HORROR GLOBAL, HORROR LOCAL: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF TORTURE PORN, J-HORROR, AND GIALLO AS CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF THE HORROR GENRE

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

Lauren J. DeCarvalho

© 2009 Lauren J. DeCarvalho

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

August 2009
The thesis of Lauren J. DeCarvalho was reviewed and approved* by the following:

John S. Nichols
Professor of Communications
Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research

Matthew F. Jordan
Assistant Professor of Media Studies
Thesis Advisor

Marie C. Hardin
Associate Professor of Journalism

Jeanne L. Hall
Associate Professor of Film and Video

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

The overbearing effects of Hollywood continue to blur the lines of distinction between national and global cinema, leaving scholars to wonder whether the latter type of cinema has since trumped the former. This thesis explores the depths of this perplexity by looking at the cultural differences in post-1990s horror films from three countries: the United States, Japan, and Italy. Scholarship on women in horror films continues to focus on the feminist sensitivities, without the slightest regard for possible cultural specificities, within the horror genre. This, in turn, often collapses the study of women in horror films into a transnational genre, thereby contributing to the perception of a dominant global cinema. Therefore, it is the aim of the author to look at three culturally-specific subgenres of the horror film to explore their differences and similarities. With a selection of fifteen films, five theatrical releases from each country, the author of this thesis utilizes narrative analysis as the primary means of exploring how each works through cultural anxieties and how each represented women, in hopes of determining whether or not a national cinema still exists.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1. AMERICAN TORTURE PORN.........................................................................................11
   The Controversial Horror Subgenre...............................................................................................11
   Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005)....................................................................................14
   Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2006)..............................................................................................................26
   Eli Roth’s *Hostel: Part II* (2007)..................................................................................................32
   John Stockwell’s *Turistas* (2006)..................................................................................................39
   Darren Lynn Bousman’s *Saw II* (2005)........................................................................................44
   Reflections......................................................................................................................................50

Chapter 2. J-HORROR.........................................................................................................................54
   When Technology Meets the Supernatural....................................................................................54
   Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998)......................................................................................................56
   Hideo Nakata’s *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* (2002)...............................................................65
   Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2003)............................................................................69
   Takashi Miike’s *Chakushin Ari* (2004).......................................................................................72
   Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Kairo* (2001)...............................................................................................76
   Reflections......................................................................................................................................82

Chapter 3. ITALIAN GIALLI................................................................................................................88
   Stylistic Appeal: Nudity, Gore, and Violence…Plus a Killer Soundtrack.................................88
   Dario Argento’s *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (1996)......................................................................93
   Dario Argento’s *Nonhosonno* (2001).........................................................................................98
   Dario Argento’s *Il Cartaio* (2004)..............................................................................................102
   Eros Puglielli’s *Occhi di Cristallo* (2004)..................................................................................107
   Alex Infascelli’s *Almost Blue* (2000).........................................................................................111
   Reflections......................................................................................................................................115

Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................119

Works Cited......................................................................................................................................129
INTRODUCTION

Within the last two decades, the distinction between national and global cinema has become increasingly ambiguous. The primary catalyst for this obscurity is a culmination of globalization, technology, and popular trends. This is not to say that the effects of globalization are recent phenomena; they certainly are not. Yet as a result of advancing technology, globalism’s effects are further reaching than ever before. In fact, from a business standpoint, it seems perfectly logical for filmmakers to want to borrow and recycle cinematic successes as a way to emulate the products put forth by their international counterparts. The problem lies in discerning where to draw the line of distinction that separates national and global cinema.

Recently, scholars have been wondering whether a previously national cinematic practice has been replaced by a hegemonic global cinema. Different genres have been interrogated to determine how many of the traditional cultural differences remain. Horror is one such genre that is becoming more invasive and pervasive within global culture, mostly because it seems to have created an ongoing market. According to popular press, "horror is hot--again--in Hollywood, capable of turning low-budget violence into a box-office bonanza. In the past three years horror films have populated the top 50 international box office lists and turned in combined ticket and DVD sales of an impressive $1.5 billion" (Egan 2007). For example, in their 2005 book, Horror International, Editors Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams ultimately take the perspective that, despite growing similarities, a national cinema is still alive and well. At the same time, they descry that a plethora of cross-cultural influence makes it hard to decipher between nations and their cinema since nearly every “nation, region, and cultural artifact” is affected by outside influences (Schneider and Williams, eds. 3). This thesis pushes these observations and seeks to
address this question of globalization as it manifests itself within the horror film in general and in particular, the way that women are represented within the genre.

As a child, I can recall my experiences watching Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) with my family. Feelings of enjoyment, mesmerism, but mostly fear came over me as I kept covering and uncovering my eyes at the sight of the antagonist Freddy Krueger’s metal claws. My mother always tried to assuage me by claiming that it was ketchup, not blood, on Freddy’s victims. Despite knowing the films were not real, I still always felt uneasy. To this day, I continue to be terrified, yet captivated, by the horror film genre and the way it taps into the dark side of the cultural imaginary.

Simply stated, there is something intriguing about this genre’s ability to construct fear in viewers, which may explain why it has such a widespread fan base. I suppose film scholar, Noël Carroll, hits the nail on the head when he addresses this contradiction of emotions in *The Philosophy of Horror* (Carroll 158-9). Dubbing it the “paradox of horror”, Carroll discusses how it is that people take pleasure in watching the horrific and disgusting, particularly since people tend to shun what is loathsome to them in everyday life. His answer to this paradox is that horror films tend to elicit cognitive interests, such as curiosity and fascination, due to their plot structures (which usually involve a narrative form).

What is horror? Primarily, horror is all about the intentions of a film’s director and his or her desire to elicit certain emotions, mostly fear and anxiety, on the part of the viewer. Renowned horror writer, Douglas E. Winter emphasizes the importance of these feelings when he defines horror as “not a genre” but as “an emotion” (Winter 12). While Winter makes some
interesting points in his own definition, I feel the real horror lies in the uncertainty that viewers face as they watch the blurred distinction of reality within the realm of the horrific unfold before their eyes. There is a sense of disconnect that viewers feel between the real and the imaginary, whether it be in the form of a monstrous villain who encroaches on reality or the uncertainty one feels as he or she enters unchartered territory. Through the utilization of varying combinations of gore, xenophobia, and the mysterious, it is ultimately the director that guides these emotions to a definitive point.

Additionally, it is imperative to note that the horror film draws from and seeps into a wide score of subgenres. While there are simply too many to delineate here, there are three, in particular, that are crucial for understanding the current iterations of the genre: the splatter; the psychological horror; and the slasher film. The splatter subgenre places undue emphasis on the graphic violence and gore aspect of a film’s plot. The psychological horror’s plots delve into a character’s mind and thrives on that person’s—and viewers’—emotions, such as fear or guilt, in order to contribute to the overall tension of the film. The slasher film, which is often mistakably grouped as the same as the splatter film, revolves around a psychopath’s killing spree where typically his choice of weapon, such as a knife or chainsaw, places prominence on phallic imagery (Clover 47). Together, these subgenres have evolved into the three current subgenres analyzed here: the torture porn, the J-horror, and the giallo.

It is important to make note that this cross-cultural study evolves in the manner that it does as a result of leaving room for cultural specificities. This is to say that careful consideration was given to the analysis of each particular subgenre. Additionally, by allowing each subgenre, as the dominant mode of horror cinema in each of the respective countries, to shine in their own
terms and light, this analytic thesis has allowed for a better playing field for comparison’s sake. In other words, it would have been biased to study one particular subgenre, such as the giallo, across all three countries as it is not the current trend in each country. Therefore, the analysis of one subgenre across all three countries would have negated the very aim of this thesis, which is to integrate space for cultural sensitivities.

The latter part of my interest, the representation of women, focuses on the centrality of women to the horror genre. This element is crucial to examine more closely due to the lack of scholarship surrounding cultural or anthropological specificities within this genre. For example, many feminist film scholars have analyzed and coined recurring roles, such as Clover’s Final Girl, Creed’s monstrous-feminine, or Kristeva’s abject mother, which women have tended to occupy within the space of the horror film. However, because they focus on structural features or on the universality of patriarchy, their analysis seems to lack insight into cultural particularities. In other words, I am more interested in looking at what these three culturally-specific subgenres tell us about their host cultures, rather than reify the universal claims about the relationships between the sexes. While I strongly agree that my research would not have been possible without feminist film theorists like Clover, Creed, and Kristeva, my analysis and research will ultimately bring their line of work to the next level in terms of understanding how women operate within the horror genre.

The juxtaposition of my two research interests—the general question about the horror genre as a global phenomenon and the particular cultural representation of women within that genre—is one that has been scrutinized by scholars time and again, particularly in regards to feminist film theory. However, I wish to differentiate my work from previous scholarship in one
critical way: my analysis will reflect a cross-cultural comparative study. Both past and present research on the representation of women in horror films often fail to acknowledge any potential area for cultural sensitivities. By this, I mean to say that a deluge of information has been assayed and written on the role of women, generally speaking, in horror films as it relates to patriarchy as a transnational ideology, instead of how these depictions speak to subtle differences between cultures.

For the past twenty years, scholarship surrounding the horror film genre has been evolving within the realms of feminist film theory and distinct cultural cinema. While these two areas have gained widespread attention (considerably speaking, given the genre), there is still much that needs to be written and addressed. For instance, in one of the most famous contributions to feminist (horror) film theory, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover assays gender as it pertains to three subgenres of cinematic horror: slasher, possession, and rape-revenge films. Reviewing cinema from the 1980s to the 1990s, Clover ultimately reveals her theory of the Final Girl, which develops and places a modern-spin on Andrew Tutor’s theory of the “girl hero” (Clover 35, 16). Yet her conclusions about the genre are based only on American horror films. Clover is not alone in this ethnocentrism as many feminist film theorists, such as Linda Williams and Cynthia A. Freeland, have inquired about the role of women in the horror genre without looking beyond American cinema. Additionally, almost two decades later, Clover’s famous contribution is in need of an update to reflect modern-day horror trends.

While feminist scholars continue to mine the genre for what it can tell us about patriarchy, a few scholars, such as Jay McRoy, have begun to investigate the horror genre for
what it can tell us about deep cultural differences and national cinema. McRoy has researched horror cinema as a way to highlight nuances distinct to the Japanese community. In his 2005 edited compilation, *Japanese Horror Cinema*, McRoy ties in the component of gender to that of the spiritual, distinguishes anxieties that are associated with Japanese horror cinema, and ultimately, dissects how horror relates to the construction and consumption of fear within that particular Asian culture. Additionally, and more importantly, McRoy confirms the gap in studying cultural variances within horror films:

> In fact, analysing representations of horror and ‘monstrous embodiment’ in oral, literary, and cinematic texts has long provided one of the most compelling avenues for understanding the cultural impact of social and political change. Critics who focus upon these particular modes of aesthetic production, however, must resist the reductive inertia of imposing an all-encompassing ‘theory of horror’ or ‘monstrosity’ by maintaining ‘sensitivity to cultural variations’.

(McRoy 15)

However, McRoy is not the only scholar to go beyond analyzing horror films as a transnational genre, and instead look at films for what they tell us about different cultures. Shohini Chaudhuri makes a similar attestation in her 2006 book, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. In the final section entitled “After Mulvey, Silverman, de Lauretis, and Creed,” she apprises readers with several conclusions as to where she feels feminist film theory is headed, or at least should be headed, in the future:
Most feminist film theory of the last three decades has been formulated in relation to Hollywood, which has been conceived as the ‘dominant cinema’, a primary institution through which patriarchal ideology is reproduced (Mulvey’s article on the Senegalese film Xala [1975] is one of the relatively few exceptions; see Mulvey 1996). In order to tackle the most urgent issues in the medium today, however, feminist film theory increasingly needs to look beyond Hollywood and to engage with the broader traditions of international filmmaking. (Chaudhuri 123)

Ultimately, Chaudhuri accedes that despite Hollywood’s influence towards being the ‘dominant’ presence in filmmaking, there may be differences concerning issues of ‘gender, genre, narrative, and stardom’ worldwide (123).

Both McRoy and Chaudhuri affirm the need for examining both horror cinema and the representation of women, respectively, at a cross-cultural anthropological level. I share this concern and aim to determine the extent to which the representation and treatment of women in horror films reflect distinct national cultures and, as such, to reveal whether a national cinema exists. It is my belief that one can learn a wealth about a culture through its treatment towards women and the abject. In short, how a culture perceives its stance on women tells us vast amounts about its own self image.

Reaffirming a similar notion, scholar Maggie Humm bolsters the importance of representation of gender in her 1997 book, Feminism and Film. Specifically, she points out the following: “Without representations we have no gender identities, and through representations
we shape our gendered world” (Humm vii). Stated another way, gender and representation co-exist in a symbiotic relationship. Unfortunately, stereotypes about gender are made through various representations. Cinema has a tendency to perpetuate this problem by reaffirming certain stereotypes film after film. Assessing the role of gender in (horror) films allows us as scholars to understand and possibly ameliorate any negative stigmas, which viewers might be eliciting from them, concerning a woman’s place in society.

First, a couple of methodological points will help explain my focus. It is important to note that I will be analyzing and interpreting a selection of post-1990s horror films from three different countries: Italy, Japan, and the United States. All three of these particular cultures have a well-known reputation for producing and consuming horror films each year. Moreover, they all share a similar modern system of living, thereby creating a more equal playing field for comparison’s sake.

In addition to this, the specific research questions that I intend to answer are as follows: How does the role of women in American horror films compare to that in Italian and Japanese horror films? Why are women represented in the manner that they are? How are these cultures reflected through the representation of their women? Do these horror films reveal distinctive styles and cultural sensibilities in the manner that they represent women? Or do they share a similar aesthetic style in how they depict women that ultimately tells us that a hegemonic, global cinema has trumped the identity of a national cinema?

As a means of elucidating my responses to these questions, I will be utilizing qualitative methods, particularly narrative analysis and semiotics. These two methods are widely accepted
as the standard for film analysis and related cultural understandings. Additionally, it is my hope that this methodological approach will both help me take the study of women’s representation in horror films to the next level and provide readers with another lens through which to view and assess women’s studies, film studies, and ultimately, cultural studies.

Lastly, to explicate the overall structure of my argument, I have broken down the analysis of films by country per chapter. In the first chapter I will be looking at the correlation between US gender politics and the treatment of women in the following five American films: Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005); Darren Lynn Bousman’s *Saw II* (2005); Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2006); John Stockwell’s *Turistass* (2006); and Eli Roth’s *Hostel: Part II* (2007). In particular, I have chosen to look at these films as representative of the “Torture-Porn” subgenre that has recently taken American audiences by storm.

In the second chapter, I will be analyzing the works of Japanese horror directors to determine if any evidence of a national cinema still lingers. I will also be taking into consideration Japan’s history of gender politics to see how this plays into it all in the following films: Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998); Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Kairo* (2001); Hideo Nakata’s *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* (2002); Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2003); and Takashi Miike’s *Chakushin Ari* (2004). These five films are emblematic of the subgenre dubbed “J-horror”, which has proven very successful both in Japan and in the United States.

In the third chapter, I will be scrutinizing the current iterations of one particular subgenre within the confines of Italian horror cinema. I will discuss how women are represented within the following five films: Dario Argento’s *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (1996); Alex Infascelli’s *Almost*
*Blue* (2000); Dario Argento’s *Nonhosonno* (2001); Dario Argento’s *Il Cartaio* (2004); and Eros Puglielli’s *Occhi di Cristallo* (2004). All of these films belong to the Italian subgenre of horror known as “the Giallo”, which will be described in detail in this chapter.

Any lingering questions will be addressed in the conclusion, which will re-emphasize my overall intent, re-present my findings, and finally reveal how a national cinema still exists. It is my hope that this conclusion, and more importantly thesis as a whole, will prove beneficial to readers and scholars alike in the manner that it acknowledges cultural sensitivities within an otherwise transnational genre. As previously stated, both film scholars and feminist film scholars have done their share (of dissection and analysis) to enrich the existing scholarship and literature that surrounds the horror film and its representation of women. Therefore, this thesis will not only contribute to, but more importantly elevate their research to the next level where both cultural and feminist sensitivities are taken into consideration.
CHAPTER ONE: AMERICAN TORTURE PORN

The Controversial Horror Subgenre

In his January 28, 2006 article, *New York Magazine* film critic David Edelstein coined the term, “torture porn” as his way of describing the recent trend of dismemberment films that have been making their way to American theaters (Edelstein 2006). As Edelstein so candidly put it, “[e]xplicit scenes of torture and mutilation were once confined to the old 42nd Street, the Deuce, in gutbucket Italian cannibal pictures like *Make Them Die Slowly*, whereas now they have terrific production values and a place of honor in your local multiplex” (Edelstein 2006). Whether he knew it then or not, Edelstein’s dubbing of Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2006) and other films of that nature, where “in the quest to have a visceral impact, actual viscera are the final frontier”, would come to name and arguably define yet another controversial horror subgenre. Three years prior to this, famed musician and now-famous film director Rob Zombie released *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), an early example of torture porn and the first of a string of his successful horror films that would hit the box office. Two years later, he released *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), the sequel to his successful 2003 film and the starting point of analysis for this thesis.

As a descendent of the splatter film, with hints of the slasher subgenre as well, the torture porn differs from its predecessor in several key ways. While the former had bloody gore elements, the torture porn takes these elements to new extremes. Scenes of violence that were once brutal, yet relatively brief, have since been transformed into lengthy, almost-surgical scenes of torture and mutilation. Additionally, another distinction that sets the torture porn apart from the splatter film genre is that the killer(s) generally has a much higher level of interaction with
the victims, either before or during these scenes of torture. Rather than the splatter film’s focus on inflicting violence in a quick and excessively-gory manner, the torture porn maintains the same explicit level of violence but slows the pace down, giving viewers an extended look at the victim’s final, horrific moments. This, in turn, increases the reaction of the audience by humanizing the victim in a way that splatter films simply do not. Probably the biggest distinction between the two subgenres is the box-office success that the torture porn has found. While some splatter films have experienced box-office success, such as George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the majority of the subgenre has not drawn huge numbers at the box office. On the contrary, many torture porn films released to theaters have exceeded their box-office expectations. As such, it is no surprise that torture porn has become the de facto genre in this era of original Hollywood horror.

Breaking down the nomenclature behind this subgenre, the term “torture porn” is rather misleading at first glance. Edelstein explains his dubbing was carefully selected as a means to draw attention to the newly-formed genre:

> It’s a term that defies an easy definition, [...] But what it is simply are movies that revolve around protracted, explicit scenes of torture that are complicated in their intent and have a strong element of spectacle. They make the audience uncomfortable and give them a charge. The word ‘porn’ comes from that charge.

(Johnson pars. 7, 8)

An important point that indirectly stems from Edelstein’s explanation is the notion that the eroticization of gore has replaced the titillation that nudity gives viewers. This is perhaps why
many people find Edelstein’s term misleading. Many mainstream viewers see the word ‘porn’ and are quick to make the assumption that it refers to the traditional explicit sense of pornography. Instead, the erotic charge is through scopophilic violence, rather than the overt erotica. It is imperative to point out that the misleading connotation has drawn quite the controversy between filmmakers of the genre and its fans versus critics and mainstream audiences. Complementing the oft-inclusion of nudity/sexuality, viewers are more stimulated through seeing and experiencing the brutality that accompanies a torture porn’s sadistic sequences.

It is this shift in what constitutes a lure by the viewer that makes this genre interesting. Laura Mulvey’s concept of the ‘male gaze’ still remains as one of the biggest contributions to feminist film theory to date. In her 1975 article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey argues that cinema, due to technological advances, is a major contributor of how things are represented, particularly to mass audiences. She highlights the way in which “[u]nchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (Mulvey 838-9). She goes on to indicate that the focus of her article is to “discuss the interweaving of that erotic pleasure in film, its meaning, and in particular the central place of the image of woman. It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article” (Mulvey 839). Using psychoanalysis and the Freudian theory of scopophilia (which refers to the pleasure one takes in looking at something or someone erotically), Mulvey states that, due to the dual-purpose of scopophilic pleasure (i.e. looking at and/or being looked at), this objectification subjects others to “a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 839). This gaze, in turn, empowers
men as spectators yet objectifies women into the role of the Other. Now, this male gaze is lured and viewing subjects are constructed by this representation of sadism.

**Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects (2005)*

Wading into the pool of the torture porn subgenre is Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects*. This film is the sequel to *House of 1000 Corpses*, Zombie’s homage to one of the most classic slasher films of all time, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). *The Devil’s Rejects* is a break from the slasher film and a divergence into the torture porn subgenre. In this film, the Firefly clan is on the run after a police raid of their residence, a decrepit farmhouse located in Ruggsville County, Texas. Applying what Robin Wood explains in his article, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” the farmhouse is emblematic of its denizens: “The image of the ‘Terrible House’ stems from a long tradition in America (and Western capitalist) culture. Traditionally, it represents an extension or ‘objectification’ of the personalities of the inhabitants” (Wood 188). The tenants of this house, the Firefly family, are responsible for over 75 brutal homicides. Leading this fiery pursuit, a vengeance-driven local sheriff named John Quincey Wydell (played by William Forsythe) is eager to capture and kill the Firefly family for its involvement in these murders, including that of his own brother (which can be seen in this film’s prequel). The police raid leaves one of the family members dead and another one, Mother Firefly, in the custody of Ruggsville County police. Unlike the first film, in which traditionally the victims are the protagonists, this movie positions viewers within the mindset of both the hunter and the hunted. As the plot develops, the audience watches as the hunter, Sheriff Wydell, becomes just as maniacal and deranged, in his mission to capture and kill, as the sadistic Firefly clan.
From a feminist standpoint, there is no doubt that every major female character is sexualized in some manner or another and subordinated under patriarchy. In fact, the nature of patriarchy in this film is established earlier on in the film as viewers witness Otis, a symbol of patriarchy, directing orders to his family, including his own mother and his sister, in the battle against a small army of all-male police officers. Characteristically, the scene reveals patriarchal objectification, despite having both male and female victims, as only female nude corpses are exploited by the camera as viewers learn the back story of the clan’s killings (through newspaper clippings and evidence folders fraught with battered female bodies). As the film pays homage to 1970s cinematic horror through Zombie’s choice of cinematography (i.e. 16 mm film, freeze frames, slow motion shots, etc.), it is questionable as to whether the appearance of the exploited female body is just part of this homage or whether it is just as relevant in achieving today’s standard of male titillation (Clover 181). Nevertheless, the function of the female character within the film narrative is, by and large, to contribute to the eroticization of the film’s gore. Through the undermining of seemingly strong female attributes, viewers have no choice but to write off the female characters as weak and submissive in comparison to the network of patriarchy at play. As will be rendered explicit in the analysis of each female character from the film, this notion ultimately reaffirms the normative criticism of the horror genre as being misogynistic in nature.

The strongest female personality is carried by Mother Firefly’s character (played by Leslie Easterbrook), the maternal figure of the disturbed family. Her persona is an updated version of Jason Voorhees’s mother from the Friday the 13th series as she is a mother willing to kill for her family. Strong-willed and ever defiant, Mother Firefly attempts to kill herself, at the
beginning of the film, to rob the police of the satisfaction of arresting her. While the rest flee, she makes the conscious decision to stay behind with her dead son. Willing to die before being captured, Mother Firefly discovers a little too late that the gun she is holding is out of bullets as she tries to shoot herself and thus gets taken into police custody. Now in the hands of the law, Mother Firefly, who is used to getting her way through her seduction and charm, finds that her light no longer attracts sexual attention. Unfortunately, she realizes rather quickly that her seductive power, and her ability to play the *femme fatale*, is lost on the vengeance-crazed sheriff. For the time being, while in the holding cell, Mother Firefly manages to hold her own as she resists cooperation with the police. In fact, Mother Firefly goes so far as to impale the sheriff with her biting words as she describes one of her own victims, the Sheriff’s brother. Her tactics essentially create the time and space needed for the return of the father figure, Captain Spaulding (played by Sid Haig), as the head of the nuclear family.

