Maple Syrup Gore: From Sexploitation to Canuxploitation (Representations of Gender in the Canadian ‘Slasher’ Film)

by

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ABSTRACT

Maple Syrup Gore: From Sexploitation to Canuxploitation
(Representations of Gender in the Canadian ‘Slasher’ Film)

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This thesis is an investigation of five Canadian genre films with female leads from the Tax Shelter era: *The Pyx, Cannibal Girls, Black Christmas, Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS, and Death Weekend*. It considers the complex space women occupy in the horror genre and explores if there are stylistic cultural differences in how gender is represented in Canadian horror. In examining variations in Canadian horror from other popular trends in horror cinema the thesis questions how normality is presented and wishes to differentiate Canuxploitation by defining who the threat is.
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Introduction

“There are the critics and enlightened few who constantly and systematically denigrate what is made in Canada. It seems that nothing is good unless it is absolutely perfect and without blemish. It’s a good thing we don’t have diamond mines here, because if we didn’t find a Kohinor every day, in these critics’ eyes our mining industry would be worthless.”

- André Link, 1975

In 1969, a blonde bombshell broke out of a convent on the back of a motorbike and straight into the hearts of the Quebecoise. The black and white film directed by Denis Héroux, followed Valérie (Danielle Ouimette), a young woman who joins a group of hippies to quell her restless spirit. Broke and failing to find herself through the Bohemian lifestyle, she finds work as a topless dancer and later a prostitute through her roommate’s connections. In the interim Valérie’s long walks in the park lead her to painter Patrick (Guy Godin) and after a weekend holiday with him and his young son, she finds herself falling in love. Unbeknownst to Patrick, Valérie struggles between her personal relationship and her profession and when he finds out how she makes her income their connection falls apart. Emotionally torn by the loss of her relationship, Valérie gives up her old lifestyle and the film ends in a happy reconciliation with Patrick. Seemingly amended with a morality tale ending for the censorship board, Valérie was a smash amongst the youth of Quebec. Mixing politics and sex with national sentiment, producers John Dunning and André Link marketed the film as a symbol for secularization and the push against the oppressive Catholic regime, “This kind of moral defiance is not just in opposition to mainstream cinema, however, but an old way of thinking that was being squashed out of the province” (Smith par. 7). Valérie was credited with “kick-starting the Quebec cinema industry” (Dunning 73) and the film’s popularity was lauded as doing, “more for the Canadian feature movie scene than all the talking, back biting and government urging of the past ten years” (“Canadian Film Industry”). After years of distributing and acquiring B-movies from Europe, Dunning and Link concluded it would be far less expensive and more profitable if they made their own brand of salacious films. Valérie provided the paycheck and the momentum a small starter studio like Cinépix
needed and in the midst of Valérie’s success at the box office Dunning and Link maintained their aim wasn’t to make a political statement: “Our sole purpose was to make a commercial movie of melodramatic content that people would see” (King). In a way Valérie was Cinépix; walking a fine line between politics and profit, art and trash, originality and convention. The film was the antithesis to the government’s bureaucratic approach to culture. Next to the memos, the parliamentary debates, and luncheons to lobby Hollywood’s control of theatrical releases, Valérie was pure rock and roll made without a dime from the taxpayers’ coffers.

While Dunning and Link gambled $100,000 on a first time director and the off-chance Quebec would embrace the nubile nudity of one of their own, the government’s investment plan in a feature film industry became operational. By the early sixties, amidst the spur of centennial celebrations, the infectious fervor for a national identity latched onto the potential of a feature film industry as an undeveloped territory for nation building. Drafted by Michael Spencer and Guy Roberge, the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) was to oversee the development of a feature film industry through assistance from government funding. The CFDC would invest in film productions “in return for a share in the proceeds from any such productions, “to invest back into loans, awards, grants, and “to advise and assist the producers of Canadian feature films in the distribution of such films and in the administrative functions of feature films” (Pendakur 148). Despite everything being in place in 1969 to launch an industry; money earmarked for feature film investment, experienced technicians, refurbished studios, distributors and thanks to Valérie the proof Canadians were in the market for homegrown features, the celebration quickly dissipated into commotion. Dunning and Link had demonstrated that it was possible to make populist films alongside the CFDC’s early investments to define the cultural and social experience of being Canadian in productions such as Don Shebib’s Goin’ Down the Road. Although the memo passed in Parliament was about “making” feature films through calculated investments that would return a profit to sustain both the CFDC and the filmmakers; political, social, and intellectual control of realizing the “right” kind of films came into sharp contrast with what made a profitable film. Unfortunately, with each investment from the CFDC in genre projects these dichotomies would erupt into a vehement struggle over the relationship between industry and the
question of how Canadian film identity ought to be presented to the world. Specifically the structure and success of Hollywood genre films raised the concern “about the impact of American culture and values on other countries (…), with the result that popular genres often seem like a threat to national cinemas” (Leach 50).

The crux of the problem in genre film is convention, the repetition of style and form until it is codified and capitalized in production. At times such processes can certainly reinforce a distinct national style. For example, the American ‘slasher’ and the Italian ‘Giallo’ share the same premise of a mysterious figure that often preys on and kills young, beautiful women. However, stylistic distinctions perpetuated over time has reinforced differences between the two subgenres. Although films such as Mario Bava’s Blood and Black Lace and John Carpenter’s Halloween share a high body count template, the variations in form are significantly different from one another to the point these stylistic norms are often referred to as cultural distinctions. For example, coloured gels in lighting (complementary blue and red in the same frame) and systematic dubbing have come to be read as a style distinct to Italian horror from the 60s and 70s. However, the more complex and sometimes problematic discourse is the relationship convention and stylistic cultural distinctions have to the portrayal of women. In Tohill and Tombs expansive study of European sex and horror movies Immoral Tales the writers argue that in Italian cinema, “violence and sex were an integral part of these spectacles, with the figure of the eternal ‘femme fatale’ acting often as a center point for the unfolding dramatic action. The dangerous female, who causes desire in men—provoking and destroying them, but in the process being herself destroyed… this image is common to a lot of Italian art” (29), including the Italian Giallo where the female victims are often working professionals in their twenties in jobs where they are lauded for their beauty such as models, actresses, or dancers. Moreover, the murder mystery form of the narrative often peels away the façade of beauty to reveal the women underneath as crooked, involved in practices such as extortion, drug use (amphetamines), witchcraft, or sometimes as the black glove killer herself. In contrast, the victims in the American slasher are most often young teenage girls, portrayed as self-centered cheerleaders or poor students involved in immoral activities such as premarital sex, drinking, light drug use (smoking marijuana), or having a disregard for adult authority. As a result their early
demise is often justified as a retribution for transgressing against the social expectations of being a chaste, moral, or virtuous woman as according to the normality presented within the culture.

The reproduction of these common conventions has often raised eyebrows in academic and critical circles as problematic representations of gender in the horror genre. In particular, the treatment of the female body in pain as a source of visual pleasure and a means to reinforce social paradigms has raised ethical and moral questions concerning the position of the spectator, particularly the female spectator. As Linda Williams describes there is the social expectation for woman to turn away when watching horror; “There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder. Another excellent reason for the refusal to look is the fact that women are given so little to identify with on the screen” (L. Williams 17). Although, problematic representations of violence continue to be rife in the genre the second part of Williams’ statement has significantly shifted in the last twenty-five years. The ability to self-publish and market oneself through the internet and social media as well as the technological shift to less expensive, higher quality, digital filmmaking has democratized and empowered the independent industry as a competitive force on the market. Even if problematic conventions and discourses in the genre still exist, a rise in female oriented horror productions and feminist based criticism offer a plethora of platforms in the community for which women are negotiating new intersectional discourses in horror. In an increasingly more diverse community, women who do identify with horror films are challenging the stereotype that an interest in the visceral and corporeal is abnormal or exists to satisfy the male viewer.

Furthermore, a shift in critical attention on variations in conventions in subgenre categories, such as the slasher, has seemed to quell the popular belief that genre is a homogenous Hollywood threat to national cinemas. There exists more than enough evidence of variations in genre cinema that offer insights into popular trends, anxieties, or expectations that exist in the culture the film was created in. From a formalist perspective Ian Conrich summarizes this relationship as follows:

“… whilst the horror genre is seen in many ways to be cyclical, the cycles
are not repetitive but evolutionary. Between different years and different decades there are new cultural forms and fashions that compete and combine for attention. Popular film can be highly absorbent and can reflect, refract and inspire new cultural variations on existing forms. The variations on a film form should be as important as the repetitions and replications” (108).

In *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* Katherine Monk applies what she calls a negative theory to Canadian film, in which “we are defined by what we are *not*, more so than what we *are*. This may well be a survival mechanism we’ve developed over time to distinguish ourselves from the monolithic American nation next door” (89). As a result, Monk argues we consistently compare ourselves to our American neighbors in search for the negative space unoccupied by them as a means of defining our own cultural identity. Seemingly, this type of approach to Canadian genre cinema would be beneficial, as Canadian horror films are often littered with aberrant variations to their American counterparts. However, the majority of anti-genre criticism in Canada has focused on repetitions and replications with any variation either ignored or criticized as poor quality filmmaking. This Canuck-O-Vision is characterized as, “a mixture of slightly fuzzy, hollow sound; a blue cast or, sometimes, a milky fog over the picture; several completely superfluous shots of a flapping American flag; a plaid shirt, the CN Tower or a stray, accidental ‘Eh?’…” (Vatnsdal 14). These differences in the physical quality of Canadian genre films have often been criticized as failure, their attempts to hide their Canadian setting as selling out, and the notion the films are subpar to the rest of the world because of their odd narrative structures that please neither Canadians nor foreign markets. Other than the invasive and transformative entomological body horror of David Cronenberg, the majority of genre films made in Canada have not established a new form or style separate from the norm. Hindered by our proximity to Hollywood our genre films have often occupied similar spaces and been criticized for representing our neighbor’s cultural anxieties and appealing to their cinematic trends to be profitable productions, perpetuating an inherent stigma that cinema made in Canada that exploits popular trends is a threat to national identity. Or as Sandra Gathercole puts, “Production naturally takes on the cultural assumption of its primary market. As long as the private sector is left stranded without assured access to its own market, and with the present over reliance on the American-
market, it will produce those numbingly anonymous films with American flags and Home Box Office formulas to the exclusion of more economical marginal French-language, regional, or even Canadian productions” (45). Essentially our genre films are just poor doppelgängers trying to appeal to Americans.

Meanwhile, the other popular question and somewhat veiled criticism has been why can’t our cinema perform the same way other national cinemas do? Again, over the last fifty years cultural bureaucrats, industry professionals, and critics have been reiterating the same answer. In conjunction with the lack of control over entertainment infrastructure (theatrical distribution), economic dependence on the South, hand in hand with many failed attempts at protectionism, has raised a plethora of practical and economic problems for the Canadian feature film industry. The fact of the matter is we have never fully controlled exhibition and distribution of our films and the struggle to make feature films let alone make them as accessible to the Canadian public has never been comparable to the fierce and competitive markets of France, Italy, Germany, Britain, and the United States to name a few examples. In Italy alone, “as in other European countries in this post-war period (1956-1984), there was a move to control the vast influx of American films. Taxes were imposed on foreign films and compulsory programming of Italian films for 80 days per a year in every cinema were introduced. This had the twofold effect of reviving the local industry but also of attracting lucrative new market” (Tohill & Tombs 30). These aggressive types of protectionist measures could be found in almost every Western country after the Second World War, except for Canada. A late start to the game and genuine fear that levying a tax on American films to support a Canadian feature film industry would affect economic ties between the two countries caused any meaningful protectionist measures to not be implemented (Pendakur 80). These were only some of the jarring economic and political obstacles in place when the feature film industry came to a late start officially in 1967. From the start of the 20th century, powerful forces in our market worked to suppress the production of any national competition.

Despite economic and political complications with the help of the CFDC and some advantageous loopholes in tax shelter policies, filmmakers were able to produce a significant body of work between the seventies and early eighties. Although harsh
criticism and poor access to a national market caused many of these homegrown horrors to idle “on the bottom shelves of the back rows of the most disreputable video shops in the crummiest quarters of town, or else pop up late at night on one of a dozen theme cable channels,” enough were produced to acquire the affectionate label of ‘Canuxploitation’ (Vatnsdal 12). Coined by writer and editor Paul Corupe he defines the term as:

“… low budget genre films which were made in Canada. (...) many of our b-films are distinctive in the way they present concepts of individuality, community, and even morality. Our films tend to be more story and character focused than their American counterparts, and when at all possible, the “wild” Canadian landscape is used to full effect. Many Canadian b-films draw influence from a diverse range of sources including the 1950’s social documentaries of the National Film Board, and a satirical humor used to maintain a distance from American popular culture” (“Canuxploitation: The Primer”).

