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## **Introduction: Gothic and Horror Heroicism in the Age of Postfeminism**

**Xavier Aldana Reyes**

In January 2017 *The Washington Post* asked Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to Donald Trump and the first woman to ever run a successful US presidential campaign, why she did not consider herself a feminist. Her response was nuanced and worth reproducing in full:

I think my generation isn't a big fan of labels. My favorite label is mommy. I feel like the feminist movement has been hijacked by the pro-abortion movement or the anti-male sentiments that you read in some of their propaganda and writings. I'm not anti-male. One does not need to be pro-female and call yourself a feminist, when with it comes that whole anti-male culture where we want young boys to sit down and shut up in the classroom. And we have all of these commercials that show what a feckless boob the man in the house is. That's not the way I see the men in my life, most especially my 12-year-old son. I consider myself a postfeminist. I consider myself one of those women who is a product of her choices, not a victim of her circumstances. (Heim 2017)

In Conway's view, to be pro-female or a feminist is not compatible with equality because feminism is premised on another form of subjugation, a reverse one. It is naturally tempting to read Conway's response as nothing more than her personal views, but her lambasting of liberal views on womanhood for their anti-male bias and her perception of the need for women to stop acting as victims is symptomatic of a problematic popular embrace in certain corners of a conservative gender politics that has come to the fore in recent years thanks to the power of the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

The best example of this anti-feminist backlash is the digital community behind 'Women Against Feminism', established in 2013 in reaction to the social media photo campaign 'Who Needs Feminism?', the latter having been championed by students from Duke University in 2012. Where the latter aimed to advocate feminism and demystify its misconceptions, 'Women Against Feminism' claimed to want to unite '[w]omen's voices against modern feminism and its toxic culture. We're judging feminism by its actions, not by dictionary

definitions' (Anon. 2014). Their main objections to feminism resonate with Conway's concerns regarding man-hating and were neatly summarised by Gilly Brown, a former anti-feminist, as follows: 'Feminists Are Just Playing the Victim'; 'Feminism Says Women Are Weak'; 'Feminists Hate Men'; and 'Feminism Means Rejecting Traditional Gender Roles' (Brown 2016). Brown overturns all of these claims in her own article and provides very significant examples for why they are based on misconstrued notions about the aims and objectives of feminism.<sup>2</sup> Yet, 'Women Against Feminism' has garnered over 40 thousand likes, has its own twitter hashtag (#WomenAgainstFeminism), a Tumblr blog, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. They might not be a huge movement when compared to other pro-feminist campaigns, but their voice is interesting in terms of its channelling of an ossified understanding of feminism, of a post-feminism that is truly 'post' insofar as it seeks to surpass what are perceived to be stagnant models of feminism.

Naturally, anti-feminist sentiments are not new, and they have not always been connected to regressive gender politics. In fact, it might be possible to see the birth of postfeminism in the events of 8 March 1968: during the celebrations for International Women's Day that year in Paris members of the group 'po et psych' (*psychoanalyse et politique*) were already holding placards that read 'Down with feminism' (Phoca and Wright 1999: 3–14). In the 1970s, the French group 'féministes révolutionnaires' had separatist tendencies, with some members believing that only lesbianism could truly fight patriarchal oppression. And in theoretical circles, feminism has been challenged by critics like H  l  ne Cixous and Julia Kristeva for its perceived bourgeois underpinnings, namely, for not being radical enough and for proposing assimilationist models that seek empowerment from within existing flawed frameworks. Much in the same way that radical feminisms may have traditionally positioned themselves against more regressive iterations of the movement, so it becomes necessary to accept that postfeminist thinking is heterogenic. While postfeminism is being used in some social quarters as a liberating label that rebels against the perceived failings of feminism, or as Angela McRobbie has put it, 'to emphasise that [feminism] is no longer needed' (2007: 28), in others, postfeminism signals the theoretical meeting ground between feminism and anti-foundationalist movements such as post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism (Brooks 1997: 13–16). With the term utilised to express both anti- and pro-feminist sentiments, it is, in fact, easier to speak in the plural – of postfeminisms.

Opinions such as Conway's or those of 'Women Against Feminism' seem, however, objectionable on more than one ground. Crucially, they can appear redundant, overlapping as they sometimes do with those of feminists. For example, feminism does not, in itself, actively support the unfair treatment of men. Antifeminist stances are also often inherently hypocritical. As someone 'who has unequivocally benefited from feminism and the hard-fought freedoms it bestowed upon her' (Hamad 2017), the relationship that someone like Conway should maintain towards feminism should be one of awe and appreciation. Instead, she 'attempts to demonstrate that she is in touch with what it "really" means to be a woman' (Hamad 2017), and does this by cynically rejecting feminism. Opinions like Conway's overlook the very real fact that a lot of women do not have the opportunity to make the choices that others of more privileged backgrounds do. More inflammatorily, Conway's declamatory message manages to put men back at the heart of a matter that involves both men and women.

