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## The Woman in the Bathtub: Elderly Women and Sexuality as a Horror Trope

Original research article

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### Abstract

This chapter discusses the trope of the nude elderly female body, traditionally employed in various subgenres of American horror cinema, in five horror films. Employing Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and focusing on the monstrous crones and hag-like characters featured in *The Shining* (1980), *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (2015), *Doctor Sleep* (2019), and *It Chapter Two* (2019), the first part of the analysis introduces the established approach to depicting the grotesque and the horrific of the aged female body in sexual contexts, generally used to elicit the reaction of terror in an audience. The second part of the paper relies exclusively on one film, *X* (2022). It argues that by applying various cinematic techniques through which the antagonist crone figure and the young and conventionally attractive "final girl" characters are mirrored, the crone trope becomes subverted and maintains that this approach, in turn, may invoke empathy and sympathy for the sexual and sexualized elderly woman and can be interpreted as both unexpected and subversive by viewers of the film and fans of the genre.

**Keywords:** Abject, crones, "final girl," mirroring, sexuality, slasher horror

## 1. Introduction

The treatment and representation of the female body in horror films have undergone significant scrutiny, notably in the contexts of feminist criticism and psychoanalysis, whereby, as Vivian Sobchack argues, scholars see the genre as a “misogynist scenario elaborated within a patriarchal and heterosexual social formation and based on the male fear of female sexuality” (336). This scenario invites the (male) spectator to view the female body as a source of monstrous terror, regardless of whether the woman in question is the antagonist of the film or one of the killer’s victims. Furthermore, according to Shelley Stamp Lindsey, it is the slasher subgenre where such a “misogynistic dread of the female body” is most prevalent (36). However, the variety and number of interpretations increase once the dimension of advanced age is added to the female body motif. Female ageing and its consequences as a form of transgression have been explored for decades in horror, with crone-like characters such as Baby Jane Hudson in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1962) that launched the hagsploitation subgenre, also known as “hag-horror,” or the forty-something year-old women in science-fiction horrors *The Wasp Woman* (dir. Roger Corman, 1959) and *The Leech Woman* (dir. Edward Dein, 1960), who sacrifice their humanity in search of eternal youth, only to both fall from a building to their death in their respective monstrous forms. While these characters reflect a sense of horrific revulsion towards women whose bodies, as well as personalities, change with the ageing process, they also display a form of derision aimed at women who are unmarried or otherwise fail to maintain a romantic heterosexual relationship. The presence of this notion in popular culture is also reflected in a recent analysis by Kinneret Lahad, who, by focusing on the intertwining categories of age, gender, and singlehood, notes that “women are socialized from early stages in their lives, to be wary of losing their beauty, sexual desirability, and reproductive functions” (58). By expanding on the patriarchal norms, which are both openly expressed in society and internalized by women, the author also references a type of transgression from

“age-appropriate behaviors and expectations” (Lahad 60) that women in patriarchal societies commit by existing past a certain age whilst being unmarried.

To further these arguments, this paper will first briefly review the trope of the sexualized elderly female body as a source of terror and abjection in horror films, with examples taken from *The Shining*, *The Witch*, *Doctor Sleep*, and *It Chapter Two*. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of *X* will follow in order to argue that, within the context of slasher films, *X* challenges the pre-existing notions regarding age and female sexuality, such as the aforementioned transgression, by employing various techniques to engender a sense of empathy and sympathy in viewers towards the elderly female killer.

## 2. The Object and the Elderly Body

Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, a psychological horror about a man who, driven mad by a haunted hotel, tries to murder his family, features arguably one of the most famous cinematic depictions of a reaction to the abject in horror. The murder scene presents Jack Torrance, the aforementioned patriarch, entering the mint-green bathroom of Room 237, where a white shower curtain covers half of the bathtub (1:12:36–1:16:00). At first, he sees a figure pulling the shower curtain back and recognizes a nude young woman who steps out of the bathtub to approach him. Attracted by the woman, Jack embraces her and they begin to kiss. Yet, during their kiss, Jack gazes towards the bathroom mirror and notices that the alluring woman has magically morphed into a rotting old corpse-like creature. The now-horrific woman begins to cackle and approach Jack menacingly, which drives him away. Furthermore, the scene of the woman approaching Jack is interspersed with those of Jack’s five-year-old son, Danny Torrance, experiencing visions of Room 237 and of the woman, now appearing as a bloated cadaver floating in water, slowly rising from the bathtub. Clasen’s description of the same scene as depicted in Stephen King’s original novel conveys the sense of revulsion induced by the