As mentioned earlier, the study of horror and genre frequently centers around the argument productions reflect the cultural anxieties or fears of the time they were made in (or in regards to Italian film, are often heavily influenced by hundreds of years of literary and artistic traditions). For example, George A. Romero’s Night of the Living Dead is often cited as a reaction to the fear and distrust incited by McCarthyism and the Vietnam War, or Tobe Hooper’s crazed cannibal family in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre is a reflection of failed economic policy denying rural families the American Dream. In comparison, the different regions across Canada have resulted in a more heterogeneous conversation on national identity. Historically there has been a resistance to codifying or selling a unifying vision of national sentiment, there is no ‘Canadian Dream’. As a result, itemizing what scares us may not be the most effective approach in understanding our horror films. Corupe skirts around any specific reference to reoccurring horror motifs, while Vatnsdal jests, “what scares the average Canadian, besides guns, de-socialized medicine, weak beer and Americans?” (Vatnsdal 13).

In his definition of Canuxploitation Paul Corupe highlights that the films can be characterized by their focus on character over story and their presentation of individuality as notable distinctions. In the past, focus on recurring characters in Canadian cinema has predominately been on the portrayal of masculinity and the personality types of the bully, the clown, and the coward. However, an analysis of what type of women and if there are
similarities between them in Canuxploitation film has had considerable less focus. The question if there are recurring representations of women in Canadian horror hasn’t been probed in the same was as portrayals of masculinity. Considering the complex space women occupy in the horror genre, I believe it is critical to examine how female characters are portrayed in Canadian horror in comparison to other representations and more importantly to determine if there are patterns. For genre films, patterns are usually equated to conventions and conventions can perpetuate harmful representations, be a means of absorbing and reflecting popular trends, or revealing a cultural narrative and if it is manifested as a specific fear or anxiety. How gender intersects with this in Canadian horror can offer new perspectives in approaching the history of our cinema and examining stylistic cultural distinctions. First of all acknowledging the ways in which gender is performed in Canadian genre film offers significant variations. Two, can the variations in how gender is performed be read as a cultural stylization? Third, is the trend common enough to allow for a feminist reading of 70s tax shelter films with female leads? Lastly, can we draw comparisons between female leads in the 70s to ones in Canadian horror films being produced today? In her study of Canadian literature Survival Margaret Atwood suggests, “The study of Canadian literature ought to be comparative, as should the study of any literature; it is by contrast that distinctive patterns show up most strongly. To know ourselves, we must know our own literature; to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole” (17). As a result, in order to navigate and better understand female roles in Canadian horror it is helpful to examine other popular female representations that are commonly associated with horror films. This will help to determine if we perform conventional American representations of female characters? How do we define normality? How do our films depict women as victims? By defining the differences in how women are represented, we can not only identify another element unique to Canadian horror films in comparison to other national horror films, but also distinguish our films through feminist discourse.

Robin Wood was one of the first film critics to critically examine the horror film, in a series of 60 films screened at the Festival of Festivals (now TIFF) along with a handful of essays titled The American Nightmare. According to Wood, “The aim of both the retrospective and the book was to further the responsible reading of the horror film as
an important phenomenon within our culture, since the genre, and particularly its finest specimens, offer (it seems to us) the material for a radical and diagnostic reading of culture itself” (“Neglected Nightmares” 25). In *The American Nightmare*, Wood argues all horror films stem from repression and fear of sexual energy that challenges the bourgeoisie or patriarchal order, such as bisexuality, the sexuality of children, and female sexuality. He posits:

“In a male dominated culture, where power, money, law, and social institutions are controlled by past, present, and future patriarchs, woman as the ‘Other’ assumes particular significance. The dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male created and male controlled. Woman’s autonomy and independence are denied; on to women men project their own innate, repressed femininity in order to disown it as inferior (to be called “unmanly”—i.e., like a woman – is the supreme insult)” (Wood 27).

Most genre films are characterized and marketed by similarities in style and subject matter. Therefore, when Scream Queens, Final Girls, or the monstrous-feminine achieves mainstream success in one horror film they can often be found repeated in a sequel or imitated in other films hoping to capitalize on the first representation’s success. Andrew Tudor describes this phenomenon as, “a kind of survival of the commercially fittest. Financially successful films encourage further variations on their proven themes, thus generating a broadly cyclical pattern of successes which then decline into variously unsuccessful repetitions of the initial formula” (23). These cyclical patterns have sometimes resulted in ugly stereotypes, a fetishistic obsession with the female body, and the reinforcement of the gender binary by punishing those who transgress acceptable social definitions of the masculine and feminine in the film’s worldview. Unfortunately the conclusion of most psychoanalytical criticism of horror films is that the conventions repudiated as loathsome or threatening are most often gendered feminine. This is not to say horror films are void of meaningful female characters. Wood’s suggestion of a collective fear of female sexuality maintained through repression provides a myriad of opportunities to examine weaknesses in patriarchal authority through its female characters. However, repetition of conventions to capitalize on box office success is a powerful operative force in creating subgenres that rely on cycling imitations of the original representation that overtime affirm patriarchal norms rather than question them.
Or as summarized by Robin Wood, “At this stage it is necessary to offer a simple and obvious basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the Monster. I use “normality” here in a strictly non-evaluative sense to mean simply “conformity to the dominant social norms” (Wood 31).

In the following chapters, I will analyze a handful of horror films that established the Canadian genre film in the 70s. Out of the considerable list of available films I have chosen the following because of their female leads and status as cult classics of Canuxploitation: *Cannibal Girls* (1973), *The Pyx* (1973), *Black Christmas* (1974), *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), and *Death Weekend* (1976). The films touch on various popular subcategories such as the cannibal film, satanic ritual abuse/the occult, the slasher, exploitation and the rape/revenge drama. How the films stray from their popular American and British counterparts has had a distinct impact on the representation of gender in Canadian horror films. Referring back to Katherine Monk’s negative theory, that Canadians define themselves more so by what they are not then what they are, it is important to examine Wood’s basic formula, “… normality is threatened by the monster.” How Canadian horror films present normality and what is the monster are important to identify in all of these films in comparison to dominant American trends to illustrate discrepancies in Canadian horror. I recognize the multitude of work in consistently reevaluating female tropes in horror cinema and the always-evolving negotiation of positive and negative representations of women. Comparisons to these recognizable representations is only in so far to examine if Canadian concepts of ‘normality’ and the ‘monster’ are repetitions and replications of American portrayals. It is the purpose of this thesis to determine and define whatever variations exists and to challenge the notion our horror films are poor knock-offs of American national identity through our female characters. It is my opinion that normality is the monster in Canadian horror.
Chapter One: The American Standard

“There are certain rules one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie. For instance, number one, you can never have sex. Big no-no. Number two, you can never drink or do drugs. It’s a sin; it’s an extension of number one. And number three, never, ever, never under any circumstances say, ‘I’ll be right back,’ because you won’t be back.”

- Kevin Williamson, Scream (1996)

To date, one of the most influential pieces in approaching specific conventions in horror films from a feminist perspective has been Carol J. Clover’s Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film. Clover addressed concern about the popularity of the slasher in the 80s and challenged the moral panic that young men watching the evisceration of other teenagers, predominately young women, were the result of a desensitized and more violent generation that empathized with a psychopathic killer. Instead Clover focused on the main character, the female protagonist, and identified a series of similar traits: virginal (or unavailable/uninterested in sex), a unisex name, often boyishly dressed in comparison to her female counterparts, and always the first to become aware of the danger and to fight back. Clover called her ‘Final Girl’, the girl who survives through her own self-sufficiency to overcome the threat that has destabilized the normality of the world. Citing numerous 80s slasher texts including, Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, and Texas Chain Saw II, Clover traced the similarities between the female protagonist and the modus operandi of the killer to John Carpenter’s Halloween (1978). The holiday horror is often recognized as the flagship of the slasher subgenre and protagonist Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) as the classic archetype of the Final Girl. On Halloween night of 1978, Laurie finds herself the focus of sociopathic killer Michael Meyers who fifteen years earlier snuck up the stairs of his happy suburban home to brutally stab his sister to death. Escaping from a local institution fifteen years later, Michael Meyers now referred to as The Shape, makes his way to the idyllic (and fictional) town of Haddonfield, Illinois to reap his rage. His focus becomes a group of young teenage girls, including the academically ambitious and relationship nervous Laurie. As Laurie’s sexually active and less studious friends are picked off one by one, she finally realizes only she can protect herself against the wrath of Meyers with
various domestic house tools turned weapons, such as knitting needles and closet hangers.

Clover asserted that once the Final Girl picks up her weapon of choice to fight the sociopathic killer (usually some type of object which stabs or penetrates the flesh) the performance of gender becomes destabilized, thus allowing the male viewer to transfer his experience onto the female heroine. Clover argued this occurrence in the majority of slasher films was more than just a disguised thematic metaphor of sexual repression:

“But the “certain link” that puts killer and Final Girl on terms, at least briefly, is more than “sexual repression”. It is also a shared masculinity, materialized in “all those phallic symbols”—and it is also a shared femininity, materialized in what comes next (...): the castration, literal or symbolic of the killer at her hands. The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmaned an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with” (Clover 49).

Her observation concludes that the transference of the gaze allows the male viewer to identify with the female protagonist as she becomes more ‘man-like’ next to the questionably masculine killer. This is a development on Laura Mulvey’s argument on masculine identification in which she proposes that the cinema is either a scopophilic experience (pleasure in looking at someone as an erotic object) or a narcissistic identification with the image on screen projecting a male fantasy of controlling and possessing women as the object of desire. In the cinema:

“The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. The argument must return again to the psychoanalytical background: women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat” (Mulvey 25).

In the context of horror films, where gender can be transferred depending on performance Clover uses Mulvey’s psychoanalytical approach to spectatorship in the cinema to demonstrate that this reversal is a means of fetishizing the threat. In the case of Clover’s examples, Michael Meyers, Freddy Kruger, Jason Voorhees, all of these threats are portrayed as somewhat sexually deficient, childlike in their desire. Next to the highly aesthetic female body fighting against the onslaught with her own phallic weapon the
killer’s lack of a sexual threat suggests he is castrated. As a result, next to Final Girl the threat is gendered feminine while the heroine becomes masculine to balance the binary and eventually overcome and kill the ‘Other’. As Robin Wood theorizes the monster threatens the quiet and idyllic life in small town Illinois and in order to overcome the threat, Laurie must ‘man up’ and fight back to return Haddonfield to its previous state.

However, before Laurie was Jess, the delicate dark haired sorority sister fielding calls from a pervert before Christmas Break. A precursor to the 80s slasher, Bob Clark’s 1974 classic *Black Christmas*, is lauded by most film critics “as a foundational text for the slasher film genre, with a plethora of movies borrowing its holiday focused-milieu, dreary atmosphere, unconventional camera techniques, teenage victim pool, inventive kills, and psychologically damaged killer” (Burns 135). Carpenter cites the film as the inspiration behind *Halloween* and prior to filming his suburban slasher had approached Clark about the potential for a sequel to Black Christmas. As told by Clark, he declined Carpenter’s invitation to pick up where the film left off, stating: “No, I don’t intend to. I’m not here to make horror films. I’m using horror films to get myself established. If I was going to do one, though, I would do a movie a year later where the killer escapes from an asylum on Halloween, and I would call it *Halloween*” (Corupe “Interview”). Although similarities between the films are discernable for most purveyors of genre, noting *Black Christmas* as the foundational text of the slasher genre is problematic. Clark’s film lacks the linear formulaic structure and conventions that have come to be associated with *Halloween*. Jess cannot be characterized as a Final Girl and killer Billy lacks the physical and almost supernatural prowess of Michael Meyers. As mentioned earlier, while differences between slasher and Giallo films have been characterized as cultural distinctions, there has been little to address the variations in *Black Christmas* as evidence of a characteristic stylization.

Critics of psychoanalytical readings of horror films, particularly of the slasher subgenre, have noted, “it is an inordinately reductive form of analysis, presupposing the overall credibility of a particular perspective and seeking to assimilate the widest possible range of cultural variation to those terms” (Tudor 3). In particular, psychoanalytical discourses of horror films have dominated singular readings of genre, providing a collective language that comprises the majority of a spectator’s fluency. On the flip side,
challenging these singular readings of genre film has also been an equally important part of the continuation of genre film and inspiring new trends and perspectives. Andrew Tudor describes this dialectic in genre film as a key aspect of its history and ongoing development: “The horror movie genre is simultaneously both singular and plural, and its history must be told and retold in such a way as to reflect that variation. There is, from one point of view, a single genre and a single genre history: a reservoir of conventions, narratives and iconographic resources. But there is also several genres, open to be understood and reconstructed from a range of vantage points and in a variety of terms” (2).