The tensions between different notions of subjection, empowerment and choice are very important to the horror genre, as are the nuanced, sometimes contradictory, views that infuse both popular and academic postfeminisms. After all, horror cinema has often been accused of being male-centric (the perception that horror is a genre made by men for male teenagers) and of being misogynistic (especially in connection to exploitation cinema, where violence is often rendered erotic). Work in the 1980s and 1990s by critics like Barbara Creed (1986; 1993) and Carol J. Clover (1987; 1992) has done much to address the intricacies of gender representation in horror of the 1970s and 1980s, and to redress the notion that horror is intrinsically conservative, but more recent horror films have not been studied with as much care.<sup>3</sup> The rest of this introduction serves both to introduce the important collection of essays that makes up this special issue of *Revenant* on the representation of women in Gothic and horror film and to provide an initial survey that may serve to pave the way for more specific and detailed analyses of individual texts and of new feminist cinematic trends.<sup>4</sup> By doing this, I hope to reflect on how postfeminism, in its positive meaning as a movement or series of movements looking to investigate the positive or pro-feminist representation of women in cinema, may be shaping the horror cinema we consume, as well as the one that is yet to come. Horror evolved significantly with the rise of the slasher, to the point where its formula was accepted as an urtext for the genre more widely, as is expressed in the meta-textual *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012). I take horror heroinism to be significant beyond the level of representation and focus on how the women working in the industry themselves

need to be understood as heroines of sorts, for as important as representation is being given the chance to represent.

### **Horror's Twenty-First Century Heroines: On and Beyond the Screen**

As activist and critic Sophie Mayer shows in her study of feminist filmmakers, *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (2016), we are living in cinematically exciting times for those interested in women in cinema. Despite the fact that only 4% of top-grossing films between 2007 and 2015 were directed by women, it is simply not the case anymore that the output of female filmmakers is too small for it to grant critical attention. Mayer's book chronicles around 500 contemporary films and begs the question of whether the blame for underrepresentation can still be realistically put on limited sources or whether the real problem is the perceived lack of value still attached to female-led cinema. The twenty-first century has seen a flurry of activity on the part of female directors and screenwriters, and also a number of firsts that are worth recording, even if only in passing detail: a woman, Kathryn Bigelow, won the first Best Director Academy Award in 2010; another, Kathleen Kennedy, at one point deemed 'the most powerful woman in Hollywood' (Ellison 2016), became the head of the American film and television company Lucasfilm in 2012; female filmmakers have had success via broadcast and streaming series such as *Transparent* (2014–present); women filmmakers have emerged from countries like Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Burkina Faso and Kenya; female trans cinema has begun to emerge; feminist porn has been shown at major festivals, and its once maligned study has been defended, among others, by influential scholars from Linda Williams to Clarissa Smith; Pussy Riot have used digital platforms to channel strong political messages. In a bold radical move, Sweden introduced a new A-rating in 2013 which uses the Bechdel test to promote the active presence of women on screen (Associated Press in Stockholm 2013).<sup>5</sup> Since then, Imdb.com has created a similar F-rating, thanks to the director of the Bath film festival, Holly Tarquini, and this rating has been adopted by more than 40 cinemas and festivals in the UK as of the fifth of March of 2017.

Horror has not lagged behind, especially as concerns the rise of women directors. Stephanie Rothman, Katt Shea, Bigelow, Amy Jones, Mary Lambert, Rachel Talalay and Shimako Satō all made low-budgeted horror films in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, so women horror filmmakers are not a twenty-first century development. The level of publicity and attention they are currently receiving is, however, very different from the one they commanded back then. Writing for *The Guardian* in 2007, just after the torture porn scandal raised by the poster for *Hostel: Part II* (Eli Roth, 2007), feature writer Emine Saner asked whether women and horror can mix productively, and wondered if the key to this question might be that women tend to prefer more psychological types of horror (Saner 2007).<sup>6</sup> Crucially, though, she complained about the fact that there were not enough female directors working on the genre and quoted Barbara Creed in her suggestion that ‘[w]hat we probably need are more thoughtful horror films that speak directly to female experiences’ (Saner 2007). In order to begin to change this, Darklight, a widely publicised initiative, run by low-budget film studio Warp Films and which aimed to encourage female horror directors, was set up. Running workshops with ten selected women, the idea was that these new directors would help move the genre forward. Caroline Cooper Charles, Darklight’s head of creative development expanded on the ethos behind the initiative:

