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## *The Woman's Horror Film: Swallow and Promising Young Woman*

I wanted to make a kind of Hitchcock thriller . . . in which people really didn't know what was going to happen next.

– Emerald Fennell qtd. in Adam Rathe, “Promising Young Woman Director Emerald Fennell on Making The Year’s Smartest Horror Movie,” *Town & Country*, 15 Apr. 2021

Since Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), the modern horror genre often crafts stories that address themes related to gender and sexuality. In the post-#MeToo era, it follows that horror filmmakers would set their sights on interrogating gender relations in this new social and political context. In this article, I identify a new horror cycle for the present era. I look to two recent films in independent Anglophone cinema: Carlo Mirabella-Davis’s *Swallow* (2019) and Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020). I make the case that these films fall under the psychological horror and slasher categories but shift the respective sites of the threats. In these two films, the protagonists are not confronted by a singular external threat to evade, escape from, and triumph over, as in early slasher flicks; rather, these films depict female subjectivities existing under the heavy forces of patriarchy, forces that operate from all directions and no one point in particular. I conceptualize the two films as part of a woman’s horror film cycle, combining the woman’s film and horror genres, respectively.

My identification of this new cycle is not to claim that slashers (e.g., *Halloween Kills*, 2021) and supernatural horrors (e.g., *The Haunting of Hill House*, 2018; *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, 2021; *Things Heard and Seen*, 2021) are no longer of interest to the industry or audiences. Rather, in the spirit of this year’s *Cinephile* theme, Constant/Change, I suggest that the horror genre maintains its prominent place among cinephiles because of its ability to adapt to

emergent structures of feeling (R. Williams 131-35). Post-#MeToo horror film audiences no longer believe in the extraordinary circumstances of the slasher or supernatural horror and instead desire realistic features that articulate the terrors of ordinary existence under patriarchy. The evidence for this claim about audiences and the genre comes from the proliferation of the twenty-first century art cinema trend known as extreme cinema. Extreme films address pressing social and political concerns using the codes and conventions of the horror genre but are geared towards arthouse cinemas and their audiences (Horeck and Kendall; Bordun, *Genre Trouble*). While not part of this trend, my two selected features are nevertheless influenced by extreme cinema directors’ focus on women’s oppression and each film has an unrestrained and graphic visual style and a narrative structure informed by the mode of art cinema (Bordwell).

As more women helm independent US films and continue to work behind-the-scenes (Lauzen 14), it should not come as a surprise that these filmmakers are refocusing the themes of horror cinema.<sup>1</sup> Luckily for horror and thriller filmmakers, a defining feature of the horror genre is that it has “no clearly defined boundaries,” affording them a level of freedom to experiment and rework conventions (Wells 7). From the perspective of genre studies, the two entries I discuss below share no formal, narrative, or aesthetic similarities, and thus cannot constitute a genre in the sense of demarcating specific semantic and syntactic elements (Altman 128-43). I thus opt for the term cycle, “groups of films made within a specific and limited time-span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual

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1. Due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, Martha M. Lauzen advises caution in interpreting the increase in women’s employment in the industry in 2020-21.

commercial success” (Neale 9). I choose cycle as opposed to genre because this new brand of horror has only emerged after the revelations espoused in the #MeToo movement(s). Moreover, as Rick Altman notes of early studios who adopted or stole characters and character types from other films or comics (115-16), the new cycle investigated here borrows from the real-life personages who dominate the #MeToo movement: straight, white, young, attractive, middle- and upper-class cis women. *Swallow* and *Promising Young Woman* are not stories about oppression in general, but oppression specifically experienced by straight white women.<sup>2</sup>

To start, the #MeToo movement sparked a slew of film cycles that take women’s lives and sexual oppression as the central focus. Filmmakers turned to the genres and styles of drama (*Bombshell*, 2019; *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, 2020), historical drama (*The Last Duel*, 2021), documentary (*Athlete A*, 2020), and art cinema (*The Assistant*, 2019) to craft feature films for the post-#MeToo era. My focus is on two films in the horror cycle that I term the woman’s horror film. There is no originary film in the woman’s horror cycle but a concerted response with a women’s rights movement that, in practice, melds the codes and conventions of two genres. I adopt the woman’s film designation to mark the cycle’s family resemblance with the 1940s cycle of woman’s films initially noted in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars such as Molly Haskell and Mary Ann Doane (Altman 74-77). Canonical films include *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Mildred Pearce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948). As I summarized in a recent article,

the woman’s film places a woman’s desire for familial relationships, romantic/sexual relationships, or financial independence at its center (Greven 36-37). Scholars agree that the core thematic element of the genre is a transgressive female subjectivity [in that t]he lead character’s emancipatory project from traditional sites of women’s experience, such as the domestic and familial spheres as wife and mother, is “a failure to accept the repressive, subjectivity denying