The problem for Canuxploitation films is they have rarely been offered the advantage of being reconstructed from a different vantage point and separated from terms used to describe depictions in American genre films. Rather than separate films such as Black Christmas from a conventional reading of a slasher, critics often perceive as an oddity: “What makes Black Christmas such a fascinating film is that none of the genre’s conventions had been solidified or imitated yet. There is a strange awkwardness and disconcerting confusion over what is exactly happening in the film, what is the killer’s motivation, and why events are unfolding in an inexplicable way” (Burns 136). Again, Monk’s negative theory is useful in considering how Canadian horror films differ from their American counterparts by what they are not, in terms of how they do not fulfil narrative and character conventions fluent genre viewers expect. What is consistent in Canadian horror is the criticism that they often fail to deliver on viewer expectations; they lack the conventional fluency that is expected of a genre film. Following this pattern of thought, if we have taken narrative conventions such as Wood’s basic model of the horror film, (normality is threatened by the Monster), it may be just as useful to disengage from this binary relationship and question whether this tension is even present in some Canadian horror films. Although Tudor is wary of deferring to psychoanalysis to characterize horror he maintains, “‘threat’ is the central feature of horror movie narrative, the organizing principle around which all else revolves. The other is because if we are ultimately concerned with different of fears articulated in these movies, then it is in relation to the ‘threat’ that the most general trends will become apparent” (8). In Black Christmas the film’s focus is not the tension building to the showdown between Final
Girl and killer, but the how the killer is able to take advantage of a systematic bias against female sexuality to commit violence. As a result, the film does not contain the core conventions genre aficionados expect in films such as *Halloween* and other 80s slashers. In this particular case, one can see the evolution in a cycle of horror rather than a repetition or recycling of ideas. Moreover, the lack of key conventional tropes in *Black Christmas* offers a significant variation in a seminal Canadian production. If Jess is not a Final Girl and Billy is not the imperishable villain reaping his rage on unsuspecting female victims, then how does this inform the notion of the monster threatening normality?

*Black Christmas* opens on a large house decorated with bright colorful festive lights and an arrangement of holiday classics (*Silent Night*, followed by *Jingle Bells*). From an objective perspective, the camera pans over a window where a group of young people are shown drinking and celebrating the approaching holiday in festive sweaters. A switch to a subjective perspective disrupts the music and cheer with heavy breathing and the loud crunch of footsteps in the snow as the perspective changes and the viewer is placed into someone’s POV (point of view) looking into the windows. From the killer’s perspective the spectator climbs up into the attic of the house and down to the second floor where he watches the party at the top of the staircase. From this point forward the main narrative of the film focuses on the predatory threat living in the attic of the sorority house and coming down to kill the girls one by one. However, rather than follow a linear storyline (such as in *Halloween*), *Black Christmas* presents a number of secondary storylines and builds tension through the deteriorating relationship between Jess Bradford (Olivia Hussey) and her boyfriend Peter Smythe (Keir Dullea) to eventually align with the killer in the attic storyline to reach the main climax of the film. The undulating structure between multiple storylines expose an underlying tension between an ageing patriarchy and a new movement pushing for autonomy and the relationship between the institutionalized patriarchy and its conflict with a younger generation’s need to redefine dominant social norms surrounding the association between morality and sexuality, particularly female sexuality. This becomes a key theme in the personal conflicts leading to the climax of the film between the various male and female relationships (father/daughter, police/victim, boyfriend/girlfriend). The refusal to conform to social
norms emphasizes the sorority sisters’ vulnerability to the predator living in their house. Ultimately the killer demonstrates there is a systematic bias against female sexuality that is normalized and as a result he is able to kill almost all of the girls in the house before he is seemingly caught. This is an important distinction, as the entrance of the ‘monster’ or ‘killer’ does not disrupt a stasis that eventually leads the Final Girl to a battle of life and death to revert back to the way things were. Instead, the film raises a number of scenarios on how normality willingly fails to protect women against violence in a domestic situation and transgression is punished through willful blindness towards danger.

Soon after breaking into the house the girls receive the first phone call. Jess answers and calls out to the girls to come to the front hall: “Hey! Quiet! It’s him again, the moaner!” Evidently the calls are frequent enough that the girls have given the perpetrator the nickname ‘the moaner’. Breathing heavily through the phone and imitating sounds of strangulation, the phone call takes an explicit turn, “Let me lick it. Let me lick you’re pretty, pinky cunt (…) suck my juicy cock, I’ll come over and you can suck it.” Barb, the least affected by the language, takes the phone from Jess and attempts to defuse the situation with sarcasm, “Oh why don’t you go find a wall socket and stick your tongue in it, that’ll give you a charge.” She manages to call the anonymous caller a creep before the ‘moaner’ ends his call with the threat, “I’m going to kill you.” Barb hangs up the phone, shrugging off the threat and perverse language as a common inner city occurrence; only the doe-eyed virginal Clare reproves Barb for engaging and encouraging the caller when a local girl was recently raped. Barb rolls her eyes and responds with, “Darling, you can’t rape a townie,” and tells the appalled Clare they live in a “sorority house not a covenant.” It is important here to note that the phone call underlines sexual violence twice; it establishes the calls are frequent and the predator who assaulted a local girl is still on the lam. The explicit language in the phone call is necessary as it indicates whoever is on the other end of the line has a strong sexual motivation for making the calls. Furthermore, the disturbing nature of the call pushes the girls’ personalities and the interaction amongst them demonstrating a close relationship and awareness of one another’s boundaries. Clare leaves to pack for the holidays and Barb calls her a “professional virgin” to her retreating figure while both Jess and Phyl (Andrea Martin) try to offset the tension between them. However, the fight with Barb is
far more important than a plot device to send Clare upstairs to be the first victim, strangled to death with a plastic bag and hidden in the attic while the party continues. It also demonstrates how much the girls are aware of one another’s sexual relationships and values.

Clare’s death and disappearance triggers the entry of the masculine authority; her conservative father and the police force. After his daughter fails to meet him at the entrance of the university Mr. Harrison (James Edmond) goes to the sorority house. Next to Mr. Harrison’s looming presence and disdainful gaze, it is humorous to watch the housemother Ms. Mac (Marian Waldman) try to hide lewd posters in Clare’s room (such as a grandmother giving the middle finger or a group of young naked teenagers assembled in the peace sign). Mr. Harrison is quick to find a picture of Clare’s boyfriend on her dresser and comments to Ms. Mac, “I didn’t send my daughter here to be drinking and picking up boys.” Next to Ms. Mac, Mr. Harrison appears out of touch, which he is when it comes to the private-lives the four girls share in the sorority. The humour contributes to an uncomfortable and unsure tone precipitating the control of female sexuality. This is a detail that director Bob Clark wanted to establish: “Her fathers a very straight laid guy, she’s come to college and she’s interested in these things. She’s particularly interested in establishing herself, it’s a subtlety but it’s a statement of her life. These signs are not just there to be funny, they are there to tell you something about the man and the daughter that he’s lost and I think they do that” (Clark 2015). Instead of accepting the maturation of his young adult daughter, he reproaches the matron and the educational institution suggesting they are responsible to ensure abstinent values. His daughter’s independence and responsibility are disregarded and her sexuality is commodified into something she is not permitted to make decisions over and should be trusted to a higher authority that ensures the values of his generation. Ms. Mac mocks this expectation in the following scene as she talks to herself in the mirror: “Tough shit. Am I supposed to be responsible for the morals of every girl in this goddamn house? These broads would climb the Leaning Tower of Pisa if they could get some up there. I do my best. I don’t know what the bastards expect of me.” Mr. Harrison’s expectations are made laughable by the personable Ms. Mac yet they are still dangerous, as they typify patriarchal control of female rebellion by denying independence and autonomy through
This theme continues at the police station where Phyl and Barb are met with the same hostility when they try to alert the police to Clare’s disappearance. The officer working the front desk tells them to “shut up” and offers them a missing persons form responding with, “in 90% of cases the girls are shacked up with a boyfriend for the weekend.” Between the father and the police force female sexuality becomes trapped between expectation and assumption. The father expects the institution to control and enforce chastity, while the police assume any disappearance is the result of raging hormones. Both the expectation and the assumption made by the two masculine authorities punish a woman’s independence or choice. For the police, if a woman disappears she has done it of her own accord, even if there is an overwhelming lack of evidence as in the case with Clare. Moreover, Clare’s disappearance and the police’s lack of interest to investigate are paralleled with a mother (Martha Gibson) filing a missing person’s report for her 13-year-old daughter. The lieutenant shoulders the mother much the same way the police secretary does the sorority sisters. He suggests if the young girl’s disappearance is “all that strange?” A theme also explored in *The Pyx*, sexual relationships are taboo and treated as personal affairs to be ignored or looked upon with a willful blind eye rather than be acknowledged as a reality and potential space of violence. The suggestion is that either female sexuality is controlled or it has managed to slip away to participate in this deviant behavior. Female friendship is a powerful force in Barb, Phyl, and Jess’s insistence that Clare’s disappearance as troublesome, but their word is still brushed aside. This is repeated with the distraught mother who is also not taken seriously, when the officer finds out the daughter’s father is a truck driver who is absent on a day-to-day basis. The police force’s disregard of the mother’s missing daughter in conjunction with their failure to register Clare as missing by the people who see her on a regular basis, demonstrates a systematic bias against the testimony of women. Even after the missing 13 year-old-girl is found dead in the park the police continue to dismiss the disturbing phone calls coming to the house Clare is missing from, “I don’t know when we can get a man on it. Probably just one of your boyfriends playing a joke.” It is not until Clare’s boyfriend Chris (Art Hindle) brings this to the attention of his brother, Lt. Kenneth Fuller (John Saxon), that the phones are tapped to investigate their origin.
Women are not used as window dressing on the screen and lined up as lambs for slaughter; violence is contextualized in the social fabric in which it is allowed to happen. The threatening phone calls, the missing thirteen-year-old girl, the disappearance of Clare -- all of these situations are exacerbated by the normality that disregards the women’s testimony, punishes female sexuality and fails to acknowledge its vulnerability. The threat in the attic can exist and prey on the girls because he is able to take advantage of this situation.

Meanwhile the film’s narrative arc moves through the disintegration of Jess and Peter’s relationship. Jess goes to the Peter prior to finding out about Clare’s disappearance and tells him she is pregnant and intends to have an abortion. Distraught by the news, Peter fails his performance exam and destroys the piano shortly afterwards. The building tension between Jess and Peter (and the discovery of the deceased thirteen-year-old girl) is coupled with the police finally deciding to investigate the origin of the phone calls. Shortly after the phones are tapped, Lt. Fuller begins to suspect Peter after he listens in on a conversation where Peter begs Jess not to follow through with an abortion. She invites him over and eventually Peter turns up announced from her bedroom claiming the door was unlocked. He asks Jess to marry him and she rejects him, “Do you remember when we first met you told me about you wanting to be a concert pianist? How it was your greatest dream? And I told you about some of the things I wanted to do? Well I still want to do those things. You can’t ask me to drop everything I’ve been working for and give up all of my ambitions because your plans have changed. Be realistic. I can’t marry you.” Jess asserts autonomy over her body and is met with hostility from Peter, who calls her “selfish” and a “bitch.” Moreover, his reaction to Jess prompts Lt. Fuller to convince her there is enough motive for Peter to be the perpetrator; he has inexplicably turned up in Jess’s bedroom, has demonstrated erratic behavior by calling her and weeping on the phone, as well as exhibited violent behavior in destroying the piano and refusing to accept her decision. As a result we accept Lt. Fuller’s reasoning for labeling Peter as dangerous and more importantly, the idea is placed in Jess’s mind. There is the underlying suggestion that if the ‘threat’ that has been calling the house is Peter he is the product of frustration or failure at being denied the opportunity to perform in a traditional male role; provider, breadwinner, father. This inner frustration is a result
of a social fabric that privileges men in such roles and emphasizes the vulnerable position that a women who refuses to conform, such as Jess, are left in.

The revelation that the calls are coming from within the house triggers the climax of the film. If we consider the characteristics of a slasher film for a moment; the Final Girl realizes she must confront the killer; she does so with some sort of penetrative weapon; after a struggle she manages to outwit the killer and overcome or temporarily stun him; the killer either escapes or is removed and stasis is restored. The ending of *Black Christmas* follows none of the traditional denouement: Jess stuns the killer and manages to narrowly escape his pursuit by locking herself in the basement. Shortly afterwards, Peter knocks on the window from the outside and climbs in through the basement to find a terrified Jess. Believing Peter to be the killer she strikes him. Jess never confirms Peter is the killer. There is no moment of realization; she assumes he is based on his attitude towards her decision to have an abortion and Lt. Fuller’s opinion that he is capable of violence. There is no symbolic castration as Jess disarms the killer by penetrating his flesh, thereby unmanning him and asserting her dominance. Jess kills Peter in self-defense by bludgeoning him with the fireplace poker, and the police accept that his corpse and his return to the house are sufficient evidence to be the perpetrator. Most importantly, *Black Christmas* does not allow for the return to stasis the heroine is rewarded with by defeating the threat. A sleeping Jess is left alone in her bedroom, while the camera moves up into the attic where the bodies of the housemother and Clare remain positioned towards the window. The phone rings, revealing the killer is still present and hidden in the home; there is no definitive resolution.

Postmodern readings suggests slasher conventions in the Final Girl narrative could be interpreted as having the same structure as a classic fairytale, a cautionary tale on the transition from childhood to adulthood. As Short notes, “equally apparent within such films is the way in which domestic relations come to the fore, with slashers often attacking the family, as much as adulthood itself. Many such texts are framed as nightmares in which the innocence and relative safety of childhood are shattered, and while normality returns at the break of day there is also a sense of a path having been crossed, from which there is no way back” (Short 53). Where there is a sudden absence of authority figures in slasher films or parents and police officers are made weak or
disposable by the strength and cunning of the invasive monster, the opposite is suggested in *Black Christmas*. Jess doesn’t become an independent and changed heroine now armed with the knowledge that to survive one must be self-sufficient. Instead, she is left sedated, stripped of her faculties, and in the hands of the men whose social privilege protects them from a killer such as Billy. The threat in *Black Christmas* is how easy it is for Billy to slip away, to continue to exist in the attic as easily as he is able to invade it in the beginning of the film. Instead of returning to normality it is left in a questionable state as those who need to be protected most are continued to be left as vulnerable in the beginning of the film as in its conclusion.