I think women have a different take on what people find scary. I love horror films but most I don't find scary. Some of the ideas the women have come up with are scary, perhaps rooted in their own experiences. A lot of them have female lead characters. What we're not getting is the standard horror film, where the only appearance girls make is to run around semi-clothed before getting their heads chopped off. The female characters are much more important in the narrative than in most horror films. I think this is a move that was happening anyway. *The Descent* was one of the first films where a group of women led the story. Another trait in horror films is that sexually-active women are the ones who get it first so I think we can redress that. (Saner 2007)

The films made by women directors in the last decade have certainly been characterised for their variety and boldness. Alice Lowe, co-writer of *Sightseers* (2012), explores the social (but also personally transformative) effects of pregnancy in her fantastically funny *Prevenge* (2016). The use of extreme body horror in Julia Ducournau’s visceral *Raw* (2016) can be read as a critique of the careful policing of female diets and expected behaviours. So can Marina

de Van's paean to self-mutilation, *In My Skin* (2004), from a different and playful perspective. Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) expertly captures parental anxieties from the point of view of a widow. And rape was tackled in 2012 by the Soska Sisters, who made headlines with their bod-mod-inspired *American Mary* (Barone 2013). 2014 saw the premiere of the first Iranian-American vampire Western, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, directed by Ana Lily Amirpour, where a young vampire girl defies and transgresses the limitations put on young women for their apparent benefit and protection.<sup>7</sup> 2017 saw the release of the much-awaited *The XX*, a female-led anthology that explores issues of domesticity and challenges representational straitjackets for women. In the words of one of its directors, Karyn Kusama, the film was 'a response and reaction to the way women are represented across all kinds of art forms—not just horror' (quoted in Antrim 2017). These films show that, as more women who are conscious of the value and effects of cinematic models enter this profession, the more likely it is that stereotypes may be interrogated and subverted, and new models of womanhood and femininity explored. Pro-female initiatives that show an acknowledgement of the increasing role of women in horror now include Hollywood's Viscera Film Festival, Australia's Stranger with My Face festival and Atlanta's Women in Horror Film Festival, as well as the online and event-based project Women in Horror Month.

It is naturally important to resist reductive readings of the films by these directors as necessarily feminist. Some of them are only implicitly so or are interested in exploring larger topics. Similarly, to propose that a film made by a woman director should be noteworthy specifically for what it may have to say about women poses the very real risk of further pushing a small number of directors into a corner, of portraying their films as of interest to a minority. Julia Ducournau has expressed her frustration with the journalistic emphasis on this aspect of her work at the expense of others. In her words, 'I've never before been asked so much about my gender. At some points it's almost like people are asking me why [I'm] a woman' (Kermode 2017). If postfeminist horror cinema is not to be frivolously trivialised, then it must be valued for its portrayals of women and its overall artistic qualities, not just for the gender of its makers. In fact, a number of twenty-first century gender-conscious horror films that are certainly coloured by feminism have been directed and written by men. *Crimson Peak's* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015) Radcliffean heroine, transplanted to a clay-ridden and crumbling nineteenth-century house of Usher, is not just interesting because she needs no man to save her day, but because she quite literally (re)writes her own story. Penned by Guillermo del Toro, the film is a self-avowed love letter to the Female Gothic of the

Brontës, and updates their tropes (appealing inheritances, incest, Byronic lovers). *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016) is a pastiche of witch lore in which the protagonist, Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), does not seem fated to eternal damnation or to the gruesome physical penance of the horror archetype she represents. Thomasin knowingly goes beyond societal limits in her attempt to become herself, unaware (as is the audience) of what this might entail. The same attitude is portrayed by Shideh (Narges Rhashidi) in *Under the Shadow* (Babak Anvari, 2016), a political rebel who has been forced to suspend her medical studies because of her progressive beliefs. Shideh's challenging of a ghostly force which takes the shape of the 'chador' she refuses to wear mirrors her refusal to accept the state's understanding of a woman's social position. Interestingly, these films have explored very similar territory to the one covered in the films made and written by women during the same period; they have vouched for heroines who do more than fight back, who take responsibility for, and ownership of, their own futures and legacies. This is an indication that there is something more to the representations of women in contemporary Gothic and horror cinema than authorship and agency. Postfeminism is creeping in at the levels of narrative through the expansion of gender roles.