Strong women still draw fire from patriarchy in the ultimately androcentric world of the American horror film. Mother Firefly gets burned in the process as Sheriff Wydell vows to take revenge upon his brother’s killer. Since she refuses to help him catch the rest of the clan, he promises to capture each and every single one of them, which (as he points outs) includes hunting her favorite “angel” (aka Baby) down like a dog (Zombie 2005). Mother Firefly’s initial gloating of his brother’s death contributes towards pushing Wydell over the line. In fact, in his breaking point, Sheriff Wydell has a dream where after trying to explain to his dead brother’s ghost who is trapped in hell, symbolically visualized as the basement of the farmhouse, that he is “walking the line here”, he finally decides that the only way to get justice is to kill them (Zombie 2005). Thus, he returns to the holding cell and uses her *femme fatale* ego against her, feigning an
interest in her sexually. Mother Firefly is eager to see him as she proclaims that she “has a power over men” (Zombie 2005). Blinded by self confidence in her own charms, this power is utterly useless towards the enraged Sheriff, who takes a knife and kills her. The revenge cycle trumps the noir detective narrative as the dominant mode.

As a character that is sexualized through dialogue and her own facial expressions, when dealing with those outside of her family, Mother Firefly transcends the loving maternal role and turns into a dangerous, sexualized demon of sorts. Dissecting her name, she is symbolic of why fireflies glow in the first place and that is purely for mating reasons (Eisner 141). In fact, according to leading insect chemical ecologist Thomas Eisner in his book, *For Love of Insects*, female fireflies are known for being *femme fatales* in the insect world. Thus, it is most interesting to learn that this alias of Mother Firefly (which viewers learn is one of many) correlates with her personality in more ways than one, thus complicating the reasoning behind her name, which is supposedly in homage to the Marx brothers. As Eisner continues in his chapter entitled, “Masters of Deception”, more often than not, female fireflies use aggressive mimicry, which involves them “imitating some feature of its prey” as a way to lure and trap their male counterparts (155). Like these fireflies, Mother Firefly preys on males and usually is protected (thanks to her sadistic family). However, her isolation in the holding cell ultimately renders her defenseless against Sheriff Wydell.

Baby Firefly (played by Sheri Moon Zombie), the film’s main leading lady, initially appears to be a strong character. However, after closer inspection, she is just as incapable and helpless as the other female roles (with the exception of Mother Firefly) in the film. Unlike the rest of her family, which appears filthy and downright hideous throughout the entire film, Baby
manages to always appear attractive and well put together. She serves as little more than bait in the family’s vicious traps and eye candy for the male viewer. Yet her appearance does not translate into her own power as from the start, she follows the orders of her older brother, Otis B. Driftwood (played by Bill Moseley). Dressed in a white camisole and a pair of ripped blue jeans, Baby appears to embody two conflicting traits: either that of an innocent victim or that of a *femme fatale*. For instance, in terms of the former, she pretends to be hurt in the middle of the road, causing an elderly waitress to pull over to help her. While Baby acts as bait for the old woman (and the male gaze), Otis creeps up and stabs the woman in the back, then steals their getaway car.

When not taking orders from Otis, Baby looks for guidance and direction from her father, Captain Spaulding. In the midst of running, Baby makes a call and informs him of the current situation. He advises her to stay calm and meet him at a nearby hotel. There, she utilizes her sex appeal to bait a middle-aged man (played by Geoffrey Lewis), coyly uttering: “I bet all the girls just want to fuck you” (Zombie 2005). This allows Otis, armed with a gun, to have enough time to sneak up behind the man. After gaining access to the man’s hotel room, Baby torments her victims (the middle-aged man named Roy Sullivan; his wife Gloria; his friend Adam Banjo; and Adam’s wife, Wendy) with childish taunts. As per the rules of the new genre, Baby gets her kicks from the violence she forces her victims to inflict on each other. Like her mother, Mother Firefly, Baby’s primary function is as the *femme fatale* who lures her victims into the arms of Otis, the “torture porn” sadist.

Whether she earned the nickname first from her immature demeanor or whether she just acts childish to live up to her name, Baby thrives for sadism like the rest of her barbarous family.
Unfortunately, her inane humor (i.e. singing “Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these” as she shakes her clothed breasts and buttocks in front of her victims) and her immature demeanor (i.e. throwing a temper tantrum as a means to get Otis to stop for some ice cream) undercut her as a character, emphasizing her submissive relation to her older brother. Additionally, male characters (i.e. Otis, Captain Spaulding, Charlie, and Tiny) rescue Baby at least once each during the course of the film. In the ultimate test to this, Baby is given a chance to redeem herself towards the end of the film, when Sheriff Wydell sets her free as means to initiate his own game of cat and mouse. Instead of rising to the occasion, Baby is left wounded and crying for help as the sheriff, who has since been driven over the brink of insanity, gives her a taste of her own medicine: “You like that? You like the feeling of being helpless? At the mercy of someone who’s as sadistic and deranged as you?!?” (Zombie 2005). Keeping his word, Sheriff Wydell hunts Baby down like a dog and even goes so far as to howl at her from a distance. Here Wydell follows the new genre’s rules, where torture is everything and deaths are prolonged. As is typical in the torture porn genre, even the “good” characters still partake in inflicting torture and pain upon others. In the end, Baby’s failure to outsmart the fox, or in this case, the wolf (after crying wolf time and again) leaves her weak and defenseless. In this version of patriarchy, only the xenophobic monster, Tiny (played by Matthew McGrory), can save her from near death.

Two other female characters of importance in this film are Gloria Sullivan (played by Priscilla Barnes) and Wendy Banjo (played by Kate Norby), who are part of a traveling singing group. Stopping at a local motel, these two women are sexualized from the start and are diminished by the oppressive males in this cinematic world. In the very first scene showing them, Gloria and Wendy are seen standing outside discussing Gloria’s “flapping titties” (Zombie
This conversation is joined by both of the women’s husbands, Roy and Adam, respectively and their roadie, Jimmy. It is important to note that Gloria does not control the situation by utilizing her sexuality. In one particular scene, Otis forces Gloria (at gun point) to strip down to her undergarments while her husband Roy, Wendy, Adam, and Baby watch. During this scene, Otis presses the gun in the bands of her bra and underwear. Lastly, he demands a kiss and then forces her to perform oral sex on him. Like Gloria, Wendy is another character who is objectified against her will. In the first instance of this, it is actually the camera that violates her privacy. In this formulaic scene, which pays homage to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), viewers see Wendy’s breasts as she is shown taking a shower at the motel. Taking this a step further, however, Wendy is seen full-frontally nude as Otis drags her out of the shower. Clover explains this aspect of voyeurism as typical within the horror genre: “[…] horror merely takes to an overt extreme an operation that is surely as endemic to the act of cinematic spectatorship as aggressive voyeurism” (Clover 230). With sexualized camera shots having long been a staple of horror films, torture porn does not deviate from the generic rules when it comes to the inclusion of the “assaultive gaze”. In the majority of the American films studied here, there is always at least one scene with the prolonged voyeuristic camera shot.

Even though their characters are subject to blatant sexualization by both the men in this film and viewers, Gloria and Wendy appear stronger than their respective male counterparts. Roy, who appears to be the patriarchal leader of this group, is easily lured by Baby’s cheap temptations. Adam is unable to cope with the situation at hand and is rendered useless, overcome with fear and hysteria. In this sense, Roy and Adam are typical throwaway males in the horror genre. Roy’s inability to control his male desires leaves Gloria and Wendy in danger.
Additionally, Adam vomits on Wendy as he sees their friend, Jimmy, shot in the head by Otis. Later, he is seen lying in Wendy’s lap as he prays aloud. Unlike the weak men, Gloria and Wendy excel at keeping their calm composes. They work together to gain Baby’s approval in Wendy’s request to use the bathroom. Secretly, both women know that this is their only chance to escape while the men are gone. Wendy tries to escape from the bathroom and Gloria grabs Baby’s gun. Unfortunately, Baby is one step ahead of both of them with a knife in hand: “Stupid cunt. There ain’t no bullets in this thing. It’s all fucking mind power” (Zombie 2005). In this world, a woman’s weapon of choice is her sexuality and psychological trauma is more important than gore.

An important point to make is that Baby stands as the “abject” in the world of this film. As Deborah Jermyn so brilliantly describes this term and its meaning in her article, “Rereading the bitches from hell: a feminist appropriation of the female psychopath,” the abject is a concept that is prevalent among horror films:

‘Abjection’ is a term developed by Julia Kristeva to describe the border between order and presymbolic dis-order. ‘The abject’ is all those things which threaten society’s established boundaries, disturbing order or identity. Horror texts are particularly illustrative of a number of important features of the abject. Firstly, the idea that the abject is both repellant and fascinating. Secondly, the notion that the abject is always present; although horror films usually expel the abject by the ending, its existence has nevertheless been acknowledged and may indeed return. Thirdly, there is the idea of ritual, that the formulaic nature of horror exists as a tolerable means of exploring, and finally rejecting, the abject. (Jermyn 254)
Relating this quote to Baby, as well as to her abject mother, her character essentially threatens the normative existence of society, particularly towards her inverse female counterparts, Gloria and Wendy who represent all that is “good”. Jermyn attributes this particular inversion as one of two levels that are explored in horror films:

The border these films are concerned with exists on two levels. Firstly, there is a fairly traditional representation of woman as monstrous-feminine, embodying male fears. But there is also a more ‘topical’ border being explored: the border between the female psychopath and her positive inverse, problematizing female identity, in an exploration brought about by changes in gender roles and what constitutes acceptable behavior. (Jermyn 255)

Since this film serves as a tale of “morality” (that is, for a patriarchal society), it only makes sense that Baby is killed in the end. Applying what Jermyn discusses in her article, Baby cannot survive longer than necessary; in this case, it means that she cannot pass her devious ways onto other women:

Therefore, the abject here exists both in the perpetual sense of man’s age-old fears of the ‘true’ nature of women and female bodies, and as the abject of women in our culture. The female psychopath is woman’s abject since she crosses the borders other women are forced to maintain, lives out their fantasies about escaping their place in the symbolic, and, in her defeat at the end, represents women’s necessary attempts to expel their desire for the abject. (Jermyn 255)
Despite this, it is important to remember that Baby is only as progressive as her brother and father allow her to be. This is to say that she feels the freedom of doing what she wants when they are not around, thereby allowing her to cause havoc and pain onto other women like Gloria and Wendy.

The other female characters in the film, Candy, Casey, and Fanny, perform sexualized roles. Candy (played by Elizabeth/EG Daily) is the top-earning prostitute at Charlie’s brothel. While she is never seen nude, she is instead sexualized through dialogue, particularly by Charlie: “You got to hustle that pussy. Find a new angle and you might attract a higher clientele” (Zombie 2005). Additionally, she is seen dancing in lingerie and later straddling Otis, which is interrupted by her death (she is killed by a bounty hunter that Sheriff Wydell sends out). Like Candy, Casey (played by Deborah Van Valkenburgh) is also a prostitute who is killed by the bounty hunters. Lastly, Fanny (played by real-life porn star Ginger Lynn Allen) is seen in Captain Spaulding’s dream, where they are engaged in intercourse. In their post-coital moment, Captain Spaulding makes a remark, insinuating that she is a prostitute. Upset at this, Fanny places a loaded gun to his face and pulls the trigger. This ultimately shows the manifest of his subconscious paranoia within the dream. Essentially, the dream reflects the same pattern that he follows with his victims: using them for sex (consensual in the dream but without consent in life) and then killing them afterwards. However, trading places in the dream, Captain Spaulding is the victim. This is a reversal of his typical role as the active sadist, rather than his passive victim status in the dream.

Looking at the male characters’ perception of the female characters in this film, it seems unanimous that all of the females come off as needy or demanding in one way or another. For
instance, as Captain Spaulding is leaving his house (after learning that the police are after him in the beginning of the film), his companion Ruth, who shows great contrast from his young attractive victims, begs him to stay so that they could have more sex. Her desperate pleas leave him pushing her away (with his palm on her face) as she tries to pull at his arm. Another instance of this perception can be seen when Roy’s wife, Gloria, asks Adam to change the television channel. When he refuses, she persistently continues to ask him to do so. To this, Adam responds, “Jesus Christ, I don’t know how Roy puts up with your shit” (Zombie 2005). A final example is when Baby throws a temper tantrum at Otis to get him to pull over for some ice cream. The males’ negative perception of the females is reaffirmed through their dialogue towards them, which often includes derogatory comments and the use of the words “bitch” or “whore”. An extreme case is when Sheriff Wydell inquires about one of Otis’s dead female victims, to which Otis replies: “She’s still fuckable” (Zombie 2005). From a feminist standpoint, Otis’s comments are cause for an expected form of justice administered by Sheriff Wydell. However, in a film in which the morally “bad” characters are the protagonists, it can be expected that these comments are, in a way, almost approved by the typical, non-feminist viewer.

Comparing the roles of women to that of men, it is obvious that there are quite a few strong female characters. From Mother Firefly to Candy and Gloria to Wendy to Fanny, many female characters in this film carry out actions that are worthy of being deemed strong-willed and/or heroic. Mother Firefly’s defiance of police cooperation elucidates her innate, maternal role that appoints family first and foremost. Candy’s career as a prostitute has appeared to have hardened her against the derogatory comments of men, such as Charlie and Otis. Furthermore, she does not hesitate to grab a gun when the bounty hunters show up at the brothel for the Firefly
clan. While she is no match for one of the bounty hunter’s quick draw, she at least dies trying to defend herself. As for Gloria and Wendy, despite their eventual deaths, their well-composed dispositions during the hostage situation make their male counterparts look weak and terrified. Lastly, Fanny even retaliates against Captain Spaulding’s misogyny, despite being confined to his dream. However, all of these strong-willed women seem to be no match to the male characters of Sheriff Wydell, Captain Spaulding, and Otis, who always appear to have the upper hand in dominance. These male characters dramatize the new sadistic patriarchy of the torture porn subgenre. Additionally, the strong-willed natures of the women seem to diminish in the eyes of the viewers as Baby, who is by far the most prominent female role in the film, has a weak disposition.

On the surface, this film appears to be fraught with all the elements of torture and gore needed for a successful product of the horror genre. However, an in-depth analysis of the film allows for the elucidation of a tale of morality, where these same elements of torture and gore are deemed necessary for the elimination of evil from the community. This world essentially is the hyperbolic visualization of patriarchy, where the only power women have is through exploiting their own sexuality. Through feminist lens, this film creates an inversion of the horror genre by having Tiny, whom xenophobic viewers place as the hideously scarred, giant monster who spends his day dragging a female nude corpse through the woods, as the deus ex machina towards the end of the film. Comparing the plot to that of its prequel, which pays homage to Tobe Hooper’s The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), Tiny’s character bears a slight physical resemblance to the monstrous character of Leatherface. The fact that Tiny is left as the savior reveals to viewers that patriarchy, whether it be literally and figuratively distorted through his
character, inevitably wins in the end. In essence, only the remainder, the byproduct of this sick world, can save it. While *The Devil’s Rejects* has blurred distinctions between the slasher film, the splatter film, and the torture porn, the next film is a full-on passage into the cinematic world of torture porn.

**Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2006)**

If *The Devil’s Rejects* implies that intricate sadism has been assigned the new lure for the viewer’s gaze in the torture porn genre, *Hostel* makes this link to erotica explicit. In this film, produced by Quentin Tarantino, two American backpackers named Paxton and Josh, accompanied by an older Icelandic tourist named Oli (played by Jay Hernandez, Derek Richardson, and Eythor Gudjonsson, respectively), are traveling across Europe in search of one last hurrah before beginning the post-college stage of their lives. After spending some time in Amsterdam and learning about a particular hostel in Slovakia, these three men quickly hop a train to Eastern Europe. There, they find the hostel and meet two attractive women named Natalya and Svetlana, who end up seducing and drugging them. After the first night of partying, Oli goes missing. Josh ends up missing the second night, leaving Paxton in search of both of his friends. (Paxton avoids being drugged by being accidentally locked in a storage room at the bar they were at.) When Paxton catches up with Natalya and Svetlana, he inquires as to where his friends are and they tell him they are at the “exhibit” (which mirrors the spectacle that is torture porn). Thus, Paxton demands to be taken to this art “exhibit” where his friends are located, which actually turns out to be a defunct factory where the wealthy pay to torture and kill human beings (e.g. Oli and Josh). There, Paxton is locked up and about to be tortured by a German businessman. However, he manages to escape and helps another tourist (an Asian woman who
has been kidnapped as well) to get free. They make their way to the train station. On the train, Paxton overhears a familiar voice and realizes that it is the Dutch businessman (who had been aboard the same train to Slovakia) who had tortured and killed his friend, Josh. To avenge the death of his best friend, Paxton follows the man upon exiting the train and kills him in a nearby bathroom.

By and large, Natalya (played by Barbara Nedeljáková) is the film’s most prominent leading lady. A typical *femme fatale*, Natalya is a highly sexualized character. On multiple occasions, she is shown either nude or semi-nude. For example, when the three backpackers enter their room at the hostel, they learn that they are sharing it with Natalya and her friend, Svetlana. She is first introduced to viewers in her underwear as she is getting dressed. When she seduces the male protagonists, she is shown topless in a sauna for an extended period of time. Additionally, she is later shown topless again while having intercourse with Josh. The next morning after, Josh and Paxton overhear Natalya and Svetlana (played by Jana Kaderabkova) in the shower together, insinuating their promiscuity to viewers. Typical of American horror films (particularly within the torture porn subgenre), beautiful women are used again as sexual bait to lure male victims to their eventual plight (and to lure the male gaze of the viewer).

Despite her sexualized nature, Natalya is a very strong character. Her main function as a *femme fatale* is to seduce (and drug) foreign male tourists long enough to have them taken away to the torture ring, where the real “pornography” happens. In exchange, she is given a large amount of money for her involvement. It is particularly interesting to watch her sudden transformation from an attractive, warm seductress into an unattractive, cold-hearted accomplice. In fact, her transformation is symbolized by one particular scene where Paxton sees Natalya
(from a distance) walking from one side of a tunnel to the next. Before this scene, she is fun-loving and alluring; yet after this scene, she is seen with dark circles under her eyes and a serious disposition. Viewers (and Paxton) soon learn that she is not only fully aware of the torture-ring operation but is in full support of it. When Paxton discovers the ill-fate of his friend, Josh, he turns to Natalya and calls her a “bitch” (Roth 2006). Her clever response to this, which reveals both her and the cinematic world’s predisposition towards gaining material wealth rather than caring for the well-being and life of another, is as follows: “I get a lot of money for you, so that make you my bitch” (Roth 2006). Hence, there is this turning-the-tables effect going on where previously Paxton and the other backpackers viewed Natalya and the other females as pure commodities, stories to tell their friends when they arrive back in the States: “Josh, you want to be a fucking writer? How about some life experience, right there in that room” (Roth 2006). However, Natalya’s twist in character reveals that she is tired of being viewed as a tourist site and therefore, does not feel bad about the ill-fates of Amerocentric tourists like Josh. Thus, she turns the tables by making sure that these same tourists are the ones being commodified in the end.

The second most prominent character in the film is Svetlana. Like Natalya, she is involved with the torture ring and also highly sexualized, again materializing the juvenile fantasies of male American tourists (and viewers). Svetlana can be seen topless several times in the film (i.e. getting dressed, in the sauna, during intercourse with Paxton). Yet while she functions as yet another strong *femme fatale* in the film, she does not seem on par, in terms of power, with Natalya as she always lets her brunette friend talk for the both of them. Similar to
Natalya, Svetlana is also transformed into a cold-hearted accomplice to the torture-ring operation.

Vala (played by Jana Havlickova), the desk attendant for the Slovakian hostel, is the film’s third most prominent female. This initially free-spirited, fun-loving character also joins Natalya and Svetlana in their roles as *femme fatales*. However, unlike the duo, Vala seems to function on her own agenda. Her character is sexualized, but not to the extent as Natalya and Svetlana. Instead of being seen topless or engaging in sexual intercourse (though the latter is implied at one point), Vala is sexualized purely through dialogue (mostly from Oli). There is one instance where the camera exploits her body as a fetish object for the purpose of constructing what Laura Mulvey calls the “male gaze” (Mulvey 841). In fact, in one of the most blatant film shots of this gaze, the camera looks up and down Vala’s body (as if following the eyes of the male trio) as she is turning to reach for the room key. Despite her innocent appearance and wide smile, Vala’s character is by no means weak and in the clear. She may not spend nearly as much time with the male trio as Natalya and Svetlana do. However, she is essentially the one that delivers Oli to the torture ring. Additionally, she “helps” Josh back to his hostel room after he is drugged, only to call in the man that will be taking him over to the factory.

The final female character that has a prominent role in the film is Kana (played by Jennifer Lim), an Asian tourist staying at the same Slovakian hostel with her friend, Yuki. When Yuki turns up missing on the same day as Oli, Kana informs Paxton and Josh that she has received a mysterious picture message from her missing friend (which reveals in the photo that she is with Oli). Unlike Paxton and Josh, Kana is genuinely concerned about the whereabouts of
her missing traveling companion. Hence, while they go out to a bar the next night with Natalya and Svetlana, she declines Paxton’s invitation in an attempt to continue the search.

Throughout the film, Kana’s character is the only female role not to be sexualized. Interestingly enough, at the same time, she is also the only female role that is revealed to be rather weak in character. Typically in the slasher subgenre, Kana’s non-sexualized role would essentially qualify her as the potential ‘Final Girl’, usually a strong and level-headed character. However, in this film, even after being saved by Paxton and being relatively safe, she proves not to be ‘Final Girl’ material. Once she absconds to a nearby train station with Paxton (and is moments away from freedom), she notices the now-distorted image of her face (i.e. her missing eye) in a reflection and immediately jumps in front of an oncoming train. This scene is most upsetting to watch as up until now her character has been quite strong-willed, persistent, and genuinely not superficial when it came to appearances. Thus, viewers are left astonished after witnessing her suicide. Given the circumstances, it is expected that most survivors of the torture ring would just be grateful to be alive and free from the horror at the factory. Therefore, it is especially hard to see Kana, a genuinely caring person, kill herself due to her new distorted appearance. If we look at Kana as a symbol, she represents a person scarred (both in the figurative and literal sense) by trauma; her actions display how the identity or sense of self of someone violated in this way cannot survive.

When it comes to the males’ perception of the female characters, aside from Kana, the rest of the female characters appear to be objectified in the eyes of the backpacking trio (Paxton, Josh, and Oli). In fact, it is made blatantly clear through dialogue that the trio’s main goal, while traveling through Europe, is to sleep with as many women as possible before returning to their
respective countries. Additionally, the entire premise behind the trio heading to Slovakia is to meet sexually-uninhibited women, as they were told are common in that country. Even the background female characters are heavily sexualized in the eyes of the trio. For instance, in a hemp café in Amsterdam, Oli sits a heavily-drugged young lady in front of Paxton. His response to this is, “She’s cute but we can’t rail a girl who’s in a coma. I think that’s illegal even in Amsterdam” (Roth 2006). Some other minor female roles include the following: prostitutes in Amsterdam’s famous red-light district; two young women at a Dutch nightclub; some more women at a Slovakian bar; pictures of nude females on Alex’s phone; naked women at the sauna; etc. Wherever they go, Paxton, Josh, and Oli always seem to be eyeing the women around them. This film seems to be saying that there is karmic justice for such objectification of women.

