both narratively and visually in the film, and it is this double identity that undoes the transference of identification.

While in other slasher films, like the Texas Chainsaw Massacre series, or Last House on the Left, the transference of identification is made incomplete by the presenting of female suffering as spectacle for consumption, it is made incomplete in Candyman by the Candyman’s victimhood. While antagonists like Michael Myers are faceless, and seemingly free of emotions other than rage, Candyman is a creature of yearning and sadness. While Clover posits that women, unlike men, are allowed to cry on screen, Candyman sheds tears many times on screen. Candyman is not the image of a villain expected in these kinds of films – driven only by bloodlust and a grotesque curiosity about their prey. Nor is he the voracious, hypermasculine stereotype of a black man most often put on screen by white filmmakers – the type of stereotype that reflected and perpetuated the stigmatization of black men in historical and social reality. He is sensitive, aware of his emotions and his desires – aggressive in his hauntings and vengeance, and painfully romantic.

The violence that turned him into a monster is explicitly stated to be racist violence. His backstory is this: the son of a former slave, Candyman was a painter who fell in love with a white woman. When she became pregnant, her father led a lynch mob that tortured and murdered him, cutting off his painting hand and replacing it with a hook. He was then covered in honey and a beehive was broken over his body, leading to a slow and painful death. The honey earned him his legendary name of “Candyman.”
Thus, Candyman’s haunting represents more than just one aggrieved person returning for revenge, like Jason Voorhees in Sean Cunningham’s *Friday the 13th* (1980). Instead, Candyman’s return as a supernatural entity signifies the return of the oppressed. His unstoppable violence is enacted with the hook that has been crudely shoved into the still-bleeding wound of his amputated hand. His attacks are made possible by the violence enacted unto him by a racist lynch mob – the sensitive, creative, productive attributes of a painter’s hand replaced with an impotent metal hook, only good for destruction. The tragedy of the Candyman’s creation is evident at all times, because it is apparent on his body. The site of amputation has never healed, it is always raw and bleeding. The bees still live on within him, turning his ribcage into a hive of bones and shredded flesh. The signs of his monstrosity double as the signs of his victimhood, and thus complicate the supposed role he should fill as the villain of a slasher film.

Candyman’s assigned role is complicated further not just by his duality as victim and monster, but also by the rest of his appearance. As previously explored, the xenomorph from *Alien* does away with the issue of identification because it is truly non-human. Who the audience should identify with in this case is not an issue, and transference of identification is not necessary. In the case of other horror films, the transference of identification is actually made incomplete, because of the human villain’s role as creature who consumes, as opposed to the final girl, a creature to be consumed. Still, alienating the villain from the audience *is* attempted in these films via the costuming. Masks and facial deformities are typical: Michael Myers from *Halloween*, Jason Voorhees from *Friday the 13th*, Ghostface from *Scream*, Leatherface from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and Freddy Krueger from *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Candyman’s face, on the other hand, is not only unobscured, it is attractive. His beauty is made clear to the audience from his first on screen appearance, as stated by Donaldson in her work analyzing the
representation of bodies in the film:

In this moment, and throughout the film, Candyman is revealed to be sophisticated as well as barbaric. The more human and cultured elements of his presence are shown most prominently through the combination of his movement and costuming. The lack of violence in his movement on this occasion, as well as the elegance of his body – elaborated by the flourish of his hook – counters the violent intensity of his determination. When he is finally placed in a close-up the handsomeness of Todd’s features is immediately apparent: he doesn’t look like a monster, his face unmarked and his expression intense. He appears dignified, his head held high and posture upright, his movements unhurried and purposeful. His voice, while still unnaturally deep, gradually softens and becomes seductive, his language refined. The details of his costume, which include a white cravat and fur-trimmed coat, accentuate the distinguished aura his quality of movement and physicality presents, making him appear more like a dandy than a monster (Donaldson 39).