If we are to acknowledge the representation of violence as the product of the social fabric it happens in as a significant variation in *Black Christmas*, it is important to ask whether Bob Clark’s film is unique in its vision or if similarities can be found in other Canuxploitation films in which women are treated as victims or prey by an exterior threat. Following these conditions, violence is also contextualized in a similar manner in *The Pyx*. Just as *Black Christmas* was seen to run parallel to *Halloween*, on its release *The Pyx* was referred to as Canada’s response to the occult genre, popularized on the screen by films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) released later in the same year. However, unlike the tension in Rosemary’s life as she begins to suspect a malicious intent towards her and her unborn child, the film is less about the exterior threat of the occult and more concerned with the private vulnerable aspects of Elizabeth’s life as a prostitute and heroin addict, struggling with personal loss. In some ways the occult genre is similar to the slasher in the idea the threat is an outside invasive force gendered masculine. Some sort of demon or evil spirit of one of the three Abrahamic religions has breached the private world of the characters, disrupting their happy stasis and family life with its intrusion. Moreover, this intrusion is often sexual in nature. The woman’s body is invaded either through a strange sexual encounter (such as in *Rosemary’s Baby* when Rosemary is drugged on the eve of having sex with her husband to try and conceive a child and has intercourse with the devil) or on the cusp of puberty when the child begins to transition into a young woman and become aware of her sexuality (like Regan (Linda Blair) who shortly after her 12th birthday becomes possessed by the demon Pazuzu in *The Exorcist*). From a psychoanalytical perspective the idea that
female genitalia provides an entrance for the demon to enter the body through a sexual encounter and take possession of the female body has often been attributed to the same castration anxiety Final Girl must destabilize to overcome the killer. The woman has a weakness in her body that is an entrance for possession; through her genitalia her body can be used against her and transformed into an abject terror that spews goo, bleeds, and can turn the womb against the mother. Once the female body transforms into a horrific version of itself and as such is allowed to express all manner of perverse thoughts, actions, and language, the possessed woman is able to exhibit any number of sexual repressions or desires for the spectator’s pleasure. An important tenant of Mulvey’s argument of the fetishized female form is that “among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (Mulvey 17). Regan, Rosemary, and all their spin offs are performances of repressed sexual desires made acceptable by transforming the female body into an abject version of itself through possession.

However, unlike the predatory occult films where the devil invades or terrorizes the female body, The Pyx is more concerned with the private vulnerable aspects of Elizabeth’s life; a prostitute and heroin addict struggling with personal loss. The Pyx opens with an investigation into the death of a woman who has fallen from the top rooftop of an apartment building. Wearing a white cotton dress around her neck is a crucifix and a pyx, a small ornate container that holds the consecrated host of the Eucharist. Sensing this is not an accident, Detective Sergeant Jim Henderson (Christopher Plummer) opens an investigation into the death of Elizabeth Lucy (Karen Black). The film shifts between the investigation in the present and a retrospective of Elizabeth’s last days before her death. As the film moves between the past and the present we learn Elizabeth’s death was the result of a satanic ritual gone awry. Unlike the predatory occult films where the devil invades or terrorizes the female body, there is no descent into madness for Elizabeth. Instead of possession through a strange sexual intrusion we watch as her autonomy is eroded making her more vulnerable. The beginning of the film introduces Elizabeth in bed with one of her clients, professional and assertive she declines the offer of staying the night. The camera stays focused on her face shooting from slightly below to ascertain her reactions and facial expressions as the focus of the
scene. In a recurring visual motif, whenever the film moves into the past the camera predominantly features Elizabeth in medium or close up shots, asserting her gaze, her perspective, on the last days before her murder. As a result the film’s narrative is driven by the private experience of the main character. Instead of blaming the victim, the majority of the film is focused on how such a murder is able to take place by demonstrating how easy it is to psychologically isolate those who are already living on the fringes of society.

Later, Elizabeth visits one of her friends in a Catholic-run sanatorium. Peering through a set of iron bars she watches her friend during mass, half hidden in the shadows, suggesting her feelings of separation from faith, community, and her past. This moment foreshadows Elizabeth’s first meeting with the client where he asks her to take her clothes off and then proceeds to interrogate her about her past where we learn she separated herself from her, family, community, and religion to navigate the present on her own. The horror of the film becomes the revelation of Elizabeth’s situation and how her self-esteem is preyed on and taken advantage of by the client to isolate and emotionally manipulate her. Unbeknownst to Elizabeth it is the client’s intention to use her in a satanic ritual; the slow psychological erosion of Elizabeth’s independence by making her emotionally and physically vulnerable disrupts the convention that her murder is somehow deserved or an act of retribution against her lifestyle. An atmosphere director Harvey Hart describes as, “the documentary aspect of it was the horror of our everyday lives… to try and out do that would have been an attempt to top myself with horror, (...) The attempt was to shock [audiences] philosophically” (Vatnsdal 68). Again as in, *Black Christmas*, accepted social masculine norms backfire in the film; a forceful control of the situation, a dismissive attitude, and a need to adhere to conservative norms. In *The Pyx* the parallel of Elizabeth’s last days with the present brutish, masculine police force who use violence and intimidation to crack the case suggests the failure of society to provide assistance to those who are most vulnerable (prostitutes, addicts, homosexuals). Evident in the sergeant’s private relationship with a prostitute and the forceful intimidation of the madam Meg (Yvette Brind’amour) after Elizabeth’s death, by destroying her home, and threatening Elizabeth’s friends with legal retribution. Against the opposing masculine forces the film reiterates Elizabeth’s growing isolation in the retrospective scenes,
whatever fear she feels from the mysterious clients who follow her around invading her private life outside of her work she equally cannot turn to the police who would also compromise her autonomy. As a result the horror of the film is the psychological erosion of Elizabeth’s independence by external masculine forces leaving her vulnerable to coercion and leading her to death.

In the introduction of this thesis I acknowledged that certain conventions can reproduce harmful or fetishistic representations of femininity. However, I also welcomed variation as a powerful force in disrupting assumed conventions and that genre is both singular and plural in the way it continues to perform conventions it is associated with. By isolating two films, *Black Christmas* and *The Pyx* from representations commonly associated with occult and slasher genre films, I demonstrated these examples of Canadian horror offer a strong variation on films where the primary threat seeks to destabilize normality by attacking the female body; either internally or externally. However, the popular notions reproduced in the American slasher, e.g. the highly aestheticized female body who in picking up the phallic weapon and overcoming the threat allows gender to be destabilized and the male viewer to transfer his experience onto the female body or the female body transformed into the abject by the intrusion of the invasive demon, are elements not found in these Canadian-made horror films. Arguably with these conventional tenants absent we can reexamine the position of the spectator in watching Canadian horror films. Mulvey argues that women represent castration and that illusionistic narrative cinema is designed to circumvent this threat. However, castration anxiety as represented in the conventions of American slashers and occult films are not present in these Canuxploitation examples. From Mulvey’s perspective it is difficult to see the female body in these Canuxploitation films as fetishized and there is little room to see where the films allow for a projection of a repressed desire onto the performer. What is present is a strong mistrust and criticism of the social fabric that makes such violence against women a culpable possibility. The threat is not the exterior invasive force, but the society that permits violence against women to occur.
Chapter Two: Bullies, and Cowards, and Clowns, Oh My

“After a night of evil dreams Rydal’s smoldering desire leaps into flame.”
- Intertitle from Back to God’s Country (1919),
Written by Nell Shipman

Churning, rushing rapids and billowing piles of snow frame a figure dragging a sled across the great Canadian wilderness. Underneath a thick wooly hat, dark cascading locks frame a small face with wide expressive eyes. With her gentle nature, Delores (Nell Shipman) is able to tame a half wild dog named Wapi to help her drag her sick husband two hundred kilometers across the Barren Land to the northeast shore of Great Bear Lake. Yet, little does Delores know that the outlaw who harmed her husband and killed her father is the villainous ship captain who is her only hope to take her across the icy waters to a doctor at Fort Confidence. Having avoided his forceful desire once by throwing herself into a river to rescue her husband’s limp frame, now Delores has to rely on her wit and resourcefulness to maneuver against not only Rydal’s lasciviousness but also the ship’s cronies as they travel across the treacherous half frozen lake. Written by its star Nell Shipman, the silent black and white film Back to God’s Country was a novelty in comparison to the films being churned out in the South. With its expansive landscapes, plethora of wild animals, and containing one of the first and consequently controversial nude scenes, the strange action adventure film is still one of the most financially successful features ever made in Canada. The film seems to capture the independent spirit of Canadian filmmaking; landscapes for studios, heroines for heroes, character development over narrative plot. It would seem our response to the powerful production house shelling out the American Dream as consumable capital was to combat the glitz and glam with our own brand of grit. The early history of Canadian cinema is punctuated by individuals, like husband and wife team Ed and Nell Shipman, trekking across the winter landscape of Canada to film the epic in 1919. To make such a film on location in the middle of winter was a logistical nightmare in itself. In the early 1920s the cumbersome equipment was almost as large and heavy as a person and sensitive to extreme temperatures, such as the frigid Canadian landscape. To create volumes of
product the technology required specific infrastructure and it was the United States who capitalized on this notion by building factory-like studios to maximize the efficiency of producing feature films. Centralizing production, print processing, and distribution to one location, Hollywood was able to flood the market with thousands of productions a year by the 1920s (Leach 4). Although presenting a significant challenge to those enthralled by the entertainment business, it did not quash the Canadian entrepreneurial spirit. However, the use of real locations over building sets or filming in studio certainly gave early Canadian feature films a very different aesthetic with a penchant for realism.

Recurring motifs of vast wilderness is a prominent feature in a majority of Canadian film (including visual art and literature) and has often been likened to a documentary tradition. The National Film Board (NFB) founded in 1939 by John Grierson was the first significant infrastructure built in Canada to produce and distribute film. Grierson “had a distinct and innovative film philosophy that made the documentary much more than an obvious tool of state interests. He wanted to replace the actor with ordinary people and the studio with the real world. He wanted the power of non-fiction to triumph over the power of fiction” (Melnyk 65). In response to the south churning out hundreds of productions of collective celluloid dreams, Greirson suggested a national identity motivated by the tenants of social realism to draw attention to the everyday conditions of ordinary Canadians. During the Second World War, significant amounts of reels were being produced and distributed in Canada with the intention of casting Canadians back at themselves. The purpose was to create a realistic self-reflective portrayal that would surpass the fictive representations spewing from Hollywood and to promote the war effort and recruitment. By the end of the war the NFB was producing almost 200 films a year, about 5 ½ a week, with a staff of 700 (McLane 136). However, after the war the NFB went into a steady decline, Grierson found Hollywood films and programming to sell a false promise of bourgeoisie escapism, “what he wanted for the real world documentary was a dramatic style comparable to Hollywood” (Melnyk 60). Yet with the advent of lighter, more flexible 16mm camera and synchronous sound technology the style of documentary filmmaking also began to shift. It was possible to move cameras to follow the subject, to catch sound in real time, and to shoot everything in color that could be blown up to 35mm to project in theatres. The advances in the
camera technology allowed the equipment to move off the tripod and into the community. The films produced by this younger generation, sometimes with crews as small as three, was determined to show “people as they really were (...) a slice of undeniably “tribal” life via a technologically advanced medium” (Monk 16). This change in technology revolutionized the style of documentary filmmaking and became known in Canada as the ‘direct cinema technique’. The subjects in the direct cinema technique were shown from the perspective of the objective observer (the camera operator) removing the disembodied authoritative voice of God narration, giving the films a “home video” aesthetic and self-referential awareness. As described by Betsy A. McLane, “Direct cinema sought to expose reality through capturing unguarded moments of self-revelation in the normal flow of life. Cinéma vérité wanted to explain the raison d’être of life, whereas direct cinema wanted to let life reveal itself” (McLane 239). Building off of individual events the documentaries would often lead to a climax that reflected personal community concerns that challenged the unified national social inclinations of the Grierson era. The goal was to be a sort of ‘fly-on-the wall’ where “revelations” would take on a narrative form following the drama of situations to a climax, “They show something happening, followed by something else that happens, followed by yet another thing, and so on” (239).

