

Bekah's Confessions: Horror Films, Breasts and the People Who Watch Them

Written by Bekah McKendry

Saturday, 19 February 2011 09:41



February is Women in Horror Month, so I thought I would take a moment to reflect on my femaleness and horror. I was never one to really celebrate my astute ability to simultaneously possess boobs and watch CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST or any other random horror flick, but the more I'm in the industry, the more I realize how unusual this can be.



I grew up as the lone female horror fan in a small town. Though an honors student/perky cheerleader by day, I fell in with a core group of rebellious youths who by night would invite me to join them for B-movies and horrific gorefests. I was never made to feel female or male. I was just another fan on the couch cheering as maggots fell from the ceiling or a drill impaled a few spines.

When I started college and found myself surrounded by females in my dorm, I began to realize how unique my horror obsession was in the world at large. So I aligned myself with film students who shared my passion and thought nothing of the fact that I would rather spend evenings on a dark basement couch with Herschell Gordon Lewis or Mario Bava than at a frat party or dance club. I was still the solo female in the horror entourage I had acquired, but again, I didn't pay much attention.

I did not really feel like a lone wolfette in the horror realm until my first horror convention about 10 years ago. A tiny little spookfest in Kentucky, and I was one of the first in line for entrance. By the end of the opening day, something had become clear. With the exception of a few horror actresses signing various memorabilia, I was a lady lost in a sea of thousands of black-T-shirt-clad guys. Why were there so few distaff horror fans, and even worse, why was I hard-pressed to find female horror film directors?

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Within the next few months, two major things remediated my perceived horror female isolation. First, I stumbled on a book called RECREATIONAL TERROR written by Isabel Pinedo. The book focuses almost entirely on the female horror fan. I figured if there was an entire book about it, there must be more of us out there! I contacted the author and ended up becoming good friends with her. We still love to trade e-mails and geek-out about our recent horror exploits.



Second, female horror culture began taking shape on the Internet. Through various social networking sites, I met Shannon Lark and worked with her at several FANGORIA conventions. I met Hannah Neurotica, who writes *The Ax Wound* (a kickass female horror zine). And again, through the Internet, I watched the formulation of the Women in Horror movement, spearheaded by Hannah (who consequently was a student of the aforementioned Pinedo). I have since become friends with several powerful horror actresses like April Monique Burril and brilliant female horror journalists like Lianne Spiderbaby and Heidi Martinuzzi, as well as FANGORIA's own Debbie Rochon (pictured left) and Marla Newborn. Plus, I can't leave out my fave partner in Internet debauchery, Kristy Jett.

The Internet certainly changed life in general, but for the countless female horror fans everywhere, it gave us a unified voice. It facilitated the development of a movement to gather behind and the perspective that ladies can love horror regardless of what our respective "real life" associations may say about it. It gave us a horror family. So I guess, above all, I first want to give credence and thanks to all the strong ladies of horror who showed me what it is to be a horror chick.

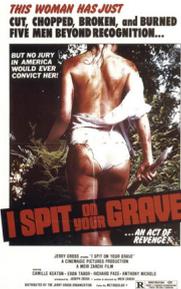
This leads to the second portion of my bloggy autobiographical rant: How do I, as a female, approach horror movies? I get this question so often that one would think I'd have a topnotch answer by now. Everyone from Fango fans to my students to my dentist has asked, "Hey, Bekah, you have breasts and seem to be mostly female. Do you think [random horror film title] which features scantily clad women getting brutally murdered after a 20-minute-topless-lesbian-bubble-bath scene is feminist or just some misogynistic schlock?" At this point, I usually drift into a dead-eyed stare with my mouth hanging open while the hamster in my brain slowly turns the wheel, and I try to come up with some type of well-thought

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response. The majority of the time I don't. The hamster keeps the wheel spinning, but in that regard, my mind and opinions change so rapidly that I can barely keep up.



Some movies are blatantly female-exploitive, but that doesn't mean I don't find good qualities there too. No matter how many times I hear claims that the ILSA movies or the original I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE are pro-female, an evil cynical voice in the back of my head screams, "Like hell they are!" You can't explicitly show a 30-minute gang rape or an electric dildo scene and still be respectful of anything. There is a reason it is called exploitation. But in the same brain burst, another voice will beat that cynical voice to a bloody brain pulp and say, "But there is something important going on here." The characters are strong females fighting tooth and nail against a male society that keeps them down. They may have their tops off, but they still end up the victors, stars and most memorable parts of the film. Are the females really being repressed here? I've been studying this stuff for years, and I still have no clue. And yes, I have both a hamster and various voices in my head. It can get pretty crowded.

When I first viewed a lot of these exploitive horror films as a young impressionable teen whose parents didn't care what she watched, I didn't really pay attention to the exploitive parts. I absorbed the parts I wanted and needed, mostly that horror females kick total ass. I never noticed that most of them were naked or sexualized. I never saw that Alice Hardy or Nancy Thompson (now Holbrook) may have sexual, "girly," or exploitive moments. I only saw that when the shit came down, they kicked butt and didn't let any machetes or razor sharp gloves hold them back. And from a young age this was what I wanted to be- smart, intuitive, fearless and strong. I found these qualities in horror films more than anywhere else in my life, and I still do today.



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So have we reached equality in horror films? Again, I never like to deem myself as a feminist as it suddenly pulls forth images of shaved heads and Birkenstocks complaining about patriarchal systems on the way to Lilith Fair. But since I feel compelled to end on some type of concluded answer, essentially, I feel we are not at the ultimate equality, but we are making strides. There are some amazing female horror directors now making waves, but there should be more. There is an abundance of female horror fans, but a female love of horror shouldn't hold the stigmas it still does. As I have said in past, in our larger society if a girl likes TWILIGHT, it means she has a cute wild streak, but if a girl like hardcore horror it means she is a heathen who you shouldn't let around your children or small animals. I fear this perception may still be in play more than I would like to think. Also, as twisted as this might seem, I judge a lot of our gender equality based on what is happening on-screen as much as off. There is still a shockingly low amount of female killers in film. We need a lot of females to do the damage before true equality can be declared. Sure, we can all name one or two femme killers, or maybe even a few dozen, but are women doing 50 percent of the movie mayhem? Not even close. We still see mostly male killers and their opposite sex victims. But change is on the horizon.

So the gender battle rages on. And female horrors fans will fight to the bloody, bitter end to be heard and counted. So with this, I'll raise my bloody knife/machine gun/reciprocating saw (my dream weapon of choice) proudly into the air and scream, "I have breasts, and I love horror films. Get the hell out of my way. Now, who wants to join me for a BLIND DEAD marathon while we do each other's nails?"

{comments on}