Tony Todd’s performance as Candyman is simultaneously eerie and seductive. Paired with the costuming, the trope that Candyman’s appearance and mannerisms brings to mind is more likely to be Prince Charming. Although this image is interrupted by the hook, and later the ribcage full of bees, these elements are not always visible. Close ups of Candyman’s face allow the viewer to map all of his facial features and emphasize the vulnerable humanity of this supernatural villain. This romantic quality is especially clear during a scene near the end of the film, when Helen finds his hidden lair in order to exchange her own life for that of an innocent baby the Candyman has kidnapped, likely as bait. This situation, while clearly villainous, is made confusing by the erotic tone given to Helen and Candyman’s interactions.
Candyman’s desire for Helen is hinted at with his gentle croons, asking for her willing victimhood. He begs her for surrender, and offers her immortality, and when she finally gives herself up in exchange for the safe return of the baby he declares “You’re mine now.” As he caresses her with both his hand and his hook, Helen does not flinch, seemingly in a daze when the hook attached to his right arm climbs up her leg and into her skirt. It is only when the bees escape from within his coat that she becomes frightened again, screaming as he kisses her with a mouth swarming with bees.

The bees that fill Candyman’s chest and mouth are the result of the violent lynching he suffered, and so the horror of the moment is layered with historical meaning. The terror is not simply in Candyman’s desire to kiss and hold Helen, but in the suffering he was subjected to - the manifestation of racism that resulted in his turning into the Candyman.
As the bees swarm Helen’s face and body, the story of his death is brought to the front of the audience’s mind. Lynched for loving a white woman - who it is suggested Helen is the reincarnation of - he is unable to caress and hold properly because his right hand was cut off and replaced crudely with a hook. His kiss is venomous because the lynch mob doused his body in honey and broke a bee hive over him, leading to a gruesome death that literally he still carries with him. There was nothing inherently evil or frightening about Candyman until he was made this way.

When Helen goes limp and unconscious out of fear after their kiss, the camera lingers on Candyman’s face. His reaction is not contempt, or lust, or violence, but rather sadness. Candyman’s strong emotions put him at odds with the cold, unfeeling villains of other horror films. He cries openly, more than once in the film, and expresses his desires with poetic dialogue rather than communicating through crazed grunts or eerie silence.

The reminders of the how and why of violence inflicted upon him also keeps the film from appearing like a horror story meant to warn against miscegenation. The genesis of the Candyman is rooted in the fears of the mythical, sexually voracious black man who preys on the vulnerable, innocent white woman. Judith Halberstram argues that the film only reproduces these fears, and regurgitates familiar tropes about black men and white women, prevalent in film since D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*: “No amount of elaborate framing within this film can prevent it from confirming racist assumptions about black male aggression towards white female bodies. Monstrosity, in this tired narrative, never becomes mobile; rather it remains anchored by the weight of racist narratives” (Halberstram 5). However, within the narrative of the film, it is clear that these conservative ideas are what led to Candyman’s death and his thirst for vengeance.
With this in mind, reading the erotic and romantic overtones of Candyman and Helen’s interactions as anti-interracial, or simply anti-black, would ignore the film’s thesis.

Candyman’s killing of the psychotherapist is a subversion of the prince rescuing the hostage princess. As he drops the therapist’s corpse down onto his desk, he looks Helen in the eyes and declares, “You’re mine now.” Helen, spattered in blood, stares at him silently. He reaches over and undoes the straps that bind her to her chair, before flying out of the closed window, glass shattering in his wake. Now, Helen is free not only to escape the hospital but to return to her apartment and confront her unfaithful husband.

The film ends with Helen’s elevation from graduate student to mythical being, a new urban legend who also exists within the overlap of victim and monster. Her role as the final girl, pre-supposed by the audience due to genre conventions, is not fulfilled. She is also not immortalized as an innocent in death, because she continues to haunt and act from beyond the
grave, materializing as she was in her final moments, her hair singed away, skin burned. Here, she moves beyond final girl and becomes the monster. Like Candyman, she meets her end at the hands of a mob and lives on only as a ghoul whose cool wrath can be summoned by invoking her. In her death, she also replaces Candyman, whose spirit dies in the same bonfire that destroys and transforms her.

The tragedy of this film all came about because of the Candyman’s race, and his gender. By the late nineteenth century, the roles of black men in America were strongly delineated, and to stray from such a role would mean death. For the protagonist of the next film to be examined, it is her gender and her place in a new world of racialization that will bring about tragedy.

The Witch and Becoming the “Other”

Robert Egger’s feature film debut, The Witch (2016), is a film that reveals how misogyny and a puritanical fear of the “Other” are what turn young women into witches. The film’s thesis is almost accusatory of the very conventions and beliefs that drive many mainstream horror classics. While Ripley from Alien was a final girl with a truly unrelatable antagonist, and Helen from Candyman had an antagonist who was both victim and monster, The Witch’s Thomasin is a final girl with no easily identifiable antagonist. There is no singular person intent on hunting her down. Instead, her greatest adversary exists woven into the film’s dialogue, revealing the casual misogyny and suspicion directed at her by the other characters.