Inspired by the Quiet Revolution, the same movement that Valerie came out of, the schism between the older Grierson-trained generation and the pioneers of the “direct approach” became a movement of resistance. Young Canadian filmmakers were not interested in meddling with subject matter to give their films “the creative treatment of actuality” to give cinema a social purpose (McLane 6). Films such as Michel Brault’s Les Raquetteurs with its emphasis on the personal experience of a long tradition of a snowshoeing competition in rural Quebec was starkly revisionist in its refusal to present the experience as a communal national identity. For Brault the focus on individual concerns, those of the rural Quebecoise, instead of a national socialist identity was, “not about what you call entertainment… For us, it really felt like we were on the verge of discovering a whole new art form… a whole new way of seeing the world” (Brault in

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1 The reason for being; an individual’s sole purpose
While the tradition of documentary realism was undergoing a radical ideological shift at the same time commercial film began to materialize as a viable enterprise: “That the Canadian feature film eventually emerged either ‘out of’ or ‘in reaction’ to the NFB monopoly was a reflection of wider historical changes that demanded a new paradigm beyond the one that Grierson and the Canadian state had created” (Melnyk 75). For these filmmakers the new paradigm of the “direct cinema approach”, changing the focus onto the individual experience was an exciting and radical new way of portraying the Canadian experience. If we revert to Paul Corupe’s definition of Canuxploitation as cited in the introduction, he notes the distinctive way in which community and individuality are presented in Canadian b-films and the stylistic influence of 1950’s socialist documentaries. Indeed some of the first horror films to be made in Canada attempted to imbue a social consciousness or purpose in the films by adding documentary elements to add to the film’s horror. Largely recognized as Canada’s first foray into horror, *The Mask* (1961), directed by NFB protégé Julian Roffman, included a prologue from a real life mask collector named Jim Moran to warn the audiences of the dangers of masks and to put on their own 3D glasses when they hear the eerie omniscient command “Put on the mask!” In similar fashion, *Deranged: Confessions of a Necrophile* (1974) also used an investigative reporter to comment on the early scenes of Ezra Cobb (based on real life body snatcher Ed Gein) and his decline into murder and grave robbing to preserve his dead mother’s corpse. Nonetheless, the presence of these authenticators to add an element of truth or realism to the horror of the film has become humorous over time; the investigative or specialized authority has a camp sensibility where sharing knowledge in a formal matter must be gendered masculine, highlighting the male academic authority as a performance. In this case the films self-referential stylistic choices lifted from the documentary genre over time has satirized the aesthetic of realism.

Although *The Mask* and *Deranged* are the most obvious influences of the documentary style on Canuxploitation, later features seemed to adopt the more complex direct cinema technique in their narratives. As aforementioned, in films such as *The Pyx*, director Harvey Hart describes the film’s terror as being in the “horror of the everyday” while Bob Clark describes his focus on female relationships in *Black Christmas* as contributing to the film’s “hyper realistic” sensibility. Moreover, despite both films being
commercial endeavors they privilege character development over plot based narrative, following the same aesthetic of the direct technique, “something happens, followed by something else” following the character’s actions to an open ended conclusion. In this case the intersection between the direct cinema technique and fiction film is interesting insofar as how the conventions of the direct cinema technique influence the reading of the film text. It is important to acknowledge that realism in fiction is a problematic territory and the “direct cinema technique” still privileges the filmmaker’s perspective. In fiction films that approach the subject in this way Jean Louise Comolli writes “fiction triumphs over the real, or rather it gives it its true dimension, relating it back to archetypes and constantly recalling the moral of the fable. The passage from the particular to the general comes about quite naturally. The role of manipulation in direct cinema is thus to control such slides and switches. In other words, to provoke them while gauging their scope and effect” (Comolli qtd. in C. Williams 228). In terms of Canuxploitation, realism meets with a genre that is built around the imaginative concept of some type of invasive threat, archetypes of men converge with the moral fabric of society to show the weaker position women occupy. However, it is dubious to suggest these horror films that employ the direct approach are more “real” then others. Trauma is an intensely personal experience that in film remains a fictive representation as imagined by the filmmaker and recreated by actors. As a result the viewer is subject to what the filmmaker intends the image to signify and the ideological consequences that result from it. The aesthetic of realism that is a byproduct of the direct cinema technique is only useful to us in so much as it provides a theoretical and stylistic difference to make the case for a Canadian style of horror that is distinct from other nations. The cultural distinction of our horror films is the influence of the direct cinema technique. More specifically, along with the stylistic influence of privileging character over plot-based narrative, how gender is performed, in particular how masculinity is performed plays an important role in the relationship between women and what threatens them in Canadian cinema.

The majority of work on representations of gender on the Canadian screen has been on the performance of masculine identity, proceeding from Robert Fothergill’s 1977 essay, *Coward, Bully, or Clown: The Dream-Life of a Younger Brother*. The basic tenant of Fothergill’s argument is in comparison to Hollywood, which proliferates images of
masculine heroism and success, Canadian films are recognizable by their themes of “failed masculinity” that results from these three archetypal personalities found in male characters in Canadian film (Beaty 313). Former editor of Canadian based horror magazine Rue Morgue Dave Alexander writes, “It’s a subversion of, or reaction to, the typical American hero who embodies success and masculinity.” He suggests that these archetypal personality types can be considered a convention that speaks to a ‘cultural anxiety’, “that comes with being the little brother of the U.S. and needing to define ourselves as ‘not American’. It can make our films more compelling, interesting and evolved, but also unappealing for those seeking a Hollywood model, and an example of how we’re a country that feels as if we lack a strong cultural identity and are still trying to figure out who we are” (D. Alexander). In The Pyx and Black Christmas the bully personality type is embodied in the police force, demonstrated through their unapproachable stance towards the female protagonists contributing to their vulnerable position and eventual death. In the classic formula of the direct cinema technique, how the individual is treated or functions as a member of society is used to draw attention to larger community successes or concerns. Again, it is important to recall that patterns in films often become conventions and because conventions rely on repetitions they can provide an insight on a specific cultural anxiety. In this case, the three masculine personalities and a distinct style of realism are recognized as qualities that constitute mainstream Canadian cinema, “While, over the past three decades, academic writers on film have increasingly turned their attention toward the high-minded or serious Canadian cinema found in the art houses and film festivals of major urban centers, reporters for Canadian daily newspapers have tended to emphasize an entirely different cinema, one that valorizes the loser as a distinctly Canadian hero” (Beaty 314). However, critics of Fothergill’s essay raise concern about the relationship masculine identity has to national identity and what it means to insinuate men in Canadian cinema are weak and ineffectual. Katherine Monk describes this process of identification through nationhood and film as follows:

“That said, all notions of identity, and the very process of identification, comes down to who you are, who I am, and where “the other” fits into the equation. When the equation is repeated enough times in the same order – say Yankee hero wins again – then a natural pattern of expectation begins
to develop in the mind of the viewer. This imprint then forms the parameters for that person’s larger worldview, which in turn forms the basis of identity. When the cycle is repeated through time and generations, one ends up with a perpetual identity machine that reflects an entire set of values and ideas back at the viewer – and has the ability to articulate a uniform idea of nationhood” (Monk 109).

What does it mean to articulate a uniform identity of a nation of losers? How does this archetype of the coward, clown, and the bully affect relationships between men and women in Canadian cinema? If men are portrayed as “ineffectual” what does it mean to place an “effectual” woman next to such a man?

By 1976, commercial films with blood, guts, and gore were frequently met with skepticism and censorship; over the next ten years furious debates would rock the halls of Parliament over the moral and artistic quality of commercial films in Canada (Spencer 71). Including the work of a young Cronenberg whose first feature film Shivers (The Parasite Murders) was met with a vapid hostility that rocked Cinépix’s relationship with the CDFC after critic Marshall Delaney posed the question in his derisive article ‘You Should Know How Bad This Film Is You Paid For It’; “… should we subsidize junk (or worse than junk) in order to create an “industry” that will also, possibly, produce indigenous and valuable feature films?” (Delaney 5). For Dunning and his company, as well as future industry professionals (who included producers such as Ivan Reitman (Ghost Busters) and Don Carmody (Chicago)) tapping into sensationalism through commercial film was the most effective route to establishing a reputation and seeing a financial return on the investment. American and European markets were willing to purchase licentious Canadian product and for young filmmakers such as William Fruet writing and directing an exploitation film was an appealing choice. Fruet had gained much critical success for his writing in Goin’ Down the Road and his successful directorial debut of Wedding In White. However, despite the critical success and numerous awards given to Fruet in the beginning of his career, the violence and subject matter of Death Weekend brought his career to a standstill. After the political debate Cronenberg’s Shivers inspired, the negative backlash to creating a homegrown horror industry was met with a moral and social stigma against sensational uses of horror. Horror can only be considered valuable when it is directly connected to a specific “use”.

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David Pirie characterizes this attitude as ‘the tyranny of realism’. Although his subject matter is focused on British horror and the English gothic, Pirie characterizes an attitude towards ‘realism’ that can also be seen in how Canadian film is commended:

“But there is another use of the term which denotes a quite specific approach and mindset, which in fact demands that the subject itself directly reflects present social conditions, that it has a documentary contemporary feel and avoids anything too imaginative or ‘other’. You can see this favoritism in action at once in the positive values that are immediately accorded to contemporary or realistic settings and to the adjectives like ‘gritty’ that so often qualify them,” (Pirie 10).

As a result, the rejection of Canadian horror films was in part a combination of a fear of cultural invasion in the form of the fantastical, ‘the other’ in horror and a general attitude that the ‘other’, the ‘sensational’ offers little of value outside of shock or disgust. But, what happens when the direct cinema technique meets the imaginative other in a contemporary setting to make a social commentary on male and female relationships? In William Fruet’s Death Weekend his ‘imaginative other’ is Diane who invited to a lake house for the weekend ends up terrorized by a group of men on the isolated property. However, William Fruet’s social commentary on the ineffectual Canadian anti-hero as violent and dangerous “was greeted with an extraordinary chorus of what seemed like nothing more than hurt feelings from the small Canadian critical community. The reviews were for the most part vicious and spiteful, and rang with a righteous sense of betrayal” (Vatnsdal 105).

Starring Brenda Vaccarro, the film opens with Diane and Harry (Chuck Shamata) driving to his country property in his slick Corvette. As they speak to one another it becomes evident their relationship is fairly new and they know little about each other as Diane learns Harry is a dentist not a doctor. He becomes defensive when her response is one of surprise instead of admiration, “I knew you were going to think that. I’m an oral surgeon. I make about $25,000 a year more than your average doctor.” Attempting to deflect the conversation, Diane asks Harry if she can drive, “I just felt like driving. I told you I have this thing for cars. It’s in my blood. A passion.” Harry relents and as Diane tears up gravel down the secluded country roads they are met by a group of aggressive men in an orange Camaro. As the scene escalates, Diane remains cool and collected driving neck to neck with Lep (Don Stroud) who becomes increasingly agitated by her
skill behind the wheel, “Jesus that broad can drive! That pisses me off!” She finally manages to outmaneuver the hooligans driving them into a pond and Lep scrambles out of the vehicle vowing revenge, “You god damn fucking cunt. You’ll get yours baby.”

Again, as in *Black Christmas*, aggressive sexualized language foreshadows sexually motivated violence specifically with the word ‘cunt’.

In his most recent essay on Canuxploitation cinema included in a larger collection of essays itemizing specific horrors in Canadian cinema (*The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul*), Paul Corupe argues that Lep is a new character type on the bully, a hyper violent brute: “… an extreme variation on the more familiar Bully character, to depict the way men can use sensationalistic violence and degradation to gain power over women in a way not entirely possible in a dramatic feature” (92). In comparison to depictions of pain, fear, and violence in a dramatic feature the horror film’s purpose is to transgress these territories to illicit an emotional and physical response of fear in the viewer; not necessarily a cathartic empathy. Fictional representations of a threat give filmmakers a larger scope to look at how individuals, relationships, or communities behave when they are endangered and to manipulate archetypes in relation to the threat. Corupe identifies Lep as a variation on the bully. In addition it could be suggested Harry is also an interesting deviation on the coward; with his country cottage property, a highly educated career, and his collection of fast cars and boats, Harry should be superior and confident to the brutish Lep. However he ends up spending the majority of the film trying to convince Diane (and later Lep and his goons) that his wealth is some sort of indication of power. After Harry and Diane arrive at his weekend mansion he tries to impress her with the names of the previous owners of the house. Diane does not recognize the “Davis” brand of senators and publishers to which Harry tries to embarrass her and gloats: “They had money and power, that’s what it’s all about.” “That’s very important to you,” Diane responds and Harry confirms, “It is to everyone. Money talks. I never had money until I was 23 years old. Having it is better than not believe me.” For Harry, ownership and possession is an important means by which he asserts his dominance, including over women. This is demonstrated to the viewer on three occasions; in conversation with two gas attendants who run their business close to his home, when he takes photos of Diane changing behind a two-way mirror without her knowledge, and
when he puts the moves on her aggressively in his boat where surrounded by water she has nowhere to go. “When I see something I want, I don’t give up until I get it,” Harry tells her. Seemingly Harry should have the confidence, knowledge, and resources to outmaneuver Lep, yet he is unable to do so. A stark contrast in comparison to other popular home invasion films such as *Straw Dogs* where insipid mathematician David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) choses vigilante justice to defend his wife Amy (Susan George) and villager Harry Niles (David Warner) against a group of violent, murderous, rapists. Sumner becomes the hero by tapping into his own masculine prowess and resources to defeat the group of men. In comparison Harry tries to appease Lep and his goons with money and alcohol more concerned with protecting his property then his well-being, let alone Diane’s. In the only instance where Harry makes a stand against Lep he is easily disarmed and soon after hunted down and shot with his own gun before the climax of the film.