Throughout the film, the power relations between men and women are constantly switching due to the ever-changing objectification process. In the beginning of the film, men come off as stronger characters due to the power that they obtain, through both the camera and their own actions, as a result of their objectification of women. In fact, for the entire first half of the film, Paxton, Josh, and Oli are relentless in their pursuit of women. However, it is later revealed in the middle of the film, that it is these same monofocal tendencies that get them in trouble with the *femme fatales*. Thus, in the middle of the film, the power is shifted as the trio gets a taste of its own medicine and is sold into the torture ring. As viewers watch, it is discovered that the trio’s dehumanization of women, through seeing them as mere sexual objects, deems the men as weak characters when they too are put through the commodification process. Towards the end of the film though, the tables are turned once again as Paxton escapes and saves Kana from the factory. Since she kills herself, Paxton is left as the sole survivor of the film,
thereby eliminating any potential for Kana to remain as what Carol Clover calls the “Final Girl” (Clover 35). Furthermore, this notion of men, appearing as the stronger of the sexes, is strengthened towards the latter half of the film when Paxton kills his torturer, Kana’s torturer, Natalya, Svetlana, Alex, and lastly, Josh’s torturer. It is Paxton’s transformation alone, from the arrogant American college graduate to the grateful-to-be-alive survivor, which allows him to have the final victory in the film’s battle of the sexes. Unfortunately, his victory is short-lived, literally, as soon will be seen in the follow-up to this film.

**Eli Roth’s Hostel: Part II (2007)**

Patriarchy may have had the final say in the last film, but in Roth’s sequel, he sets the tone early on for a torture porn revolving around a female viewpoint. In this sequel, Paxton, the lone survivor from the first film, is killed off immediately. His death represents a movement towards the new female hero, the updated ‘Final Girl’ of torture porn. Similar to George Romero’s update of the character, Barbara in his remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (1978), Eli Roth elects to update *Hostel* with a second part that instead gives women full power. As Barry Keith Grant states in his article, “Taking Back the *Night of the Living Dead*: George Romero, Feminism, and the Horror Film”, “[t]he new *Night*, then, attempts to reclaim the horror genre for feminism, for all those female victims in such movies who attempt to resist patriarchal containment” (Grant 210). Roth introduces three new characters to give him a clean slate to retell his story: American females named Beth, Whitney, and Lorna who are studying art in Rome, Italy. Heading off to Prague for the weekend, the three women are persuaded by Axelle, one of their female nude models, to take a trip to a spa with hot mineral springs in Slovakia. They take the recommendation of Axelle to stay at this one particular hostel in that country, which happens
to be the same one from the first film. (It seems that Roth chose to go with female protagonists in
order to differentiate the film from its predecessor, to avoid seeming like he was cashing in on
essentially the same movie twice, as he indicated in the short featurette *Hostel Part II: The Next
Level* found on the *Hostel: Part II* DVD (Roth 2007).) There, the four women (including Axelle)
attend a harvest festival hosted by the locals. Meanwhile, two American businessmen have won
the bid for two of these women and are currently looking at the prizes from a distance. Despite
Beth’s objections, Lorna accompanies Roman, a man she meets at the festival, on a boat ride.
The next day she never returns to the hostel. Later the same day, Whitney also goes missing and
finds herself at the location of the torture ring. The final female, Beth, is the last to be taken to
the torture ring, but is fortunate enough to buy her way out and switch positions with her torturer
(an American businessman). Before the film concludes, Beth seeks revenge on Axelle, who it
turns out set them up from the beginning.

The film’s most prominent leading lady is Beth (played by Lauren German), who
becomes the torture porn’s answer to the “Final Girl”. Additionally, she is the film’s strongest
persona and the only female not to be sexualized. From the start, viewers see that she is not only
intelligent and observant, but also very much independent and capable of taking care of herself.
For example, in one scene at the harvest festival, she avoids being drugged by not accepting
drinks from strangers. Even when she does have a cup given to her, she makes a point to toss the
drink aside. Despite making it her responsibility to watch after her two friends, Beth is unable to
stop Whitney and Lorna from being taken. She seems to redeem herself by realizing what is
going on before it is too late. Furthermore, in the face of danger, Beth does not panic before the
audience’s eyes. A prime example of this is when she outwits her American torturer and
demands to speak with the leader of the torture-ring operation, while holding a pair of shears around her male torturer’s penis to ensure that she is not joking. When the leader of Elite Hunting, Sasha (played by Milan Knazko) sees her, he gives the command to just kill both of them. Quick to react, Beth talks her way out of this by offering him a substantial amount of money. However, Beth does not stop there. The icing on the cake appears when she takes revenge on Axelle at the very end of the film.

Whitney (played by Bijou Philips) appears as the second most prominent character in the film. Unlike Beth, Whitney is highly sexualized in the film. She is never actually shown either in the nude or revealing attire. Instead, she is sexual by nature. For the first half of the film, she spends her time either flirting with or trying to pick up men. Accompanying her assertive disposition, she makes a point to continually make crude, sexual remarks. During a scene at the harvest festival, she goes up to Miroslav (played by Stanislav Ianevski), a man she sees at the hostel, and grabs his arm and drags him towards the dance floor. This is just one of the many instances that viewers see how high Whitney’s confidence level is, particularly since Miroslav was in the midst of speaking with another female. In addition to this, she dismisses the traditional, local dance and instead does her own provocative, Americanized dance. Aside from being assertive towards males, viewers also take notice that she spends a large amount of time in front of a mirror, practicing suggestive poses or checking out her appearance. According to the Clover formula, Whitney’s aggressive sexual nature all but seals her fate as an eventual victim in the film and bars her from being the ‘Final Girl’ (Clover 33). To further exemplify this, her “sin” of displaying an overt sexual manner renders her punishable, not once but twice, to ensure that she has learned her lesson and place within the confines of patriarchy. As viewers see, she is
initially sliced in the head with a circular saw by one torturer and is expected to be finished off by another paying customer.

It is confidence that gives Whitney her strength. She knows what she wants, when she wants it, and is not afraid to obtain her goals. Like Beth, she knows how to take care of herself. Furthermore, she does not rely on men. Despite her strength in character, Whitney does find herself at the decrepit factory (most likely drugged as a means of getting her there). She is forced into a make-up artist’s chair, where she bites the nose off of the make-up artist in an attempt to escape. Yet her overt sexuality, as per the rules for survival in the horror film, dooms her. Unfortunately, she is nearly down the hall when the guards are called in and attack dogs are sent in to ensure that she is caught.

The third most prominent female role is that of Lorna (played by Heather Matarazzo). Homesick and depressed, Lorna is a weak character. She’s gullible, unintelligent, and extremely naïve. When she is not whining, she is heavily medicated and is pretty much afraid of everything. Additionally, she relies on both Beth and Whitney in order to get by. However, her gullibility (or perhaps desire for love) bends her towards trusting Roman and dismissing Beth’s objections. Whereas in slasher films, this might have led to her unwilling survival (since she does not display a fatal sexuality), in torture porn this makes her a sympathetic victim for torture. As a result, she is taken to the torture ring, where she experiences a brutal death.

Unlike Whitney who is sexual by nature, Lorna’s character is sexualized against her will. In fact, her personality is the complete opposite of sexualized. However, when she is captured, her feet are bound with chain; forced to hang upside over an empty bath tub, Lorna is seen nude
as her breasts and buttocks are captured by the camera. Once candles are lit around the room by Roman and some other man, a woman enters the room, disrobes, and lies in the tub. Viewers witness as the naked women (assumed to be a rich businesswoman) takes a scythe and continually slices parts of Lorna’s naked body. Eventually, the businesswoman slits Lorna’s throat and in horror, the film’s audience watches as the woman takes a blood bath (literally). As such, Lorna’s demise dramatizes the extent to which gore is now the erotic lust. This scene shows the essence of torture porn, where sex and blood is mixed to satiate the typical male viewer of the genre.

The fourth and final prominent female role is that of the *femme fatale*, Axelle (played by Vera Jordanova). From the first instance that viewers are introduced to her character, Axelle is sexualized. As a nude model, she is briefly shown topless (less than one second) at the beginning of the film. In the scene at the spa, the camera focuses on Axelle’s body as she approaches Beth. Upon reaching her newly-made American friend, she starts to give Beth a massage. Eventually, viewers watch as Beth falls asleep and Axelle kisses her neck, leaving the film’s audience to question the potential for lesbian undertones and giving us suspense, as per generic rules, as to whether or not Beth will survive. Overall, Axelle is a strong character as she knows exactly what she is doing and is comfortable working for the torture ring. In every instance that viewers see her, Axelle is seen playing the *femme fatale* game and playing it well.

Throughout the film, the male characters mirror the male gaze of the film, perceiving the female characters in a degrading and/or sexual manner. For instance, when Axelle disrobes for modeling, the viewer is sutured into the perspective of two male college students, whose reaction shots emote excitement. Another example is seen when the American trio is en route to Prague
(and later, Slovakia). Whitney notices a man looking at her and so she asks him to light her cigarette. Whitney inquires about obtaining drugs from the man, who invites both her and Beth back to his room. There, the two ladies find themselves in menacing territory as they quickly realize the ill intentions of the Italian man and his friends. In an attempt to leave the uncomfortable situation, Beth says that they have to leave and return to their friend, Lorna. Upon hearing this, one of the men remarks, “One, two, three, perfecto. Otherwise, we have to take turns, huh?” (Roth 2007). Later in the same scene, the first Italian man gets upset upon learning that the women do not want to stay and comments, “Where you go? I knew you were a tease, you fucking cunt” (Roth 2007). The world of this film, as one would expect from American horror, is one in which women exist as sexual objects for male pleasure.

Another instance where male characters are seen sexualizing the female characters occurs as Beth and Whitney walk through the train car. The camera captures as two men turn around to check the duo out. In a later scene, it is implied that Todd (played by Richard Burgi), one of the two American businessmen, is receiving oral sex from a prostitute. The woman is topless and in a thong. When Todd receives his page saying that his victim is ready, viewers watch as he literally tosses the prostitute off him, reaffirming his lack of respect towards the female gender and showing how, in torture porn, the real erotic thrill is sadistic violence.

Yet despite the general disrespect of men towards women, the female characters come across as stronger characters than the males, which may key us in on Roth’s sensitivity to feminist criticism of the first film as well as his fidelity to the ‘Final Girl’ formula in this sequel. In fact, throughout the whole film, there seems to be only one strong male character, Sasha, the head of the torture-ring operation. In contrast, there are multiple strong female roles (e.g. Beth,
Whitney, Axelle, and the businesswoman who kills Lorna). Additionally, viewers take notice that Beth is not only the leading lady but easily the strongest character in the film. However, one has to question whether Roth’s intentions for this film, which were to partially respond to the feminist criticism of his first film, are not undermined by the portrayal and treatment of female background characters. This is, after all, a world filled with women in lingerie and fully-nude women swimming in a large fish tank, where prostitutes perform oral sex and coincidentally, female torturers are required to play scenes with full-frontal nudity. Thus, other than the prominent female roles, nearly all of the female background characters contrast sharply to their fully-clothed counterparts. The one exception to this seems to be Inya (played by Zuzana Geislerová), who is second in command to Sasha at the factory. She seems tough and in control, yet viewers are inclined to pass this off as the result of what money can buy: power. (As seen in Beth’s success in switching places with her American torturer, this seems to be one of the major themes in the film, a blatant social commentary on capitalism.) Thus, it seems most logical to turn to the comparison of this film to its prequel to determine whether or not females come up ahead, or whether this is the same ideological universe as the typical American horror film, following the same generic conventions.

Comparing this film to its predecessor, it is interesting to see how different men and women are portrayed. For anyone who has seen Hostel, there is no doubt that the male trio signifies all of the American stereotypes of the overstimulated male college student. This 2006 film reveals the misogynist nature of male backpackers and their ease in positioning women as objects, essentially singling out their own commodities in Amsterdam’s red-light district; yet, later in the film, they are incapable of seeing the correlation between their own hedonistic
behavior and that of the torture ring where money also buys you an erotic victim and a room. However, in this sequel, viewers are forced to relate to the film’s main character, Beth.

Throughout the course of the film, Beth is seen as genuinely caring towards her friends as well as capable of recognizing red flag alerts. Early on, Beth is seen refusing to indulge herself at the Four Seasons in Prague (despite the objections of Whitney). It is not until the very end of the film, where Walter Cannon’s “fight or flight response” kicks in, that Beth is forced to utilize her material assets as a way out. The film’s audience can attribute this hypocrisy to Roth’s social commentary on Amerocentrism and capitalism, thereby finalizing their views that women are portrayed stronger in this film. Continuing the trend of strong female characters in the torture porn subgenre, the next film also exemplifies the evolution of Clover’s ‘Final Girl’ in the new subgenre.

**John Stockwell’s *Turistas* (2006)**

Another film that examines not only the ‘Final Girl’ but also Americans abroad in relation to detainment and torture is *Turistas*. In this 2006 film, three Americans named Alex, Bea, and Amy travel to Brazil on vacation. When a bus accident leaves them stranded with other English-speaking tourists (Pru, Liam, and Finn), they quickly learn about a bar located on a nearby beach and decide to pay it a visit. There, the group meets and parties with some locals (Kiko, Arolea the waitress, and Camila the bartender) as well as a Swedish couple (Svend and Annika). In the aftermath of the partying, the original group wakes up on the beach in the morning to learn that they were drugged and robbed. Additionally, the locals are nowhere in sight and the Swedish couple is missing. Thus, they search for the police. Unfortunately in the process, they cause some trouble with locals, leading them into Kiko’s hands. The local says he
will take them to his uncle’s isolated cabin in the woods as a means to ensure their safety. Along the way, he becomes friends with them and decides to stop at a nearby waterfall, where he ends up hitting his head. In an attempt to stop the bleeding, the rest of the group decides to take Kiko back to his uncle’s cabin. However, when Kiko’s uncle returns, they are terrified to discover that the Brazilian doctor (played by Miguel Lunardi) runs an organ-trafficking operation as a way to give back to his people and retaliate against the Westerners, particularly Americans who keep the demand high. While most of the group is killed, Alex, Bea, and Pru manage to escape thanks to Kiko’s help, who is later killed by his own uncle.

Throughout this xenophobic tale of a vacation gone wrong, we see gender representations typical of recent American horror films: every single female character is portrayed in a sexualized manner. The most prominent of these females is the character of Bea (played by Olivia Wilde). As the sister of Alex (played by Josh Duhamel), Bea is intent on having a nice vacation despite her big brother’s overprotective disposition. While she is not sexualized at her own will, Bea is construed in this manner through dialogue and cinematography. For instance, upon first meeting Alex, a British tourist named Finn (played by Desmond Askew) comments on Bea without knowing he is talking about Alex’s sister: “Bit like bringing sand to the beach though, isn’t it? Bringing a couple of fit little birds like that to Brazil” (Stockwell 2006). In another scene, the camera focuses on Bea’s buttocks as she is dancing on the beach.

On a whole, Bea is a strong character. Throughout the course of the film, she is one that is constantly striving for independence, particularly as a means to escape Alex’s overprotective nature. Additionally, it seems like she functions as a female contrast to Alex in that she wants to embrace the local culture and oppose her brother’s xenophobia. Furthermore, she does not need
to rely on men to save her. In one scene where she is fleeing from the isolated cabin in the woods, she manages to escape to the underwater caves that Kiko had shown her earlier. There, she not only kills a man who is attacking her, but she manages to successfully defend herself while simultaneously swimming.

The second most prominent character in this film is Pru (played by Melissa George). Like Bea, Pru is sexualized by the male characters and the camera. In one particular scene, she is changing into a bikini top on the beach. While one of the other females changing does so in a seductive manner, Pru changes without exposing herself. Despite this, the male characters still find the idea of her changing as enticing and even “teasing” in a sense. Nevertheless, this Australian tourist comes off as the strongest character of the film. Her assertive disposition informs both Alex and viewers that she is interested in him. Additionally, she is extremely independent, streetwise, and adaptive to her surrounding environment. While she does not rely on others to save her, she contrastingly saves the group on three separate occasions, including the final confrontation with the assailants.

The third most prominent female role in the film is that of Amy (played by Beau Garrett). Out of all of the leading females, Amy is by far the most sexualized character through dialogue, her own flirtatious actions, and the camera’s male gaze. Unlike Pru, Amy has no quarrels about being seen topless. In fact, she appears to enjoy the attention, despite only recently meeting two of the male characters, Finn and Liam (played by Max Brown). This scene is crucial in the respect that, according to the formula established by Carol Clover to analyze slasher films, it essentially foreshadows her death later in the film. In her book, Clover argues that those who engage in sexual relations are more often than not the first ones to die in the film: “In the slasher
film, sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction” (Clover 33). Torture porn often follows the same rules, so it is no surprise that after Amy is seen kissing Liam (who shares her ill fate) at the top of the waterfall, thereby reaffirming her promiscuity, she is seen topless one final time as the Brazilian doctor harvests her organs for money. Therefore, it is most logical to assert that her sexualized nature merely instigates her untimely death, which according to Clover is a result of her “stray[ing] into proscribed territory” (Clover 34). However, unlike the slasher film, the distinction between subgenres lies in the prolonged violence and torture that Amy has to endure.

As is established by the literature on the slasher film, it is apparent that the male characters in torture porn primarily see the function of the females as sexualized and ultimately there for the sake of titillation. However, it is important to note that, unlike the other films that have been discussed thus far, Turistas stands alone in the fact that its male characters are against the idea of objectification. In the prior films, the male roles seem to embrace the idea of objectification for the most part (with the sole exception of Josh who despised the idea and was clearly in the minority) as is literally seen in The Devil’s Rejects, Hostel, and Hostel: Part II. For instance, in one scene, Finn initially gloats in the aftermath of having intercourse with Arolea (played by Lucy Ramos) but later appears upset to learn that she takes money from his wallet, thereby insinuating her role as a prostitute. He even insists that their relationship is “not like that” (Stockwell 2006).

In addition to viewing the women as sexualized objects, the male characters also dramatize for viewers that they essentially feel the women are inferior and therefore always in need of some rescuing and overprotection. However, time and again, the females display their
inclination toward wanting to be independent and their ability to take care of themselves. In fact, as a result of these females’ lack of reliability on the part of the male roles, it seems that the women ultimately come across as stronger characters. Bea and Pru both use their intelligence to overcome adverse situations. In comparison, Alex and Zamora (the Brazilian doctor) are also strong characters but their reliance on physical strength and weapons (and henchmen) respectively diminishes their overall character strength. Additionally, it is ultimately Pru’s actions, as sort of the ‘Final Girl’ character, that save the group (including both sexes) on multiple occasions, thereby increasing the appearance of women as strong characters in the film.

In *Turistas*, the females are quite impressive in their ability to overcome the power relations at play, through sexualized dialogue and blatant shots of the male gaze, that appear to give the males the upper hand throughout the majority of the film. In the opening credits, there are numerous women shown in bikinis and thongs. A few scenes later, viewers watch as Finn stares at a woman’s breasts as she reaches for something in her luggage on the bus. Later, when Liam and Finn discover they took the wrong bus (and are heading to Belem instead of Floripa), they are not in the least bit covert about their desire to meet sexually-uninhibited, attractive women:

**Liam:** Don’t suppose that Belem is famous for having a ten to one ration of women to men, where even the ugly girls look like Giselle.

**Finn:** And they’re all fun, smart, alcoholic, nymphomaniacs with a soft spot for charming, if slightly grubby foreign tourists?
**Liam:** Six, six *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models are from Floripa. Do you understand how select that gene pool must be? (Stockwell 2006)

However, despite the sexualized dialogue and blatant shots of the male gaze thanks to cinematography, the females manage to fend for themselves and prove their capabilities. Like *Hostel*, this film reiterates one of the main gendered conventions of torture porn: patriarchy utilizes women for their sex appeal and little else. Additionally, it should be noted that both the cinematic worlds of these films position global culture as the objects of the horror nightmare.

While all of the films analyzed up to this point are exemplary of the new subgenre, which thrives on the combination of the eroticization of gore and sexuality, the next film focuses purely on violence alone and yet manages to reach a commercial success that, to this day, remains unmatched.

**Darren Lynn Bousman’s *Saw II* (2005)**

Continuing on the success of James Wan’s film, *Saw* (2004), American Darren Lynn Bousman follows up with the film, *Saw II*. His sequel manages to find tremendous worldwide box-office gains, far out grossing not only the film’s predecessor but also every other torture porn analyzed here, the next highest-grossing film from this chapter coming in at $67 million less (Box Office Mojo). In this film, the serial killer known by police as Jigsaw (played by Tobin Bell) rehashes his modus operandi through a new set of brutal and violent puzzles. His latest victim is a police informant who did not react fast enough in finding the key to his “death mask” (Bousman 2005). According to Jigsaw’s recorded VHS tape, which was left at the scene, this “snitch” did not value his life and therefore was granted a second chance at living through
Jigsaw’s puzzle (Bousman 2005). Unfortunately, he could not pry his eye out fast enough to gain access to the key that was hidden behind it. Furthermore, Detective Eric Matthews (played by Donnie Wahlberg) is personally called to the scene by a note written by the killer. Matthews eventually tracks down Jigsaw, who prefers to be called by his real name John, at a local steel company. There, Matthews (along with his former partner, Detective Kerry and other fellow police officers) learns that John has another trick up his sleeve—in fact, monitors in a nearby room reveal that he has imprisoned nine people, including Matthews’ own son Daniel (played by Eric Knudsen), in a house full of deadly booby traps and puzzles. John tells Matthews that all he wants to do is talk and that if Matthews sits down and listens, his son will make it out alive and safe. Additionally, if the people trapped in the house play by the rules and solve the puzzles within two hours, they too will make it out alive. Otherwise, they will die from a poisonous nerve gas that has been slowly pervading the confined space. As per the rules in this emerging genre, viewers are made to suffer with them as they await their fate.

In time, viewers learn that the connecting link between the nine imprisoned people is Detective Matthews. With the exception of Daniel, the remaining people have all been framed and sent to jail because of the corrupt police officer. Several twists are revealed at the end of the film, starting with the fact that Matthews’ son, Daniel, had been locked up in a safe (with an oxygen tank) that was located next to Detective Matthews all along. Additionally, the plot’s main twist is revealed at the very end of the film when Matthews realizes that Amanda (played by Shawnee Smith), one of his framed victims in the house, is actually John/Jigsaw’s accomplice. Since John is dying, Amanda has been trained and is now ready to take over the duty of granting the corrupted and immoral with second chances at life…starting with Detective Matthews, who
gets locked in the same bathroom that most of the first Saw film took place in. Ultimately, in this cinematic world, corruption cannot escape Jigsaw’s game. Those forced to partake in the game embody wrongdoing, including (in this instance) patriarchy as represented through the law and Detective Matthews.

As one of the most prominent examples of torture porn, Saw II’s representation of women is telling. First, it is crucial to point out that unlike many horror films that use women to lure in the male gaze, there is absolutely no nudity in this film. The closest viewers get to seeing exposed flesh is a male character, the police informant, who is chained to a chair in only his boxers. Second, there are a total of four female roles in this film and none of them are sexualized. Third, women are ultimately seen as stronger than the film’s leading men. As such, Saw II breaks the mold of the slasher films in the way that it pulls in viewers and manages scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey 839). It is the torture that provides the cinematic lure.

The film’s most prominent female character is Detective Kerry (played by Dina Meyer). As the lead investigator working on the Jigsaw case, Kerry commands Matthews and the other officers to follow her orders as she has been studying the serial killer’s moves for quite some time. Her apparel consists of a black pants suit with a fully-buttoned up green blouse and a long black trench coat, thereby leaving little room for the sexualization of her character. Yet while the viewer is cued to take her seriously, her fellow police officers (who appear to be all males, with the exception of one non-speaking female in the background) do not. Instead, they constantly second guess her and question how she is handling the current two-hour deadline. While they argue for using forceful interrogation techniques on John, she insists that Matthews should simply hear the man out. With time running out and no leads in sight, Detective Matthews
decides to disobey Kerry’s commands and take matters into his own hands. Sergeant Daniel Rigg (played by Lyriq Bent) and several other male police officers aid and comply with his decision by ensuring that they physically block Kerry from following.