The narrative features a Puritan family who has settled in New England sometime in the seventeenth century, and must now leave their settlement after the family’s patriarch comes into conflict with other Puritan leaders. Banished from their community, they settle near the edge of a forest, and survive with much difficulty on rotten crops they farm themselves. One, or perhaps
several women, then begin to prey on this family, beginning with the kidnapping and murder of their youngest child, infant Samuel.

The titular witch could be any of the magical women who appear briefly throughout the film, but Thomasin, the teenage daughter of a Puritan settler family, is the central witch of the narrative, even though she is innocent of all witchcraft throughout the film. Her conversion in the film’s penultimate scene, where she signs her name in Satan’s book, could not have happened if her family had not turned against her and accused her in the first place.

Fig. 7. Naumkeag traders enter the settlement. *The Witch* (2016).

Native Americans are glimpsed only once in the film. As Thomasin’s family leaves in disgrace, a small group of Native men are seen walking into the settlement, presumably to trade. William, the patriarch, briefly mentions trading a silver cup with “Indian Thom.” Because of the film’s setting, it is impossible for Native Americans to be portrayed as nothing more than
vengeful spirits from beyond the grave. However, they are still ephemeral, made up of people who are mentioned in passing or seen for mere moments before vanishing from the frame.

When pre-teen Caleb returns to the farm, bewitched and mysteriously, violently ill, the concept of “Indian magic” is brought up. “Dost remember John Kempe’s boy? That first winter, he was tormented of Indian magic,” says Katherine, the matriarch of the family. Here, the process of othering becomes clear within the narrative of the film. Katherine soon suspects that Thomasin, her own daughter, is the witch who is tormenting Caleb. She suspects Thomasin of this “savagery,” uniting herself with the darkness of the forest and the unknown rituals of Natives, which is aligned with Satan.

The young girls from the Salem witch trials in 1692 claimed they had learned witchcraft from Tituba, a South American indigenous woman who was enslaved and taken to Massachusetts. This reality – that fear of witchcraft was not only tied to fear of female independence, but tied to fear of Natives as well – is not forgotten by writer/director Eggers, who paid close attention to historical accuracy in both writing and shooting the film. Diné writer Lou Cornum in his piece “White Magic,” explains further the importance of indigeneity in the American understanding of witchcraft, especially during colonialism:

In the mid-17th-century atmosphere in which this “New England folktale” takes place, the threat of witches follows from a fear of the Natives and their grounded intimacy with a coveted land yet to be tamed by settlement. This intimacy with land is then projected onto Indigenous forms of sociality and sexuality deemed unruly and un-Christian. Tellingly and expectedly, in The Witch it is the teenage girl of a Puritan family who, in coming into maturity and sexuality, brings witchery into the home. The film’s unexpected performance at the box office—grossing $40.4 million on a budget of $4 million—might
in part be attributed to a recent revival in America’s interest in witches. This interest … rarely attends with such historical accuracy as *The Witch* to the specter of savagery that witches once promised. (Cornum)

As stated by Cornum, it is the inclusion of the “specter of savagery” that sets *The Witch* apart from other media concerned with witches. This also ties into why Thomasin as a final girl is presented and positioned differently from other final girls. Throughout the whole film she is undergoing the process of “othering.” Her proximity to nature others her. Her gender others her. She does not spend the whole film escaping or battling the “other,” as different final girls have done. Final girls must fight sexual deviants, representations of people of color, or often men with an unnamed mental illness. Thomasin, however, is trying to survive the societal beliefs that paint her as untrustworthy, malicious, wild, and sexually deviant.

It is clear in the film’s dialogue that Katherine fears the “othering” of her children, and believes it is happening because of their expulsion from the settlement and their newfound proximity to the forest. “Was not Christ was led into the wilderness to be ill met by the devil?” she asks her husband. The land is wild, they are far from fellow Christians, and so her children grow more and more like savages.

WILLIAM (O.S.): This is Godly land–

KATHERINE (O.S.): (overlapping) Godly? Our children are being fostered up like savages.

This fear of racialized savagery is only compounded by internalized misogyny. Katherine’s desire to send Thomasin away is directly tied to the arrival of Thomasin’s first period, thus indicating the beginning of her life as an adult woman. Thinking that the four children of the house are asleep and cannot hear her, Katherine tells her husband: “Our daughter
hath begat the sign of her womanhood. . . She’s old enough, she needs must leave to serve another family.”