Instead the film is centered on Diane’s resourcefulness as the violence escalates. Diane frustrates the men because she refuses to conform to their expectations and challenges social boundaries the men place on gender roles. Her independence threatens Harry’s idea that beautiful women can be bought and her skill behind the wheel angers Lep because she is a “broad”. On numerous occasions Diane’s skills are mentioned as being incongruent with her gender: “I’ve never met a woman who could fix a carburetor or drive a car like you can.” Moreover, early on she is able to recognize her vulnerable position in the men’s escalating behaviour to assert their dominance, trying to communicate this to Harry when the men become distracted by his boat: “They are not going to go away Harry. For God’s sakes can you not guess what they are going to do next?” However, Harry who assumes power comes with wealth continues to try and barter with Lep and his men. It is Diane who recognizes Harry is no match for Lep whose physical prowess and strength in numbers commands over them. Corupe argues that, “Fruet often pulls the away from the supposed protagonist, Diane, to tell the story from the male character’s perspective. And although Diane is a strong, proactive character, more of the script is devoted to developing and clarifying Lep and Harry’s motivations, as flawed as they may be. In this way, Fruet emasculates the audience by directly inviting the viewer to experience the male characters’ impotence” (104). Albeit it is feasible to
make a claim on Lep and Harry’s impotence, it is important to stress Fruet does not minimize their proclivity for violence towards Diane. Harry, who we know from one of the gas station attendants has “brought a different girl up here every weekend” is unable to process Diane’s rejection of his sexual advances and attempts to woo her with his wealth. After Diane declines Harry’s sexual advances he becomes angry with her and refuses to drive her to the bus station, “Sweetheart, there’s the road, you just get your things together and find your way.” He demonstrates he has little sentiment for her outside of a need to assert his sexual dominance. In some ways this refusal could be read as leaving Harry physically impotent, much in the same way Lep is left physically impotent when he fails to rape Diane through penetration becoming ineffective when she stops fighting back. However, Harry and Lep’s impotence both result from Diane’s ability to quickly adapt and acknowledge the men’s intention in each situation. From a male perspective this refusal and the different reactions from Lep and Harry may invite the opportunity to empathize with them. Yet this marks a somewhat dangerous intellectual territory. Lep and Harry have demonstrated that despite not being able to force, woo, or intimidate Diane into sex, her position is still a dangerous one as she stops being a person that represents the potential for sex and becomes an object the men can project their rejection and impotence on.

Often characterized as derivative of other popular rape/revenge films of the 70s the depiction of violence differs greatly from the visceral law of retaliation that propels the plots of films such as *Straw Dogs* and *Last House on the Left*. Corporeal brutality is exchanged for a savagery against property, feeding on the fear that capital has a relationship to identity that can be exploited through violence. Moreover, underlying the superficial attachment of monetary value to self-worth is a chilling relationship between women and property. The danger of the men in the film is the value they place on Diane, as a thing that can be equated to the economic system and if she fails to conform treated in the same violent ways as a $50 vase. Although the men become physically impotent around Diane, they are still dangerous to her wellbeing. Like *Black Christmas* and *The Pyx* these three films also manage to revert back to the same theme, the rebellion against feminine expectations and the subsequent punishment of this transgression. What differs in *Death Weekend*, is that Diane’s transgression of being superior in traditionally
accepted masculine skills triggers the complex of the ineffectual male in Lep, who
instead of giving up is determined to assert his masculine identity through violence or
intimidation against the things that bring it into question, thereby disrupting the frustrated
loser anti-hero. Here Fruet demonstrates that even an ineffectual male has the capability
of being a dangerous one and as the writer behind one of (if not) the most seminal piece
of Canadian cinema that created this archetype in Goin’ Down the Road and again in
Wedding In White Fruet creates a blatant subversive commentary on the celebration of
such masculinity.

Often characterized as derivative of other popular rape-revenge films of the 70s
such as Straw Dogs, Last House on the Left, or I Spit On Your Grave the Canadian
counterpart’s lack of violence and late release to the market left it with a lackluster
reputation. In her expansive study of rape-revenge films from around the world
Alexandra Heller-Nicholas acknowledges the differences in Death Weekend, “Fruet’s
film is concerned primarily with the struggle between men to assert their masculinity, and
the violent consequences that women who get in the way may be exposed to” (Heller-
Nicholas 115). However, she notes in comparison to other rape-revenge films, “the
catharsis that so often accompanies such a conclusion is notably absent here” (116).
Again, the lack of a cathartic and satisfying ending is present in the conclusion of Death
Weekend as in Black Christmas and The Pyx. The distinct way in which the films move
from individual to community concerns in the “direct cinema technique” could be the
reason for these similarities in Canadian genre film in comparison to their American
counterparts. An observation Corupe concludes his argument with, “Fruet’s choice to
make a genre film indicates a deliberate move towards a more commercial style of film
production, this does not preclude him from exploring specific Canadian themes. Instead,
Fruet takes the well-established ideas of a wounded, insecure male character that attempts
to subjugate a female and the inherent class conflict between rural and urban Canadians
and simply reframes them in a way not previously explored in Canadian film” (106).
Fruet’s film is more concerned with exploring Canadian archetypes through genre film
then attempting to borrow American conventions for an American market. Death
Weekend demonstrates Canadian genre films have their own stylistic influences that
effect how women are threatened more so by social expectations that although can
embody a specific threat, exists beyond the dangerous individual.
Chapter Three: Chasing Sensationalism

“When you have the devil chasing you by the tail, you have to stay one step ahead regardless of whatever actions you have to take”

- John Dunning

“There’s a guy over there getting a tattoo of his friend’s face from when he was 5, in front of everyone,” Chris G., promotional manager of Black Fawn Distribution tells me as he motions across the basement floor of the Centennial Hall in London, Ontario, “There’s another guy sitting over there wearing a half rabbit face and a Batman mask. Where else would you see that? Not even on Halloween would you see that!”

It’s something you can only find at Shock Stock that describes itself as, “the premiere Horror Con in Canada! Three days of reel deal horror and exploitation cinema” (“Shock Stock”). It’s the first stop on the convention circuit for most industry professionals in early May in southwestern Ontario and over the years the event has grown in notoriety. Industry professionals are referred to as ‘scumbags’ and the unofficial motto of the weekend might as well be ‘anything goes’. The guy getting a tattoo in front of everyone is Sweet Pepper Klopek of Monsters of Schlock, “The World’s Most Extreme Two Man Circus Sideshow Comedy Magic Extravaganza” (“Press”). Pepper’s sideshow partner, Burnaby Q. Orbax stands next to him documenting the event and christening it a “Shock Stock miracle”. The person whose five-year-old school picture will now be forever inked on Pepper’s upper right thigh is owner, organizer and ‘king of the scum bags’ Jake Grimbo. It’s not exactly a convention the likes of Fan Expo, but more of a rite of passage.

Surrounding the excitement are tables piled high with an amalgamation of nostalgia and the outrageous; stacks of rare VHS tapes of B and X movies, custom made figurines of obscure film characters, teddy bears with their fur torn from their faces to reveal gory skeletal features, and magazines called Girls and Corpses mixed in with back issues of Fangoria and Rue Morgue. A man walks around dressed as Jesus proclaiming himself to be the first of the living dead and selling copies of his new film Jesus Is A Douchebag. Above all what makes the event truly unique is it embraces the most fringe elements of the genre, including horror spin offs from the porn industry such as the Evil
Head or the lowest form of exploitation z-movies like Bill Zebub’s Dickshark. Another staple is the promise of yearly performances by burlesque dancers, adult entertainers, edgy Q and A panels, and if the Monsters of Schlock feel up to it they’ll go for a Guinness World Record such as “most animal traps released on the human body in one minute” (“World Record”). Shock Stock sells the opportunity to experience the outrageous and uncomfortable in the present and it fosters an economy off of the thrill and danger of 70s exploitation films. ‘Exploitation film’ is an umbrella term incorporating many subcategories in the horror genre. In its most broad definition exploitation films are low budget b-movies seeking to derive financial benefit by capitalizing on current trends or niche markets often with a lurid angle. In the history of performance, the exploitation film is derivative of the Grand-Guignol theatre, the Parisian sensation whose promise of “blood, sperm, and sweat” was a quick cash sensation in its sixty-five year history, approximately 1897-1962 (Quigley 105). Featuring live action decapitations, disembowelment, and visceral torture, the plays were discredited by critics but remained popular amongst patrons despite being labeled as an immoral act “for the exclusive purpose of frightening the timid or of stimulating jaded emotions” (Irvine qtd. in Freshwater 249). Yet, the criticism that followed the Grand-Guignol over the years for its exploitation of corporeal horrors can also be seen time and again in modern criticism of horror. There is an inherent relationship between value and the visceral that is incompatible or historically unacceptable in mainstream social circles: “Again, the word ‘exclusive’ implies that horror might be acceptable in other circumstances. From this perspective, performance was required to have a use. Mere exhibition, or immersion in the world of senses, was unacceptable and could expect censorious suppression” (Freshwater 249). For Cinépix producers John Dunning and Andre Link to exist they needed to make money and the ‘acceptable’ uses of horror belonged to an NFB documentary or in the familial drama of kitchen sink realism (Going Down the Road, Wedding in White). The choice was clear-cut, make movies for the critics and the censorship board or find a way to thrive:

“Sensationalism could work for us, largely because no one else was working it here. It was an open playing field. Sure, critics could say we were kowtowing to the lowest common denominator of audience taste. But we were intent on succeeding. We had this passion to survive and
have something, naïve though we may have been. When you have the devil chasing you by the tail, you have to stay one step ahead regardless of whatever actions you have to take” (Dunning 56).

The development of the term ‘Canuxploitation’ has been predominately used to refer to all Canadian horror films made in during the 70s and early 80s as a product of tax shelter reforms that allowed for an influx in privately funded productions to capitalize on the incentive. However, in comparison to other trends around the world this small pop of Canadian B-movie cinema is still significantly smaller than European and American markets. In addition, it is important to clarify here the ‘-xploitation’ suffix is somewhat of a misnomer. In terms of naming subgenres in genre cinema, films that tend to fall under the Exploitation umbrella are ones that derive benefit from rendering niche elements to an extreme with the purpose of making audiences uncomfortable by dealing with forbidden topics in ‘bad taste’, “which includes everything from aging horror movies to juvenile delinquent and biker films, drug films, women-in-prison films, mondo movies, and pornography that predates the hard-core era, as well as certain especially naïve or grisly educational shorts” (Hentzi 22). As the previous chapters have demonstrated, most Canadian horror films suggest violence rather than portray it on screen with more focus on development of character and exploring the implications of realism. However, the way in which sensationalism coincides with the role of women in early Canadian exploitation films is a curious point of interest in comparison to other exploitation trends around the world. Films such as Ivan Reitman’s Cannibal Girls (1973) and Cinepix’s Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS (1975) are different from their Canuxploitation sisters in that the women in these films are the antagonists and commit onscreen violence towards male and female victims. However, like The Pyx (1973), Black Christmas (1974), and Death Weekend, Ilsa and Cannibal Girls also return to a similar theme, the rebellion against feminine expectations and the subsequent punishment of this transgression. Despite the most sensational and exploitive elements used in these films to appeal to commercial markets outside of Canada; thematically the films follow their Canadian counterparts with the slight variation being the transformation of the villain into a victim of the patriarchal structure over the course of the film.

By the early 70s attitude towards showing female flesh on the camera had
loosened and nudity coupled with female sexuality became a popular theme. *Valérie*, was quickly followed by a slew of sexually ambiguous films bent on pushing the censorship board with money from the CFDC. Referred to as “maple syrup porn” the films often showed young people celebrating sexuality and featured full frontal nudity, mild sexual scenes, with lighthearted content and comedy (Corupe, “The Primer”). However as quickly as the next film was made, it grew stale, chasing sensationalism through ‘sexploitation’ films proved problematic as a means of reproducing a previously successful profit model. The demand for something new, more exciting, ‘hardcore’, dogged Cinépix with each new release. Nonetheless, subsidized by the CFDC, who were receiving heavy complaints about funding pornography were highly scrutinized by the censorship board in Quebec, the films could only go so far. In retrospect, what the films could not show in sex was replaced in dialogue that often highlighted the oppression of female sexuality and pleasure with a touch of satire. Films such as *Loving and Laughing* (1971) followed the adventures of two young men who switch identities to help one escape punishment for avoiding the draft. Leaving a hippie commune under a false identity as a private tutor for an upper middle class family in Massachusetts, Lucien soon discovers that the desire and need for sexual pleasure has no connection to social class. Unfortunately the films loose and playful ideas with sexual pleasure as the great social equalizer could not compete with the harder content coming out of America. By 1972, *Deep Throat*, the oral-fixated sexploitation flick of a woman with a clitoris in her throat, made films such as *Loving and Laughing* look like child’s play.

