

The Scandinavian Horror Heroine

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What is a horror heroine? Is horror not a genre *without* heroes and heroines? Is horror not a genre with victims and monsters?

Yes. And no. I shall return to the question of what horror is about at the end of my talk. For now, I want to talk about the female protagonist in horror films. Horror has a two-hundred year long history as a genre, and the roles of women have changed. What women feel and do in horror has changed. And in this talk I shall draw the picture of the horror heroine, who is a recent character in the genre. I will look at four Scandinavian horror films:

Finnish *Body of Water* (*Syvälle salattu* by Joonas Tena from 2011)

Danish *Cecilie* by Hans Fabian Wullenweber from 2007

Norwegian *Fritt vilt II* by Mats Stenberg from 2008

Swedish *Låt den rätte komma in* by Tomas Alfredson from 2008.

A working definition of horror

But first a working definition of horror. The English film scholar Robin Wood once suggested this definition: normality is threatened by a monster. This gives three things to examine: a definition of normality, a definition of the monster, and a definition of the relation between the two. Robin Wood also added that the harder the three were to define, the more interesting the film.

So horror has two characters at its heart: humans and monsters, most often presented as humans threatened by a monster. The monster can take many forms: it can be those supernatural creatures like vampires and ghosts, it can be an alien from outer space, a schizophrenic serial killer as in *Psycho*, a lethal

environment like the fog in *The Fog*, a predator animal like the shark in *Jaws* – or it can be an inner state, a psychological dimension within ourselves.

Women as victims

The prehistory of horror goes back to the sentimental novel and the gothic novel in the 1760ies, where young, beautiful, and virtuous women were pursued by men with evil intensions of a sexual and often lethal nature. Often these men were so much older that they might be their fathers, wich in some cases, they also were as in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) where a father kills his own daughter. These sentimental and gothic heroines became the female victims in the horror novel, most notably in classics such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and *Dracula* (1897). Here are three filmatizations of those novels, respectively from 1931, 1931, and 1979.

images

Frankenstein, James Whale, 1931

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Rouben Mamoulian, 1931

Nosferatu, Werner Herzog, 1979

Coming from the dark romance of the sentimental novel and the gothic novel, horror cast the characters of human and monster as *female victim* and *male monster*. Even when the monster was not of human nature it often had male features, either by looking like a man (male vampires and werewolves and zombies), or by having masculine characteristics – the violence and hunger of the shark in *Jaws* or the phallic tail and head of the alien in *Alien* (1979). In short, the *monstrous* was portrayed as male in nature and in appearance, thus being strong, evil, lustful, aggressive, lethal, perhaps sadistic. And the *human* was cast as female in nature being fearful, fragile, weak, passive, young, and beautiful. The women in the horror film before 1970 were also known as scream queens, because they screamed when they met the monster.

Women as final girls

Now, in the late sixties and early seventies gender roles changed in our real world with movements such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, cultural movements promoting pop art and popular culture, and diverse political left-wing movements. Women no longer stayed home in a nuclear, bourgeois family but, like men, became part of an educated work force where the family became the place of leisure *after* work hours.

After these political changes, the roles of women in horror movies also started changing. In her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) the American film scholar Carol Clover thus describes *the final girl* of the seventies' teen-slasher movie. The final girl is that last victim who fights the monster when all her friends have been killed. The final girl either escapes from the monster or she kills the monster. If she kills it and is in a series, she is usually first victim in the sequel. The final girl, says Clover, is an atypical female acting in "male" ways. She is the one without a boyfriend, she is smarter than her friends, she is sceptical, rational, intelligent, able to defend herself, and finds the strength and courage to fight back, to stab, shoot, even torture if necessary, and to kill. Examples of final girls are Laurie in *Halloween* (1978) and Alice in *Friday the 13th* (1980). In another subgenre of horror, the rape-revenge film, women fought back in titles like *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit On Your Grave*, where the monsters were male rapists. And in *Alien* from 1979, astronaut Ripley famously outsmarted the alien and survived to star in the first horror series with a female lead, the four *Alien* films.

So why, can we ask, is the Final Girl *not* a hero?

For two reasons: First, the Final Girl is portrayed as an ordinary girl, who ends up killing the monster because she has to, since no one comes to her rescue. She doesn't really do anything we understand as heroic, she has no mission and saves no one but herself.

The other reason is historical: in the seventies and eighties, the feminists simply rejected the Final Girl as a rolemodel for women. They did not see her as a

positive character. Feminists complained that the young woman who kills the monster or the psycho or the rapist was used as an pin-up to be enjoyed, sadistically, by men. And then, when Final Girl fights back, feminists compared her to the femme fatale, an erotic dominatrix figure in male masochism. Both the pin-up and the femme fatale, the feminists felt, were platforms for male desire and pleasure. In a much-quoted passage Carol Clover thus concludes that

The Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in . . . to the extent she means 'girl' at all, it is only for purposes of signifying male lack . . . To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development as some reviews of *Aliens* have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty (1992: 53).