On a whole, Detective Kerry appears to be the only strong and level-headed character. After all, if the police officers would have followed her orders, Detective Matthews would not be trapped by Amanda at the end. Additionally, she comes across as the most intelligent out of all of the higher-ranking officers. Unfortunately, her calm composure and extensive knowledge of Jigsaw’s tactics are no match for the male characters’ machismo, which come into play and ultimately prove fatal. At the same time, her character is severely discredited in the eyes of viewers as they learn that she is the reason that Matthews is currently undergoing a divorce and hostility from his son. It is revealed that they were having an affair during their time as police partners. Through dialogue, we learn that she is the all-too-common-yet-difficult decision that many women face today: choosing between having a career and having a family. This struggle is briefly referenced in a one-liner from Sergeant Rigg to Kerry:

**Kerry:** I am the one who has been working on this case from day one. I have been spending every waking moment piecing it together.

**Rigg:** Maybe that's why you ain't got a goddamn family for yourself and you can't understand what this man is going through. (Bousman 2005)

The complexity of this struggle is one that nearly all women will have to face at some point in their lives and to have Kerry’s decision thrown in her face with Rigg’s biting one-liner is simply misogyny at its worst.
The second most prominent female character in the film is Amanda. Her role is a unique one in that she appears weak throughout most of the film. However, when the main twist of the plot is revealed, viewers discover that she is stronger than she initially leads people, viewers and Detective Matthews alike, to believe. In other words, she essentially functions as the film’s red herring. Like Kerry’s character, Amanda’s complexity in having contradictory traits is something that does not shine well under feminist eyes. At first glance, her character is made strong merely because she has been John/Jigsaw’s accomplice all along. After some scrutiny, it appears the issues lie in the word, “accomplice”. Once again, as was the case with Baby, it is goes back to the patriarch directing orders to his submissive helper. Looking at the case further, it seems that John gave former drug addict, Amanda (who had previously been one of his victims in the first Saw movie) a second chance at life. In return for “seeing the light”, Amanda now thinks of John as her savior. Thus, another classic storyline, similar to the phenomenon of Stockholm Syndrome, evolves here: that of the woman being rescued by the man, thereby being eternally indebted to him. This is significant for our understanding of the genre as this theme, of the passive victim shifting into the role of the active sadist, is recurring throughout torture porn.

Two of Jigsaw’s victims, unable to overcome his trap as Amanda did, are Addison and Laura. Both women have criminal pasts and have spent time in jail thanks to Detective Matthews. Additionally, both women find themselves imprisoned in Jigsaw’s house of horror. Dressed in a salmon camisole and black pants, Addison’s character is strong-willed and does not put up with others’ derogatory comments. For instance, in one scene, a man named Xavier (played by Franky G) insinuates that she is promiscuous:
**Addison:** Well, we've established that the macho-bullshit approach isn't opening the door. Any other suggestions?

**Xavier:** Look who's talking. The only door you know how to open is between your legs.

(Bousman 2005)

However, she is quick to defend herself and tells him to stop talking. While the other female characters are panicking, Addison remains level-headed, calm, and composed as she persistently tries to find a way out of the horror house. In relation to the slasher subgenre, this horror house would be equivalent to what Clover calls the “Terrible Place, most often a house or tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves […]” (30). Unfortunately, she falls into one of Jigsaw’s traps and ends up bleeding to death as she tries to grab the antidote (to the nerve gas) in a boxed contraption. In contrast to her character, Laura is fearful and panicked throughout the entire film. In fact, in most of the scenes, she is either crying or huddled against a wall. As a result of her fear, she has an inability to function which essentially causes her downfall as she is unable to help herself find a way out of the house.

Throughout the film, the male characters are constantly putting down the female characters with derogatory comments. Simply put, it is their machismo alone that interferes with the safety and survival of Jigsaw’s victims, including Detective Matthews. For instance, the male police officers take orders from Detective Kerry but make it clear that they disagree with her. When Matthews and others go against her orders, they end up in a worse predicament than they were previously in. Viewers ultimately witness the female characters come off as stronger characters in the end. Out of all of the police officers, Kerry appears to be the only strong-
minded character that is willing to use her rational thinking ability as opposed to her emotions. Out of Jigsaw’s imprisoned victims, Xavier and Jonas (played by Glenn Plummer) both appear strong. However, Xavier’s over-macho approach gets him (as well as Jonas and many others) killed. Thus, this leaves Amanda as the strongest in the house as she has been pretending to be a weaker character all along. Overall, women come across as stronger, more intelligent and more level-headed characters. In comparison, the male characters come across as overly aggressive, emotionally angry, unintelligent, and panicked.

However, in the world of this film, patriarchal figures transcend the boundaries of rationale and rank. For example, despite Detective Kerry being the high-ranking officer, the other (male) officers are more willing to follow Detective Matthews’ ideas. Additionally, Amanda has supposedly been “saved” by Jigsaw’s game and has learned to appreciate her life. If this is the case, why is she not out fulfilling her life rather than fulfilling John’s life by further propagating his game? Perhaps we can again point out that she is transformed from the passive victim into the active sadist. In the end (of this film), even though Detective Kerry holds the high rank and Amanda defeated Jigsaw at his own game, they are still succumbing to the rules of their male counterparts within the patriarchal game.

Reflections

Looking back at the films that have been discussed, it is apparent that these new torture porn films still assign the most prevalent female role to the *femme fatale*. With the exception of Amanda’s role as the red herring in *Saw II*, this rings true for all of the other villainous female characters (e.g. Baby in *The Devil’s Rejects*; Natalya and Svetlana in *Hostel*; Axelle in *Hostel:*)
Part II; and the bartender and waitress in *Turistas*); as such, strong women are dangerous
women. It is interesting to contrast the male characters’ perception of the female characters to the
viewers’ perception of all of the characters. In nearly all of the films, the men perceive the
women as inferior; yet, upon closer inspection, viewers are keen to find that the over-hyped
machismo displayed by the male characters usually contributes to their downfall. In fact, it is this
machismo that allows the films’ females to shine as strong-willed, level-headed characters.
Additionally, it is reassuring to see female characters, like Beth and Pru, who survive until the
films’ credits but are not necessarily emblematic of Carol Clover’s “Final Girl”; instead, they are
an update on Clover’s iconic figure. In other words, these females are by no means “boyish” as
Clover would typify (Clover 40). Instead, these characters are feminine, however are still not
shown in a sexual manner; they are intelligent, capable characters that use their wit to outsmart
the villains.

The representation of women throughout the American torture porn reflects a society
that, despite having progressive rights for women in terms of equality within the workplace and
showing a modernized ideology by not restricting them to the confines of a household, still has a
difficult time accepting equal status within social relationships. Natalya and Axelle, from *Hostel*
and *Hostel: Part II* respectively, are two prime examples of this: they are strong-willed and
socially adept; however, in the moment of betrayal, they are discovered to be cold, heartless, and
driven by greed. In a way, this implies that socially well-liked women are motivated by a secret
agenda, always trying to advance themselves socially in the premise of obtaining ill gains. By
villanizing smart and independent women, men show a level of intimidation and insecurity
concerning male-female relations within the social sphere.
Yet while women’s role as the *femme fatale* has remained the same in the American horror film, eroticism has changed in the torture porn. While nudity and overt sexuality were once the sources for “erotic” scopophilic pleasure in the horror film genre, the eroticization can now additionally be attributed to a “charge” (as Edelstein stated) from the gore found in certain films (Mulvey 839). The erotic content of slasher films is still there, only now it is linked to lengthy protracted torture. In all five films that are analyzed in this section, there seems to be a plethora of torture, gore, and nudity (with the exception of *Saw II*, where none of the latter is present). However, as with everything, there is always a time, place and context. Female nudity is missing in *Saw II* but it can be argued that both men and women are equally tortured and brutalized. Likewise, some of the victims from these films are depicted in revealing states (e.g. Josh in *Hostel* and Amy in *Turistas*) and some are not (e.g. Roy in *The Devil’s Rejects* and Addison in *Saw II*). Depending on the film, there are more female victims that male ones and vice versa. Regardless, this seems to be irrelevant in terms of the larger picture (i.e. messages) that these films are trying to convey. Whether the film’s premise is a vacation gone wrong or being imprisoned in a house of horror, it is obvious, through screenings and scrutiny, that all of the films are essentially tales of morality, social commentary on American hypocrisy at its worst.

Furthermore, every film depicts an inversion of the horror genre where the villains’ actions are ultimately justified in their means of retaliation against the protagonists’ long-stemming, hypocritical tendencies. The villains’ propensity towards turning the tables on the protagonists, or giving them a taste of their own medicine so to speak, illuminates the wrongful actions of the films’ “heroes”. In *The Devil’s Rejects*, Sheriff Wydell gives the clan a taste of their own medicine via his mission to capture and kill them. In *Hostel*, Natalya makes certain
that Paxton is aware of his own tendency towards the commodification of women, by in turn making him a commodity. In *Hostel: Part II*, Beth realizes that the torture-ring operation exists due to a plethora of the wealthy that are used to exploiting Eastern Europeans and their resources as a means of satiating their hedonistic desires (i.e. the female trio going to Slovakia for use of the natural hot springs). Similarly in *Turistas*, the Brazilian doctor informs Amy that the only reason her organs are being harvested is due to the high demand for them by rich Americans. In *Saw II*, John (aka Jigsaw) sheds light on Detective Matthews’ corruptive nature while Amanda takes revenge through making him her first victim. In the end, it seems that the most horrific part of these films is perhaps not the torture and gore used as a means of retaliation and later as a means to rid communities of evil, but instead the social negligence that audiences inadvertently consume. So we see the torture porn following many of the generic conventions while linking them to contemporary anxieties in American culture. But, as we shall see, the morphology in the horror genre is not the same from culture to culture; rather, in J-horror and gialli, we see different concerns and values being visualized for viewers.
CHAPTER TWO: J-HORROR

When Technology Meets the Supernatural…

While the cause for cultural anxiety in the American torture porn is brutal violence inflicted by other human beings, this is not the case in J-horror. Instead, cultural concerns reside over the potential harm that can be done by the supernatural. In these Japanese films, the damage inflicted upon society by the vengeful spirits leaves a somber tone, affecting many directly as well as indirectly. In 1998, the release of director Hideo Nakata’s horror film, *Ringu*, started a new wave of horror cinema that would ripple throughout Japan and later into international waters. Film scholar, Shohini Chaudhuri, succinctly explicates the premise behind this new subgenre in her 2005 book, *Contemporary World Cinema*, when she elucidates that “[t]he genre typically combines technology with the supernatural” (107). Nakata’s film not only marked the dawn of a new age for filmmakers but also for the Japanese film industry as a whole. As the now-famous director discusses in the Foreword of the 2005 book, *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film*, the 90s was a period of deep-rooted change in Japan when “two of the five major studios in Japan, both with long and glorious histories” shut down (Mes and Sharp ix). In fact, as Nakata declares, “[t]he ‘90s was the decade of starting over for the Japanese film industry. Some film critics like to say, ‘Japanese filmmaking seems very active now. And the films are received very well at foreign festivals.’ It may be true in a sense, but I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic, because starting over in the ‘90s also meant the end of traditional studio filmmaking” (x). Nowhere was this anxious scrutiny more apparent than in the Japanese horror film, or J-horror.
Yet though traditional filmmaking may have changed, there is still a great deal of cultural continuity present in Japan’s newest iteration of horror. In his 2007 book, *J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond*, film historian David Kalat considers renaming the subgenre to “Dead Wet Girls” but finally settles on calling it “the Haunted School”, which he likens more to an “art movement” than to an actual film genre:

What we find in the recurring visions of ghostly schoolgirls, dark water, viral curses, and disrupted families is a common iconographic language. The written language of Japan is ideograms (kanji, katakana, hiragana). Kanji characters don’t represent isolated sounds as in our alphabet but are symbols representing ideas. Depending on context, the meaning and pronunciation of a kanji character will change. The imagery of the Haunted School is a sort of cinematic kanji, using an alphabet of phantoms to symbolize larger issues. (Kalat 9, 12)

Drastically different from the American torture porn, J-horror often utilizes these same recurring visions of the supernatural. With this better understanding of the symbolic logic of J-horror, it is important to note that the format of analysis for the Japanese films will not take the same format as the American segment. In a sense, this is because they are markedly different subgenres. First, whereas the American horror films revolve around the sexualization of women, this is not the case for the horror film’s evolution in the Japanese context. In fact, out of all five examples of J-horror previewed, there is only one instance of nudity (a brief shot of a woman’s bare breast) seen by viewers. Second, while each film’s plot in the American segment differs greatly from one another and it is the style and shift in eroticism that is significant within the torture porn, the Japanese films’ plots are very similar. One reason for this may be that the American films place
heavy emphasis on special effects (i.e. upping the gore factor), while the Japanese films tend to place emphasis elsewhere, primarily on the atmosphere of the film. Due to plot similarity, it is only natural for these films to have shared underlying themes. Some of these thematic concepts consist of the following: disrupted (and disruptive) families; child neglect/abuse/abandonment; the vengeful spirit; the monstrous-feminine; etc. Dissecting each of these underlying themes, we will see how women operate within each and determine their primary function(s) through each of their representations. With this in mind, let us now turn to the analysis of the Japanese horror films, starting with Hideo Nakata’s mega-successful film, *Ringu*.

**Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998)**

Whereas torture porn has evolved to reflect the American audience’s seeming fascination with protracted sadism, J-horror seems to reflect anxieties about moving away from traditional ways of life towards a more technological world. In this 1998 film, the screening of a homemade video tape incites a string of deaths exactly one week after each victim’s initial viewing. Media, here, is the source of J-horror. Determined and eager to find a reversal to her and her son’s own ill-fates after watching the video, a female reporter named Reiko Asakura (played by Nanako Matsushima) ensues on the challenge of finding the origins of the mysterious videotape. With the help of her ex-husband, Ryuji Takayama (played by Hiroyuki Sanada), Reiko both traces the videotape back to Izu Peninsula (west of Tokyo, Japan) and uncovers the truth about the videotape’s creator, a young girl named Sadako (played Rie Inou) who demands retribution for her untimely death forty years ago. Reiko is convinced that if she finds the body of Sadako, she can finally put the missing girl’s soul at rest, thereby ending the curse. After an extensive investigation, Reiko and Ryuji find the young girl’s body in a sealed well located under a cabin
on Izu. Thinking that the curse is lifted, Reiko realizes too late (after she learns that her ex-
husband dies suddenly from what appears to be fright) that Sadako’s spirit will stop at nothing to
ensure that the curse continues on. Eventually, Reiko figures out that (ironically) the only way to
beat the curse is to promote it. In other words, she learns that she survived, and Ryuji did not, as
a result of making a copy of the videotape. Thus, the film concludes with her on her way to her
father’s house with the intention of having her son, Yoichi (played by Rikiya Otaka), make his
own copy of the tape.

One of the major underlying themes in this film is that of the disrupted family, an idea
that is essential to Japan’s ongoing self description. Through the film’s protagonist, Reiko, Ringu
elucidates the long-lasting repercussions of social damage caused by problems in the family and
makes this the key to its identity. Not only is Reiko a divorcée, but it is made clear that her son,
Yoichi, has had limited, if any, contact with his biological father, Ryuji. In one particular scene,
succeeding the night that Reiko first views the tape, Yoichi exits his house and watches in
suspicion as an unknown man (Ryuji) walks past him, approaching the door to his house. Once
inside, Ryuji inquires to Reiko as to which grade the young boy is in. This absence of a paternal
figure in the film stems from the deep-rooted tradition that the Japanese family should revolve
around the maternal figure, as the writer of the fictional tale, Koji Suzuki points out in David

My position is that there is no preexisting paternal instinct. Under the traditional
patriarchal system, fathers never assumed any true responsibility for their
families—they were basically just symbolic figures. So what I am trying to stress
is the notion that fatherhood as a concept—this idea of paternal instinct—is
something novel. Throughout Japanese literature, the men are forever telling their wives to take care of everything while they stumble out into the outside world, blindly accepting what they see as the natural family order… Japanese society is an overwhelmingly maternal society where men are indulged. But to the extent that they permit themselves to be indulged, men simply become a burden for women. (Kalat 30)

Interestingly enough, despite Suzuki’s efforts to grasp this concept of the paternal instinct, the film’s screenwriter, Hiroshi Takahashi, decides to scratch having two male leads. In the original storyline, both Reiko and Ryuji are males:

Suzuki based the two characters on his own psychology, splitting his more logical and his more creative selves into two fictional alter egos. Suzuki deliberately made both characters men to emphasize a point dear to him, as a stay-at-home father in a culture that overwhelmingly placed child-rearing duties on female shoulders. He wanted to show a strong, positive father figure, a man who takes his role as a father seriously. (Kalat 30)

Instead, Takahashi opts to have Reiko be the female star, leaving Ryuji as her male complement. Defending Takahashi’s decision, Kalat argues that Suzuki’s original character of Reiko did not treat his wife as an equal counterpart, thereby not promoting “a positive image of Japanese manliness” either (30). As such, by having Reiko portrayed as she is in Ringu, the film represents women in a positive light (to a certain extent, as will be discussed shortly) by having the lead
protagonist be characterized by a strong, capable female. Women are thus strong, not by choice but, because they must work through the curse that comes with progressing in Japanese society.

The theme of disruptive families in *Ringu* extends beyond Reiko, as Sadako’s family paralleled that of Yoichi’s. Sadako’s mother, Shizuko, had extrasensory perception (or more commonly referred to as ESP) and utilized her ability to predict a volcanic eruption forty years ago. With the help of a married professor named Dr. Ikuma, Shizuko tried to study her special gift. This eventually led to a scandalous affair that possibly bore an illegitimate child (Sadako). Highlighting the abnormality of such an affair, the film speculates that Sadako was possibly the spawn of something supernatural. Regardless, as a direct result of the disruption in the family, Shizuko was left caring for Sadako as a single parent, a second underlying theme.

Both Reiko and Shizuko try to raise their children, Yoichi and Sadako respectively, despite the absence of a father figure. In Japanese culture, traditionally the mother is in charge of running the household, while the father’s role is to provide financially for the family (Kalat 30-1). By being forced to take on both roles, the women in these situations have to maintain a careful and difficult balancing act of both caretaker and provider. Reiko is a motivated, single mother who strives hard to make a career for herself as a reporter. Her ambition to excel as both a loving mother and a hardworking career woman is initially trumped by trying to tackle both as a single parent. She often works late, thereby bringing Yoichi to take care of himself afterschool, an abnormality at such a young age. Similarly, Shizuko does her best to utilize her ESP for a good cause and take care of her daughter. Unfortunately, the disrupted nature of Sadako’s upbringing forces the little girl to take action and come to the quick defense of her mother when a reporter declares Shizuko a fraud. The reporter suddenly dies and Shizuko realizes that Sadako
killed him. Unable to come to terms with her own mistakes about Sadako, Shizuko eventually takes her own life. While some may be able to manage the added responsibilities and stress (as with Reiko), in this case Shizuko succumbs to the problems caused by the fatherless world.

The coding for a disrupted family in contemporary J-horror seems to directly correlate with one single-working mother and one absent father. In turn, as pointed out in the film, this disruption leads to the third underlying theme: child neglect/abuse/abandonment. Reiko’s attempt to take care of Yoichi, via entering the workforce, essentially causes him to raise himself due to her late nights. In one particular scene, while Reiko and Ryuji are analyzing the video at Reiko’s work, Ryuji inquires as to whether Yoichi is okay being alone. To this, Reiko replies: “He’s used to it” (Nakata 1998). Similarly, Shizuko’s inability to take care of her daughter as a single parent (or in other words, realizing the potential of her inherently evil daughter) induces her to fear the worst, thereby committing suicide to “escape” the duties of parenting such a daughter. This, in turn, leaves Sadako in the care of Dr. Ikuma. In the beginning of the film, Reiko comments that “these horrible stories get started when people die horrible deaths”. This quote alone forebodes viewers as it is indicative of Sadako’s story, as she was later sealed alive in a well by Dr. Ikuma.

These three key underlying themes (disrupted families; single-working mother and absent father; and the corresponding child neglect/abuse/abandonment) force viewers to contemplate the cause and effect of the fourth underlying theme: good mother versus bad mother. It is on this theme that the film defines its normative gender roles. Despite Reiko’s attempts to provide for her son financially, this lead protagonist ends up neglecting (to a certain extent) her son and placing her career ahead of her family (i.e. Yoichi, her father, etc.), thereby neglecting his
emotional state as well. Perhaps as a result of this, Yoichi is an extremely capable, young boy. He is very bright and mentally alert. From the film, viewers get the sense that he knows what is going on as he is always either looking back or watching suspiciously. Whether or not Reiko fulfills the role of the good mother or bad mother is left unclear to viewers throughout most of the film. In fact, it is not until Reiko fully understands Sadako’s story, primarily her abandonment and abuse, that she starts realizing the potential harm she may be causing her own son. This potential is turned into a harsh reality when she realizes that Yoichi watched the video, at the bequest of his dead cousin Tomoko’s spirit and now runs the risk of dying in exactly one week’s time. With this, viewers acknowledge that Reiko truly does love her son and is willing to do whatever it takes to save him. Contrastingly so, Shizuko’s selfish exit alerts viewers that she is, by and large, the bad mother. Her neglect of Sadako, while under the guidance of Dr. Ikuma, essentially blindsides her from realizing her daughter’s powers. Unable to cope with this realization of her daughter’s monstrous persona, she takes her own life, disregarding everything including the future of Sadako (with no family to tend to her). Thus, it really is no surprise when Dr. Ikuma, who only cared about his experiments, sealed Sadako’s fate within the well as she laid in there still very much alive.

If the move away from traditional matriarchal femininity is a source of anxiety, another underlying theme related to normative gender roles and relations found throughout all five films pertains to males aiding the female leads. Specifically within Ringu, Reiko is aided by her ex-husband, Ryuji. In fact, moments before his death, Ryuji is the one who figures out how to beat the curse. Unable to tell Reiko in person, he comes back as a spirit (i.e. replacing the man from the video who has his face covered, as can be seen in the change in shirt color) and answers her
question of what she did that he failed to do: made a copy of the tape. It is his move back toward the supportive role and the traditional father that enables this overcoming of the crisis.

With a normative landscape of gender complicated, one structural feature of J-horror, that is not prevalent in the American or Italian models discussed here, is that of the avenging spirit, or “onryou” (McRoy 6). Whereas the more secular American audiences tie their horror in abnormal individuals, the supernatural is a normal occurrence commonly found in Japanese horror cinema. As discussed in his 2005 book, Japanese Horror Cinema, Jay McRoy explicates that “[…] most cinematic texts designated as kaidan depict the incursion of supernatural forces into the realm of the ordinary, largely for the purposes of exacting revenge” (3). Within the realm of the kaidan story (or supernatural tale), “the onryou, or ‘avenging spirit’ motif, remains an exceedingly popular and vital component of contemporary Japanese horror cinema” (McRoy 75). In his book, Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Cinema, he discusses the appearance of the onryou (or avenging spirit) in more detail:

A continuation of a cinematic tradition in place long before the second world war began, prominent features associated with the onryou include long black hair and wide staring eyes (or, in some instances, just a single eye). These physiological details carried a substantial cultural and aesthetic weight, as long black hair is often aligned in the Japanese popular imaginary with conceptualizations of feminine beauty and sensuality, and the image of the gazing female eye (or eyes) is frequently associated with vaginal imagery. (McRoy 6-7)
Thus, it can be said that Sadako’s “transformation and mutation” from the “gifted child” to the ‘avenging spirit’ is one that fits within this realm of the kaidan (or “supernatural”) story (McRoy 25; Iwasaka and Toelken, xx). Richard J. Hand explicates more on this “transformation” in Jay McRoy’s 2005 compilation, Japanese Horror Cinema:

The power of transformation and mutation has a special place in horror in general, but is a central motif in Japanese horror theatre and film. […] In her analysis of Japanese pornographic animation, Susan J. Napier argues that the genre presents a ‘frenzy of metamorphosis’ of the female body that is not simply misogynistic, but in some ways empowering. (McRoy 25)

In a way, Sadako represents what Barbara Creed dubbed the “monstrous-feminine”, despite having her life abruptly taken away before having the chance to reach adulthood (Creed 3). The young girl goes around seeking vengeance for her wrongful imprisonment and death in the well.