It would take Cinépix a few years and some commercial failures before achieving success. Meanwhile the development of female villains, particularly the predatory female vampire, was becoming a common motif popularized by the British production company Hammer Films. Lavish period sets, beautiful women, and stories of revenge and lust dominated the market, replacing the grotesque and dangerous male monster with the sexually irresistible woman who lures young daughters away and changes them into her protégés. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* inspired the sexually explicit Karnstein trilogy -- *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), and *Twins of Evil* (1971) -- creating new representations of beautiful women with an appetite for blood. It is important to note here that the female relationships differed greatly from the male
vampire to the female victim narrative. Where woman were often hypnotized and preyed on by the male vampire for his gratification, the female vampire existed to pleasure, protect, and educate her love interest. She often challenged heteronormative principles and threatened the patriarchal structure by taking away young, engaged women from their fathers and husbands thereby disrupting royal or capital bloodlines. Yet, desire often developed into angst between the female vampire and her human interest; despite a feeling of closeness and affection the women were separated between the experience of living and dying, of innocence and worldliness that ultimately dooms the relationship. Bonnie Zimmerman observes that: “By showing the lesbian as a vampire-rapist who violates and destroys her victim, men alleviate their fears that lesbian love could create an alternate model, that two women without coercion or morbidity might prefer one another to a man” (433). The heterosexual relationship must almost always find a way to triumph and failing on a personal level, the relationship between vampire and lover lacks stability inevitably exposing the threat and dissolving the union.

Ivan Reitman’s directorial debut of *Cannibal Girls* loosely follows the tradition of the female predator and there are certainly some indications of Hammer’s influence. The opening credits are brightly colored in a neon pink similar to those of Hammer productions, such as *Vampire Circus* (1970), the title written in bright pink fleshy lettering suggestive of blood or guts. Like their vampire counterparts the female cannibals prowl for their victims at all hours and feminine features are emphasized in moments of stalking or killing. The opening scene of the film follows a couple walking through a snow-capped mountain range on a sunny afternoon by the cool blue-grey lakeshore. The couple settles down on a picnic blanket when suddenly the woman pulls away from the man and screams as a pick-axe held by red manicured fingernails comes crashing down on the man’s head. The setting is similar when the viewer is first introduced to protagonists Gloria (Andrea Martin) and Cliff (Eugene Levy) driving through the wintery mountainside in the middle of the day. Cliff pulls over when “nature calls” and as he disappears into the woods the black panty-hosed legs of a woman are slowly revealed observing the car from afar, her back coquettishly covered by a short cape. Much like the consistent presence of the haunted female vampire searching for her next victim in a white negligee in the Hammer films and other European lesbian vampire horrors
(Daughters of Darkness (1971), The Living Dead Girl (1982)), danger accompanies the beautiful and seductive.

This is certainly an element that Cannibal Girls exploits. Dressed in bright clothing with their large doe-like eyes, there is nothing monstrous or grotesque about the girls. In a flashback, we learn that Anthea, Clarissa, and Leona lure men back to their country property with the suggestion of a sexual encounter: “I share a farm with two girlfriends just outside of town… Well that’s too bad you are passing through because I thought we could get together and spend a few days up at the farm.” At their home the women lull the men into a sense of complacency, serving and doting on them for two days. By playing the role of docile caregiver the women are able to seduce the men into a false sense of security that they, the men, are in charge. In turn the women use this expectation and the promise of sex to easily overcome each of the men one by one. Next to the women’s sexual prowess the men are portrayed as ineffectual and easily manipulated. However, how “failed masculinity” is portrayed is radically different from the violence in films such as Black Christmas and Death Weekend. The clown is the least threatening of the male archetypes, whose diffidence becomes a target for the female villain to prey on. Unlike the bully and the coward, the clown embraces his emasculation and welcomes the sexual attention as good fortune making him easy prey for the female predator. The reversal of gender in relation to who is the threat mixes comedy with the lurid to make the uncomfortable, laughable, giving the film a layer of “camp”: “visible artifice, outrageous exaggeration, and a healthy dose of self-love” (Hentzi 24). In Susan Sontag’s seminal essay Notes On “Camp” she characterizes camp as a sensibility that among many things “converts the serious into the frivolous” before listing fifty eight examples, “for no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it” (Sontag 1). Among the sensibilities, Sontag describes the “androgyne” as “a taste in persons” where “Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined forms of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine…” (Sontag 4). In the context of Cannibal Girls the girls put on a heightened and artificial performance of female sexuality to manipulate
and overtake the men in the film. There is no violence against the female body in *Cannibal Girls*. The female body is untouched by any phallic or penetrative imagery; only the male body is stabbed and consumed. They are dangerous because they are able to reverse the performance of gender to kill and satisfy their hunger. In exploitation films, “This leads to cultish celebration of marginal artifacts in which “those who are otherwise dominant are, for once, excluded” (Cleto 1999: 31 in Mathijs 87). Or in the case of *Cannibal Girls*, the convention of the archetypal Canadian male who is often represented as a threat against women is disrupted and made to be the victim.

In comparison, boyfriend Cliff behaves like the typical bully. He is often short with Gloria and dismissive of her suggestions. He demonstrates little interest in the relationship; when asking the locals for a place to stay in town he refers to her as “the broad.” After a strange evening at the former cannibal girls’ house, which has now been turned into a fine dining restaurant, Cliff tells Gloria the entire experience was just a dream. Trusting her gut instinct and noticing Cliff’s burly personality, she begins to distrust him. Ending up back at the house Gloria’s worst fears are confirmed, Cliff is in cahoots with the cannibal girls and has delivered Gloria to them and their reverend. However, it is Cliff who ends up as dinner at the climax, receiving a blow to his guts from his former lover. Men are punished for having negative attributes such as being self-centered, dishonest, and lustful. It is these subversive qualities, punishing the buffoon and the bully at the hands of a group of women, that is *Cannibal Girls* exploitive element. However, there is also a strange tone and unsatisfactory feeling at the end of the film that disrupts the conventional 70s flesh flick. As Corupe observes, “The humorous bits don’t fully blend in well with the sleazier horror aspects of the premise, resulting in a sometimes unsure tone” (“Cannibal Girls”). Unlike the Hammer Films that subvert the patriarchal structure by stealing daughters away from fathers to threaten bloodlines, the cannibal girls take advantage of the patriarchal structure where women are expected to serve and care to the head of the household’s needs. The satisfaction in the Hammer Films comes from the triumph of good over evil; in the end the young beauty overcomes the seductive and controlling power of the mature and older female vampire to define her new identity or to return to her family; the ending provides a resolution and a new stasis. In comparison to *Cannibal Girls* there is no resolution or grand escape, no reversal to a
changed world after the girls, Gloria joins the gang and eats her ex-boyfriend. Moreover, the gang is led by a reverend with a strange hypnotic power introduced halfway through the film, as well as the suggestion the town itself has a craving for human flesh. This leaves the conclusion with an unsure tone, Gloria’s membership is left as a questionable coercion and the girls seem to function as providers for a male-headed household who controls the town by offering human meat. The ending subverts any sort of feminist notion the women exploit heteronormative relationships by thriving off the flesh of men for their own benefit. Although individual men “fail” at the end of most canuxploitation films the effect on women is always much more all-encompassing and negative, showing them as challenged or trapped by a larger masculine dominated force that protects that failure.

However, Canada’s most famous exploitation/horror export would be the reincarnating prison warden Ilsa. Leaning over to me on panel at Horror-Rama in Toronto, actress Dyanne Thorne quips, “It wasn’t called sexploitation then, “we were just doing things,” with a sly smile. At 82, Dyanne Thorne and her husband Howard Maurer continue to travel the world to talk about Ilsa. The notorious prison warden is probably Canada’s worst kept secret in its film history and the most influential film for setting the standards of the ‘nazisploitation’ genre. Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS was a flagship of this bizarre subgenre for its portrayal of one of the first female villains, a composite of Nazi personnel Ilse Koch “The Bitch of Buchenwald” and the sadistic Joseph Mengele. Producers John Dunning and André Link knew the film’s sensitive subject matter and exploitive portrayal could be potentially damaging to their fledging production company and produced the film under the pseudonym Herman Traeger in California on the old set of Hogan’s Heroes. The plot of the film follows SS general Ilsa who believes that women have a higher pain threshold then men and would therefore be more effective spies. To prove her theory to her male counterparts in the SS she experiments on and tortures both male and female prisoners at her camp. Along with Ilsa’s sadistic experiments, she also suffers from an insatiable appetite for sex. Struggling to experience sexual pleasure, she sleeps with various prisoners, castrating the men who fail to please her until she meets German American Wolfe (Gregory Knoph), whose ability to withhold ejaculating distracts Ilsa long enough for the prisoners to plot their escape.
Similar to *Cannibal Girls* the exploitive element of *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* is the female villain. However, the sensational element is Ilsa’s sadomasochistic sexuality in comparison to Reitman’s film where the female vampire is replaced with a man-eating cannibal as the twist on the female villain. John Dunning maintains making Ilsa the exploitive element of the film was an early idea from University of Toronto English professor John Saxton (who wrote the screenplay under the pseudonym Jonah Royston):

> “John brought it to another level. He gave Ilsa this kinky notion that the SS wasn’t accepting women because they were chauvinists. She, in turn, wanted to impress upon the Nazis that, since women could better bear up to pressure than men, they could play an important role as spies in the SS. It was Ilsa’s contention that women would never reveal the greatest secrets under torture” (Dunning 92).

As a result the depiction of torture in the film serves to demonstrate Ilsa’s cruelty in her deranged mission to serve the SS with new theories that will contribute to winning the war. Coupled with Ilsa’s explicit sexuality the film was lambasted by critics for exploiting Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust. Yet, the way in which the filmmakers diametrically place Ilsa’s wolfish sexuality and the film’s depiction of Nazi torture turns the titillating into the uncomfortable. Defining what makes us uncomfortable in an exploitation film is instrumental in determining its value, “As a genre, horror depends upon transgression for its effects. Its imagery traces the boundaries of taboo. In order to shock and thrill its audience it must affront our sense of decency, outrage proprieties and challenge the civilized” (Freshwater 249). The uncomfortable response for the viewer is the jarring difference between Ilsa’s pleasure-seeking sexuality and the visceral violence of torture that emphasizes the difference between the sexualized and non-sexualized nude body. In Jean-Pierre Geuens essay, *Pornography and the Holocaust: The Last Transgression* he discusses representations of the Shoah in modern cinema. In particular the failure and commodization of the event in “realistic” and melodramatic portrayals common in productions such as Jack Gold’s *Escape from Sobibor* (1987), Agnieszka Holland’s *Europa, Europa* (1990), Robert D. Young’s *Triumph of the Spirit* (1991), and Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993). He argues, “These films propel typical protagonists through the events of the times, effectively civilizing the Nazi horror through traditional narrative that equates the perpetrators with other, more conventional villains:
pirates, gangsters, monsters, Klingons” (Geuens 117). Geuens argues that the horror inflicted by the Nazis during the Holocaust was a transgressive moment of cruelty in history and that these melodramatic and realistic portrayals fail to demonstrate this on screen. He states, “What we witness through these stereotypes is a failure of the artistic imagination to reengage the past more forcefully. In this view, it matters little that these scenarios partake of the realistic or metaphorical mode; any deviation at this point, any transgression almost from the shrunken narrative that is now our lot could not but help us summon once again some passionate concern toward what actually took place” (Geuens 119). As a result, for Geuens, exploitation films depicting torture, sadomasochistic sexuality, in context of the Holocaust and Nazi cruelty has the potential of taking the viewer into that transgressive moment to communicate the limit and the horror of the historical experience. It is important here to stress that Geuens concludes his essay that although the handful of Italian nazisploitation films (Deported Women of the SS Special Sections (1976), SS Experiment Love Camp (1976), SS Hell Camp (1977), Nazi Love Camp #27 (1977)) do create this visceral sensation they fail to deliver any overall meaningful message: “Although one comes out of these films with a sense of personal degradation, this particular baseness remains at the local level, mired in the dissatisfaction with the films’ aesthetic ineptitude and their semantic inability to engage the existential and political consequences that should arise from the material harking back to Sade and Artaud” (Geuens 126).

Nevertheless, Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS is far closer to its Canuxploitation sisters than the Italian nazisploitation films it inspired. As a result the film uses the sensational element of a female villain challenging the chauvinist power structure with her sadomasochistic ideas to transgress social boundaries and deliver a message of political consequence in the film’s conclusion. This idea is established in the opening of the film: the camera travels across a bedroom revealing a blonde straddling a man, her breasts exposed, she exclaims, “Please, not yet!” Much to her disappointment the man finishes and she exits to shower where she suggestively masturbates with the showerhead. Only once Ilsa’s sexual satisfaction is shown, she exits dressed in her Nazi uniform and removes the man who we learn is a prisoner. From the start of the film the exploitive element is established by the power and control Ilsa wields with her need to be sexually
pleasured and how her nude body is depicted. This opening scene is immediately contrasted with the arrival of a new group of inmates. The women stand lined up, stripped naked, some of them forced to expose themselves as they attempt to cover their nudity. The viewer is made to see the prisoner from Ilsa’s perspective, as subjects being chosen and prepared for experimentation. The contrast on how to perceive the nude female body in the first ten minutes moves from titillating to the uncomfortable, forcefully subverting the sexual expectation of power and play between prisoner and warden featured in most ‘women in prison’ sexploitation films, such as Jess Franco’s 99 Women (1969), where the exploitive element is voyeurism and fantasy in a variety of sexual relationships.