Image: Ripley in *Alien* being used as pinup.

Another feminist, Australian film scholar Barbara Creed, examined monstrous women in her influential study *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). Be they witches, possessed teenagers, castrating women, vampires or archaic mothers, Creed found no positive qualities in such women in horror.

I am not arguing that simply because the monstrous-feminine is constructed as an active rather than passive figure that this image is 'feminist' or 'liberated'. The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity (1993: 7).

But the feminists were wrong. The final girl was a step forward from being a victim. She was a progressive character, who fought for her life. And when Ripley returned in *Aliens* (1986), the Final Girl evolved into the Horror Heroine.

Women as horror heroines

We now return to the question: What is a horror heroine?

In the first film, *Alien* (1979), Ripley saved herself. Her ship was lost and everyone else in her crew died. Likewise, the final girls of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* saved themselves. But in *Aliens* from 1986 Ripley becomes the leader of a group of elite soldiers on the planet where the aliens are loose. She takes charge, leads the soldiers and rescues a little girl, Newt. In *Aliens* Ripley is heroic. She displays courage, not just to herself and against a monster, but also as a defender of others.

The character Ripley was created by James Cameron, who both wrote and directed *Aliens*. He had the year before, in 1985, co-written *Rambo: First Blood Part II* with Sylvester Stallone and the year before that, in 1984, he co-wrote and directed *Terminator* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Now, borrowing the heroic attitude and the tools from Sylvester and Arnold and from *Terminator* and *Rambo*, James Cameron combines traits from the Final Girl with the action hero.

So, I suggest that the Horror Heroine is both an updated version of the Final Girl, a sort of next generation Final Girl, and a kind of hero. In 1986, a new generation of film directors (raised perhaps in families with working mothers?) created a new woman in horror. She progressed into a character who has the same education as men, the same jobs, the same strengths, and the same possibilities. She may be held back by something, but it is not men or patriarchy.

It is time to meet our four Scandinavian horror heroines, the Finnish Julia, the Danish Cecilie, the Norwegian Mannicke, and the Swedish Eli.

Julia – guilt and motherhood

In *Body of Water* (*Syvälle Salattu*, 2011, director Joonas Tena) the young Julia, played by 28-year-old Krista Kosonen, is a single mother and a lawyer. We learn that she is recently divorced when we hear a phone conversation about custody over her son Niko. In her new case she aids environmentalists who want to protect a beautiful lake near a village. This village happens to be Julia's birth

place, and at that lake something has happened. In the film's opening Julia and Niko visit the grandmother, who is institutionalized with mental disease.

Julia is a hard-working mother who fills the vacuum after her divorce with work rather than giving Niko the attention he wants. "Isn't this a nice adventure," she asks when they drive together to the lake. "How so, it's your business trip," Niko responds. And in the evening in the house they are staying in, Julia hears Niko telling his father that he misses him and would rather stay with him.

We are in the tradition of Japanese ghost films like *The Ring* and *Dark Water*, where single mothers struggle both to support themselves and to keep supernatural forces away from their children. After just a few days in the village Julia is convinced there is a spirit in the water. A spirit who drowns Niko's dog Osku and who next wants Niko. When Julia was a child, her mother told her fairy tales about a water spirit in the lake, who wanted the first-born son in return for riches. And when Julia's father says he worked hard so that Julia would never have to return to this place, she becomes convinced that the father sold her brother – who died when she was a child – to the water spirit.

After almost drowning, Niko and Julia are in the hospital where the grandfather arrives. "You have a right to a career like everybody else," he tells his daughter, "you're a good mother. There's no need for you to feel guilty." Yet Julia *does* feel it is her fault that Osku drowned and Niko almost drowned too. Guilt and ghosts go together and after *The Sixth Sense* and the wave of ghost movies, the topic of the guilty single-working mother entered horror.

Julia fights not only the water spirit, but also her guilt and her past. Her divorce is no different from anyone else's life. Her pain no bigger. And what is the nature of the monster? Well, it is not male in nature, nor in appearance. In the end, when Julia, her father and her son are all in the water about to drown, the water spirit gives Julia back her son.