film: “A decomposing corpse with agency, with malicious intent and the capacity to move, is a horrifying concept to a prey species vulnerable to infection. It violates a basic human intuition about dead organisms—they are not supposed to have intent and locomotion—and is highly dangerous” (85). The instantaneous transformation of the young woman into a crone forcefully blurs the boundaries between youth and old age, beauty and repulsion, and life and death. As Julia Kristeva explains, the images such as these elicit the ultimate fear of the abject:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. . . . If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. (3–4)

Regarding the abject in horror films on a more general scale, Sobchack echoes the same notion, claiming that the fear women who are deemed grotesque due to excessive behavior and physicality invoke in men “has less to do with sexual desire and castration anxiety than with abjection and death” (337). Here it is also worth noting that, in the film, Jack Torrance is depicted as a relatively disheveled middle-aged man whose physical appearance becomes more menacing as his psyche deteriorates. However, his lust towards the ghost-woman in her youthful form would not commonly be viewed as an act of transgression in Lahad’s terms. Building upon Susan Sontag’s notion of the double standard of ageing, Erica Åberg et al. claim that, because men and women are faced with different expectations in terms of their attractiveness, not only is their behavior judged differently but the moral value of women may also hinge upon their appearance: “[W]omen face greater losses because age

erodes their most highly valued social asset (their physical attractiveness) while enhancing men's most valued social resources" (2).

In a manner similar to the above-mentioned scene from *The Shining*, *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (dir. Robert Eggers, 2015) depicts a shape-shifting crone from a satanic coven who terrorizes a seventeenth-century family of Puritans. The eponymous witch is first seen after she kidnaps the infant Samuel in the form of a nude hag, who then proceeds to grind the child into a bloody flying ointment to cover her body and broom (00:07:45–00:09:30). By the midpoint of the film, the witch makes her second appearance. Here, however, she has transformed into a beautiful young woman wearing a red-hooded cape, and, like the ghost-woman waiting for Jack in Room 237, she is approached by Caleb, the eldest son of the Puritan family. In a deviation of the classic fairy tale, it is the young pubescent hunter who loses his way in the woods and falls prey to the disguised wolf (incidentally, Caleb was convinced that Samuel was taken by a wolf, rather than a witch). Only, while Jack was able to recognize the ghost-woman in the mirror and run, Caleb is unable to escape the Witch's embrace, and he fails to notice that the woman's arm on his shoulder is now that of a hag (00:40:45–00:42:17). Eventually, the boy is found naked and delirious by his family and, in a horrific variation of another fairy tale, ejects an entire red apple from his throat before violently dying.

In his analysis of Kubrick's *The Shining*, Robert Kilker has noted that, while the fear of the abject, that is, "fluids such as blood, vomit, feces, pus, mucus, and others" is horrifying, the female body that bleeds every month is "especially monstrous" (58). The animated cadaver in Room 237 and the predatory witch can, therefore, be seen as abjection taken to the extreme. In addition, not only are the female figures abject due to their horrific bodies but also both the ghost-woman and the crone at times mask their severe and aged features underneath a youthful surface. The women thus commit an act of transgression that, once again, according to Sobchack, in the context of horror films, demonstrates what

Kristeva calls the abject that comes from within, or the other present in such female bodies that are “transformed, monstrous . . . divided against themselves” (Sobchack 343).