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2. While I do not want to foreclose the possibility of trans or non-binary characters in this cycle, I have yet to encounter one. Additionally, the limited range of characters here and the short span of this horror cycle do not foreclose the possibility of a new genre of post-#MeToo horror films. As Altman notes, “It is all too easy to forget that most genre labels began life attached to a limited cycle” (120).

structures of patriarchal femininity” (Pravadelli 102-107; Lang qtd. in Grevin 39-40). (Bordun, “Art, Porn, and Schlock” 18)

The key feature of this 1940s genre, which persists within later iterations such as the “postmodern chick flicks” of the 1990s and 2000s, such as those starring Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan (Garrett 63-65), is that women’s subjectivities are seriously considered and not trivialized because they are outside of the public activities of men. Filmmakers adapt the codes and conventions of melodrama and the result of the above-noted emancipatory project leads to characters’ and/or spectators’ outpouring of emotion, often in the form of tears (L. Williams 603).

What happens when core thematic elements of the woman’s film emerge in a different low genre (L. Williams), specifically in a low genre with much current commercial and artistic success?<sup>3</sup> In the woman’s horror films under discussion in this article, the structures of patriarchal femininity engage sites and relations of repetitious suffering for the women characters. I understand this power along the lines of Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of the term: power is not repressive but uses tactics from all sides to produce a kind of knowledge about how to best discipline bodies (Foucault 94-99). In the case of patriarchy, this manifests as knowledge about how women should act, behave, and think. As Foucault notes, there is also resistance against this power, and the films discussed below are two such instances. In *Swallow* and *Promising Young Woman*, as a result of their everyday social and political life under the systems, institutions, and structures of patriarchy, the protagonists will into existence a crisis in the form of bodily self-harm: an eating disorder and an impossible revenge plot, respectively. I contrast the omnipresent and omnidirectional operations of power in the woman’s horror film with horror cinema’s conventional threat of unidirectional gendered violence, i.e., a male killer hunts and attempts to kill one or more female protagonists. The films of this new horror cycle shift the terrain of conventional horror battlegrounds and emphasize, in novel ways, gender and oppression in a contemporary context.

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3. In her oft-cited article, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess,” Linda Williams notes that the low genres (horror, pornography, and melodrama) are also body genres: these genre films emphasize the physicality of the characters which, in turn, produce bodily effects on the films’ spectators.

## Swallow

Carlo Mirabella-Davis's *Swallow* illuminates the expansive horizon of the new horror cycle.<sup>4</sup> Hunter (Haley Bennett) marries an upper-class man and finds no meaning in her large, luxurious house. Confined to domesticity while the husband is at work, she develops pica. Pica is an eating disorder whereby a person consumes items that are not typically fit for human consumption, have little to no nutritional value, and/or can cause bodily harm. Hunter snacks on marbles, batteries, pushpins, and nails, often with much pain. Later, when she evacuates her bowels, she retrieves the items and adds them to a hidden collection. Hunter takes joy in this process, and her unhealthy and harmful practice is nevertheless an accomplishment, i.e., something done for no other reason than to satisfy the question of whether she can exist for herself. "I'm proud of myself," she tells her husband after she swallows her first marble. "I did something unexpected today."

In the first half of the film, Mirabella-Davis combines one of the conventional characteristics of melodrama, an ill woman who is also in a state of bodily excess (L. Williams 604), with body horror. Early on in the development of her disorder, Hunter sometimes swallows the items with success, while other objects do not immediately go down – in these moments, she grips her throat and spurts up blood and whatever sharp object she tried to ingest. In the second half of the film, after visits to doctors and therapists, Hunter uncovers what triggered her pica, here resembling the generic trait of a past that haunts the melodramatic protagonist. To her therapist, Hunter blurts out that she is a child born of rape. However, unlike the melodrama and its cause-and-effect narrative structure, I read this revelation as an attempt to misdirect viewers, to see how simple it is to fall back on psychoanalysis and the unconscious to explain trauma. This works for spectators too: it would suit our conventional understanding of the ill-woman if her health issue was a matter resolvable by the talking cure.