As regards the wider picture, audiences are as important as authorship and representation, since consumers play an active role in what characters are developed and what products are deemed commercially viable. Overall, it is important to challenge misconceptions about women viewers. If we were to simply follow statistics showing a low female share for films such as *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005, 37.1%) and *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005, 34.6%) (Saner 2007), we might be tempted to conclude that female viewers for horror continue to be a minority. It is more likely, however, that such numbers simply show particular preferences for types of horror film. While *Hostel* and *Wolf Creek* were violent thrillers, the female share of more psychological, suggestive films like *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013, 53% female, 59% of which were under 25), *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013, 56% female, 56% under 25) and *Mama* (Andrés Muschietti, 2013, 61% female, 63% under 25) is a lot more substantial and even outdoes the male share for those films (Cunningham 2013). Comparable figures have been given for films such as the remake *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003), *Dark Water* (Walter Salles, 2005) and *Annabelle* (John R. Leonetti, 2014) (Saner 2007). While we should remain cautious of drawing too many conclusions from scant data, it is possible to see how more women than was previously acknowledged are indeed watching horror, and that the issue is perhaps one of subgeneric preference. Most of the films



mentioned here include strong female leads, unlike the more male-centred narratives of *Hostel* and *Wolf Creek*. In 1999, Brigid Cherry already concluded, in another small-scale study of female horror audiences, that ‘female horror fans make up a “hidden”, yet often substantial, portion of the horror film audience’ (1999: 65). As narrative trends begin to adapt to new audiences, horror grows increasingly capable of attracting viewers who may have traditionally not been connected to the genre or even interested in it.

### **Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema**

Women in Gothic and horror cinema have changed, and part of that change has been premised on a rejection of prior models that no longer encapsulate the current position of women in the cultures that are producing Gothic and horror films. These new heroines have stopped having to legitimise their existence or adapt to traditionally masculine models. They have stopped having to channel a form of systemic resistance. They have stopped having to rebel by paying lip service to androgynous models that can simultaneously take away their perceived feminine uniqueness. Gothic and horror heroines have started to look after themselves, to become the super heroines they have rarely been given the space to be, to be able to save themselves and others. As I have shown in the previous section, they have begun making films and entered one of the most poorly represented of industries. They have started being taken seriously as directors, irrespectively of their gender. In sum, they have started to do everything male characters and directors have been doing in cinema for over a hundred years. A broad, overall understanding of the place of gender within culture and art, as well as the places we have not dared go yet, seems crucial in terms of making models of subjectivity available, and thus forms of life acceptable and liveable.

I am not proposing that Gothic and horror films hold the answer to entrenched social misogyny, but what I *am* suggesting is that the Gothic and horror, like fantasy and science fiction or the fantastic mode more generally, have the capacity to transgress the limitations of realistic paradigms, and are therefore ideally co-optable for (post)feminist purposes. They have the ability to go beyond the veil of the mundane and the proscriptive by virtue of their generic allegiances and connections to the possible; they can help us imagine things differently. They, of course, also have the power, like any other artistic product, of simply

reifying the status quo. But the films and directors I have briefly surveyed here seem to be putting forward new ideas, breaking formulas and subverting expectations. Horror is sometimes less a genre than a language through which to explore threat and protection, attack and defence, intrinsic aspects all of them to the feminist plight for inclusive representation. Horror also sells in a way that other genres do not, which makes it more attractive to certain directors and, more importantly, to the producers who will back up projects financially. We are finally beginning to see a shift towards an all-encompassing cinema in which women can and will gain more of a voice, and in which new heroines will articulate more modern forms of womanhood. Gothic and horror cinema still have to open up in many respects. For all that they have acknowledged gay men, any other forms of queer identity are still largely underrepresented. National markets and traditional distribution channels also restrict the types of cinemas we watch, rendering filmmakers like the Argentinian Lucrecia Martel or the Nigerian Chika Anadu an exclusive taste rather than commonplace names.

Gothic and horror heroines in the age of postfeminism embody the challenges of postfeminist debates that have been quicker to lay down the theoretical ground than they have been, for instance, in proposing the structural underpinnings to sustain inclusion and investment in female directors or crews. A 2013 poll run by the Sundance Institute and Women in Film on nearly 12,000 directors, producers, cinematographers and directors revealed that five major areas identified as hampering women's career development are gendered-financial barriers and male-dominated industry networking (Silverstein 2013). At the end of the day, most people working in academia, education or the arts are rarely policy makers, so there is little they can do on that front. What *can* be done, and what we *are* doing, is investing our time in the areas of overlap between feminism and the Gothic and horror, and thinking aloud and in public about the roles and the representation of women in cinema, of highlighting the transformative power of characters, trends, actors, directors, scriptwriters and anyone else involved in making films. We will continue to engage with the topic intellectually, and to make female-led horror more than, at best, a subgenre of interest only to certain audiences, or, at worst, a side note to cinema histories. Gothic feminism needs to become central to the process of doing Gothic more generally. The path-opening work of Diane Long Hoeveler (1998), E. J. Clery (2000), Adriana Craciun (2002), Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (2009), Diana Wallace (2013) and Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (2016), among many others, has laid out the theoretical ground, and this special journal issue, as well as the conference and initiative to which it is connected, is a great example of how this endeavour may be