Another supernatural element that underlines the film’s plot is that of the actual curse. The condemnation, in this film, begins after the victim views a cursed videotape. After the victim watches the tape, he or she receives a phone call that tells them that they have exactly one week to live. As Ryuji and Reiko both discover, the only way to escape the curse is to uphold it by making a copy of the tape and showing it to someone else. Richard J. Hand details this further in Jay McRoy’s 2005 book, Japanese Horror Cinema: “Similarly, Reiko’s redemption in Ringu is the discovery of another kind of ritual: the dubbing of the videotape. Moreover, the invocation of Sadako through the contemporary ‘ritual’ of viewing the video is comparable to moments of ritualised summoning in Noh” (McRoy 26). Furthermore, a key distinction between American
and Japanese horror films, as pointed out by David Kalat in his book, *J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond*, is that there is no justified revenge in Japanese horror cinema (Kalat 16). Transcending the notions of justice, rather than just punishing those who have wronged, the revenge in J-horror cinema is blind and blanketed: randomly falling over all those unfortunate to be caught under it. Going hand in hand with the curse, technology usually finds itself in the picture. For instance, utilizing the VCR is the only way to continue the curse in *Ringu*. By and large, technology allows the dead to enter the realm of the living, as will be discussed in depth in the succeeding films. The symbolic importance behind the utilization of technology by the dead is that they are both essentially lifeless. An inverse relationship exists between people, the use of technology, and the direct interactions between human beings. As more people turn to technology, a cold inanimate medium, the direct interactions with each other decrease. Perhaps this is almost a comment on this relationship; instead, the dead, another cold, lifeless medium, come through in the place of technology to disrupt the world of the living.

The themes discussed here are pivotal to gender representation in the manner that they represent the consequences of women when they attempt to progress or divert astray from their traditional gender roles as caretaker of the household and nurturer of the children and elderly. Shizuko’s diversion from the normal, which is coded by her affair with Dr. Ikuma, has a monstrous impact on society (both figuratively and literally speaking with Sadako as proof of this). In fact, it is her diversion alone that causes irreversible damage on later generations. *Ringu*, and as also will be seen in *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*, comments on Japan’s tendency to place more emphasis on feelings and emotions than on reason, unlike Americans (Kalat 18). This commentary is symbolically shown by the theme of wetness and the surplus of water that
surrounds Japan, in general, and Sadako’s spirit as she emerges from the depth of the well as seen more specifically in this film. Thus, Japan’s ‘wet’ culture reiterates the emotional needs of women as the entire family revolves around the matriarch (18).

**Hideo Nakata’s *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* (2002)**

Continuing on this theme of the matriarch, Nakata furthers the implications that the modernization of women’s roles within Japanese society brings, in his next film, *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*. In this film, a woman named Yoshimi (played by Hitomi Kuroki), who is currently in the midst of getting a divorce from her husband, moves into a small apartment in Tokyo with her daughter, Ikuko (played by Rio Kanno). Once they settle in, Yoshimi soon realizes that something is not right, particularly as she witnesses the large water stain on her bedroom ceiling getting larger as the days pass. A mysterious red bag (obviously belonging to a small child) starts appearing everywhere, beginning on their arrival day when Ikuko wanders up onto the roof of the building and stumbles across it. Yoshimi eventually learns about the disappearance of a five year-old girl named Mitsuko Kawai (played by Mirei Oguchi), who lived in the apartment directly above them. As the plot unfolds, Yoshimi has a vision of what happened to Mitsuko and learns that the little girl’s body is entombed in the sealed water tank on the roof. Unfortunately, Yoshimi learns too late that Mitsuko wants more than just her body found; instead, she wants a maternal figure. In an attempt to save Ikuko from Mitsuko’s wrath, Yoshimi decides to stay with Mitsuko in the apartment building and keep her company forever. Ten years later, Ikuko returns and learns the truth about her mother’s sacrifice.
Like *Ringu*, the main theme of this film revolves around the disruptive and disrupted family. The lead protagonist, Yoshimi, has flashbacks of the trouble caused by her own parents’ divorce. Paralleling her story, Yoshimi unknowingly puts Ikuko through the same agony. Time and again, Yoshimi is late to pick up her daughter from school, just as her parents did the same to her. Additionally, it is clear that Yoshimi and her husband are not only going through a nasty divorce, but they are particularly bent over who will be granted custody of Ikuko. Several times throughout the film, Yoshimi is interrogated by officials about her past, which is revealed to them by her husband.

In addition to the disruptive family, the theme of the single-working mother comes into play, just as it did in *Ringu*. As Yoshimi states in her meeting with child services, Ikuko’s father has had little concern over his daughter until now (with the divorce proceedings). After years of being a homemaker and housewife, Yoshimi is forced to go back to work as a book editor as a means of making ends meet. As it stands, the officials explain that mothers of children age six and under are usually granted custody. However, Ikuko is right at the cusp. Thus, if Yoshimi is unable to support both herself and her daughter financially, she will lose custody of Ikuko.

As in *Ringu*, the conceit of the abnormal family creating a disruption in the symbolic order is linked to the single-working mother. In *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*, Yoshimi, paralleling Reiko of *Ringu*, has no choice but to leave Ikuko to wait alone (this time at school, not at home) while she is at work. Furthermore, the condition seems worse as Yoshimi herself was put through the same scenario as a child. She would wait for hours until her mother came to get her at school. While Yoshimi is akin to *Ringu*’s Reiko and Ikuko is similar to Yoichi, Mitsuko unmistakably seems like the Sadako of the story. As discussed earlier, Sadako’s mother
committed suicide to escape her duties as a mother. Similarly, Mitsuko’s own mother abandoned her, leaving her in the hands of her father. Mitsuko’s fate roughly parallels that of Sadako’s: one day, when her father neglects to pick her up from school, Mitsuko is forced to walk home alone. Upon arriving at her apartment building, Mitsuko makes her way onto the roof as she is curious about the water tower. As she is peering into the open top of the water tower, she accidentally drops in her favorite red bag. In an attempt to reach for it, she herself falls in and drowns. (Later that day, cleaners of the tower seal the lid shut and Mitsuko’s body is sealed in.) If only her father had not neglected her, she would probably still be alive and well. Beyond the tragic effects of the rupture from traditional family roles, what can also be seen here is that the bond between mother and daughter, or rather the need to repair the lack of such a bond, remains beyond death. Though Mitsuko’s father remains in the apartment, actively searching for her, a year after she goes missing, Mitsuko’s spirit is not satisfied by this as all she wants is her mother. In J-horror, the spirit would also want a normative family order.

This foregrounds the discussion of the good mother versus the bad mother again. Like in *Ringu*, viewers are uncertain as to whether Yoshimi is a good or bad mother. She is apparently so traumatized by her own experience in childhood that she is unknowingly neglectful towards Ikuko. In many scenes, Ikuko is tending to herself, as did Yoichi in *Ringu*, such as when she does the dishes while Yoshimi is investigating the rooftop. Once viewers learn that Yoshimi does love her daughter, Ikuko, and that she is willing to do anything to save her, including sacrificing herself, they acknowledge that it is Mitsuko’s mother who is the bad maternal figure. Her abandonment of Mitsuko has long-lasting effects, through the curse, on later familial units (e.g. the damage that it brings to Yoshimi’s own relationship with Ikuko).
The character of Mitsuko undergoes a similar transformation as Sadako in *Ringu*. She goes from being an innocent, abandoned little girl to a vengeful spirit. (If you recall in *Ringu*, Sadako goes from being a gifted child with ESP to one being filled with rage after having her life taken from her at such an early age.) Even after Mitsuko gets her maternal figure back (i.e. with Yoshimi as her new mother), she still seems to harbor a maliciousness that can be seen at the very end of the film when Ikuko returns. Behind Ikuko, viewers can see Mitsuko lurking, ready to harm Yoshimi’s biological daughter. Thus, it is only fitting that as Sadako filled the role of the “monstrous-feminine”, so does Mitsuko. While the American version of the “monstrous-feminine” deals with sexuality and the threat of castration, the Japanese version here implies the literal sense of the monster. In addition, it seems that Mitsuko certainly fulfills the role of being the vengeful spirit. Once again, the type of yūrei (ghost) involved seems to be an onryou, wanting to avenge her death with those that are now inhibiting the haunted space (i.e. the apartment building). Mitsuko torments the mother-and-daughter duo in the apartment below hers and even goes so far as trying to drown Ikuko. In the end, she wants a mother and is willing to threaten anyone else that might inhibit her from gaining this, even if it is a little girl just as she once was.

Like *Ringu*, *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* displays what happens to society when women run astray from their gendered roles as maternal figures. Heavy emphasis is placed on Mitsuko’s spirit wanting someone, more specifically a woman, apparent as she disregarded her father’s attempts to reach out after her death, to occupy the position that her own mother initially abandoned. The rage that society endures, particularly Yoshimi and Ikuko, as a result of this abandonment is one filled with water (again, emotions run high in this ‘wet’ culture as explained
by Kalat) and endless pain (18). In turn, one woman’s diversion from the gendered norm (as seen through the abandonment of her maternal duties) has repercussions down the line that reciprocate through another family’s misery and torment.

**Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2003)**

Like *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*, *Ju-on: The Grudge* displays what happens to society and families when women digress from the gendered norm. In this 2003 movie, the plot is comprised of six “non-linear, episodic narratives” where viewers watch as a mother and son team work together to murder anyone that enters their former abode, or this film’s version of a haunted space (McRoy, *Nightmare Japan* 77). Following Kalat’s notion of revenge in J-horror cinema, the *onryou* exert their rage upon anyone, without provocation and without mercy. At the start of the film, Rika (played by Megumi Okina), a volunteer social worker, goes to check in on an elderly lady at the house (or what Clover calls “The Terrible Place”) and to her horror, discovers a young boy named Toshio (played by Yuya Ozeki) locked in a closet (Clover 30). As the plot unfolds, different stories focusing on different protagonists are revealed: Rika, a social worker; Katsuya (played by Shuri Matsuda), the husband of a couple that recently moved into the haunted house; Hitomi (played by Misaki Ito), the sister of Katsuya; Toyama, a former police detective who handled a string of cases involved with the house; and Kayako (played by Takako Fuji), the woman who is shown murdered at the start of the film and now haunts victims with the help of her son, Toshio. It is shown that anyone who enters the house either ends up missing or dead, thereby continuing “the grudge” of the mother-and-son duo. Additionally, as revealed after a flashback at the beginning of the film, where a man is implied to have killed his wife, son, and family pet, the following appears on the screen: “Ju-on:
the curse of one who dies in the grip of a powerful rage. It gathers and takes effect in the places where that person was alive. Those who encounter it die, and a new curse is born” (Shimizu 2003). This is essentially the premise of the film in a nutshell. Culturally speaking, the rage that is felt symbolizes the reaction to the assault of one’s honor, which is highly esteemed in Japanese society.

Following the tradition of the two films directed by Nakata, this Shimizu film also revolves around the concept of the disruptive, abnormal family. At the commencement of the film, a husband named Takeo murders his wife, Kayako and their son, Toshio. As revealed through the recent male tenant of the house, Katsuya, who later finds himself possessed by the spirit of the dead man, Takeo discovered that Kayako was cheating on him and that, even worse, Toshio might not even be his son. This disruption in their chain of family ties is in essence what triggers the fit of rage that Takeo experiences, thereby instigating the murder of his family and initiating the first curse to be born. The ultimate form of child abuse occurs when Takeo kills Toshio in his fit of rage as well.

The theme of haunted spaces is continued in this film, like in Ringu (which initially started on the island where Sadako died) and Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara (i.e. the apartment building), where this time the Tokunaga house is the one where Kayako and Toshio were originally murdered. Thus, it is only natural that the space is haunted with the spirits of the mother and son, thereby giving rise to the conceit of the vengeful spirit or the onryou. Out of revenge, they kill anyone that enters their home. Additionally, it is important to make note of one crucial aspect of this film, as well as the others discussed thus far: there seems to be quite a lack

Once she and her son Toshio are ghostified by Takeo’s jealous rage, she proceeds to inflict her spectral vengeance arbitrarily. There is no rhyme or reason to which people end up her or Toshio’s victims—aside from the blanket logic that anyone who enters her house is accursed for that alone. This isn’t ‘revenge,’ because her victims did nothing wrong, aside from maybe making poorly informed real-estate decisions. (Kalat 16)

Kalat goes on to point out one reason why this is especially scary for American audiences: “For human beings, thirsty for rationality, desperate for explanations for everything from why the sky is blue to why God lets bad things happen to good people, the repudiation of such hard-won solutions is bone-chilling” (51-52). Thus, Shimizu’s message to viewers is not so much focused on justified revenge, which seems to be a concept absent from J-horror as a whole, but instead how disruptive families have a corrosive impact on society.

Essentially, this film’s plot serves viewers with yet another tale of morality to be learned. Like the previous films that were discussed, this film offers audience social commentary as a way to inhibit its plot from occurring in reality. Dissecting the tale from *Ju-on: The Grudge*, it appears the lesson to be learned is the social damage that results from when a wife cheats on her husband, thereby provoking the death of the entire family (as even Takeo was found dead shortly after his wife’s murder). However, the damage does not cease there as it shall continue for years
after that, causing the wrath of the dead to haunt new victims. If this is not enough, the film ends, like the others, on a melancholic note as everyone, involved or in contact with the curse, dies.

Like Nakata’s films, *Ju-on: The Grudge* depicts the consequences of women trying to progress outside of their traditional gender roles. The disruption that society faces is a direct result of Kayako’s extramarital affair, which gives rise to Takeo’s rage as well as both her and Toshio’s ill fates. Japan’s anxiety over the modernization of women’s roles in contemporary times is reflected yet again as a curse plagues generations to come. While Kayako went outside the traditional Japanese gendered norm of loving wife, unlike the mothers in *Ringu*, *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*, and as will be discussed in *Chakushin Ari*, she did not abandon her maternal duties. This results in another difference between the films: the onryou consists of both mother and child, rather than just the vengeful spirit of the child. Here we see the persistence of the onryou in the form of a mother-child tandem as will be repeated again in *Chakushin Ari*.

**Takashi Miike’s *Chakushin Ari* (2004)**

Reverting back to the theme of technology and the supernatural, as was implied in *Ringu*, *Chakushin Ari* takes this source of disruption and further complicates it with the mother-child tandem seen in *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* and *Ju-on: The Grudge*. In this 2004 film, the supernatural once again utilize technology as a means of sabotaging the world of the living. As the movie commences, a group of friends are enjoying their dinner at a restaurant. The group is met by another friend, Yoko (played by Anna Nagata), who had just attended the funeral of a high school friend. Later that evening, Yoko’s phone rings and a voicemail is left as she misses the call while in the bathroom. When she listens to the message, she hears her own voice,
moments before what appears to be her death. Both Yoko and Yumi (played by Kou Shibasaki), who listened to the voicemail as well, notice that the missed call log displays a time in the future. This starts a string of incidents such as Yoko’s phone call and subsequent death, where people are left either voicemails or text messages that foretell their deaths. After each recipient dies, a piece of red candy is found in their mouth. As Yumi learns, this curse was started by what appeared to be a mother abusing her child. However, as the plot unfolds, she realizes that a little girl named Mimiko (played by Karen Oshima), and not her mother, was actually causing harm to her own younger sister, Nanako, as a way to receive attention. As is prevalent in J-horror, technology is both pivotal to the disruption of the symbolic order and central to the plot. Almost acting as a reverse Ouija board, technology is again the means through which the dead reach out to the living.

The recurring theme of the disruptive family is a primary focus of the film’s plot as, once again, both Yumi and Mimiko have absent fathers. In conjunction with child neglect/abuse/abandonment once more, this conceit is learned early by viewers as the main lesson taught in Yumi’s college child psychology course is that “abuse spawns more abuse” (Miike 2004). Without paternal figures, both Yumi and Mimiko are left to the care of their mothers. Viewers discover that Yumi’s own mother abused her as a child, to the point where her grandmother always tried to intervene. However, Yumi feels the most extreme case of abandonment when she learns that her grandmother has taken her own life (by hanging herself), leaving no one to interject in the abuse she is receiving. Additionally, viewers are led to believe that Mimiko’s mother, Marie Mizunuma, is supposedly abusing Mimiko and her younger sister, Nanako. Like Yumi, Mimiko experiences her own share of abandonment when Marie fails to
help Mimiko during a severe asthma attack. Later, viewers learn that the mother had good reason since Mimiko had continually been abusing her younger sister (who, at the time, needed to be taken to the hospital for cuts inflicted by Mimiko).

Again, all this bad behavior is enabled by the dissolution of the normative family unit. The theme of the single-working mother comes into play for Mimiko’s mother who tries desperately to support her two daughters (which in actuality gives Mimiko more time to abuse her younger sister). Hence, the discussion of good mother versus bad mother needs to be brought up again, this time concerning Yumi’s mother versus Mimiko’s mother. Through flashbacks, viewers witness Yumi’s abuse, including being burnt by cigarettes and forced to look through a keyhole to see her grandmother’s body hanging from the ceiling, by her mother. Put simply, Yumi’s mother is, in the rules of the genre, the bad mother. On the contrary, while many people believe Mimiko’s case is a clear sign of Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome (or MBPS), where a caretaker causes illnesses and/or injuries onto someone as a means of receiving attention (as a caretaker), on her mother’s part, this is not the case.

Like the other films that have already been explored, Chakushin Ari looks at how technology can cause long-lasting social damage. This time around, as discussed, the avenging spirit (Mimiko) utilizes her mother’s cell phone as a means of picking her next victim. In death, when Mimiko’s spirit harms others (by killing them), she make amends for this harm by giving a piece of red candy, just as she used to do with her sister when abusing her. Additionally, as in all the films detailed thus far, the technology used (i.e. cell phones) is not evil itself, just being utilized to conduct harm onto others.
The theme of the ‘monstrous-feminine’ in its Japanese manifestation is one that is all-too familiar to the J-horror subgenre. Like Sadako, Mitsuko, and Kayako, Mimiko represents the female monster, trying to avenge those around her. Once again, the revenge is by no means justified as Mimiko uses the phone to randomly ring in her next victim, despite not even knowing them. Additionally, Mimiko can certainly be classified as an onryou since it is her spirit that is doing the avenging. She malicious by nature: in life she wanted to hurt people and in spirit she takes that to the next level by killing them.

Haunted spaces occupy this film as another underlying theme. Just as the apartment building served as a place where the spirit of Mitsuko from Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara resided, the hospital where Mimiko died is haunted by Mimiko’s presence. Similarly, she also makes a point to haunt the old apartment where she lived with her mother and sister. In one particular scene, Yumi and Yamashita (whose own sister was killed by Mimiko) search the apartment in hopes of finding clues that could put an end to the curse. Yumi panics as she sees hands and a face appear from a cabinet above her, which vanish by the time Yamashita looks at the cabinet.

The curse itself mimics the ritualized form of the one from Ringu. Once a cell phone rings, a voice message (or text message with a picture) allows the receiver to hear themselves moments before their death. The time of the missed call reveals the exact day and time of their impending fates. After the victim is killed, at said time and date, their phone randomly dials someone else in that person’s contact list. Thus, the next person dialed is given the death message and the cycle continually repeats itself. Mimiko’s revenge continues in a pattern similar to Sadako’s in that of Ringu, thereby elucidating that “[t]he notion of horror implied in this
buried/forgotten past is that the remnants of yesterday may turn vengeful as a consequence of being denied, ignored, or otherwise erased” (Schneider, ed. 296). Once again, the theme of the onryou is clear in J-horror: a “wronged” spirit will forever be relentless in its revenge. The next film differentiates itself from the rest in this chapter as it is the only one that features returning spirits that are not onryou.

**Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s Kairo (2001)**

The theme of onryou and their utilization of technology has been prevalent throughout J-horror. *Kairo* sets itself apart in that the film contains many spirits but no onryou, and completely revolves around technology, making it the film’s central theme and driving force. In this 2001 film, director Kurosawa paints an existential picture, for his audience, of what happens to society when technology gets the best of it. In essence, this film follows two parallel storylines, that of a plant sales woman and that of a male economics student, until they eventually collide towards the end of the movie. Michi Kudo (played by Kumiko Aso), the female who works for the plant sales company, is recently adjusting to her move to Tokyo where she befriends her two co-workers, Junco and Toshio (played by Kurume Arisaka and Masatoshi Matsuo, respectively). Ryosuke Kawashima (played by Haruhiko Katô), the college student, stumbles across a mysterious website, which asks “Do you want to meet a ghost?”, as he attempts to connect to the Internet. Without response to the posed question, the website proceeds anyway to show images, which resemble those taken from a webcam, of people who appear to be dead. Kawashima goes in search of an answer and meets a female computer science graduate student named Harue Karasawa (played by Koyuki) along the way. Together, they try to understand the meaning of the images and the origins of the website. Kawashima eventually finds the answers, which he is not
quite ready to accept, from a computer science graduate student named Yoshizaki (played by Shinji Takeda):

The spirit…Or consciousness, the soul, whatever you want to call it, it turns out the realm they inhabit has a finite capacity. Whether that capacity accommodates billions or trillions…eventually it will run out of space. Once it’s filled to the brim…it’s got to overflow somehow, somewhere. But where? The souls have no choice but to ooze into another realm, that is to say, our world. (Kurosawa 2001)

Both Michi and Kawashima (separately) start noticing people either vanishing or killing themselves. Rooms with red tape, bordering the door frame, mysteriously start appearing across the city in prevalent numbers.

Eventually, Michi and Kawashima meet as Michi is left stranded in her broken-down car. Kawashima, recently upset at the disappearance of his friend, Harue, is convinced by Michi to search for his friend one last time before heading out of town. They find Harue alive, but realize they are nevertheless too late in their efforts to help, as her will to live has depleted due to her fear of being alone. Both Michi and Kawashima watch in horror as Harue, devoid of hope and unable to move on with what little is left of the world, shoots herself in the throat. Her self-destruction is ultimately the result of the dissolution of societal bonds and her fear of being alone, including in the afterlife. Before leaving the scene, Kawashima, despite Michi’s request to steer clear of them, enters a room surrounded by red tape. There, he encounters a ghost and realizes that what is happening is real. With the help of Michi, Kawashima manages to escape to a boat heading towards Latin America, where there are supposedly survivors. Unfortunately,
Michi soon witnesses Kawashima exit the world of the living, leaving behind a black silhouette on the wall behind him. Both Michi and viewers learn that technology has created something close to an apocalyptic culture, affecting more than just Tokyo (as implied by the crew leaving for Latin America), due to the alienation and isolation that the Internet and other communicative technologies cause for those who use them. When traditional forms of sociability are lost, horrifying things begin to happen.