I posit that the revelation about Hunter's conception is misdirection because the lack of control

experienced earlier in Hunter's mother's life (as a teenager, the mother's boyfriend raped her and, following the rape, abortion was not an option) parallels Hunter's married life – both mother and daughter have no control over the terms of their existence. In other words, it is all too easy to point at Hunter's unconscious that needs treatment when, in fact, it is her social situation under patriarchy that needs repair. While Hunter's mother experienced threats from two external sources, her boyfriend and her religious family that would not allow abortion, Hunter faces threats from all sides and within the supposed safety of her home: her husband's friend corners her in the kitchen, demanding "just a hug," her husband has no interest in her except when he wants to be seen with a beautiful woman in public, desires sex, or wants a child, and she is depicted in a long shot vacuuming an already immaculate-looking living room in an homage to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Luce Irigaray suggests that under patriarchy, a woman is an "obliging prop for the excitement of man's fantasies" – he takes her as his object (25). When therapy fails to stop Hunter's pica, the husband and his family confine her to the home and put her under surveillance. She eventually escapes to track down her rapist father.

With the body horror in the first half of the film and the forcible confinement of the second half, Mirabella-Davis ventures into what I have called the woman's horror film – the condition of women's status under patriarchy as a domestic servant, concubine, and reproductive vessel. While the climactic confrontation between Hunter and her father effectively cures her of pica and she takes it upon herself to terminate her pregnancy (the penultimate scene has Hunter in a mall food court, munching on foods fit for humans as well as abortion pills given to her by a doctor), this conclusion does not make a dent in the patriarchal systems of oppression. Presumably, Hunter then leaves her husband and married life, yet when her former husband selects his next promising young woman, there is no guarantee that his new wife will have experiences that differ from Hunter's struggles.

## Promising Young Woman

In Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*, Cassandra/Cassie (Carey Mulligan) crafts a clever plot to strike fear into the hearts of men who are soon-to-be or are repeat sexual offenders. Her plan plays out like a slasher film stood on its head: Cas-

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4. I introduced the new cycle of horror films as helmed by women. Mirabella-Davis now identifies as a man. In his young adulthood, he identified as a woman named Emma Goldman. In a recent interview, he said that had terms like gender-fluid been available to him earlier in life, he would have adopted them for his gender expression and identity (Malkin).

sandra acts drunk at bars and clubs, men bring her to their apartments to commit assault and, when the men are about to take advantage of her, she terrorizes the would-be assaulters. For example, at the culmination of the first sequence, Cassie feigns semi-consciousness on a male co-worker's bed – splayed, no less, in a crucified position. As the co-worker pulls off Cassandra's underwear, in an overhead shot, Cassie gazes upwards and transforms her stupor into a conscious grin. Her initial repeated and slurred question, "Wait... what are you doing?" is soberly repeated as the heroine sits up and stares down her potential victimizer. Thus, Cassandra does not terrorize the men with violence; rather, she catches them in an act that they cannot rationalize or defend. By enacting this ploy, Cassandra harms the victimizers' cognitive faculties. Cassie's goal here is straightforward: to force the men to think twice about assaulting women.

Similar to the serial killers in slashers who take victims' body parts as trophies, in a secret journal, Cassandra lists the men she has terrorized by their first name and, in jagged strokes, keeps a tally as well (based on the tallies, I guess that she has enacted the drunk woman ruse upwards of 720 times, which may seem a bit farfetched, even by slasher standards). Moreover, again following slasher conventions, Cassie, who functions as a villain to the men, has a deep, traumatic wound that serves as the cause for her endless quest. However, *Promising Young Woman* reverses tropes of the slasher by switching the gender roles of villain and victim(s): in slashers, punishment comes to "the sexually active 'bad' girls" in exchange for their pleasure (L. Williams 610), while in Fennell's film, Cassie punishes the predatory men for trying to take pleasure at a woman's expense.

Traditionally, in the woman's film, the protagonists are often abandoned by their lovers and this abandonment serves as the emotional core of that respective story (L. Williams 604). In *Promising Young Woman*, Cassandra does not lose a lover or even a man, but her friend, Nina Fisher. While they attended Forrest Medical School, their classmate Al Monroe assaulted Nina. Charges were not laid, the College administration did not investigate, and the suggestion in the film is that Nina then took her own life. Cassandra thus enacts her plot for both her dead friend and the universal rights of women. Following Linda Williams's assessment of the melodrama in that characters always arrive "too late" to secure their happiness, thus producing tears in characters and and spectators (613-15), Cassie missed the chance to save her friend. What remains is for her to terrorize

predatory men as well those responsible for Nina's death, such as the College's Dean and Monroe's lawyer. Because Cassie is too late, her namesake from Ancient Greek literature suggests that should she go to the authorities with information about Al's rape, no one would believe her.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, similar to the Trojan priestess Cassandra's prophesy of her own death, Cassie knows what her future holds: eventually, one of her male victims will fight back and even take her life, as Al does in the penultimate sequence.<sup>6</sup>