Two more films based on Stephen King’s novels support such abject representations of women. The first film, *Doctor Sleep* (dir. Mike Flanagan, 2019), is a sequel to *The Shining*. The film begins with a flashback of young Danny Torrance, who, after the events of the original film, is still haunted by the ghosts of the Overlook Hotel. As he wakes from a nightmare during the night, Danny goes to his bathroom only to be confronted by the ghost of the woman from Room 237 once more (00:06:40–00:07:50). In her reappearance, the ghost again takes the form of a water-logged corpse of a nude old woman with grey skin and large lesions covering her body. She no longer needs to morph between the young and the old form; the first-person full-frontal view of her animated and predatory cadaver trudging towards Danny is terrifying in itself. As opposed to the first film, *Doctor Sleep* eschews the internalized abjection of the changing body visible through the linking of the old body to its bygone form. Rather, it relies on laying bare and underscoring the marks of extreme ageing. Therefore, the horror is evoked by the so-called “abject that comes from without . . . these visibly decaying bodies that reach out to touch a man who recoils in horror, these ‘non-egos’ who threaten society less by their rage than by their presence, certainly engender this form of the abject” (Sobchack 343–44).

The second film to be considered here, *It Chapter Two*, based on King’s 1986 novel *It*, features another interesting scene of elderly female nudity turning into abrupt horror. In the film, the adult Beverly Marsh, the only female member of the “The Losers Club,” must return to her childhood home and face the memories of her physically and sexually abusive father in order to defeat the eldritch evil known as “It.” Upon ringing the doorbell, the name on the apartment door changes from “Marsh” to “Kersh,” and Beverly is greeted by a somewhat dazed looking grey-haired woman who informs her that her father passed away. Mrs.

Kersh invites Beverly in for tea and, as Beverly explores her old room, the elderly woman, who can be seen in the background behind Beverly, moves erratically out of frame, accompanied by jarring and dissonant music (01:08:45–01:08:53). The scene is followed by a conversation between Beverly and Mrs. Kersh over tea. The eeriness of Mrs. Kersh is highlighted via filming techniques, such as the close-up shot and traditional shot-reverse shot, which frame her frozen grin, as well as a large open scar on her chest, made visible by her unbuttoned collar (01:09:48). The conversation continues until Mrs. Kersh leaves to bring the cookies she was baking, whereby she is again seen moving behind Beverly, now fully nude, and scurrying out of sight. Once Beverly realizes she is faced with another manifestation of It, a monstrous giant version of Mrs. Kersh with wild hair, grey skin, a deformed face, sagging breasts, and two additional pairs of mouths on her neck charges towards her and chases her outside while cackling and screaming (01:11:00–01:11:20).

What is most interesting to note in the films described thus far is the aspect of gender and how it manifests in the monstrous hags and their victims in the context of horror films. This topic has perhaps been most famously explored by Carol J. Clover in her seminal text *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. While this text may be most commonly cited regarding slasher fiction—Clover was in fact the first to introduce the term “final girl” in her essay *Her Body, Himself* while studying classic slasher films (x)—its notions on gender and the killer-victim dynamic will be particularly useful here. This paper has already hinted towards a peculiar type of gender ambiguity manifested in *The Witch*. As mentioned, through his victimization, the character of Caleb can be read as two distinct female fairy-tale characters: Red Riding Hood, lost in the woods, and Snow White, put to sleep by an enchanted apple. Another fairy-tale motif can be seen in *It Chapter Two* with Beverly, who regresses back into her childhood memories after being lured in by a witch posing as a kind old woman, with the promise of tea and cookies. In other

words, gender in horror oftentimes depends not on the characters themselves but, rather, on the functions they perform:

The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behaviour (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male. Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cover because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller [sic] because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psychokiller [sic]. (Clover 12–13)

While noting that, in myth, it can be said that there are only two characters or functions, the masculine active being that penetrates closed spaces and the immobile feminine being that represents the space to be penetrated, Clover still aims to highlight that the distribution of gender roles in horror is “more complicated” (13). It is indeed even more complicated when trying to apply the same theory outside the slasher genre and onto, for example, the previously mentioned paranormal or psychological horror films. Here it may be more suitable to ascribe the “feminine” to victims of possession and the possessed loci—as is also noted by Clover in her analysis of *Poltergeist* (66). The examples given in this paper feature victims struggling to find their way out of possessed bathrooms, enchanted woods, and confined apartments. The entities terrorizing them in such spaces appear as shape-shifting and demonic women whose physical existence, that of crones whose sexuality is made explicit and assertive, strikes the viewer as uncanny and disturbing. Displaying the aged female bodies in sexual contexts is abject in itself since, as Sobchack comments, it evokes “the horror and fear of an inappropriate and transgressive sexual desire that lingers through the very process of aging, phys-



ical degradation, and decay” (337). With this in mind and taking Clover’s theory on the slasher as a starting point, this paper shall now turn to analyzing sexuality and the aged female body in the film *X*.