The film focuses on the harmful effects of technology, particularly the Internet, which poses a threat to traditional society by promoting isolation and alienation. Viewers learn that the yūrei (ghosts) are somehow utilizing the Internet as their portals for entering the human realm, thereby driving out the existing humans by either causing them to vanish or commit suicide. These yūrei appear not only on the Internet, but also on cell phones. This appears to be a general comment that reflects the cultural anxiety over modernity and its reliance on technology. Additionally, these yūrei appear in two different forms, depending on their strength. The weaker ones appear as black silhouettes walking around. However, as Yoshizaki explains to Kawashima, they gain strength in numbers and once the passage opens fully, they soon start to take on the physical form of humans. In fact, the physical spirits (as seen through the webcams) are images of the people right before they died. With the exception of their “ghostly” aura, these spirits look like they did when they lived.

The victims of the yūrei appear to be people who feel lonely or alienated (or in other words, those not connected to traditional society). As Harue explains during one part of the film, many people opt towards utilizing the Internet as a means of feeling “connected”. Yet the film seems to argue that the Internet has the opposite effect in that it isolates individuals. Thus,
isolation and alienation, two symptoms of modernity, appear as an underlying theme in all the films. As David Kalat explains in *J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge, and Beyond*, Tokyo itself is a space filled with loneliness:

> The urban wasteland of junked buildings also highlights the sense that Tokyo’s famously crowded confines are a conundrum: a place where people are packed together but also kept apart. Kurosawa is concerned with the space between, the wasted space as a symbol of disconnection. ‘One of the major themes of my films is individual life in the metropolis called Tokyo. I’m not sure how this plays out in the U.S., but what we have in Tokyo is individual human beings living completely cut off from traditional, regional communities that had supported them in the past. The theme is that of a human being, isolated amidst a huge aggregation of people and information systems, but the individual remains entirely alone within this metropolis. (Kalat 114)

This same visual scenario is represented onscreen through Yoshizaki’s computer program, where white dots on an otherwise black screen appear in random patterns of movement. Additionally, the *yūrei* are able to gain momentum and grasp on to alienated individuals more easily once their first victims leave the human realm. In fact, these ill-fated and ill-willed humans are able to receive instructions on how to make “The Forbidden Room” (i.e. rooms with red tape around them) once they make initial contact with the *yūrei* from viewing the webcasts of them on the site that Kawashima finds. These “forbidden rooms” represent the anti-communitarian impact of new media. In one particular scene, Harue is watching all of her different computer monitors, each with a different webcam image of a spirit. Her interest in this stems from wanting to
decipher what happens in the afterlife, whether people end up just as alone in the afterlife as she feels now, a fear that she expresses in the scene titled “Ghosts and People” (Kurosawa 2001). Upon looking at these, viewers watch as she prints out instructions. Additionally, in all of the beginning cases that viewers see in the film, these isolated individuals have these instructions somewhere near them (i.e. Yabe investigates his dead co-worker, Taguchi’s apartment and finds a computer print out with nothing but “The Forbidden Room” on the piece of paper). Whereas in American horror, society remains durable despite the trauma done to isolated individuals, in J-horror, a world of individuals is posed as a horrifying destruction of community itself.

Another underlying theme, which appears as a result of the loneliness caused by technology, is the apocalyptic outcome of too much technology. People may feel “connected” to one another online, but Kurosawa seems to ask whether these bonds are as strong as those formed when interacting with one another in person? At the end of the film, very few people survive. In fact, one could say that in this ghostly tale of morality, after Kawashima dies on the boat at the very end, Michi is left as sort of the Japanese version of the “Final Girl”; she is strong-willed, non-sexualized, and independent. Additionally, the end of the world is felt, by viewers and Michi alike, as Michi drives through the streets of Tokyo and sees no one in sight, only broken down cars, smoke, and fire. One of the most memorable scenes in the film is a shot of the Tokyo skyline in flames and ruination. As implied by the boat’s captain at the end, the disaster that hit Tokyo is larger than just the confines of the islands. In fact, it appears to be worldly as the only communication the boat’s crew receives are some weak signals down near Latin America. It is interesting to note that the only known survivors are trying to gain strength
in numbers and form a group, thereby commenting on human beings’ natural instinct to be in groups/societies, reversing the social destruction wrought on by technology.

In this film, the curse itself relies on, and is linked to, technology. Without the Internet as a portal, the yūrei are not able to enter the human realm. The course of action of the curse appears to be the following: after watching the website, the characters (or victims) are advised by the ghosts to create these “Forbidden Rooms” where red tape is bordered around a door’s frame, indicating it as a portal site and as a place for humans to avoid. If a human goes through that door, the spirit is that more easily able to take the human’s life. Additionally, after viewing the website and following the instructions for the “Forbidden Room”, people soon lose the will to live, and then either fade away in loneliness or kill themselves due to a sense of overwhelming alienation.

Yet despite technology providing a means for social disintegration and alienation, the computers themselves are not evil. Instead, Kurosawa is trying to stress that it is the over-usage of these technologies, such as the Internet, that has ill effects on social bonds. Similarly, just as the ghosts utilize the haunted spaces known as the “Forbidden Rooms” as portals, the Internet serves as a portal for alienation and isolation for the humans. In Kurosawa’s eyes, the over-utilization of a small machine by an individual, collectively as a society, is what is causing the real damage in society when it comes at the expense of traditional forms of socialization. In Japanese Horror Cinema, McRoy comments on technology as he sees it in the film, Ringu: “The Ringu films thus articulate a troubled and yet oddly expectant vision of a future in which the great collective psychotronic apparatus of contemporary information technology ceaselessly
reconstitutes individual identity” (46). His comments here may also be applied to this 2001 film in that they accurately describe Kurosawa’s vision of the future in *Kairo*.

As seen through the J-horror subgenre, Kurosawa’s Japan is one plagued by the effects of hyper-individualism, as represented through the lonely Internet user, on society. As stated by the director in an interview with *Midnight Eye*, an online magazine devoted to Japanese cinema, Kurosawa explains his take on the negative effects of technology:

[…] I'm not so interested in the group that surrounds the individual. I'm interested in the values that the individual has come to embrace. For the individual to re-assess those values and understand the way in which those values that he has come to embrace are in fact the forces that have come to oppress him, not something from the outside. (Mes 2001)

In this film, people embrace the Internet as a means of further connecting as a community. However, it is these notions of societal bonds that are actually severed by the widespread adoption of an unconventional (at the time of the film in 2001) method of interacting with one another. While the theme of disrupted families runs high throughout many of the other films discussed, it is actually the theme of disrupted society that is focused upon in *Kairo*.

**Reflections**

The paralleling storylines of both *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* may be a result of having the same director, Hideo Nakata, or they may be indicative of something more symbolic, as they also held similar themes to *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *Chakushin Ari*. All of the films, including *Kairo* which appeared to have more of a social commentary on the damaging,
apocalyptic effects of technology than anything else, seem to center around women. With female
lead protagonists, these films combine technology with the supernatural as a way to reflect
cultural occurrences and isolate certain stigmas still in play.

After World War II and the atomic bombs, Japan seemed to put forth two types of horror
films: those dealing with giant monsters as a direct result of radiation (i.e. Godzilla) and those
dealing with onryou, primarily female spirits that cause social damage in their attempt to defy
traditional maternal roles (McRoy, Nightmare Japan 6). The subgenre of J-horror certainly fits
within this second category, as all of the films (with the exception of Kairo) revolve around
spirits who occupy haunted spaces as a means to avenge their wrongful deaths. Ultimately, the
anxiety now revolves around the modernization of women’s roles in Japan and the disturbances
this causes to the normative family unit. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that all of these
onryou seem to take their wrath and vengeance out on innocent victims, rather than those that
instigated their initial pain and suffering.

As discussed in each film’s section, the major themes that seem to be shared throughout
most of these five films are isolation and alienation, child abandonment/abuse/neglect, disrupted
families, male aids to the female protagonists, and of course, the monstrous-feminine. Some
important lesser themes that come into play in these ghost tales are as follows: water in a
foreboding sense; haunted spaces; and melancholic endings. As Jay McRoy explains in his book,
Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema, wetness in these films is used as “a
metaphor for illness and decay” (83). Another possible meaning for this water theme is
explicated by David Kalat as follows: “In Japan, the concept ‘wet’ has a meaning not found in
English; it also means ‘emotional.’ The Japanese say of themselves that theirs is a ‘wet’ culture,
as compared to dry Americans. By this they mean that Japanese culture places a higher priority on feelings and emotions, while Americans emphasize reason” (18). Perhaps this quote reaffirms that American horror films often have justified revenge, while the avenging spirits in these Japanese films target those that merely enter the haunted spaces.

Another distinction between the American torture porn and the J-horror film is placed on the differing causes of cultural anxiety. In the American torture porn, there seems to be a sense of individualism at play that is soon disrupted by a group of oppressors. Often in American torture porn, a larger group will target a smaller group of victims. Xenophobia is a common fear as Americans place concern over the threat of those they have previously exploited coming back for vengeance. Contrastingly, a sense of community is everything in Japanese society so while the story is told from the point of view of just a few individuals, the vengeful spirits’ revenge blankets entire communities. For Japanese culture, the real threat lies in the rupture of the community. This is symbolized through the incorporation of the supernatural as a symbol for the lifeless entities of technology and the negative effects that they have on human interaction within the community.

In these Japanese films, women are represented in a manner that elucidates the challenges between their traditional and contemporary roles. In Ringu, Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara, and Chakushin Ari, single-working mothers face the hardship of trying to maintain a balance between their roles as both maternal figures and primary breadwinners. As eloquently stated by David Kalat in J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond, the film historian explicates some common characteristics of J-horror films as well as comments on the gender codes within these texts:
The connective tissue that links the many symbols of J-Horror together is sexual deviancy and violation of traditional family structures. The Haunted School consistently invokes incest, rape, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, adultery, the irredeemable trauma of child abuse. In each of these films we find some departure from established traditions of how men and women are ‘supposed’ to relate to one another and form families. These departures threaten the existing order, and lead to anxious, uncertain futures. The modern world with all its progressive ideas gives women the power and opportunity to break away from their traditionally circumscribed roles in society, but as women increasingly turn away from established orthodoxy they threaten the social order—something these films represent with monsters and ghosts. What else are ghosts but the revenge of the past on the present? (Kalat 14)

Additionally, most of these films (minus Ju-on: The Grudge and Kairo) feature a dead young girl trying to fight a working-class heroine. This, in turns, shows a sharp contrast between good and evil, between weak and strong, between past and present, in regards to perspectives on women. One more thing to point out is that women are at the center of the Japanese household and as a result of this, the lead protagonists (all women) always have a male counterpart to help them. Unfortunately, most of these male counterparts (e.g. Ryuji, Yamashita, and Kawashima) die in these films, thus leaving only the females to continue on. In essence, these films depict women and children being abandoned, the dissolution of the traditional nuclear family, and the rupture of the social abstract that results.
Like the American horror films, these films all serve as tales of morality for audiences. However, instead of having individual messages as do their American counterparts, these Japanese films (with the exception of Kairo) convey similar messages that comment on the lasting effects of social damage caused by issues within the family. Additionally, as David Kalat points out, “[t]he Haunted School is not so much about monsters, not in the literal sense. Instead, the monsters serve to highlight alienation, how modern society disrupts traditional family structures and leaves the most vulnerable of us alone in an unfriendly world” (13-14). This is the precise theme that plays out in all of the films. For instance, in Ringu, tragedy strikes and hell breaks loose only after Sadako’s mother kills herself, thereby shirking her maternal duties. In Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara, Mitsuko’s mother abandons her, leaving the little girl to an ill fate as she walked herself home from school. In Ju-on: The Grudge, Takeo kills his wife, Kayako and his son, Toshio, out of rage after finding out that Kayako was having an affair and realizing that Toshio might not have been his son after all. Lastly, in Chakushin Ari, Yumi, the female protagonist had been abused by her mother and audiences are led to believe (throughout nearly the entire film) that the avenging spirit, Mimiko, had also been abused by her own mother.

Unlike the American horror films, these films do not end on a happy note. Instead, they often end with credits that roll to somber lyrical choices. As David Kalat says in his book, J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond, “[t]he Haunted School may give you little to scream about right away, but will send you home very, very sad” (17). Another differentiation to note is that “American horror movies tend to fixate on a fear of death itself, specifically a fear of that moment of transition when life ends”, but J-horror films focus elsewhere (Kalat 18). Instead, they “tend to localize their concept of death sometime after the
precise moment at which life ends. They aren’t movies about dying, but about the time afterwards”, thereby pointing out a large cultural distinction between the United States and Japan (Kalat 18). Thus, we see that horror has evolved differently to reflect specific cultural sensibilities. While J-horror focuses on the impact of progressive women regarding the upbringing of their children, as we will see in the next chapter, the modern Italian giallo often places emphasis on the progression of women in the workplace.
CHAPTER THREE: ITALIAN GIALLI

Stylistic Appeal: Nudity, Gore, and Violence…Plus a Killer Soundtrack

While the American torture porn utilizes the sexuality of women as *femme fatales* that lend a hand in the eroticization of gore, and the J-horror film punishes women that progress past their traditional roles within the nuclear family, the Italian horror film has a different idea in mind when it comes to the horrific. In the subgenre of the ‘giallo’, which is the dominant mode of horror in Italian cinema, these Italian horror films combine characteristics of a psychological thriller with that of slasher and exploitation films. Meaning “yellow” in Italian, the creation of the giallo subgenre has long been attributed to Mario Bava and his 1963 film, *La Ragazza Che Sapeva Troppo* (Needham pars. 2, 8). The reasoning behind the color “yellow” stems back farther, to approximately 1929, when Italian mystery novels began being released that eventually became known for their yellow binding. While the medium of paper has been replaced, the name “giallo” still describes a story which revolves around an investigation. What sets gialli apart from otherwise being grouped with police/detective dramas is that emphasis is placed on their stylized violence, gore and sexual aspects. As the subgenre evolves, these general conventions may be added to or even replaced within the contemporary giallo.

Modern Italian gialli share similar themes that reflect cultural anxiety towards the following: the digression from the old set of genre rules; the emergence of the New Man and Woman of modern giallo; psychotic individuals as a product of trauma and violence; and the negative influence of technology and the arts. A good summary of traditional gialli conventions is stated on the website, *The Deuce: Grindhouse Cinema Database*:
The giallo films usually involved an unknown killer who preyed on beautiful women. The killer would only be seen in quick shots and the dark mysterious figure would often wear black clothing and gloves. The killer would use sharp razor blades, butcher knives, ropes and other torturous methods instead of guns to murder his victims. The stories often had a [sic] antagonist that would try to investigate and solve the murders. When the killer was finally found, he would then commit suicide or be accidentally killed by one of his victims leaving alot [sic] of questions unanswered. Another very cinematic aspect of the classic giallo film is the use of nightmare and dream sequences that would take the viewer into other realms. By using psychic visions and eerie dreams the director would twist the audiences [sic] thinking patterns and change the films [sic] linear storyline into a puzzle of purely cinematic images that added a psychadelic [sic] beauty to the story being told. (“Giallo Cinema” 2008)

In addition to these, a few other conventions of the classic giallo come to mind: the portrayal of male domination over women is widespread; the violence portrayed is both highly stylized and eroticized as well as often synced with the film’s soundtrack; the lead investigators are usually male; the killer’s identity is often discovered by someone other than the police; and finally, the “faceless” killer is often introduced early on in the film as a seemingly innocuous character, however in a twist, his identity as the killer is revealed at the very end.

The first major theme present in the modern giallo is the digression from these aspects comprising the traditional giallo. While many of the long-established characteristics make the transition into the modern giallo, there are a few major departures from the original style. One
key deviation is in the notion of the “faceless” killer. Traditionally, this character’s identity remains a mystery until the film’s climax; however, in the modern giallo, the character is often revealed early on and the mystery lies in how to catch the killer. Another major digression is that not all of the targeted victims are women. In two of the films, men and women are both targeted by the killer and in one film, only male victims are targeted. Along these same lines of gender evolution in Italy, the next significant departure is the incorporation of lead female investigators. The protagonist role of lead investigator, traditionally held by men, perhaps as a sign of the times, has been updated to include women. The progression of the role of women in these films, mirroring the advances in women’s equality in contemporary Italy, leads to the next major theme of the modern giallo.

The emergence of the New Man and/or Woman of modern giallo as a recurring theme reveals that men still have anxieties over women as equal peers or even superiors within the Italian culture. The examples in this section display progressive roles for women in the workplace where they hold positions of higher authority over their male colleagues. Protagonists from 1970s gialli were usually male investigators. However, this is not the case with the modern giallo, where often the main protagonist is a high-ranking female investigator. Throughout these films, male anxieties shine through, as can be seen through their insubordinate actions and vocalizations under their female superior officers. This is similar to the American film, Saw II, where lower-ranking male officers continually questioned and subverted Detective Kerry’s authority into her investigation of the sociopathic killer, Jigsaw.

Like Jigsaw in Saw II, another prevalent theme in the modern Italian giallo is that traumatic violence leads to psychotic individuals. In several of the films, traumatic (often
violent) events transform those seemingly innocuous into full-blown, violent sociopaths. In these films, the traumatic precursor to transformation is often drastically different (rape, institutional violence, and child abuse); despite this, these varying precursors yield the same end result: a socially-withdrawn, sadistic killer. An associated subtheme is the widespread moral decay that plagues the cities in these films. This subtheme, most often portrayed in the backdrop rather than the forefront, subtly guides the sociopathic character in their transformation. These themes show how the violent antagonist came to be; the next theme shows how the antagonist operates.

Like J-horror, the influence of technology (as well as creative mediums such as art and literature) on individuals can be seen as a cause of cultural anxiety and concern within the modern Italian giallo. In these films, technology, art, and literature are part of the modus operandi for the serial killers. In all five examples, this theme is a critical component of not only how the sociopath operates, but also how the investigators attempt to track them. However, even though in all of these films the investigators are able to figure out the killers’ modus operandi, in only one film is the killer ultimately caught through this information. Looping back to the first major theme of the modern giallo, a final digression of the original conventions becomes apparent. In the modern giallo, rather than being discovered by the protagonist, the killer often reveals himself in an attempt on the main character’s life. Only in this moment is the protagonist able to overcome the serial killer. Even with all the departures from the old and the new themes to add to the list of established traits, these films are still firmly giallo at heart. All of these conventions, whether regarding the classic or modern giallo, can perhaps be attributed to one man.
Just as Alfred Hitchcock has been credited with the creation of the slasher film, Dario Argento is considered the “master” of the giallo and the one who essentially modernized the subgenre. Unlike Hitchcock who thrives on psychological thrillers, Argento combines psychological terror with gore and sex as a means of modernizing the slasher film into the classic giallo. His dedication towards cult cinema has certainly not abated as he continues to produce films year after year. His productivity has been widely recognized. For instance, he was the first director ever to be granted filming access in Florence’s famous Uffizi Gallery (Jones 227). Marking another milestone, his film La Sindrome di Stendhal (1996) was the first Italian film ever to incorporate computer-generated imagery (“Dario Argento” 2009). Additionally, just this year alone, Cine-Excess awarded the director and his loyal composer, Claudio Simonetti, its most esteemed ‘Lifetime Achievement Award’. For these reasons and more, three out of the five films in this section have been written and directed by Argento. As for the other remaining, non-Argento films that will be discussed, the widespread success and influence of the renown director is simply inescapable. Occhi di Cristallo (2004) was co-written by Franco Ferrini, a beloved colleague of Argento’s. In fact, Ferrini helped write the screenplays for all three of the Argento films in this section. Finally, Sergio Donati, one of Almost Blue (2000)’s writers collaborated with Argento back in 1968 when he co-wrote the screenplay for the story that the famed director wrote called C’era una volta il West (or Once Upon a Time in the West, which starred Henry Fonda). As the modern giallo begins with Argento, perhaps it is fitting to commence our discussion with three films from the famed director.
Dario Argento’s *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (1996)

After being away from the Italian giallo for almost a decade, Argento wanted to return to the roots that made him legendary. While on set during the filming of *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, the renowned director makes his intentions clear:

*The Stendhal Syndrome* is a return to the type of strong material I used in the Seventies. As filming has progressed, my gut feeling has made me think this will be as gory and as hardcore as *Tenebrae*. It shares a similar theme of psychotic transference too. There’s nothing for children here because I decided to go for the frightening and daring extremes I was always famous for. (Jones 225)

With a $3.8 million budget, which is considered high for an Italian horror film, Argento was certainly able to afford his “daring extremes” (Jones 235, 225). In this 1996 film, a female police detective named Anna Manni (played by the director’s daughter, Asia Argento) is on the trail of a serial rapist/killer named Alfredo Grossi (played by Thomas Kretschmann) who initially strikes in Florence and then makes his way to Rome, Italy. An anonymous tip leads Detective Manni to the famous Uffizi Gallery one morning where she experiences the effects of Stendhal Syndrome. This illness, according to Detective Manni’s psychologist in the film, has symptoms which “include a cold sweat, nausea, anxiety, hallucinations, severe depression, and personality changes”, which in turn explains Detective Manni’s onset of hallucinations and her recent quest for a new persona (Argento 1996). Utilizing the effects of this syndrome against her, Alfredo captures Detective Manni and rapes her repeatedly. She manages to escape, only to be captured later on by the sadist, once again due to his use of paintings to bring the onset of the syndrome
back. For days, Detective Manni is repeatedly raped until she manages to escape and kill Alfredo. With a new persona and look, Detective Manni continues Alfredo’s killings until the police realize her illness. Anna, the female protagonist, progresses beyond the old genre boundaries, many of those that were set by Argento himself, where the role of lead investigator was almost exclusively male.

When it comes to horror film directors, one of the biggest distinctions that many argue sets Argento aside is his ambiguity towards gender. One such argument is made by film scholar, Adam Knee in his essay, “Gender, Genre, Argento”, where he states the following:

Indeed, while Argento tends to visually present his killer as a single hooded and cloaked figure, the killer often turns out to be bi-gendered and multiple-personed, a number of individuals acting as one. The individuals involved in murder are themselves often presented as ambiguous in both their gendered characteristics and their sexual preferences although the actual identity of the killer is rarely made clear before a film’s conclusion, so the spectator is always forced to guess at the killer’s sex. (Knee 215)

With this particular quote in mind, it is interesting to look at La Sindrome di Stendhal where the initial killer is a male whose actions (i.e. multiple counts of rape) prompts the work of another serial killer (Detective Manni) whose gender identity is repeatedly called into question. One difference from Knee’s quote and the traditional giallo conventions, as noted earlier, is the lack of the “faceless” killer. Unlike many of Argento’s prior works, the serial rapist/killer in this film is given away early on, keeping his anonymity for only a few short scenes early on. The
character’s anonymous identity is discovered about halfway through the film when Detective Manni realizes her attacker is the same man from the Uffizi Gallery (the renowned art museum).

Another theme common throughout the modern Italian giallo is the use of a creative medium (in this case, art) as part of the killer’s modus operandi. Alfredo’s attacks on Detective Manni are highly specialized, in which he takes advantage of her infliction of Stendhal Syndrome. He uses artwork to trigger her condition and essentially render her defenseless. It is in this catatonic state, induced by the Stendhal Syndrome, that Alfredo sexually assaults her. Audience members witness the psychology of trauma, a recurring theme throughout the contemporary giallo, which accompanies the aftermath of rape as they view Detective Manni’s blatant change in both manner and appearance, immediately after the first time she is repeatedly sexually assaulted by Alfredo. In the very next scene after she escapes Alfredo, Detective Manni’s skirts have since been replaced with pants suits that sport her new (much shorter) haircut. After Detective Manni survives a second round of assaults and kills Alfredo, her apparel is immediately cycled back to her original choice of blouses and skirts, which she now supports with a long blonde-haired wig. The sudden change in apparel parallels the gender identity crisis that Detective Manni experiences. As she explains to her psychologist, after the initial assaults, Detective Manni got sexually violent with her co-worker/former lover, Marco: “I wanted to fuck him like a man, the way that men do it” (Argento 1996). Taking Knee’s statement to heart, it seems that he is correct in his assumption about Detective Manni and her bi-gendered personality. However, looking at the motives behind the initial serial rapist/killer, Alfredo, it seems that Knee’s quote is not entirely on par. This “gentleman” was trusting in his looks, thereby quickly winning the affection of his victims (Argento 1996). Alfredo selectively chooses
all female victims, a typical convention of the old genre rules, and even manages to keep his heterosexual relationship with his wife on the side. Alfredo’s success is ultimately his undoing. The overconfidence he acquires from the physical and sexual domination over his female victims leaves him an Achilles’ heel.