Julia's beauty and youth link her to the classical female victim and also to the final girl. She seems vulnerable and fragile, crying several times after family confrontations. Yet, if we compare Julia in *Body of Water* to the mother in *The Shining*, we see the differences between a victim and the horror heroine. In *The Shining* the ghosts, the father and the son are the three main characters and the

mother a side character. The mother in *The Shining* doesn't change, she merely fights the supernatural forces and escapes with her son, leaving the possessed father to freeze to death. In *Body of Water* Julia is the protagonist and the men around her – her father, the villager Elias (Peter Franzén), Niko – are all side characters. In the end, the water spirit turns out to be a creation of Julia's imagination, and the monstrous elements come from repressed guilt about Julia inadvertently being the cause of her brother drowning in the lake when she was a child. Thinking her father is about to sacrifice Niko to the water spirit, Julia hits him with an paddle. Moments later, she dives into the water and saves the father from drowning.

Julia is a mixture of the fragile female victim, yet also a horror heroine who defends her son and is also capable of facing her inner demons, making sure she does *not* become insane like the mother.

Cecilia – trust your emotions

Not all horror films tell you to trust your instincts. *Body of Water* for example didn't. But the Danish horror film *Cecilie* by Hans Fabian Wullenweber from 2007 is all about trust.

Cecilie is a schoolteacher in her early thirties with a traumatic memory of a rape. But there were no signs of rape. Again, this is an insanity/ghost story. And as so often in these kinds of films, the doctors are male and the patient female. In psychology, they speak of the *moral agent* and *the moral patient*. The moral agent is someone who understands right from wrong and thus a responsibility to act. The moral patient, reversely, must be protected. he or she is not capable of taking on responsibility. An example are parents and children. Children are moral patients and their parents are agents.

Now, when she sees ghosts and almost drowns in her bathtub, Cecilie becomes hospitalized. But can the doctors tell if there are ghosts? Are they moral agents when it comes to the supernatural? Many horror films give us horror heroines of this kind. Bordering on the real and the supernatural, we are asked to have faith in Cecilie's emotions, in her alternate reality. She tries to keep working, although a teenage ghost girl appears in her class asking her to solve

her death. Cecilie argues with her husband and her boss and her doctor that she is seeing *real* ghosts, not imagined ones.

The character of Cecilie draws from the final girl and from woman-as-victim. Like the gothic heroine, she is a highly sensitive woman thrown into gothic surroundings. The big school where she teaches is the dark, gothic castle with cellars and secret rooms, and hidden ghosts, killers and victims. It is in the cellar Cecilie confronts her visions, here she discovers the identity of the serial killer and here she kills the killer and frees the kidnapped teenage girl who was about to become the next victim.

Cecilie is a multi-layered Horror Heroine, both gothic in her high-strung sensitivity, victim in her being hospitalized and patronized by her husband and the doctor, final girl in the scene where she fights the killer, not really prepared to fight, but determined not to accept that she should be insane, and a Horror Heroine when she rejects the “male” and rational explanations of her visions and insists on being a moral *agent* with faith in her visions. She *is* responsible. She takes action. She rescues a victim, kills a serial killer and solves a crime.

In *Body of Water* and *Cecilie* rationality is presented as male and emotions, sensitivity and fragility as female. In *Body of Water* emotions must be controlled or they become lethal. In *Cecilie* those emotions save a young girl. Taking medication never helps in the horror movie. it dissolves your defences, it blunts your perceptions, and it mutes your emotions. And sensitivity is what will keep you alive.

Jannicke

Hospitals are beloved places in horror. In fact, all of our four Horror Heroines enter a hospital and the Norwegian *Fritt Vilt II* by Mats Stenberg from 2008 is even set in a hospital.

Fritt Vilt II is the second part of a trilogy with a supernatural boogiemer whom fans on the internet call The Ice Man. In the first *Fritt Vilt* we follow five friends who are snowboarding in the remote mountains of Norway. When one of them breaks his foot, they discover an abandoned ski resort and seek refuge. Here they are killed off one by one by a mysterious killer. Jannicke, played by Ingrid Bolsø Berdal, is the final girl who kills the monster. In the sequel the killer

returns from the dead and is now supernatural and almost impossible to kill. The third film is a prequel where we see how a boy becomes a teenage psychopath who will eventually become The Ice Man.

Now, in *Fritt Vilt II* Jannicke is in the hospital. She was found on the road by a policeman, and her four friends and The Ice Man are found dead and their bodies taken to the morgue in the hospital. Jannicke's friends remain dead. But the killer wakes up and starts killing. In *Body of Water* and *Cecilie* the salient horror emotions are suspense, dread, and mystery. We, the audience, are detectives who ask ourselves if the ghost and the water spirit are real or not and if the Horror Heroine is insane or not? With *Fritt Vilt II* we are in a sequel and we past such wondering. We *know* the killer is real, we *know* he is supernatural, and we *know* the protagonist is right and that most of the people we meet will be killed. The plot is about killing and the salient emotions are shock, terror, and horror.