### 3. The Female Body in Ti West’s *X*

The persistence of female ageing and sexuality in contemporary horror has been made highly apparent with the recent release of the film *X* (2022), written, directed, and produced by Ti West and starring Mia Goth in the dual role of protagonist and antagonist. The film provides a modern exploration of the notions of beauty, sex, and ageing in the context of the slasher subgenre. Filmed in a manner visually likening it to Tobe Hooper’s 1974 horror *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *X* is set in 1979 and follows a group of young men and women travelling from Houston to a rural and more affordable county to make a pornographic film. The cast and crew consist of performers Maxine, Bobby-Lynne, and Jackson; Wayne, who is the head of the project and Maxine’s boyfriend; and film students RJ and his girlfriend, Lorraine. The farm where they intend to shoot their film belongs to the elderly couple Pearl and Howard, with Howard, unaware of their plans, expressing his distrust towards Wayne and the crew, and Pearl observing them from the house.

A technical detail that must be noted is the fact that the same actress, Mia Goth, plays both Maxine and Pearl, whereby Pearl’s character is created with the help of heavy prosthetic makeup and generally low lighting. The metatextual casting choice conveys the first of many examples of mirroring between the two characters. Goth, who, in an interview, claims that she herself saw Pearl and Maxine as “the same woman in many ways,” collaborated with the designers and sculptors of Pearl’s prosthetics in order to abate the more monstrous effects: “There was a time when we were doing the prosthetics and we really pushed it. She didn’t look human at all . . . I said to Ti, ‘That doesn’t interest me. That just doesn’t interest me as an actor.’ We scaled it back a little bit and we found the right balance that worked for the film” (qtd. in Erbland). In another interview,

Brittany Snow, who plays Bobby-Lynne, comments on Goth's technique and how her ability to shift between the two characters impacted her on set: "It was very strange. I had to really look at Pearl, and I couldn't see Mia. That's a mark of a great actress, but also, it's the mark of just how terrifying this character was. It was really easy to play off of, too. I completely forgot I was working with Mia. It was amazing" (qtd. in Juvet). Another example, on the textual level, where the two characters are linked can also be seen in the repetition of identical lines, hinting at the film's topic of desire, spoken by both Maxine, who refers to fame, and Pearl, who refers to Maxine: "I'm sick and tired of never getting what I want" (00:08:21; 01:28:34).

The first point of contact between Pearl and Maxine happens from afar; Maxine is leaving the car and, as she looks through the car window towards the window of the old couple's house, she notices a shadowy figure staring at her. An over-the-shoulder shot from Pearl's room shows Maxine walking away and glancing back at the house. She expresses her distaste for people who look at her several times in the film, for instance, when referencing or speaking to Lorraine: "People who stare give me the heebie-jeebies" (00:09:12), "What are you looking at? . . . Ain't nobody ever teach you not to stare? It's rude" (00:45:35–00:45:45). Despite being a stripper and pornographic actress, Maxine's reactions to others looking at her and observing her indicate a possible anxiety regarding her physical appearance and aspirations, which she combats by using cocaine and repeating self-affirming mantras in the mirror.