In another deviation from the old giallo, the killer in this film is defeated by his own actions. Rather than being caught by his pursuers, Alfredo specifically targets Detective Manni, giving away his identity. He successfully captures Anna, restrains her to a mattress, and then repeatedly assaults her. Overconfident and therefore inadvertently careless, Alfredo leaves Anna, a trained police detective, unguarded for a long period, giving her ample time to escape from her restraints. When he returns to find Anna still on the mattress, he is full of confidence, lust, and heedlessness. Taking advantage of his carelessness, Anna, who is actually free from her restraints, manages to kill him.

In the aftermath of the rapes of Detective Anna Manni, two themes common to the modern giallo can be witnessed. The first, the trauma endured by Anna leads her to become the film’s villain. Soon after Alfredo’s death, halfway through the film, Detective Manni takes over the role of the sadistic killer. This follows the theme of the sociopathic serial killer experiencing a traumatic experience that molds them into what they are. This trauma transforms them from the passive victim to the active sadist. Out of this, the next theme arises, that in which the victims of the modern giallo can be male or female. Anna’s victims are entirely male, which can be viewed as a digression from the old set of giallo conventions.
The heart of the film shows the aftermath of rape and its repercussions on society, particularly on women. Detective Manni’s identity crisis is one that many female rape victims can relate to: the “disgust” and shame that accompany the forced actions; the need to hypermasculinize oneself to avoid being the victim again; the terror that is associated with constant paranoia about being vulnerable; and finally, the distorted version of Stockholm Syndrome that one faces. This is to say that Detective Manni, as she confesses to her psychologist, feels dirty just thinking about sex. Thus, to ensure that she is not a victim again, she subconsciously finds the need to act aggressively towards any potential male perpetrator, including her own brothers (i.e. when she is too aggressive and brutal in her sparing at the gym). Her suddenly-masculine appearance and mannerisms are a mere façade to the pain that she inherently feels as a result of the trauma. In fact, she results to cutting herself as a way to ensure she is still alive. She does not feel physical pain, but instead the blood reminds her that she is human. Additionally, as much as she lives in fear that she will become a target again, she subconsciously forces herself to identify with her attacker, Alfredo, so as to ensure that she will not be targeted again (i.e. her inclination to kill as well as her recent appreciation of art).

In turn, the sexual violence towards women reflects a great deal about men and Italian societal concerns. First, it reveals that there is a crisis of masculinity occurring as gender equality progresses. This crisis creates concerns over control and identity, on the part of males, that need to be fulfilled and addressed in other spaces and mediums, such as the horror film. Second, the insensitivity that males display in the film, particularly toward their raped lovers, only goes to show that their innate desires need to be satiated before their ability to show emotional support can come through. For instance, Detective Manni’s colleague and lover, Marco, visits her at her
home in Rome once she leaves the hospital in Florence. With him, he brings flowers and other material goods, as well as his blatant desire for sexual intercourse. Detective Manni has just faced the unimaginable (with her first encounter of sexual abuse) and yet this supposed friend would like to see to it that his masculine needs are met in exchange for the emotional support package (i.e. the flowers) he has quickly purchased for her. According to Mary P. Wood in her chapter entitled “Gender Representations and Politics” in *Italian Cinema*, “[t]he masculinity stereotype of violent domination and control, and the difficulty of conceiving a masculine role in which sensitivity and moral superiority do not entail damage to the patriarchal model, both indicate the negotiation of responses to modernity, and the fear that loss of power entails” (174-175). Lastly, it is interesting to point out that while other female characters in the film are displayed in the nude, perhaps Argento’s paternal side came into play as Detective Manni was never seen unclothed. The brutality that Detective Manni takes out on Alfredo is enough to display both a rape victim and her director/father’s revenge. While this film certainly has giallo conventions, it is not until 2001 that Argento makes a full-fledged return to the giallo subgenre.

**Dario Argento’s *Nonhosonno* (2001)**

Probably the most exemplary of Argento’s contemporary gialli is *Nonhosonno*. Set in Turin, Italy, a serial killer known as the “Killer Dwarf”, due to his short stature, has terrorized the city and stumped Detective Moretti (played by Max von Sydow), the lead investigator on the case. After a 17-year hiatus, the killings begin again and Detective Moretti starts closing in on the killer’s tactics to determine whether the Killer Dwarf has returned or whether it is a mere copycat. The killer’s trademark is a paper cutout of an animal at each crime scene. With the aid
of one of the victim’s sons, Giacomo (played by Stefano Dionisi), Detective Moretti discovers that the killer is no “dwarf” but instead an adolescent killer that has since grown up.

Out of the three Argento films that will be discussed in this section, this film is the only one that fails to have a main female protagonist. Instead, the women that are represented in this film are portrayed solely as victims. The portrayal of women is in line with the traditional giallo conventions. Also adhering to the rules of classic giallo is the theme of the “faceless” killer. For almost the entire film, the killer is shown only in brief, fleeting shots; his voice is masked, his identity a secret. It is not until the final scene in which his identity is discovered.

Similar to Li Sindrome di Stendhal, a creative medium (the nursery rhyme, in this case) is an integral part of the modus operandi for the killer who turns out to Lorenzo (played by Roberto Zibetti), a childhood friend of Giacomo. Lorenzo selectively chooses his victims according to which animal they represent in his favorite nursery rhyme (written specifically for this film by Asia Argento), where a farmer slaughters his animals one by one. This is an example of a recurring theme, mentioned earlier, throughout the modern giallo. Focusing on the nursery rhyme itself and how Lorenzo interprets and uses it for guidance in his killing spree, one ballet dancer, for instance, is dressed as a swan and is therefore ideal for that part in the storybook; another woman (who also happened to be his best friend Giacomo’s mother) has Gallo as her last name, which translates to ‘rooster’, and therefore is chosen for that part. Despite their flawed inclination to judge a book by its cover (i.e. trusting Lorenzo because of his rather non-intimidating appearance), most if not all of the women shown being murdered put up quite a fight. In fact, Lorenzo is forced to cut off the tops of one of his victim’s fingers since she
scratched him so many times, leaving him fearful that his DNA would be left at the scene of the crime.

Aside from his “planned” victims, Lorenzo’s attitude towards women is reflected in his daily treatment towards them. Like his intended victims, he merely sees every woman as an object of some kind. At the beginning of the film, the unseen killer (Lorenzo) is trying to persuade a prostitute to allow him to perform sadistic sexual acts on her. His disrespect towards women is also shown in interactions with his own girlfriend, whom he often ignores and does not take seriously. A third element is the way that he disregards his mother as merely being “not there” in contrast to his overbearing lawyer of a father.

Lorenzo’s boyish looks, both as a young boy and as an adult, enable him to get close enough to his victims to kill them. As he explains to Giacomo at the end of the film, he always had an urge to kill. However, once he was read that particular nursery rhyme by a local author, he knew he had to fulfill his destiny. Thus, he stole the book and started making the nursery rhyme a reality...taking each line literally. Lorenzo’s execution in obtaining control and letting his true personality shine through the course of his 17-year killing spree reflects an Italian culture that fears the influences of technology, literature, and film on its youth. Moreover, it reflects yet another crisis of masculinity in the way that the killer needed to exert complete control and domination over his female victims. Wood states the following:

…violence is also the outward manifestation of the difficulties of maintaining an image of patriarchal masculinity which dominates Italian culture at a time of national defeat and enormous social change. The popular genres of the latter half...
of the twentieth century indicate the arenas where male conflicts can be played out at a distance from contemporary life, the 'sword and sandal' epic, the western, and the horror film. (Wood 171)

Additionally, Lorenzo’s motives for killing are a reflection of the social effects that familial problems can lead to; in essence, the 30 year-old wanted to take control of his life since he had an overbearing father and a mentally-absent mother.

There is a disparity between the two young male characters, Lorenzo and Giacomo, of this film. Lorenzo is the aggressive man who comes from an upper-class family. On the other hand, Giacomo loses his mother at the hands of the faceless killer (who he much later learns was Lorenzo) and is left to live with his father who decides to remarry. In one scene at Lorenzo’s apartment, where Lorenzo and Giacomo are catching up after a 17-year hiatus, Giacomo confesses that his father used to physically abuse his mother. Wood pinpoints the symbolic importance of Giacomo’s character as well in *Italian Cinema*:

This masculine template of the victim of violence who is also morally victorious is found in many films. […] The feminized, sensitive, intelligent, moral model of masculinity is depicted in healthy family relationships, but its defeat by violent means signals the difficulty of adopting the ‘new man’ role, which also finds expression in unbalanced visual composition, visual excess, and *noir* elements. Moreover, this protagonist’s female companions generally remain in supportive and subordinate roles, maintaining the traditional female stereotype. (Wood 173)
Her accuracy does not stop there as she correctly asserts Gloria’s role as the “supportive” type who is grateful to have him back in her life after so many years. The character of Giacomo represents the theme of the New Man in modern giallo. His victimization as a young boy (which stemmed from watching the brutal killing of his mother) has made him less aggressive and has raised his level of sensitivity, a reversal of the masculine role in traditional giallo. Lorenzo, his masculine counterpart, remains solid in his representation of a typical giallo male with the exception of one thing: the motive behind killing is his inherent nature rather than the result of traumatic violence in his youth.

One final note, out of these five giallo films, this is one of only two films that follow the traditional convention of the investigators figuring out the killer, as opposed to the example of Li Sindrome di Stendhal where the killer inadvertently brings about his own defeat. While there are a few digressions from the classic giallo, Argento for the most part maintains the original conventions in this modern film. Perhaps it is for this reason that, out of these five films, Nonhosonno carries the look and feel of the classic giallo best.

**Dario Argento’s *Il Cartaio* (2004)**

Unlike Nonhosonno, in this third and final Argento film, the famed director attempts to radically modernize the giallo subgenre. The premise, in this film, follows as a serial killer plays a taunting game of video poker with police in Rome, Italy. The stakes are high as each wrong move on the part of investigators results in the amputation of one of his victims’ body parts. Leading the case, Detective Anna Mari (played by Stefania Rocca) works with Detective John Brennan of the British Embassy (played by Liam Cunninham) to try and track down the killer.
As determined by specialists, the killer’s profile is someone who thrives for the thrill that accompanies risk taking. Two dead bodies are the result when the killer, known only as the Card Player, beats the hand of Detective Mari, known to him as Sara. With the assistance of a young video poker champion named Remo (played by Silvio Muccino), Detectives Mari and Brennan finally are able to win back the Commissioner’s kidnapped daughter and get one step closer to their own intended target.

The first major digression in this film, from much of Argento’s earlier work, is the incorporation of a strong female investigator who strives hard to defy gender stereotypes. The character of Detective Mari represents the New Woman of modern giallo. She is the most mentally and physically competent officer in her division. Her acute powers of observation give her an advantage over her male counterparts, particularly that of the Card Player. This, in turn, shows the impotency of traditional males in Italian society and reifies the theme of the New Man and New Woman in the modern giallo. Furthermore, she is the only one who manages to beat the killer, not once but twice, in life or death situations. The first time she is able to outsmart the killer, who breaks into her house, and physically defeats him, thereby scaring him off. The second time she encounters the Card Player, and learns that it is a colleague of hers named Carlo Sturni (played by Claudio Santamaria) who has long had a crush on her, she manages to outsmart him in his very own game of poker by getting into his head. The New Man comes into play as Carlo represents the now-impotent male who is rendered inferior to his female colleague, who is symbolic of the progression of women in the Italian workforce.

Here again, we have a pair of traditional giallo conventions upheld: the “faceless” killer and his selection of female targets. Similar to *Nonhosonno*, the killer is introduced early in the
film as a seemingly innocuous character. As the film progresses, few hints are given to the killer’s identity; however, it is only in the film’s climax that it is truly revealed. Like *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, once again the killer’s folly is in his move to destroy the film’s protagonist. In *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, Alfredo is purely motivated by his lust for domination over Detective Manni. Contrastingly in *Il Cartaio*, Carlo has lust for domination and power as well over Detective Mari; however, he also seems motivated by his fear of the New Woman of modern giallo. Detective Mari seems poised to take him down and reduce him from the masculine and powerful Card Player to the impotent and inferior Carlo Sturni. Carlo hopes to defeat Detective Mari before she realizes that it was him all along. In typical giallo fashion, all the pieces to the killer’s identity and motive finally fall into place, shortly before his or her ultimate defeat.

The police have been able to rule out motives of sexual violence as none of the female victims were sexually assaulted by the Card Player. Up until the film’s final confrontation between the now-revealed Carlo and Detective Mari, the motives have been unknown. In this telling scene, Detective Mari learns that Carlo’s motives are purely an issue of control, recognition, and overcompensation for his shortcomings, which ultimately stem from his crisis of masculinity. Given that the Card Player is Detective Mari’s associate, Carlo, it is clear through what audiences initially see of him on the job that he is not highly respected nor taken very seriously. Rather, he is repeatedly ignored and merely told what to do. Perhaps the reasoning behind his actions stands to combat the feelings of inferiority and subordination he encounters every day at work. Almost in a sense, not only is he exhibiting power over the women that he
victimizes but as the persona of the Card Player, he also commands a sense of power and respect over his colleagues, which he would never achieve as merely Carlo Sturni.

Focusing on his victims, the remaining cast of female characters each falls prey to the Card Player. Always wanting the upper hand and not willing to fight on a fair playing field, before they even have a chance to resist or escape, he drugs them with a syringe, which allows him the anonymity and time he desires to tie them up before a webcam. Like the American torture porn, a certain aspect of the eroticization of gore comes into play with each of the victims; however, the method differs, in both their actual death and discovery of their body afterwards, from the American films. These victims, all female, are shown nude, but only after their body has been found. Aside from their fully nude appearance, which can most likely be attributed to the killer not wanting to leave any trace of himself behind, close-ups of bruised areas are inspected that are likely to make audience members cringe. More so, emphasis is made on different ways that Detective Brennan double-checks the victims’ post-mortem conditions. Even in these autopsies, to the viewer, a level of the eroticization of gore still exists.

Adding to this level of the eroticization of gore, the utilization of technology as a theme plays a major role. Carlo is highly-technologically adept; his complex set-up allows him to position himself within the crowd of the police as they watch the tortures and murders occur, giving him, secretly the killer, a feeling of victory upon the defeated nature of his colleagues. The film itself creates a picture within a picture with the use of the webcam. The police in the film are subject to the position normally reserved for only the film’s viewers. This is to say that the police intently watch, on the webcam, the voyeuristic eroticization of gore of the killings, while the viewers do not witness the murders firsthand but instead only through the reaction of
the police. The viewers do not directly experience the eroticization of gore during the actual murders, but see it during the succeeding autopsies. This style differs drastically from Argento’s previous works in the giallo. He explains his reasoning as follows:

My angle on the violence is somewhat different to my prior films too. Could I show extreme sadism without any blood? Even though I have to depict throat slashing, fingers being cut off, spikes through torsos and fish hooked bodies? I’ve gone for a more clinical, forensic approach with the police probing body orifices looking for clues. I even asked Liam to wipe blood off his lips in one scene because I didn’t like it. It seemed too much. We filmed all the Internet murders in the first week of shooting so the actors could react to the real thing on their computer monitors. I shot those to look sleazy, disgusting and almost pornographic, focusing on the girls’ faces while they are being tortured, maimed, and slain. Are they violent scenes? You know something I think I’ve lost all ability to judge! (Jones 307)

Argento’s gambit on digressing from the typical giallo convention, where the film’s violence is highly stylized and explicit, was not received well. Stated from a review, originally found on an officially-sanctioned Argento fan site and later archived in Alan Jones’s *Profondo Argento: The Man, the Myth & the Magic*:

However it’s the complete lack of bloody shots that places *The Card Player* near the bottom of the fans’ favourites. Each time you think Argento’s camera is moving in for the full-frontal kill he annoyingly cuts away from the abductions
and throat slitting. In some instances he even places an out-of-focus object or someone’s head in front of the action to deliberately obscure it. (309)

With Il Cartaio, Argento’s most recent endeavor in the modern giallo, meeting disappointing critical and fan response, it will be interesting to see whether his June 25th, 2009 debut of Giallo, starring Adrien Brody, at the Edinburgh International Film Festival will continue to massively digress from the classic giallo conventions or whether it will revert back to what was once his formula for success.

Eros Puglielli’s Occhi di Cristallo (2004)

Although Argento is considered the master of giallo, of the gialli from 2004, it is perhaps Eros Puglielli’s Occhi di Cristallo that stays truest to the classic giallo roots. In this film, a detective named Giacomo Amaldi (played by Luigi Lo Cascio) tries to track down a serial killer utilizing the clues left at each crime scene. Highly intellectual and detail-oriented, the serial killer amputates pieces of his victims to put towards his use in the creation of a life-size doll. In the mist of trailing the killer, Detective Amaldi helps a female university student named Giuditta (played by Lucía Jiménez), who is currently being stalked. Coincidentally, Giuditta’s forensic anthropology professor (Dr. Avildsen) turns out to be the serial killer. As a child, Dr. Avildsen (played by Eusebio Poncela) was the son of a woman who ran an orphanage and who also had an obsession with dolls.

One of the most defining conventions of the classic giallo is upheld in this film: that being the “faceless” killer. From the very beginning to almost the very end, there are virtually no clues as towards the killer’s identity. Even though the killer is targeting specific people, all of
which he knew, and is leaving hints as to who his next victim will be, the police are unable to piece any of the puzzle together. Like *Il Cartaio* and *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, the killer is introduced early on as a minor character. Again, only at the end of the film is the killer’s identity truly revealed.

Along with his identity, the male killer’s motives and intentions are also revealed at the end of the film: he intended to make a life-size doll, using certain body parts from his male and female victims, as a way to not only exact his revenge on those who wronged him but also to make a life-size replica of one of his mother’s dolls that had been broken. His choice of victims, both male and female, is a deviation from the old genre rules. Here, the theme of traumatic violence yielding psychotic individuals is displayed once again. Because of the trauma experienced in his youth, involving his mother and those around him, he is molded into an intelligent but still dangerously sociopathic murderer. Each one of his victims is in some way related to his pain and suffering over the years. For instance, the head comes from his childhood friend Augusto, who is the one who initially gets him in trouble with his mother. It was Augusto’s idea to masturbate to the doll; Avildsen merely went along with it but he was the one who was severely punished (i.e. fingers tied together in a contraption that leaves him missing one later in life). This example illustrates both Avildsen’s transformation from the passive victim to the active sadist and his psychosis being a product of traumatic violence from his childhood, as is typically found in the classic giallo.

Thus, the issue of familial problems (as is recurring throughout the Japanese segment) is prevalent in this film. Dr. Avildsen’s issues arise from an abusive mother, who greedily burns down an orphanage to collect insurance money. As can be seen through the abuse inflicted by his
mother, she pays no regard to Dr. Avildsen’s well-being as a child or to the five children left dead in the fire. Once again, familial abnormality affects society in a way that will come back and haunt (not literally in this case, as is usually the case in the Japanese horror film) future generations. Like Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), the film’s plot parallels Norman Bates’s desire to keep his mother alive in his mind as Dr. Avildsen acts similarly in his actions to make a new doll. In fact, both Bates and Dr. Avildsen share the hobby of taxidermy. However, as a forensic anthropology professor, Dr. Avildsen has interests that range beyond taxidermy as well.

His love for literature and cultural anthropology ultimately become his giveaway as the killer. In an early scene in Dr. Avildsen’s classroom, Detective Amaldi enters the room in the middle of a lecture. This particular lecture is about the Abeokuta, a tribe from West Africa, and the decapitation of their king, Alake. It is not until much later that the police catch a break in their investigation. While following a lead on a purchase made by the killer, Detective Amaldi’s partner sorts through records and finds a single record that stands out: a fake name coupled with a real address. The name is Alake Abeokuta, one that Detective Amaldi immediately recognizes from earlier in the film. In that moment, it becomes clear that Dr. Avildsen is the killer. Amaldi rushes to find Avildsen and gets there just in time to save Giuditta who is tied down to a bed, ready for dissection.

Despite starting off on a heavy note with a woman getting raped in broad daylight, this film comments more on societal problems as a whole than on sexual violence per se. Detective Amaldi’s cases are brutal in nature and more bodies are piled up than should be since moral decay runs high. For instance, while hunting for animals to satiate his hobby of taxidermy, the serial killer comes across a couple having sex in a nearby area. Not only is this couple engaging
in sexual activity out in the open, but an old man stands and watches in the near distance, masturbating to the couple’s activity. The serial killer kills off the masturbator first before murdering the couple.

Women are treated as objects to desire throughout the film. For instance, Detective Amaldi finds Giuditta quite attractive and desirable. While on the case for the killer, Detective Amaldi questions a female doctor named Dr. Cerusico, who is currently the object of desire for the head (male) doctor. Additionally, the female rape victim at the beginning of the film acts as the object of desire for the masked male perpetrator. More so, (mostly female) body parts are objectified heavily in this film. The young woman, who is shot while engaging in sexual activity in broad daylight, has her breast blown off. The killer, who thrives for meticulous attention to detail, goes ahead and reconstructs the breast. Dr. Cerusico is killed off for her legs and she is left sitting by the beach, which is where a fisherman discovers her corpse.

Occhi di Cristallo adheres to the traditions of the classic giallo. It has a “faceless” villain molded by a traumatic childhood experience, highly-stylized violence, and a relentless male lead investigator who tirelessly pursues the killer. With only one major digression, that being a selection of both male- and female-targeted victims, this giallo remains true to form for the most part. Lastly, it is interesting to take note that, unlike Argento’s Il Cartaio, director Puglielli is able to integrate traditional giallo conventions within the setting of a modern giallo. The next film discussed has a completely different take on the modern giallo.
Alex Infascelli’s *Almost Blue* (2000)

*Almost Blue* is a radical approach to the modernization of the Italian giallo. In this 2000 film, for which Alex Infascelli earned a Nostra d’Argento for Best New Director, a female detective named Grazia Negro (played by Lorenza Indovina) travels from Rome’s Unit of Analysis for Violent Crime to Bologna to help local police track a serial killer. The killer’s trademark is that he only targets students, stealing their personal belongings and leaving his previous victims’ things at the scene of the most current crime. Detective Negro enlists the help of a young blind man named Simone (played by Claudio Santamaria) and his ability to link colors to voices: “good” voices being denoted by the color blue and “evil” voices being symbolized by the color green. With Simone’s help, Detective Negro discovers the identity of an otherwise always-changing individual named Alessio Crotti (played by Rolando Ravello) and is able to pinpoint Alessio’s next location. Unfortunately, Alessio outsmarts the police, confronts Simone, and razors out his eyes to take Simone’s identity. This renders Alessio incapable of evading police yet again, thereby essentially handing himself over to Detective Negro and leading to his eventual placement in a psychiatric treatment facility.