At the end of the film, wholly convinced that her daughter is the witch that has brought misery upon their family, Katherine accuses Thomasin of trying to seduce her own brother and father. In her mother’s eyes, these accusations, the last things Thomasin will hear from a family member, seal her fate. Thomasin has fully become the “other,” the sexual deviant willing to sleep with her own family, using her sexuality to bewitch and harm.:

KATHERINE: You bewitched thy brother, proud slut!

THOMASIN: Stop it, mother.

KATHERINE: Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore?

THOMASIN: What say you to me?

KATHERINE: And thy father next!

Katherine then attempts to murder Thomasin, at this point driven mad by the witchcraft that has exploited her secret feelings towards her daughter. Thomasin kills her own mother in self-defense and weeps, holding her body against her own, alone on the barren farm. Caleb, who looked upon her with lust in his eyes, is dead from some mysterious witchcraft. Her hypocritical, anxious father has been killed by the goat Black Phillip. Her youngest siblings, toddler twins Jonas and Mercy, have vanished overnight, spirited away by some old witch. And now her mother is dead. Devastated, Thomasin enters the barn at night and speaks to Black Phillip.

Black Phillip is the family’s black billy goat, an animal which Jonas and Mercy claim speaks to them. William is aghast when Thomasin reveals this to him, taking the twins’ childish claims as truth and believing it to be a sign of devilry and witchcraft. These childish claims, of
course, are revealed to be the truth when Thomasin approaches him in the dead of night and conjures him to speak to her.

Thomasin’s conversation with Black Phillip is also her conversion into a witch. Splattered with the blood of her mother, stripped down to only her shift, Thomasin is at her most vulnerable and desperate now. Filmed in a medium close up, she is lit only by the flicker of candlelight, her golden hair swallowed up by the dark shadows around her. Black Phillip, off screen, is silent, and does not reply to her pleas until she turns to leave.

“What dost thou want?” he asks, his voice nothing more than a whisper, cold and eerily layered, like many voices speaking at once. Thomasin replies simply “What canst thou give?” “Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? . . . Wouldst thou like to see the world?” These pretty words are more than enough to entice Thomasin, who has been starving for months due to her father’s incompetence as a farmer, distanced from all manner of earthly delights since leaving England for the settlement. Solemnly, she replies, “What will you from me?” At this, Black Phillip asks if Thomasin can see the book in front of her.

The shot changes to a close up of an open, ornate book on the floor of the barn. Chimes signal the presence of magic, and Black Phillip’s hoof enters the frame from the left, followed by a man’s leg, encased in a heeled leather boot. A black coat follows, embroidered with gold thread, blurry as it crosses the frame. Black Phillip has transformed into a man. The scene cuts back to the medium close up of Thomasin, who now has tears glittering in her eyes. Black Phillip, shrouded in darkness, can be seen crossing behind Thomasin, barely visible to the audience as he commands “Remove thy shift.” Thomasin does so, and Black Phillip places a gloved hand on her shoulder, perhaps comforting, perhaps threatening. Thomasin, after a
moment of looking upon the book, admits to her illiteracy and says, “I cannot write my name.” Black Phillip, peering over Thomasin’s shoulder, replies, “I will guide thy hand.” The scene cuts abruptly to a wide shot of Thomasin and Black Phillip the goat walking into the forest.

![Figure 8](image-url)

Fig. 8. Black Phillip, barely visible, helps Thomasin write her name in his book. *The Witch* (2016).

Thomasin is so far from the camera, she seems ghostly, and she quickly vanishes into shadows as she walks into the tree line. A wide tracking shot shows as Thomasin continues through the forest, slowly, while Black Phillip ambles ahead of her, as though leading her. Thomasin’s long blonde hair covers most of her body, lit only by moonlight. The sound of women chanting begins here, loud and startling. The scene cuts to another wide shot.

Here, in a clearing, Thomasin encounters a witches’ sabbath, where six nude women writhe and chant around a fire. Thomasin enters frame and slowly approaches the Sabbath, her
body only a dark silhouette against the fire. Another cut shows Thomasin in medium close up, lit by the bonfire.