The proper meeting between Maxine and Pearl takes place as the other crew members begin shooting their film, and it is once more layered by the mirroring of the two characters. In her work "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" Suzanne Keen references a type of neurons known as "mirror neurons," that is, "neurons that fire both when an action is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else" (qtd. in Gallese 3). According to Keen's theory on empathy (which she also describes as the precursor to sympathy), in the literary context:

Character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization. (Keen 214)

Continuing on how character identification can provoke a sense of empathy (and thus potentially sympathy) in the reader, the author says the following:

Specific aspects of characterization, such as naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness may be assumed to contribute to the potential for character identification and thus for empathy. (216)

It can thus be argued that the mirroring techniques between characters (including literal mirroring in what follows) can be used to elicit empathy for an antagonist such as Pearl. Namely, viewers are slowly introduced to Pearl during her first meeting with Maxine. On the one level, their meeting parallels the plot of the first scene of the pornographic film (“The Farmer’s Daughters”), which features Jackson and Bobby-Lynne, who are filming it while Maxine and Pearl are together. As Jackson’s character is invited into a house by the farmer’s daughter, so does Pearl invite Maxine into her home. Scenes of lemonade being offered shift from an erotic encounter in “The Farmer’s Daughters”—underlined by a typical 1970s pornographic film score—to Maxine’s silent and awkward encounter with Pearl, where Maxine forces herself to drink the entire glass of lemonade in one gulp so as to leave the table as soon as possible (00:33:55). Here, Pearl’s features are barely visible in the dark kitchen; she is a skeletal grey-haired woman, possibly in her late eighties, who slowly guides Maxine through a hallway in order to show her photographs from her youth. Ageing, the primary theme of *X*, is made explicit for the first time at this point, and the concept is overtly referenced throughout the film. While

showing Maxine photographs from her youth, Pearl speaks for the first time on screen:

I was young once too. It was taken right before the first war. Believe it or not, my Howard served in both. He survived the trenches at Omaha Beach. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for me back then. That's the power of beauty. I was a dancer in those early years. But then the war came, so. . . . Not everything in life turns out how you expect. (00:34:55–00:35:39)

Finally, the melancholy scene takes an eerie turn when Pearl walks Maxine towards a mirror in front of which they both stand and observe each other, with their reflected images separated by a stair post, and, as the characters in “The Farmer’s Daughters” begin to have sex, Pearl caresses an alarmed Maxine’s breast.

After taking cocaine in front of a mirror again, Maxine leaves to shoot her scene with Jackson in the barn, where she is, unbeknownst to her or the crew, spied on by Pearl. In what can be described as a fantasy segment, images of Maxine having sex are intercut with scenes of Pearl having sex in her place (00:42:49–00:42:58). The brief close-up shots of Pearl show her age spots, greyish translucent skin, as well as the heavy blue eye-shadow she applied after her encounter with Maxine. In a more macabre sense, Pearl’s attempt at beautifying herself is reminiscent of an extreme version of what Linda Dittmar calls “women of a certain age,” that is, those “whose emaciated body, made-up ‘lifted’ face, and firmly permed and sprayed bleached hair invoke the craft of the mortician as much as that of the beautician” (72).

The midway turning point of the film occurs as Pearl returns to the house and attempts to seduce Howard, when the viewer learns that, due to his old age and weak heart, Howard is too afraid to have sex, resulting in him leaving Pearl alone in the room. In the aftermath of the rejection, Pearl is shown as a woman who is unhappy due to her aged body preventing her from ever achieving what she desires. Describing Pearl’s sense of frustration, Sobchack contends that “in a sexist as well as ageist technoculture, the visibly aging body of a woman has been and still is es-

pecially terrifying—not only to the woman who experiences self-revulsion and anger, invisibility and abandonment, but also to the men who find her presence so unbearable that they must—quite literally—‘disavow’ her” (343).

What follows is a scene showing the young cast and crew discussing their own youth and beauty, while also considering the frustration of elderly people, like Pearl and Howard, who cannot perform sexually. As Bobby-Lynne begins to sing “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac, the view turns into a split-screen showing a dejected Pearl removing her makeup, taking off her clothes, and going to bed alone listening to the lyrics: “But time makes you bolder / Even children get older / And I’m gettin’ older too” (00:49:50–00:50:10). This scene makes explicit the point argued in this paper, namely, that *X*, in its empathy-invoking techniques, explores a dimension thematically and structurally different from the one that may be expected in classic slashers. To return to a quote by Clover:<sup>1</sup>