Infascelli approaches this giallo in a new light. Every major digression apparent in the previous films discussed can be found in this film. Starting with the inversion of male and female roles, the lead investigator represents the New Woman of the modern giallo and the previously female-dominated victim list (now comprised of only male-targeted victims) accommodates the changing ways of societal views to update the subgenre to modern times. Typically, gialli have been famous for their portrayal of male domination over women. However, in this film, it is important to acknowledge that not only is the film’s main protagonist female but she also goes to
great lengths to defy traditional female stereotypes. For instance, when she first gets acquainted with the police team in Bologna, two male cops named Sarrina and Matera do everything possible to ensure that her stay is unpleasant. These two male officers typecast her as an agenda-driven female cop, only becoming a police officer for reasons other than her own: to continue their fathers’ line of work and to eventually become Chief of Police just to prove a woman could do it. However, Detective Negro rebuts Sarrina’s remarks: she did not attend college and therefore can never be up for the role of Chief of Police; and her father owned a café, in which he wanted her to work.

Audience members witness as Detective Negro undergoes a self-identity transformation. In the beginning of her stay in Bologna, she feels helpless and dependent on her boss Vittorio’s physical and emotional support. (It is apparent that there is some kind of romantic relationship occurring between them.) Time and again, Detective Negro leaves voice messages for Vittorio, who is back in Rome, saying that she cannot complete the task at hand without his help. Little by little, Detective Negro becomes less dependent on Vittorio and eventually cuts the cord when he takes all the credit for her hard work. Her strength in recognizing her own self worth is acknowledged by both Sarrina and Matera who eventually come to respect her (superior title) and even go the extra mile to give her a helping hand. Overall, Detective Negro’s transformation is reassuring for female (horror film) viewers who, more often than not, witness female protagonists remain dependent on their male-protagonist counterparts.

Another interesting thing to point out, in terms of Detective Negro’s transformation as the New Woman of the modern giallo, is how she goes from a dependent, submissive helper (to Vittorio) to an independent, maternal figure (to Simone). While some may argue that maternal
roles are the epitome of gender stereotyping, this is simply not the case in this film as there is nothing “traditional” about the way that Detective Negro approaches her maternal duties. First of all, she feels responsible for the death of Simone’s biological mother. As a result, it seems like she steps in as a lover and as a mother to make up for everything that he is now lacking. Again, arguments may be raised that she is changing her own self identity in order to mold to the needs of a (young) man. However, her choice to be his surrogate caregiver seems guilt-ridden on her end more than anything else. Detective Negro’s transformation allows her to step in where she feels she did wrong as an attempt to correct the pain that she has caused the young man. She finds transcendence not in the older male (Vittorio) but instead in youth (with Simone).

Detective Negro represents a new kind of maternal figure who cares for the newly-potent young male rather than the traditionally-macho Italian man. Additionally, she is pleased to have made the decision based on her own free will and is appreciative that Simone has always highly regarded her (as is evident in the beginning of the film when he serenades her by playing Elvis Costello’s “Almost Blue”).

Accompanying the theme of trauma leading to a psychotic killer, another interesting relationship established is the one between the two young men of the film. The contrast between Alessio and Simone shows the different ways that two young men live vicariously through others. Alessio, the film’s antagonist and “faceless” killer, whose face is ironically always changing, is the product of a society gone wrong towards Italy’s youth. The rejection he faced by his parents culminated with the abandonment by his only remaining kin (i.e. suicide by his drug addict brother) and his forced stay in a psychiatric ward at a young age results in the full development of his initially-borderline case of autism. Once again, a traumatic childhood
experience shifts him from the position of the passive victim to the vicious aggressor. His inability to locate his own self identity leaves him capturing and killing others as a way to imitate and, better yet, emulate. Alessio’s reliance on music and the use of his CD player parallels Simone’s dependence on music and his computer. This brings the minor theme of technology into play. Alessio’s refusal to remove his headphones renders him essentially unable to hear the world outside of his techno music. On the other hand, Simone, without his computer, is essentially unable to experience the world outside of his house. Also, Simone’s use of his computer is how the police are brought onto the trail of Alessio.

Alessio’s quest for a new persona leads him on a path of violence, killing each victim, assuming their identity, and then moving on to his next target. Unlike typical gialli, his targeted victims are entirely male. He does kill women as well but only if they are in between him and his intended victim. In another deviation from traditional gialli, Alessio is a different type of “faceless” killer. His face and name are revealed early on in the film. However, in his search for a persona, his character still remains “faceless”, only in the sense that while viewers know what he looks like, they know virtually nothing about him.

Simone, one of the film’s primary protagonists and the killer’s final target, is the “good version” complement to Alessio’s “evil version” character. Simone’s inability to see is alleviated through his expert computer skills that allow him to eavesdrop into private chat room conversations, phone calls, etc. Both young men appear to be impotent (i.e. abstinent) and yet their methods for getting their needs met seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. As Mary P. Wood explains so eloquently, “[i]mpotence is present in Italian cinema not only in its sexual form but in narratives that somehow fail to reach successful closure in the re-establishment of the
status quo, that is male dominance” (175). Simone’s role as the New Man, who is the submissive counterpart to this film’s New Woman, Detective Negro, is realized in his interactions with the detective.

Reflecting the old cliché saying, “good things happen to those who wait”, Simone’s nature eventually leads to the end of his “impotency”, as described by Wood. His innocent nature attracts Detective Negro to him, allowing her to fulfill his maternal needs, particularly after the recent murder of his only kin (his mother) at the hands of Alessio. While there seem to be subtle hints towards a possible connection between the young blind man and the slightly older female detective, their sexual encounter that comes towards the end of the film is still unexpected and rather abrupt. However, perhaps this just reaffirms societal views that “good” individuals (i.e. Simone) will be richly rewarded while “evil” individuals (i.e. Alessio) will be punished. Alessio, on the other hand, ends up spending his days in a psychiatric ward, pretending to be Simone. His ultimate capture is one of his own doing. Conforming to his zealot nature of completely assuming his victims’ identities, he blinks himself by cutting out his eyes in order to truly emulate Simone. In this act, not only is he left permanently blind, but he also inadvertently renders himself incapable of committing further aggressions and absorptions of identities. Alessio finally has an identity: passive, submissive, and compliant, that of the New Man of the modern giallo.

Reflections

Throughout this chapter, there are four recurring themes that can be found in all five giallo films: the digression from the old set of giallo rules; the emergence of the New Man and
Woman of the modern giallo; psychotic individuals as a product of traumatic violence; and the negative influence of technology or the arts as causes for cultural anxiety. As specified in the beginning of this chapter, there are certain characteristics that make a classic giallo. Any deviation from this, which includes either the inversion or perhaps even an alternative, may be considered as part of the modernization process that transcends the giallo into contemporary times. For instance, as discussed, many of this chapter’s film examples display progression when it comes to the integration of female lead investigators as well as the incorporation of males into an otherwise all-female list of targeted victims.

Along the lines of this progression of gender within the modern Italian giallo comes the theme of the emergence of the New Man and Woman. Formerly women were restricted to slaughtered victims in these films. However, the modern giallo allows women to represent the changing societal views of females in Italian culture. This is to say that contemporary times call for the inclusion of equality within the workforce. Within the films in this chapter, this may be seen as females fill the roles of head investigators (i.e. Detectives Manni, Mari, and Negro). As such, the progression of women threatens the role that Italian males previously held as macho superiors. Instead, the New Man is sensitive and submissive to the New Woman.

With the shifting of gender roles within the contemporary Italian giallo, it is no surprise to see that many of the killers’ actions (with the exception of Detective Manni) revolve around them wanting recognition and control from their now-superior female counterparts. This crisis of masculinity, so to speak, is reflected through the big screen as viewers watch these sadistic killers steer sexual and physical domination over their oft-female victims. Within the realm of cinema, it seems that the cultural anxiety felt by Italian males (particularly filmmakers)
transcends as a way to display these concerns in the most aggressive form possible (violent killing sprees). While there appears to be a distance from contemporary living to film screening, these male tendencies have an effect which is transferred onto the big screen and shared with both Italy and the rest of the world.

A third prevalent theme is the association between traumatic childhood experiences and its tendency to produce psychotic individuals. As discussed, time and time again the killer chooses to enact his revenge on society by way of a killing spree. Thus, a shift is seen from the passive victim to the active sadist as a way to ensure that the killer is far from the position he or she once possessed as a victim (most often a child, with the exception of Detective Manni). These gialli continually comment on the moral decay that can increasingly be found throughout Italian cities.

The fourth and final theme found commonly throughout these modern gialli is their social commentary on the influence of technology and the arts, particularly on Italy’s youth. As has been displayed throughout this chapter, many of the killers utilize a means of technology or a particular creative medium, such as literature, as their motivation in choosing their specific modus operandi. In a way, traditional Italian society is shown to be threatened by these contemporary items and thereby the cause of much cultural anxiety and social disruption.

Lastly, as in the cinematic culture of Fellini, stylization (cinematically and choreographically, speaking) is a key ingredient within the giallo subgenre. The handiwork of the camera and even the integration of some computer-generated imagery allows for typical giallo conventions, such as hallucinations and nightmares, to create tension and terror in both the
protagonist and the viewer. While the eroticization of gore is also a feature shared by the American torture porn and the visually eerie aura of the J-horror film has Japanese audiences cringing, stylized killing sprees are the horrific visualization of choice for Italian audiences.
CONCLUSION

Due to the overbearing reaches of Hollywood, many scholars believe that there are no longer distinct national cinemas. For instance, film scholar, Alan Williams, explores this debate in his 2002 book, *Film and Nationalism*, where he states the following: “So, too, Hollywood’s domination of world film markets renders most national cinemas profoundly unstable market entities, marginalized in most domestic and all export markets, and thus readily susceptible, *inter alia*, to projected appropriations of their indigenous cultural meanings” (Williams 43). Therefore, this thesis has focused on testing whether national cinemas still exist or if perhaps, as many scholars posit, a global hegemonic cinema has become dominant. The horror genre in its latest manifestations is a perfect case study to test this hypothesis.

Horror films have a proclivity towards revealing more than just blood and guts. As film scholar Stephen Prince argues, “[t]o the extent that we inhabit today a culture of fear, which finds threats of decay and destruction at every turn, the horror film offers confirmation of this zeitgeist” (4). Unlike other genres, the horror genre has the tendency to reflect a society’s inner thoughts and cultural fears. In particular, through this genre, one can learn a lot about a culture and its thoughts on gender, through its representation of women on the big screen. Despite this, there continues to be a lack of cross-cultural scholarship surrounding women in horror films. Instead, current academic research, both in terms of genre and feminist analysis, tends to collapse the study of women in horror films into a transnational genre, thereby disregarding any cultural specificities that may exist. Therefore, in addition to determining the presence of national cinemas within the horror genre, a secondary aim of this thesis has been to allot space, within academic scholarship, for the integration of both feminist and cultural sensitivities.
The cultural landscapes visualized through horror are very evident in the production coming from the United States, Japan, and Italy. These three countries, in particular, are well-known for their heavy output of horror each year. More importantly, these countries share a modern standard of living, which provides the ideal foundation for comparison’s sake. Over the last twenty years, each has released many horror films and seen the emergence of a subgenre specific to its cultural concerns and audiences’ preference: the American torture porn; the J-horror film; and the Italian giallo. My analysis of each of these subgenres has played a key role in coming to terms with an otherwise overwhelming film genre. Furthermore, the representation of women within these subgenres has proven to have more differences, than similarities, among the three countries.

In the American torture porn, my analysis has shown that the eroticization of gore has since replaced the titillation that nudity once provided viewers of the slasher film. In terms of the representation of American women, the torture porn still primarily utilizes females as a means of reprising the classic *femme fatale* role. In nearly all of the American films, women continue to be portrayed as sexually deviant, seductive females who help lure men (and some women) to their demise all on the account of material wealth. These females are all strong in the sense that they are fully capable of making their own decisions and sticking to them. Additionally, while most of the leading ladies display their strength in being dangerous *femme fatales*, a secondary group portrays submissive aids to the lead (male) antagonists. Lastly, a third group consists of an updated take on Clover’s “Final Girl” in the manner that they are not as tomboyish and chaste as the iconic Jamie Lee Curtis in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), yet are still not portrayed in an overt sexual manner. In one scene from the film, *Turistas*, Pru explains the importance of
adhering to the local, deeply-religious customs, while changing on a Brazilian beach: “Yeah, but
the idea is to tastefully reveal as much as possible, without actually revealing so much, that you
can still get into heaven” (Stockwell 2006). This quote actually carries a secondary meaning. In
the scope of the horror film, this essentially describes the updated version of Clover’s ‘Final
Girl’. In this new version, the Final Girl is expected to be both sexually attractive and covertly
flirtatious without ever crossing the imaginary boundary of being openly lascivious. Armed with
their strong composes and a higher level of intelligence, they are able to outsmart the “bad
guys”, and ultimately survive until the film’s closing credits.

It is crucial to stress the normative gender relations constructed through these films
through the perception that male characters onscreen had of their female counterparts, as these
views can easily be transferred onto viewers of the films. In almost all of all the films, women are
seen as inferior in the eyes of men. In this sense, much of the feminist criticism, from Laura
Mulvey to Linda Williams, still holds true in its analysis of horror as a tool for patriarchy. At the
same time, it is this machismo that is often displayed by the American men in these films that
usually leads to their ill fates, thereby leaving female characters as the majority of survivors. In
this sense of stronger female characters, these films have responded to the criticism of the slasher
films.

In J-horror cinema, my thesis has detailed the extent to which anxiety surrounding the
post-nuclear family has flooded the storylines of Japanese horror films today. In terms of what
this means for women, females are primarily represented in such a way that highlights the
struggles they face between progressing past their traditionally gendered roles as mothers and
caretakers of the household and trying to make a career for themselves in a society that fears
modernity. Three of the five Japanese horror films depict single-working mothers who strive
towards staying afloat by making ends meet and upholding their maternal duties. As a result of
their transgression from the gendered norm, these women act as both instigators (i.e. by their
choice in being progressive) and victims (i.e. by barely surviving the wrath of the avenging
spirits) of the societal problems. Additionally, the bond between mother and child is a strong one
as seen throughout nearly all of the films. They differ in a very crucial way than their American
counterpart in that the impact of individuals on society as a whole, rather than just the deaths of
transgressors, is the source of anxiety.

Another role that women occupy throughout these films is that of the avenging spirit. In
fact, three of the five films depict the wrath that dead young girls have towards working-class
heroines. Essentially, this shows the differing perspectives that Japanese society has towards its
women as it marks the contrasts between past and present, good and evil, as well as weak and
strong. Despite women being both the focal point of Japanese households and each plot’s lead
protagonist, these films almost all display male counterparts coming to their aid. As progressive
as the women may be in these films, the need for Japanese filmmakers to integrate a male
“rescuer” still shows a sign of cultural insecurity that has not yet been overcome. Whether the
presence of these male counterparts is a reflection of women needing to be rescued or rather as a
way of ensuring a love affair onscreen, these male protagonists often face tragic fates, thereby
leaving only their female counterparts. At the heart of each of these films, the J-horror subgenre
depicts the abandonment of women and children, the disintegration of the nuclear family, and the
overall anxiety that Japanese society has over the progression of modernity, particularly in
regards to its influences over women and familial structures.
In the Italian giallo, women still have essentially two roles: either they are detectives trying to hunt down a serial rapist/killer or they are the victims of that same misogynistic killer. In essence, this displays the dichotomy that Italian society shares in terms of its perception of women. For instance, some women are perceived as progressive and thereby capable of handling such brutal cases to solve, while others are deemed threatening and thereby terminable due to their stray from being inferior to the “macho” Italian male characters. In a sense, the brutality that women are seen receiving onscreen is a reflection of the anxiety that Italian men have over the progression of their female counterparts. This is seen as the serial killers (who are mostly all male) struggle to find recognition from women and control as they make their way from victim to victim, their compensation for impotency. In other words, the crisis of masculinity that Italian men may be experiencing in real life is seen being taken out on females, through both physical and sexual domination, on the big screen.

Through contemporary gialli, a new theme regarding gender relations arises. As more of the traditional male investigator roles are instead given to strong female leads, the roles from classic gialli are in a sense reversed. The New Man and New Woman of the modern giallo represent this inversion of roles. The New Man is sensitive, submissive, and a far cry from the macho Italian role of the past. The New Woman breaks free of societal restraints placed on her in classic gialli. She is intelligent, strong-willed, and persistent in her defiance of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. However, while the emergence of the New Woman is rising, a fairly high percentage of traditional giallo male and female roles still exist. It will be interesting, going forward in the modern giallo, to see who will win the battle: the New Woman or the traditional male lead.
In order to determine whether a global or national cinema exists, we must dissect the common themes found throughout each country’s cinema and compare them to one another. The first theme that becomes apparent is the effects on which the films’ plots revolve around the use of technology. J-horror revolves heavily around the utilization of technology. Perhaps with its widely-regarded stature as one of the most technologically-advanced nations in the world, this may come as no surprise. *Ringu*, *Chakushin Ari*, and *Kairo* all have technology deeply intertwined within each of their respective plots. In Italian cinema, *Il Cartaio* and *Almost Blue* have elements of technology, but not quite as an integral part as those particular J-horror films. What is interesting to note is that while the United States would also be on a list of the most technologically-advanced nations, the American torture porn includes virtually no technology as part of the storylines. Perhaps this contrast between the Japanese and American films reflects the “gadget-crazed” attitude of Japanese culture and the likelihood of a strong reception to technology-oriented films.

Another strong disparity between Japanese horror cinema versus American torture porn and Italian gialli is the nature of the films’ villains. In J-horror, the only villains to be showcased in these films are of the supernatural kind. The common ground between all five films is the presence of the Japanese *yūrei* (ghost), almost always in the form of *onryou* (avenging spirits). This is a complete contrast from both the American and Italian films. Instead of featuring evil spirits, these latter films focus on the evil nature of humans. Relentless, unjustified revenge is the driving factor for the *onryou* in J-horror, while lust for sex, power, and money, more common human flaws, are the notions behind the villains’ violence in the modern Italian giallo and the American torture porn.
While the desire for sex, power, and money is what drives the villains in American torture porn and modern Italian gialli, the lust for explicit violence and cruelty is what drives audiences of these films to go to the theater. The Italian giallo and the American torture porn share the inclusion of the eroticization of gore within their plots. Gialli have always placed a high emphasis on stylized violence, while the American torture porn reflects American horror filmmakers’ preference towards showing protracted, surgical-like brutality being carried out on victims. Both these types of films draw on the viewer’s response to the gore itself as a means of eliciting a shock-value reaction. J-horror, on the other hand, showcases virtually no gore whatsoever; instead, it relies upon the films’ dark ambience and storytelling to stir feelings of fear within a viewer.

Also absent from J-horror is the sexual exploitation of women, which is a key element throughout both the American torture porn and the Italian giallo. Women as sexually deviant *femme fatales* is one of the most recurring roles within the torture porn. These characters, often inferior to the dominant patriarch, thrive on luring men to an ill-fate, in exchange for material wealth. In the Italian giallo, the serial rapist/killer, who is most often male, exhibits physical and sexual domination over women. The brutality shown, in accordance with overt female sexuality, is played out to an ever-so important soundtrack to entice the Italian audience. In contrast, Japanese culture reveals little tolerance for the sexualization of its women within J-horror and avoids it altogether.

The modernization of women’s roles throughout society plays a critical component of both J-horror and contemporary Italian gialli. In the J-horror films, social disruption is often the result of one woman’s digression from her maternal duties. This, in turn, causes a wave of social
disintegration to ripple through the confines of the Japanese community. In a similar manner, the progression of women is a cultural concern within Italy as reflected throughout the modern giallo. However, unlike J-horror, the emphasis is placed on the modernization of women within the workplace as opposed to the familial unit. With the exception of an updated ‘Final Girl’, this cultural anxiety over the progression of women in either the familial unit or the workplace is virtually absent within the American torture porn. Instead, the concern lies in the progression of women towards equal status within male-female social relationships.

The only theme prevalent among all three countries is that of the shift from passive victim to active sadist. As seen in the American torture porn, once-innocuous characters often transform into violent psychopaths as a means of exacting revenge. Beth, for example, begins Hostel: Part II as a seemingly passive character. However, after the trauma of losing her friends and nearly her own life, she castrates her oppressor and indicates that she wants him to slowly bleed to death. In J-horror, with the exception of Kairo, most of the evil spirits who contributed to the rupture of society are those who initially had wrongdoings inflicted upon them. In a similar fashion, most of the sociopathic killers in the modern Italian giallo prove to have a proclivity towards violence upon others as compensation for a traumatic violence done to them (often in childhood).

A comparison of these three subgenres ultimately yields that national cinemas still do seem to exist within the horror film genre. As my thesis shows, each country places emphasis on different anxieties that reflect specific cultural fears. For instance, while the modernization of women remains a concern in both Japan and Italy, this same anxiety is not prevalent (or even present, for that matter) in the American torture porn. Instead, the American horror film (in the
subgenre of torture porn) reflects a society that expresses xenophobia towards unknown territories (particularly in regards to vacations gone awry) and gets thrills out of seeing visceral, surgical-like torture. Additionally, an underlying anxiety-stricken theme seems to be concerned with women that are willing to lure people to their death for sheer profit’s sake. All in all, the American torture porn displays a society that is paranoid about their desire for (and means for obtaining) material wealth to come back and kill them.

The J-horror film features strong female lead protagonists. These characters are typically single-working mothers who strive towards making a career and attending to their children’s needs. J-horror works through cultural anxiety over modernity and technology, specifically in regards to the influence it might have on traditional forms of socialization. A recurring fear in many of the films has been that the dead (or the past) utilizes technology to literally haunt the living (or those in the present). The bond between mother and child has been a prevalent theme, as it is considered to be solely the mother’s responsibility to care for a child in Japanese society. Anything considered progressive (whether in technological terms or even ideological thinking) has proven ill for the fate of Japan in J-horror cinema, as progressive thinking leads to broken deep-rooted traditions. While the J-horror film mirrors the Italian giallo in the manner that it is anxiety-stricken over the progression of women in modern times, it by no means carries out this anxiety in the same way onscreen. Instead of displaying brutality and gore (like in the giallo), the majority of the victims in the J-horror film die of overwhelming fear. In a sense, this fear stands as a warning to those that might be tempted to stray from traditional Japanese norms.

Similar to the J-horror film, the Italian giallo stresses the anxiety that males in Italy have over the modernization of women. However, instead of worrying about women as the center of
the household as is customary in Japan, the giallo places emphasis (not so much on women surpassing their gendered roles as maternal figures but) on the progression of women in comparison to men, particularly within the workplace. Throughout the majority of the gialli shown in this thesis, the cast of (all-male) serial killers goes on killing sprees as a means to express their often-neglected (by women) personalities. Their kills represent a search for identity and control as they brutally capture and conquer their female victims. It is interesting to note that the female detectives, who display authority, are in turn those that are most victimized by the male killers.

As this thesis has shown, when it comes to horror films, a global cinema has not (yet) trumped the national cinemas of the United States, Japan, and Italy. Though some similarities may exist, such as anxieties that traditionally patriarchal societies may have over the modernization of its women, this thesis has demonstrated that overall differences remain too large to overlook and generalize into a transnational category. The cultural fears and anxieties that are reflected onscreen in each of these countries are ones that simply cannot be ignored. It is my hope that this thesis lends a contributory hand in progressing scholastic criticism of both film studies and women’s studies towards new boundaries where both feminist and cultural sensitivities are explored.
Works Cited


14 June 2009


Grant, Barry Keith. “Taking Back the Night of the Living Dead: George Romero, Feminism, and the Horror Film.” The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film.


Jermyn, Deborah. “Rereading the bitches from hell: a feminist appropriation of the female
psychopath.” *Screen* 37.3 (Autumn 1996): 251-267.