carried forward. It is particularly important that an emphasis be put on film too, as, Helen Hanson (2007), Clover and Creed aside, Gothic and Horror cinema have only tangentially been a source of interest for Gender Studies.

The articles in *Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema* are very varied, a testament to the diversity of the field and the many approaches available, but they all concentrate on representation. This is because, as I have mentioned, female roles are evolving and because archetypes are beginning to be either complicated or questioned by Gothic and horror films more strongly than ever before. Chloé Germaine Buckley's article, 'Witches, 'Bitches' or Feminist Trailblazers? The Witch in Folk Horror Cinema' focuses on the witch, traditionally a liberating yet also potentially regressive image of female empowerment. The femme fatale, another staple of the Gothic tradition, is analysed in Paul Mazey's "'Unsettling the Men": The Representation of Transgressive Female Desire in *Daughter of Darkness* (Lance Comfort, 1948)' while vampires feature in Virginie Sélavý's 'Virgins and Vampires: The expansion of Gothic subversion in Jean Rollin's female transgressors'. Both articles find in fatal women – from the little-known *Daughter of Darkness* and Rollin's erotic psychedelia – interesting, if sometimes conflicting, examples of how such figures may represent transgressive sexuality and desire. The transgressive forms an important theme of Hannah R. Granberry's 'Possession, Puberty, or Pre-Abrahamic Destiny?: The Possessed Woman as Natural Woman' where it is argued that the young female protagonists of *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), and *The Witch* (2015) are better understood as representations of a womanhood which pre-dates Judeo-Christian society. The more traditional candelabra-yielding Gothic heroine is also given her due here in the articles 'A "fascinating conundrum of a movie": Gothic, Horror and *Crimson Peak* (2015) by Frances A. Kamm and Matthew Denny's 'Don't Call It a Horror Film: *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015) and the Uses of the Gothic'. Both articles raise the question of definition – of the distinction between horror and Gothic – for one of the most significant Female Gothic films of the last fifty years. Taken together, these articles offer a perfect snapshot of Female Gothic and Horror Film Studies today. Some of them look to the past to recuperate and scrutinise the value of underappreciated or ambiguous Gothic and horror gems; others centre on present successes to explore the current state of female representation. Naturally, the picture they are able to paint is only partial, but it is a crucial one nonetheless: reigniting debates around representation is an important way of resuscitating the radical political impetus of feminism.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the Internet has also been the catalyst of incredibly important feminist campaigns for equality, such as the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment that started in October 2017 and was chosen *Time* Person of the Year 2017. My point here is that the Internet has helped mobilise and visualise anti-feminism.

<sup>2</sup> These notions will be obvious to anyone with a basic knowledge of feminism and Gender Studies, so for the sake of concision, I do not repeat them here.

<sup>3</sup> Studies on women in horror are, however, evolving fast, and everything seems to point towards a renaissance in the near future. For example, 2017 saw the release of two important calls for papers from Alison Peirse and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak on contemporary female horror and the state of the ‘final girl’. It is also worth highlighting the launch of *Cut-Throat Women: A Database of Women Who Make Horror* in June 2018, intended to collect information about ‘women working in horror film production around the world’. See <https://www.cutthroatwomen.org/about/> (accessed 2 July 2018).

<sup>4</sup> I understand the Gothic as a mode defined by settings, characters and specific formulae, and horror as a more fluid genre defined by the emotion it attempts to generate.

<sup>5</sup> The Bechdel test was introduced in 1985 to gauge gender biases in films. To pass the test, a film must have at least two female named characters who talk to each other about something other than a man. According to the Bechdel website (<http://bechdeltest.com/statistics/>, accessed 31 January 2017), only 57% of their archived 7,113 films pass the test. Even more shockingly, only around 70% pass the test in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The poster for *Hostel: Part II* drew complaints for its apparent misogynistic sexualised representation of violence against women. It featured a woman, her nipples visible, holding her own decapitated head.

<sup>7</sup> There are many more noteworthy directors: Jovanka Vuckovic, Anna Biller and Leigh Janiak, among others.

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