For her final hunt, Cassandra tracks down Al's bachelor party, located in a common setting for slashers: a cabin in the woods. She feigns not drunkenness for Al's pals but performs as the conventional entertainment for bachelor parties. Cassie arrives in a sexy nurse outfit, drugs the men, and promises a singular experience upstairs for Al. Unfortunately, as she is about to carve Nina's name into Al's abdomen so he never forgets his victim as long as he should live, Al breaks free of the handcuffs and smothers the heroine. Cassie's murder at Al's hands, however, does not end her revenge plot. The villains in slasher films always return (Modleski 622). Before her death, Cassie set in motion a series of revelations about Al's rape of Nina as well as the circumstances of her death. In the film's closing moment, the police arrest Al at his wedding.

Fennell notes that she planned to end the film after Al and his pal Joe burn Cassie's body. Both Cassie and Nina receive no retributive justice. The director's financial backers urged her to film a happier ending, "[b]ut in my heart, I think that's where it would have ended," Fennell says (Aurthur and Donnelly). While we only have the film as it stands as a finished product with Al's arrest at the wedding, Fennell's intentions are in line with how I have observed and assessed the woman's horror film. Against the immeasurable forces of oppression, Cassie knew she never stood a chance. But like Hunter in *Swallow* who confronts her rapist father and terminates the unwanted pregnancy, Cassandra's actions are nothing

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5. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (458 BC), after the fall of Troy, King Agamemnon returns home with the captured Trojan priestess Cassandra. Cassandra then prophesizes the demise of Agamemnon's house as well as her own death. However, the chorus does not understand her prophesies.

6. In an interview, Carey Mulligan, who plays Cassie, notes that her character is aware of the danger of her revenge plot and the possibility that she may die. For Mulligan's Cassie, "it's worth the immense risk" (Mulligan qtd. in Aurthur and Donnelly).



short of courageous in the face of certain doom. While the villains of slasher movies are always triumphed over by the end, as the horror genre conventions dictate, they return in some form for endless sequels. It may not be Cassie who returns to terrorize more rapists in the future, but copycats of famous serial killers are never far behind.

### The Woman's Horror Film

Following these last remarks, I make the distinction between the traumas endured by protagonists of the woman's film as largely emotional and psychological (e.g., Mildred Pierce loses her daughter Kay to illness) whereas horror film protagonists' traumas are more often physical abuses (e.g., in *Halloween* [1978], Laurie fights off Michael Myers's assaults). Melding these two genres and traumas in the post-#MeToo era produces the cycle of woman's horror films. Regarding the films' melodrama lean, both features discussed in this article take place in the present but are just as interested in the protagonists' pasts. While there are no flashbacks typical of melodrama, the past traumas of the two respective protagonists are the catalysts for their present struggles with patriarchy. The emotional trauma of a past event returns as physical trauma in a form of self-harm. The latter facet thus transforms a woman's film into the woman's horror film.

Regarding the generic qualities of horror in the contemporary cycle under investigation, then, I make the distinction between the horror genre as we understand it through the slasher and its now obvious psycho-sexual themes and the woman's horror film as emotional/psychological trauma manifesting in physical trauma (Hayward 214). The key difference here is that slasher and early horror genre theory does not approach the challenges faced by women in everyday life. First, the slasher concerns itself with men's socialization, the result of which leads them down a path of gendered violence. Thus, serial killers often have more history and psychological depth than the "interchangeable" female protagonists (Modleski 622-23). Many horror films focus on what we should do for men because if men were better socialized, women would benefit (i.e., villains would not kill them). This is not the case for *Swallow* and *Promising Young Woman*. Both films show the consequences, for women, of men's poor socialization and centre the protagonists' past, present, and future.

Second, while early horror film scholars such as Robin Wood, Carol Clover, and Linda Williams

teased out the latent psycho-sexual themes in the genre, the extraordinary situation of a fantastic serial killer could not give rise to a modern cycle of horror films that engage with the everyday subjectivities of women. On the one hand, the cismen and ciswomen in slasher flicks are more or less equally at risk if a Jason or Michael Myers breaks through their door. On the other hand, the extreme, real-life traumas that parallel the kinds of spectacular violence portrayed in slasher films are relatively uncommon; however, with the raising of women's voices in movements such as #MeToo (Langone), it is now common knowledge that men harass women on the street, coerce their coworkers for sex, and assault their dates at every turn.