[H]orror movies spend a lot of time looking at women, and in first-person ways that do indeed seem well described by Mulvey’s “sadistic-voyeuristic” gaze. But the story does not end there. A standard horror format calls for a variety of positions and character sympathies in the early phases of the story. . . . In fact, horror’s system of sympathies transcends and preexists any given example. Patrons of a slasher film or a rape-revenge film know more or less what to expect well before the film rolls, and at least one horror director (William Friedkin) has suggested that their emotional engagement with the movie begins while they are standing in line. (8-9)

The first point, that the film focuses on looking at women and at first calls for character sympathies, obviously holds true for *X*. However, a voyeuristic gaze from the point of view of an older woman and the one which situates the older woman as an object, as well, may disrupt the

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that this paper does not intend to argue that *X* is the first slasher to break away from the convention, and it is important to keep in mind that Clover’s study focuses on films starting in the mid-1970s and was first published in 1992.

pre-existing expectations of the genre. If patrons of slasher films can expect that they will, in some way, empathize with the movie's victims, the constant mirroring between scenes of the eventual killer and the victims serves to elicit an unexpected notion of empathy for the killer, as well. In the same vein, this paper argues that *X* also subverts potential expectations regarding the elderly nude female figure in horror. Concretely, while Pearl is abject in the sense that she is, on several levels, Maxine in an old and cadaverous form, the reaction to her as the abject differs from the reactions expected in the films analyzed in the first part of this paper. In a narrative sense, the first half of *X* engenders what Keen calls character identification, which, in turn, allows for a sense of empathy in the viewer. This sense of empathy, and the possibility of related sympathy, distances Pearl's depiction from that of the traditional abject crones of horror.

Following Pearl's rejection, the second part of *X* embraces fully the traditional symbolism and iconography of the slasher. The first victim is RJ, who, following an argument with his girlfriend, breaks down in the shower in a scene positioning him as the female victim in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*. He decides to leave the farm by himself in the middle of the night but is stopped by Pearl dressed in a white nightgown. As the radio plays "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" by the Blue Öyster Cult, RJ leaves the car to check on Pearl, who embraces and then attempts to kiss him. Rather than being horrified, however, RJ is confused and offers to help Pearl find Harold. Pearl responds to his rejection by stabbing RJ in the throat with a knife and, as the music plays louder, mounts his body and begins stabbing his neck repeatedly in motions referencing Norman Bates once again, drenching her nightgown and the car headlights in blood (00:59:30–01:00:33). RJ, who had already entered the realm of the feminine during the shower scene, dies by being penetrated by the slasher's ultimate phallic symbol. As explained by Clover, "Knives . . . are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (32).

Following RJ's disappearance, the remaining farm guests are slowly killed by Pearl and Harold, primarily due to the fact that their first instinct is to offer help to the senior man or woman, rather than doubt their intentions. In a symbolic death sequence, Wayne is the second person to be killed, again by being penetrated by Pearl, this time using a pitchfork to stab the voyeuristic pornographer's eyes as he peeps through a pair of holes in the wall of a dark barn (01:08:46). In turn, Harold traps Lorraine in the basement, where she discovers the body of a naked chained man. The scene makes it clear that Pearl has been collecting victims to fulfil her sexual needs due to Harold's inability to perform. As Harold lures Jackson outside, a naked and bloody Pearl enters Maxine's bed while she is asleep and begins caressing her until Maxine wakes up and screams, causing the old woman to escape.

Nevertheless, the remaining characters still see the elderly couple as confused and hapless, which is why Bobby-Lynne runs towards the naked Pearl wandering on a dock in order to give her a coat and offer assistance: "Are you hurt? I don't see anything. My nana gets confused sometimes as well, I learned all about it. Believe it or not, I even thought about becomin' a nurse one day!" (01:25:02–01:25:15). After being slapped and accused of flaunting her body and sexuality in front of Pearl, Bobby-Lynne retorts with: "It ain't my fault you didn't live the life you wanted," whereupon Pearl shoves her off the dock into an alligator-infested lake. At the same time, while pretending to be lost in the woods, Harold manages to kill Jackson with a shotgun, which is a relatively unpopular weapon for the slasher genre, although it can also be interpreted as a phallic *ersatz* symbol that Harold uses to eliminate the virile pornographic actor. This death is foreshadowed earlier in the film, when Jackson, in talking to Harold about his former career as a soldier in Vietnam, says: "Had enough farmers trying to shoot me for one lifetime" (00:20:35). With all the young people dead except for Maxine and Lorraine, the elderly couple return to the house, and Pearl convinces Harold that he is able to have sex with her.