The rules of the *sequel* leave little mystery as to the nature of the monster but two possibilities for our female protagonist. The first *Fritt Vilt* was a teen-slasher in the tradition of *Halloween*. Now, the question is if Jannicke is in a teen-slasher sequel or if she is in a mission-movie, like *Aliens*, in which case the heroine is on a mission to do something. *Fritt Vilt II* takes after *Aliens* and provides the protagonist with a mission: Jannicke must save the boy Daniel, the old woman, and the other people in the hospital from The Ice Man.

Evolving from *Fritt Vilt* into *Fritt Vilt II*, Jannicke evolves from a fairly traditional Final Girl to become a fullblown Horror Heroine with sudden abilities to handle guns and rifles. From meeting the monster in the first film Jannicke now knows its nature, and she knows where to find it, she can predicts its actions and whereabouts, and she also knows how to kill it. She even, like so many action heroes to whom the Horror Heroine is related, gets a female sidekick, the nurse Camilla who Jannicke has rescued in the hospital.

Professional Horror Heroines, like male heroes, are often loners. They are not dragged down by family, by boyfriends, by friends, or by children. They are on a job or on a mission, doing what they are trained to do or what they feel they have to do. "You will get yourself killed," warns Camilla, before Jannicke

pursues the Ice Man in the mountains. Jannicke takes off, nonetheless, because it has become her duty to kill The Ice Man and take on evil.

Eli – vengeance is mine, said the lord

The Swedish vampire film *Låt den rätte komma in* by Tomas Alfredson from 2008 is unusual for several reasons. It combines social realism with vampirism in the story of 12-year old Oskar who lives with his divorced mother and is bullied by a group of boys in school and who becomes friends with the strange 12-year old girl Eli (played by Lina Leandersson) who, it turns out, is a vampire. In the end, Eli takes vengeance upon the boys who are about to drown Oskar in the public swimming pool, and Eli kills three of them.

And then, Eli is one of the strangest Horror Heroines in a long time. Let us take a closer look at her.

In the book from 2004 by John Ajvide Lindqvist upon which the film is based, we find out in the end that Eli is not a girl but a boy, Elias, who was castrated while he was still human. He had his penis cut off in some strange ritual. He then becomes a vampire and now dresses and acts like a girl. In the film this is shown in one brief enigmatic scene, where the audience sees a long scar, a cut, on Eli's crotch. Most audiences do not understand at all from this scene that Eli is a boy. They just see the scar as some strange cut. In the American remake *Let Me In* by Matt Reeves from 2010, Eli is simply a girl with no scar.

When Eli finds out Oskar is bullied in school, she tells him to hit back. "You must hit back. Hard," she says. "But they are three," Oskar objects. "Then you must hit harder!" Eli puts her hand over Oskar's and says "Then I'll help you. I can do it." Even though she is a child and a girl, she promises to help Oskar against the bullies. And she does by killing the three boys and together, Oskar and Eli leave the little Swedish town by train, travelling into a sunny winter landscape.

Let the right one in is not just a film about vengeance, it is also a film about loneliness. And also about love. "Just so you know, I can't be your friend," Eli says when she first meets Oskar. But they do become friends and even "go steady" after Oskar explains the concept of going steady to her. They also sleep

together. The love story is paralleled to *Romeo and Juliet*, the Shakespeare play where the two lovers die. Here, Eli and Oskar survive.

Eli is a young Horror Heroine, and we find other child heroines lately in Horror, such as 12-year old Ofelia in *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Eli shows that women in horror are no longer victims, they are no longer final girls, but have become creatures of their own will, sometimes even of heroic stature. Such heroism can take different expressions. It can be the straightforward heroic stance, similar to the male action hero, like Jannicke with her rifle in *Fritt vilt II*. Or it can be the mother struggling to save her child as in *Body of Water*. Or it can be the woman trying to understand her instincts and emotions and become a moral agent, as Cecilie in *Cecilie*. Or it can be the vampire, who is trying to survive and have a decent life, even if such a life is based on killing.

With Eli, we can widen our definition of the Horror Heroine.

Her mission need not be an external one, that is, to save humanity or specific people or things. It can be an internal mission. Let me return to the scar on Eli's body. The scar is both a cut, a rupture, and a sign that the border of the body has been crossed. The crossing of borders is both one of flesh – thus, in horror movies flesh signifies much more than just meat, it is also a body, a person, an individual, a *person* – and it is a metaphorical crossing of borders. Inside and outside is turned upside. Eli is a border-crossing character. He/She is both human and vampire, both boy and girl, both 12-year old boy and a 200-year old vampire.

Victims would scream. Final Girls would fight back. But Horror Heroines, they can do anything. "Then I will help you. I can do it," as Eli says.