The torture that follows in the picture are based on historical documents and include gang rape, hypothermia experiments, whipping, burning/boiling flesh, pressure-chamber endurance, and infection of various diseases such as syphilis and gangrene adjacent to experimental immunization treatments. The grotesque nature of the crimes practiced predominantly on the female body reinforces the film’s clear distinction between its main character’s sexual sensationalism and the historically documented crimes against humanity practiced by the Nazis. In the same way as Cannibal Girls it leaves the film with an unsure tone; it is not humorous, titillating, or amusing in its depiction of this content. The film certainly reinforces this with its main conflict; Ilsa becomes more determined and cruel with the arrival of an SS general to her camp to review her work and increases the number of experiments. Although the general shows some interest in her work after a particularly depraved dinner he demonstrates he is only interested in Ilsa sexually. He demands she have sex and forces her to urinate on him. At this point in the narrative, Ilsa has continued her relationship with Wolfe, taking more pleasure in him having control of her. The contrast of Ilsa’s two sexual relationships enforces a thematic reoccurrence on female liberation and sexual pleasure. Ilsa’s humiliation at the hands of the general demonstrates that none of her work matters for the SS or the Third Reich, he is only interested in Ilsa as a sex object. Yet, Ilsa has a similar attitude towards Wolfe, using him for her own pleasure. The prisoners they are able to manipulate this to take advantage of the commandant. Ilsa trusts Wolfe to tie her to the bed at which point he turns on her and the prisoners take over the camp to execute their revenge.
Seemingly, the film is set up for a classic fantasy revision of history for cathartic revenge. However, the conclusion of *Ilfa: She Wolf of the SS* delivers the same unexpected, unsatisfactory ending; the prisoners, infected, sterilized, castrated, choose to die getting their revenge on their perpetrators while Ilsa is left alive and tied to the bed frame. In the final moments, one of the brutally tortured prisoners manages to find Ilsa and brandishing a bloody knife above her it seems she will get the personal satisfaction of revenge. However she loses her strength and dies before being able to kill her. There is no satisfaction, no cathartic release in revenge. Instead, a young officer of the SS general enters and shoots Ilsa in the head without a word. Returning to the tank he calls the general, “Your orders have been carried out. Camp 9 has seized to exist. You may tell the Reich Fuehrer the allies will find nothing. They will never know,” while the camera closes in on his beaming smile. In Artaudian fashion, the world is turned upside down, Ilsa, who is probably the most cruel Nazi, of all is destroyed by those she has devoted her life and work to and those she has tried to please the most. In addition the film touches on an important historical moment in the last days of Hitler before the fall of Berlin in 1945, the destruction of concentration camps, evidence of human experiments, and any documents to do with the Final Solution. The final shot of the film shows Wolfe and his love interest Anna (Maria Marx) standing in the hills watching the evidence of the camp burn to the ground. The image freezes on them and the credits roll over, survivors of the camps horrors and tortures staring out at the audience, reminding us that the evidence of these camps exist in the real lived experience of survivors. The eyes are through which we have watched this transgression and through which these transgressions were seen and experienced. Foucault states, “Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitless into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time” (Foucault 35). Through this final scene, implicated in the gaze and the rolling credits, we are faced with this limit and the choice to accept or reject it. Finally, as one of the only positive reviews to come out of the film’s release in 1974, David James of the *Montreal Gazette* touched on this implication of the film’s violence:

“‘Ilfa, She Wolf of the SS’ is a violent film that touches on a sensitive period of contemporary history. But, to totally condemn it, is repudiation of reality. Crimes like the ones portrayed are part of our history and ignoring them only invites repetition. After all, millions of people endured
these horrors – and what right have we to insist their suffering be forgotten?” (James)

Although *Cannibal Girls* does not cross the limit, it challenges the convention in how the female villain can be portrayed. Ultimately, the villain cannot succeed; however how this is portrayed in both films is an important consideration for what contributes to the downfall of the women. In both films, in twisted and uncomfortable ways the women step outside of their expectations. Ilsa surpasses her male counterparts in cruelty and experiments for the Third Reich, while the cannibal girls prey on men by playing the role of a caregiver to manipulate their expectations in order to consume them. Both films then subvert the women’s authority and provide unsatisfactory and open endings that depict the protection of masculine failure. Gloria is reborn into a twisted new form of patriarchy, Ilsa is betrayed and punished, reminded she is not the same as her male counterparts. In the case of both these films the open-ended contemplation on punishing or finding a means to control the female gender seems to be a much too calculated statement at the end of both films. In this case I disagree with Dave Alexander’s claim the films unsatisfactory endings are an example of Canada’s lack of a strong cultural identity. Instead, the resistance to the Hollywood model by following the narrative through the characters leaves the film with a self-reflective quality. Why do we feel unsatisfied? Why do we feel uncomfortable? It is in testing the power and limit in the context of female characters the films offer a challenging view on how gender is expected to perform.
Conclusion

“Filmmakers are just generally the bottom of the barrel in the industry. It’s very hard to get respect and sell film and if people can screw you over they really will.”

- Chad Archibald, 2016

There is the notion suggested by film historian and critic Chris Alexander that a “good” horror film sometimes needs twenty years before it can be appreciated (C. Alexander). Although the idea that a film needs time to become meaningful is helpful in approaching Canadian genre cinema in the 70s it is still a problematic discourse. How do we define a “good” horror movie? One that elicits a strong visceral response or freaks-out the viewer, such as *The Exorcist*? One that establishes a new convention or style of filmmaking, like *The Blair Witch Project*? Or one that breaks formula to disrupt what is safe and assumed, in particular, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*? For the majority of horror aficionados these latter transgressive films have become the focus of most critical attention. As fans of the genre from the 70s and 80s have grown up, there has been a significant shift in discourse surrounding horror films. Magazines such as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Fangoria* have had to grow with their teenage fan base. For Chris Alexander, the third Editor in Chief of *Fangoria* in its forty-years ‘Fango’ “was the bible for those hungering to learn about the wizard behind the curtain. We wanted to know who made the magic tricks and how they did it and we wanted to see the things we were forbidden to see” (C. Alexander). However, the magic of blood, guts, and gore have dissipated over the years and the demand for new discourses on the cultural impact of horror created another boom of magazines in the late 90s; including Canada’s own *Rue Morgue Magazine*: “I remember exactly where I was when I found the second issue. It had H.R. Giger on the cover. It had an article on *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (1972) and it blew me away! Nobody was talking about these things and hadna’t for years! I nearly walked into oncoming traffic with my nose buried in the mag,” comments Chris Alexander (also a former contributor to *Rue Morgue*).

Later Chris Alexander would bring his experience to *Fangoria*, during his six-year tenure as EIC, giving the magazine new life as a progressive competitor against the

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2 Surrealist painter, Oscar winner of Best Achievement in Visual Effects for *Alien*
furiously expanding Rue Morgue. Most importantly, as the center of horror criticism and publication moved to Canada this prompted new conversations and focus on Canadian genre cinema. Dave Alexander (no relation to Chris Alexander), tells me he used his position as EIC of Rue Morgue in 2009 to bring together like-minded individuals to give Canadian genre films the same critical treatment and acknowledgment by passionate individuals who had spent years finding the films in “dusty VHS bins” and “late night broadcasts”. It made sense to cover the films as they “mainly started to be re-released on home video so people could find them” (D. Alexander). Forty years later, Canuxploitation films were finding their way into video stores and the pages of popular publications alongside new independent work. During his time at Rue Morgue Dave Alexander was committed to the magazine’s coverage of Canadian content, “we’ll make an extra effort to support Canadian films; aside from the fact they are from our own country, they often have a harder time competing against American titles, so I’ve always felt we could help balance it out in some small way” (D. Alexander). Much in the same way Chris Alexander used his time as EIC to find and bring attention to important figures of Canada’s pioneering years in the 70s: “I tracked down all the alumni and would screen Canadian horror films for my Film School at the Bloor and take them all out to dinner. I wrote about most of the big ones (Paul Zaza, John Dunning, André Link) and people that interested me.” Although Chris and Dave stress that the content of their magazines was not affected by one another, the established infrastructure covering Canadian genre film in conjunction with specialization in distribution of older genre titles gave a huge boost on a worldwide scale for Canuxploitation. Dave Alexander admits out of the proximity of the two magazines, “The only notable change I would say is that people started talking more about the GTA as a horror hub” (D. Alexander).

Today the conversations happening in the community when approaching or rediscovering older work is not to determine if the films are ‘good’, but how they continue to contribute to the ever-expanding and changing genre. Approaches in modern horror criticism have become an ongoing dialogue between past and present. As I mentioned in my introduction, in the last twenty years this has also made room for minority positions in the mainstream. The rise of feminist criticism and perspective of women who identify with horror has become an ever-expanding edition to the scene as
editors, critics, publishers, and directors. This in turn has prompted new discussions on representation from female characters on screen to those behind the scenes. As a woman who enjoys horror and a member of the independent horror industry it has been my intention to contribute to this growing body of work. I also firmly believe it is important to remain vigilant of the representations certain conventions perpetuate and to question why they have become normalized. In terms of the horror films explored in this thesis (*The Pyx, Black Christmas, Death Weekend, Cannibal Girls, Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*) my focus has been on incongruous elements that have made cross comparisons through conventions problematic in the past, predominately in the way the films have been received and criticized. I specifically chose films with female leads, as early in my research I found something very different in the women in the Canadian horror films in comparison to other portrayals I was accustomed to seeing. These women were different and I was determined to find out why. As stated by Tudor, “threat is the central feature of horror movie narrative, the organizing principle around which all else revolves” (8).

Although individuals present themselves as threats, the unsatisfactory endings across all five films follow a similar outcome; good girls are left vulnerable or dead because internal bias punishes instead of protect women who don’t conform while bad girls are punished for transgressing gender expectations. The threat always remains; stasis is never returned to but questioned.

In addition, I opted to defend the filmmakers by demonstrating physical and economic differences in the production of genre film in Canada to the rest of the world to not only show the challenging barriers unique to Canada but also to contextualize the different tradition Canadian film making comes from. Fifty years later generations of younger horror filmmakers today continue to operate in the same spirit of Cinépix: building stories around accessible resources with smaller crews and budgets, and for the most part distributing and retaining rights on the finished product. Particularly in the last ten years companies such as Black Fawn Films, Foresight Features, Astron-6, Twisted Twins, or the transnational Luchagore have gained notoriety for their collective pooling of resources, sharing traditional roles rather than abiding to a hierarchy of power, and delivering an exceptional quality of filmmaking on a microbudget. Microbudget continues to be a fairly new term and the industry (those who are unionized) tend to place
it within the $500,000 - $5,000,000 range. However, in private conversation with these collectives I was able to learn their budgets (and although I am not permitted to give specifics) the range for the majority of their films has been between $10,000 - $500,000 including postproduction costs. As the industry shifts towards microbudgets the increase in the amount of films being made and put out into the market has significantly impacted distribution. This has had a two-fold effect: less deals with bigger distributors who buy films outright for a high cost but an increase in smaller distributors who offer less money upfront but offer a significantly higher percentage of the cut in profit from sales. With fewer people going to the theatres, in addition to drops in sales of home video, the first option that used to sustain the industry is becoming an increasingly more risky investment (Lang). As a result companies such as Black Fawn Films have opted to distribute their own films (in partnership with United Front Entertainment and Breakthrough Features) as well as the films of other independent filmmakers under their sister company Black Fawn Distribution. Although offering smaller deals upfront to acquire new features, Black Fawn Distribution has consistently sent money from home video sales to the filmmakers, a fact they are proud of. However, owner Chad Archibald admits:

“’It’s a struggle. It’s just hard. You know we don’t go out and spend a shit ton of money on marketing. We do our marketing ourselves. We go out and we talk to people. We cover these conventions. Major distributors don’t come to these. They think it’s useless to just talk to a bunch of people here when they can go into Walmart and sell fifty times more. But for us we like to go out, and we like to talk to people. We like to engage with them, and we like to talk to people who have seen our films and can come back and tell us “that movies amazing” or “that movie sucks” (Archibald 4 Jun. 2016).

Advantages in the industry may just lie where Black Fawn Distribution is centering its efforts, selling a personal experience, a community and not just a horror film. Conventions play a huge role in building this relationship (Shock Stock, Horror Falls, Fan Expo) providing a space for fans and filmmakers to meet on a casual level, surpassing a middle-man, and building a fan base that will continue to grow and support their product.

As conversations around genre films continues to change, so does the way we receive the material. As horror films are increasingly appreciated for their variation more
so then their conformity it is important to find new perspectives and points of entrance to discussing Canadian genre film. Whether there is some sort of uniform cultural anxiety or repeating items in Canadian horror films, for myself personally, it has been an exciting endeavor to discover a group of films that criticizes society as a threat to women over a faceless, destructive individual. Overall, it is important to understand where our films came from and to appreciate the representations within them as a distinct cultural capital. In an ever-evolving community, fostering new discussion that values our artists own brand of maple-syrup gore will continue to build a competitive brand on the global market.
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