



Are scary movies exorcising the patriarchy?

HORROR & FEMINISM

by Elias Truitt

It's senior prom. Carrie stands at the front of the cafeteria stage, looking out over a sea of her peers. Covered in multiple gallons of pig's blood, Carrie has been victimized for the last time. Her femininity has been a target for her classmates and her mother, but now they are the targets and Carrie is the monster.

Carrie is not the only example of a fierce and vengeful woman in horror cinema history. Since the 1970s women have played a significant role in horror media, creating unique characters and offering a different perspective

into the female experience. This October San José State celebrated Halloween by highlighting the importance of women in horror with the Feminist Horror Symposium.

Event coordinator and SJSU Lecturer Apryl Berney has been a horror fan for several decades. However, Johanna Isaacson's book *Stepford Daughters: Weapons for Feminists in Contemporary Horror* introduced her to the potential horror has in empowering women, and giving them a space to express their struggles. Berney implemented the book into the

curriculum for her Women, Gender and Sexuality: Sex, Power and Politics class. Feeling like many of her past gender studies classes were too focused on personal experiences, Berney expressed her appreciation for Isaacson's book as it demonstrates how horror films often use feminist themes as a call to action, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and social awareness. "This new branch of horror that Isaacson is locating, starting with *Stepford Wives*, is about women not being ashamed, and dealing with the monstrous, the grotesque and the ickiness that is oftentimes projected on our bodies," says Berney.

Berney approached Isaacson to be the keynote speaker at the Feminist Horror Symposium. After learning about how her book impacted Berney's views on women's representation in horror media, Isaacson was grateful to get a chance to explore SJSU's campus and share her knowledge of feminism's impact on horror with the community.

While studying Isaacson's book with her students, Berney wanted to do something more creative than just a paper or a quiz, so she decided that her students would create short feminist horror movie trailers. "I don't think school

always gives students opportunities to express that creativity," says Berney. "For some students, especially if you're a hands-on learner, storytelling is a great way to demonstrate what you know." Berney teamed up with the SJSU Film Production Society to make a school-wide competition, challenging students and alumni to create their scariest, funniest or most poignant horror trailers

"I see horror as a very empowering form of storytelling because it forces us to confront and speak about the really traumatic."

— Apryl Berney



Photo of Johanna Isaacson

that deal with gender and class struggles.

Jake Ohlhausen, an SJSU film and theatre department production support technician, was a judge for the trailer competition. As the co-advisor and former president of the Film Production Society, Ohlhausen was grateful to give students a chance to be creative and express themselves, in addition to showing the rest of the community what the film department has to offer. Since its inception nearly two decades ago, the Film Production Society has been a way for film students to gain hands-on experience in legitimate film productions. While this is the biggest competition it has done so far, the Film Production Society also regularly hosts film competitions for students, including an end of the year award ceremony. Isaacson

hoped students would bring their own personal experiences with female representation, objectification and reproduction to the trailer competition, specifically involving San José and the Bay Area as a backdrop. “That would be a dream if people wanted to look at their community, their lives and their context,” she says.

Upon entering the symposium, guests were greeted with a feminist horror house in the lobby of the Hammer Theatre. Walking through this haunted house of patriarchal terror, guests encountered the daily horrors of objectification faced by women such as cat-calling and body dysmorphia, as well as the terrors of motherhood and gender constructs. Berney approached PPGenAction, SJSU’s campus chapter of the Planned

Parenthood Action Fund, to help organize the horror house. Surleen Randhawa, ’26 Health Science, is the co-president of PPGenActionSJSU as well as the president of another SJSU women’s health club: Women’s Wellness. As a health science major, Randhawa is dedicated to spreading awareness about women’s health and reproductive justice. “Issues which deal with the health of the community need to be personalized by the youths,” says Randhawa.

“Women are often looked down upon, as very delicate, sensitive and soft,” says Randhawa. “Our event highlighted the fierce side of the women.” Horror films like *Alien* have been showcasing the ferocious side of femininity, both human and alien, since the 1980s. Emphasizing both the

vulnerabilities of women as well as their potential ferocity makes the horror house lobby a proper introduction to the world of women in horror.

“There’s not always a happy ending in horror, and that could possibly make it more feminist.”

— Apryl Berney

When focusing on the softer sides of femininity, horror media can often be seen as the genre of objectification, with many of the most famous horror and slasher movies like *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* relying on female nudity and sexually explicit imagery to bring in a majority male audience. However, according to Isaacson’s research,



Photo of
Maribel Martinez (left),
Rosanna Alvarez (right)

there are currently more women behind the scenes in horror than almost any other genre, with female writers and directors flocking to the horror genre as a more accepting and experimental environment. “It’s partially because of streaming, because horror films can be made more cheaply, there’s more willingness to take risks on female creators,” says Isaacson. “We have a lot of horror that’s made more explicitly feminist by women for women.”

While horror isn’t the only genre that utilizes feminist themes in its storytelling, Isaacson argues that the ambiguity and uncertainty of horror allows it to look at social issues from a broader perspective. Often ending with suspenseful cliffhangers and eerie music, horror films are able to communicate that these issues are not simple enough for a single hero to defeat in the space of a 90-minute movie. “I have always felt that horror is particularly insightful into the issues women face,” says Isaacson. “In mainstream culture, we have a lot of narratives that don’t expose

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Isaacson was introduced to the concept of feminist horror by female-fronted 1970s horror films like *The Stepford Wives* and *Carrie*, giving her a glimpse into worlds where women are trapped inside their bodies and unable to express themselves. Isaacson’s book also delves into horror films like *Hereditary* and *The Babadook*, in which mothers are tested beyond their limits and eventually corrupted by the same monsters they are desperately trying to protect their children from.

The main goal of Isaacson’s book is to illustrate how the horror genre has taken advantage of its grisly and unforgiving nature to shed light on women’s issues like objectification, reproductive health and victimization that can’t be so easily translated into other genres. Berney echoes this sentiment, as she argues that most traditional feminist media like *Sex & The City* often carries a tone of optimism, dealing with the struggles of women on a more individual level, as opposed to looking at women’s issues as an overarching problem. “It’s not about being aspirational. There’s not always a happy ending in horror, and I think that could possibly make it more feminist,” Berney says. “It’s not delusional about the human condition.”





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In addition to the influx of female creators, Isaacson has noted that horror has also become one of the platforms of choice for people of color, as horror allows for deeper and more intense exploration into race-based issues as seen with recent films like *Get Out* and *The Candyman*. Similarly to feminist horror films like *It Follows* and *Hereditary*, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and similar films use horror's unrelenting suspense and disturbing imagery to give audiences a glimpse into the awkward, uncomfortable and even horrific realities of being a minority in America.

By spreading awareness not only for reproductive rights, but of how creative arts can play a key role in allowing students to discover new ideas and express themselves freely, the Feminist Horror Symposium offered a prime opportunity for students to get involved with the community and explore the connections between film and feminism. Isaacson is grateful to be a part of events like this that allow students to come together and share their ideas in creative ways. "When you read the news, you feel it's very hopeless, but when we talk to each other, it feels like there's so much potential and possibility."

“Solidarity between women and men can bring happiness to everybody.”

— Johanna Isaacson