The geriatric sex scene in *X* is horrific, although perhaps not due to the act itself. It is, in fact, introduced by a romantic conversation between the characters, with Harold reassuring Pearl that he has always found her beautiful, even in her advanced age. The horror of the scene, however, is built by the suspense in the act being played out simultaneously under the couple's bed: Maxine, who has been hiding there, crawls from under the bed and out of the room without being noticed by the couple having sex.

While Maxine manages to free Lorraine from the basement, the latter panics and tries to escape the house while screaming, only to be suddenly shot dead by Harold and Pearl (01:33:44). As was the case with the other symbolic deaths, that is, the director dying in a scene referencing Alfred Hitchcock, the pornographer being stabbed through the eyes, and the Vietnam veteran being shot by a farmer, Lorraine's death occurs only after her character's transformation. Namely, throughout the film Lorraine is depicted as shy, quiet, and uncomfortable around the pornographic actors, which leads to her being nicknamed "Church Mouse" by Wayne. However, the moment she is able to scream out her fear and frustration, she creates enough noise for the killers to hear and easily eliminate her.

After murdering Lorraine, Harold suffers a heart attack and dies, leaving Maxine and Pearl confronting each other, once again, in front of the same mirror as in the first half of the film. In yet another conversation that conflates the two characters, Pearl states the following: "You don't think I know who you really are? I saw what you did in the barn. You're a deviant little whore. We're the same. You'll end up just like me" (01:35:42–01:35:54). The meaning behind these lines can, of course, be manifold; Maxine and Pearl are both "deviant" sexually, they have a shared dream of fame, their characters are portrayed by the same actress, and Maxine also fears losing her youth with time. Finally, Pearl attempts to shoot Maxine with Harold's shotgun but she misses and shoots the mirror, and the blast launches her frail body through the door and onto the ground. With their mirror images now shattered, Maxine escapes into



the truck and kills Pearl by running her head over twice, after which she quotes Pearl's line from their first meeting: "It'll be our secret" (01:38:12).

#### 4. Conclusion

Depictions of women in horror have provided countless opportunities for analysis. On the one hand, the genre's misogyny in brutalizing young female victims is often highlighted, and popular tropes combining such victims with scenes involving sex and/or nudity foster these commonly-held views. On the other hand, horror and its slasher subgenre are unique in the fact that they also feature young heroines, known as "final girls," as survivors with whom the predominantly younger male audience identifies.

Age and ageism, however, provide another dimension for criticism. Taking this into account, it becomes apparent how terror is often elicited by female transgression. Elderly women are the crones and hags of horror; their very bodies—excessively marked by ageing—are abject by virtue of their existence, and their sexuality disturbs order. Thus, to depict the nude elderly body as monstrous and malicious, the genre has traditionally employed characters such as the woman-ghost from *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*, the witch from *The Witch: A New-England Folktale*, or Mrs. Kersh from *It Chapter Two*.

Yet another way of depicting the elderly female villain can be seen in the slasher *X*. Pearl, an old woman and the primary killer, is depicted in scenes of nudity and sex, with special attention drawn to signs that point to her advanced age. She disturbs order by vehemently refusing to be unnoticed and demanding that her sexual needs be fulfilled. However, the filming techniques, such as the numerous ways of mirroring the killer and the survivor, diegetic music, or exposition, provide roundness and depth to Pearl's character, thereby challenging the viewer's preconceived ideas and inviting them to empathize with the killer. This, in turn, subverts common expectations of slasher moviegoers, provokes sympathy, and

ultimately leads to the questioning of the previously held notions of abjection.

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