The woman's horror film is thus a cycle that functions with ciswomen as the suffering protagonists and foregrounds the unique circumstances of those characters within their ordinary contexts (upper-class housewife and friend who lost her best friend), rather than in an extraordinary setting such as a cabin in the woods, or a small town terrorized by a mysterious external threat at repeat intervals. What is terrifying in the new cycle is not an external, embodied threat; instead, it is in how the characters must navigate patriarchal structures and survive not a cabin vacation gone awry, but an entire lifetime of low to high threats that are unpredictable and attack from all sides, including the women's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. For Hunter, her husband, his friends, and his parents all have clear ideas about how a wife should behave and think. For Cassie, although she has control over her male victims, she unmasks the very real dangers posed by those men – if it were not Cassie but real drunk women, the men would become torturers and the women would become victims. Cassie exposes both individual men's misogynist behaviour as well as the institutions that help facilitate and excuse men's assault and harassment. In short, for both *Swallow* and *Promising Young Woman*, threats are everywhere women turn.

Unlike the traditional slasher, once the woman's horror film establishes the precise structure that threatens the well-being of the protagonist, the characters are not presented with the opportunity or situation to challenge or evade it except by turning to self-harm, discussed above. These films feature women in social situations and settings of everyday life that are inundated with oppression: households and their objects, streets, interpersonal exchanges, and nights out present omnipresent and omnidirec-

tional threats, and there is little hope of an emancipatory project because patriarchy is the ongoing condition of modern life. The two directors explored in this article thus seem well-attuned to women's lives in the post-#MeToo era.

The breakout directors Mirabella-Davis and Fennell, who also served as their respective film's writers, helped to inaugurate a new cycle with more films on the way. However, my use of the term cycle is loose. It is possible to trace the slasher-in-reverse back to a film such as Takeshi Miike's *Audition* (1999), so in this sense, *Promising Young Woman* is not novel. Similarly, the psychological horror of Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) is an obvious predecessor of *Swallow*. I suggested that *Promising Young Woman* and *Swallow* do not share generic similarities, apart from perhaps their respective uses of colour – both films are very colourful to lend an eerie cheeriness that attempts to mask the reality of the characters' lives under patriarchal structures. More important than the stylistic presentation is the films' shared sensibility that patriarchy and misogyny cannot be concretely located in the figure of a single male tormentor. Other contemporary films, with greater and lesser transparency about the direct impacts of patriarchy, make similar thematic moves: *Saint Maud* (2019) locates psychological horror in Maud's fervent religiosity; the division between reality and fantasy blurs for *Censor's* (2021) Enid as she must watch video nasties through a conservative lens; the horrifying mating rituals displayed in *Midsommar* (2019) are mirrors for the more routinely practiced mating rituals shown in *Promising Young Woman* (i.e., providing a woman excess alcohol to then take advantage of her vulnerable position); and the ways doctors approach women's health leads Jane down a path of psychological horror in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2021), set in the nineteenth century. The semantic components, or the generic building blocks of each of the above films, drift too far apart to locate a new genre of women-led horror; however, their respective emphases on women's experiences under patriarchy suggests a new trend or refocusing of thematic elements of the genre rather than forming a new subgenre.

As a brief final example, Kitty Green's *The Assistant* strengthens my claim above that these films may not establish a genre. *The Assistant* shares no generic commonalities with horror, yet, aside from *Swallow*'s scenes of body horror, it is the most disconcerting film of the woman's horror film cycle. This tale of a producer's assistant (we never see the producer's face, only hear his voice and glimpse his form) provides no

avenues of escape from patriarchy for its protagonist. The young, white, cis woman Jane (Julia Garner) has accepted her role as producer's assistant and patriarchal authority suffuses every dish washed, every berating phone call from the boss, and every working hour from dawn until dusk. Not unlike Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, then, the prolongation of Jane's working conditions creates 87-minutes of sustained dread.

In this article, I have not foregrounded the generic qualities of the woman's horror film but a possible horror continuum in a post-#MeToo cycle. *Promising Young Woman* operates in the mode of a reverse-slasher film whereby the presumed victim of misogyny becomes women's avenger. *Swallow* adopts body horror in the first half of the film then shifts its generic leaning to the somewhat elusive category of woman's film in the second half. Finally, *The Assistant* shuns both horror and woman's film generic markers altogether to nevertheless produce a film with similar results as the previously mentioned features. Without clearly defined generic boundaries, then, filmmakers are free to create works that best addresses the thematic concerns sparked by the #MeToo movement(s). The lack of generic boundaries for horror filmmaking opens up more diverse approaches to storytelling and characters – the cycle would be much improved if it were to feature women from varying classes, ages, and racial backgrounds. The privileging of young, white, attractive cis women in the above-noted films point to a gap in this cycle that is easily remedied.

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