

Confrontation with the Abject after Experiences of Sexual Interpersonal Violence: An Analysis of Contemporary Horror Films

Regan A. Moss^{1,*} and Allison Vandenberg²

¹ Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychological Sciences, Auburn University

² Instructor, Women's and Gender Studies, Auburn University

Sexual violence is pervasive, directly impacting 1 in every 59 adults in the United States every year (Basile et al., 2007). This form of violence is even more prevalent amongst young adults: reports highlight that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men experience sexual interpersonal violence during collegiate years (Ruane, 2014). The recognition of this public health concern is sweeping across a variety of media outlets. However, public narration through such outlets has many associated harms. Some argue that the atrocity of sexual violence becomes normalized because of the frequency at which it is reported to the public. Depictions may even give rise to new forms of sexual interpersonal violence (Powell, & Henry, 2017). The variance in sexual violence depiction leads to differential – and often harmful – outcomes on viewer perceptions of rape and the victim: perpetrator. (Burt, 1980; Henry, & Powell, 2018). Importantly, media coverage “perpetuates myths and stereotypes about rape, rapists, and rape victims” (Burt, 1980). Often, such myths build upon gender stereotypes (Nagar, 2016). Horror contrasts other forms of media, subverting the typical to propose an alternate narrative. The messages conveyed through horror films and the methods through which such messages are conveyed have vital public health implications. Results will inform policies surrounding public messaging related to sexual interpersonal violence. Additionally, findings will highlight outlets and methods for productive discourse.

The purpose of this study is to investigate common themes that emerge in depictions of sexual violence in popular horror films airing after 2000. Films were analyzed through three iterations of thematic analysis to answer three research questions: 1) How is the subject separated from the soul (i.e., made an abject)? 2) What is the function of social structures to purify the abject? 3a) How does the subject confront the soul after sexual violence/reconcile with the maternal body, and 3b) how does the reconciliation undermine symbolic gender relations? After analyzing the films through thematic analysis, several themes emerged. Themes of silencing, objectification of the female body, and symbolic and

corporeal power emerged in the making of abjects. Institutional purification was done through symbolic power, familial dismissal, and medical pathologizing. Confrontation (i.e., reconciliation) was reached through social revelation, physical separation, reordering of physical power, and sexual constriction of the perpetrator.

In these films, sexual violence was facilitated through symbolic and physical power, such as physical restrictions, financial restrictions, social isolation, and symbolic reinforcements of such. These positions were enforced by further silencing within multiple layers of social and relational realms. These films revealed the dismissal of victim-narrated reports in social and built environments (e.g., family, economic system, law enforcement, direct care providers), leading to the purification of the abject and the perpetuation of abjection-enforcing acts. Institutions purified the process of abjection and the objects of abjection through report dismissal and the silencing of victim narratives, mental health sequelae, and fears. Victims of sexual violence confronted their abuser, perpetrator, and social and relational positions through a variety of individual means. Horror films provoked investigation of the means and platforms through which sexual violence occurred that may otherwise remain unchallenged (e.g., family relations, mental health care providers). In doing so, they provide a constructive perspective on how social responses to sexual violence can be altered in order to better serve the victim and survivor.

Statement of Research Advisor

The purpose of the study is to better understand the common depictions of sexually based violence in media and the social norms these depictions reflect in order to aid in the development of regulatory practices that counteract potential harms flowing from such depictions. The project that she and I embarked upon has the potential to build upon both her remarkable academic achievements and her inspirational activist work relating to raising awareness of sexual violence.

- Allison Vandenberg, College of Liberal Arts

* Corresponding author: ram0083@auburn.edu

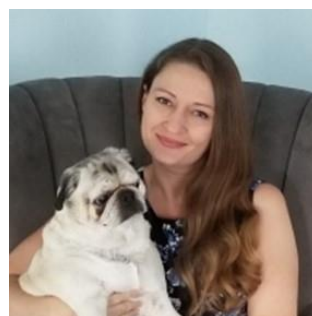
References

- [1] Basile, K. C., Chen, J., Black, M. C., & Saltzman, L. E., "Prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence victimization among US adults, 2001–2003." *Violence and victims*, 22(4), 437-448. (2007) **Journal Paper**
- [2] Burt, M.R., "Cultural myths and supports for rape." *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 38(2), 217. (2018) **Journal Paper**
- [3] Henry, N., & Powell, A., "Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research." *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, 19(2), 195-208. (2018) **Journal Paper**
- [4] Nagar, I., "Reporting rape: Language, neoliberalism, and the media." *Discourse & Communication* 10(3), 257-273. (2016) **Journal Paper**
- [5] Powell, A., & Henry N. "Sexual violence and harassment in the digital era. In *The Palgrave handbook of Australian and New Zealand criminology, crime and justice* (pp.205-220). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.(2007) **Journal Paper**
- [6] Ruane, K. L., "I'm not just a statistic: A qualitative analysis of sexual assault survivors." (2014) **Journal Paper**

Authors Biography



Regan Moss (she/her/hers) graduated from Auburn University with a BS in Neuroscience. As a Women's and Gender Studies Minor, Regan received the Samia I. Spencer Award-- the first undergraduate to have ever done so. Regan is presently a research associate and consultant at Yale University Child Study Center and the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at Yale University Medical School. She is pursuing her Master of Public Health at Columbia University. Her research interests include inter- and trans-generational trauma (e.g., sexual violence and sexual abuse), motherhood, maternal-infant relations, and menstrual & reproductive health.



Allison Vandenberg is an instructor of women's and gender studies in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. She received her Ph.D. in gender studies with a concentration in sexualities, desires, and identities and a minor in history from Indiana University in 2016. Her work focuses on gendered engagement in bodily practices, embodiment, and phenomenology. Previous publications include "Toward a Phenomenological Analysis of Historicized Beauty Practices," which appeared in the Spring/Summer 2018 issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and "The Somatechnics of Hair Straightening: Technology, Transformation, and Social Change," which was published in the edited volume *(Re)Possessing Beauty: Politics, Poetics, Change*. Her regular course offerings include Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies; Feminist Theory; Gender, Beauty, and Culture; Women in European History; and *The Virgin Always Lives: Gender, Sexuality, and Horror*.