Another cut returns to the wide shot of the Sabbath, where the women are convulsing and howling. Covered in blood, or “flying ointment,” the women take hold of large sticks and begin to levitate. Thomasin, overwhelmed, watches them, before she begins flying herself. Her levitation is only revealed by the trees shrinking away in the background, as the camera stays with her. Tears roll down her face, and she laughs, ecstatic. The film cuts to its final shot: Thomasin, filmed from a low angle, floating by the top of a large tree, her arms raised above her head in a show of exaltation and power.

Thomasin’s nudity in this scene is symbolic of her vulnerability now that her whole family has died. Black Phillip, clearly some servant of the devil – if not Satan himself – demands absolute loyalty and vulnerability from his witches. Her nudity and signing her name in his book are linked together. Thomasin’s body, however, in this scene in which a man preys on her, is not put on display for the audience’s pleasure. The suggestion of her nudity is enough for the film. The desexualized nature of this situation is confirmed in the film’s script, which describes the scene as such:

THOMASIN hesitates... she pulls the thin string on her shift awkwardly and child-like. She closes her eyes. She thinks she is ready. She gives in. It falls off her body.

(NOTE: WHILE “APPEARING” NUDE TO THE AUDIENCE, THOMASIN’S BREASTS, “ETC.” WILL NEVER BE IN FRAME.)

Indeed, her body is filmed in wide shots and obscured by shadows during her walk through the forest. Even when Thomasin joins in the Sabbath and begins to fly, she is seen only in a medium close up, showing only her face and the tops of her shoulders. The final shot of her
shows only her bare legs, dimly lit by the fire on the ground. The rest of her body is blanketed in shadows. The other witches, although not the narrative’s final girls, are filmed in wide shots, their nudity abstracted by their distance from the camera.

Thomasin’s ecstasy as she rises above the fire with her fellow witches is both relieving and ominous. She is finally free of the pain of living among people who constantly belittle her and suspect her, pushing her further away despite her innocence and loyalty. At the same time, the shadows dipping over her face turn her smile into something sinister, and the joy and power that fill the frame as she rises promises her eventual, vengeful return.

Now, in the final frames of the film, she has fully become the “other”. Pushed into this role by prejudice, she is still the film’s protagonist. She is the audience’s hero.

**Conclusion**

*Alien, Candyman, and The Witch* do not all deal with race and gender in the same ways or in the same amounts. This could be a reflection of evolving attitudes towards race and gender in the mainstream. Although all three films stand out because of their narrative and thematic differences from other horror films, all three films are still mainstream horror hits.

*Alien*’s science fiction narrative seems to exist in a world that is both post-race and post-feminist, where crew member Parker’s blackness is of no consequence to the other characters, or even to the story. Ripley takes a commanding role on the ship without objection or snide remarks. There are no sexual scenes in the film, although they were common in horror films at the time, especially to set the final girl apart from other women in the story. Sex is a non-issue in the film. At the heart of the film is rape, and it is tackled in abstract and horrific ways that do not place women in the position of an object meant to be brutalized and consumed.
*Candyman*, a film about a white graduate student studying a poor, black community in Chicago, does not and cannot invent a post-race world like *Alien*. In fact, instead of leaping towards the future, *Candyman* looks towards the past and the ways that violence of years past still informs the present. Violence against black men is the specific root of the violence felt by those in the narrative. Had there been no lynching of Candyman, no fear of him as a black man capable of love, there would be no hauntings.

*The Witch* looks even further back than *Candyman*, examining the immediate results of the first years of interaction between white English settlers and Native Americans in the American northeast. The result was swift and unyielding “othering”, which coupled with Puritanical beliefs designed to place women in roles of submission, would prove to be the formula for the makings of a witch.

Importantly, although all these films addressed (or imagined) gender and race in ways that are not typical for the genre, they all also had tropes that are traditional in horror films. Most importantly for this research paper, all three feature a final girl, although Helen from *Candyman* undergoes an unexpected and subversive transformation into the monstrous feminine by the end of the film. Thomasin’s own transformation at the end of *The Witch* forces the audience to question what constitutes a hero or a villain, and whether becoming the “other” is to hit the lowest low, or to finally have relief.

Although Carol Clover’s scholarship has been greatly influential in analysis of horror films, especially slasher films, issues in her theories can be found by examining popular horror films from the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, *Alien, Candyman*, and *The Witch*, can all be used to show how her theories can be disrupted or done away with entirely while still maintaining a heroic final girl. It is my hope that more and more horror films will continue to do this.
Works Cited


**Filmography**


