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# The Story of Monsters and Women: Canada's Interrogation of Hollywood's Horror

## **Abstract**

Rachel Gunn explores the indigenization of Hollywood genres, specifically the adaptation of the horror genre in a Canadian contest. Conflicts of nation intersect with those of gender as Gunn discusses the ways in which both John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and David Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers* (1988) invert the traditionally masculine horror genre by interrogating the concept of the monstrous feminine. Gunn compares the films' relationships to the Hollywood genre films from which they stem to the relationship between Canada and America as both the films and the nation are often perceived as similar to their monolithic cultural counterparts, but as Gunn argues, they differ in important ways.

## **Keywords**

Ginger Snaps, David Cronenberg, Jeremy Irons, Body Horror, Tom O'Regan, Dead Ringers

## **The Story of Monsters and Women: Canada's Interrogation of Hollywood's Horror**

By Rachel Gunn

Canadian national cinema is not exclusively in dialogue with a national, Canadian audience, but is creating a dialogue with a greater international cinema, particularly Hollywood cinema. There is arguably no definitive Canadian national identity, however, as Tom O'Regan states, "film institutions negotiate cleavages of ethnicity, gender, race, class and nation. It is an object of knowledge which narratively and discursively connects [a nation], society, the cinema, genre and various cultural differences" (O'Regan 8). Canadian cinema engages with the social, political, racial, ethnic, and physical landscape/environment of Canada, creating a Canadian cinematic discourse. Canada then becomes a reflective and reflexive element of Canadian cinema, engaging with dominant Canadian ideologies consciously/unconsciously and critically/uncritically. In this way Canadian genre films indigenize the genres they are engaging with as Zoe Druick writes in her essay, *Comsopolitans and Hosers*, "Genre...has tended to be dominated by Hollywood definitions. Thus, every engagement with genre is an engagement with or a rejection...of Hollywood" (165). The indigenization of genres not only comes from an engagement with Hollywood cinema through genres but also through the nature of genres. Genres themselves are in a constant state of change, differences in repetition, constant reworking, extending and transforming normative genre codes (Gittings 113). Genre, and more specifically the horror film genre, in Canadian Cinema is subjected to subversion, as David Pike states, "popular genres offered their own subversive qualities distinct from the proper artistic channels of auteur cinema...film-makers such as Cronenberg, Rozema, and Arcand incorporated alternative film-making into Hollywood tropes" (174). *Dead Ringers* (Cronenberg 1988) and *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett 2000) are English-Canadian horror films and this essay will examine how these films translate and rearticulate Hollywood genre conventions to tell Canadian stories, and more specifically how these translations act as interrogations and subversions of the horror genre and how these subversions reflect the dialogue between English-Canadian cinema and Hollywood genres.

This essay will explore exclusively English-Canadian cinema as both horror films come predominantly from an Anglophone Canadian culture that has "historically thwarted the self-determination of Quebec as a nation" (Gittings 104). Quebecois films must not only compete against Hollywood cinema but also fight against an ever present Anglophone Canadian colonialism, creating a Canadian cinema "composed of two divergent cinemas, 'Canadian' and Quebecois" (Gittings 105). Any discussion about Canada as a nation in this essay will be in reference to Anglophone Canada.

Canada is a nation in a constant state of becoming, its identity in a constant state of change, coming from its ever shifting social, economic and political environment that shapes a popular Canadian ideology. It is with this notion of Canada as a nation that its national identity shares the same nature as genre itself. Genre is in a constant state of introspection and outward dialogue with other genres, as Stephen Neale writes, "individual genres not only form part of a

generic regime, but also themselves change, develop and vary by borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another" (Neale 57). Canada is in a constant struggle of identity against the ever influential nation that is America. Much of English-Canadian identity comes from pinning Canada against America and sets out to create an identity that ascends above America's shortcomings. Canadian identity is an interrogation of American culture (while it is also its greatest influence) and with that, Canadian generic cinema interrogates Hollywood genres. It is through this interrogation and subversion of the genre of horror and its tropes that films like *Dead Ringers* and *Ginger Snaps* are able to indigenize this genre into an English-Canadian cinema.

*Dead Ringers* and *Ginger Snaps* both explore the horror trope, explained by Barbara Creed as "The monstrous feminine" (1) which defines the woman "primarily in relation to her sexuality, specifically the abject nature of her maternal and reproductive functions" (151). Female sex and sexuality is represented as vile and abject. Mary Russo refers to the vagina as a grotesque cave, associated with all the "detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion" (1-2). Adolescence begins this transformation from girl to monster as the horrors of puberty begin to change the female body. The period is seen not as the beginnings of womanhood, but of a curse that woman will not be able to survive. Much like the 1976 film *Carrie* (De Palma), in which Carrie discovers her period at the same time that her telekinesis comes to fruition, *Ginger Snaps* parallel the beginnings of Ginger Fitzgerald's period with that of her transformation into a monstrous lycanthrope (Short 1-2). The choice of monster is the first step in which director John Fawcett takes to interrogate the horror genre.

The werewolf film is dominated by male narratives. Male puberty is made monstrous through the male's transformation, giving the teenage boy insatiable urges of sex and violence (traditionally masculine traits). This is a representation that is shaped and formed by patriarchal ideologies that suggests, as Creed argues, "only phallic masculinity is violent and that femininity is never violent - not even in the imagination" (155). Traditionally the horror film was made by men for an intended male audience. These films often reiterate male fears surrounding sexual difference between men and women, or anxiety about female power in general (Short 2). Fawcett is able to subvert both these ideologies surrounding the horror genre through Ginger's transformation. Ginger takes on an assumed masculinity, in the form of a werewolf, becoming filled with sexual and violent lust. She dominates and feminizes her sexual partner, Jason, aggressively having sex with him and transmitting the curse to him, as blood excretes from his penis, a form of male period. In this way Jason becomes a male victim of the monstrous feminine, becoming feminized while also becoming a monster. Fawcett uses this to subvert the idea that "the male spectator is frequently asked to identify with a male monster that is feminized. He is feminized via the body; he bleeds, gives birth, is penetrated, and generally undergoes abject bodily changes associated with the feminine" (156). The film does not allow the audience to identify closely with Jason, or his monstrous transformation. After Jason's infection the narrative ignores him until he is used merely as an obstacle and a guinea pig for Bridgette, preventing her from giving the antidote to Ginger but also being the test subject for the antidote. Instead of

identifying with Jason, the narrative villainizes him, using him as a means to critique a hypocritical patriarchal ideology in regards to sexuality. He is viewed positively for his sexual endeavours, while Ginger is viewed negatively for the same actions, a hypocrisy she shows distain towards in the film. This critic can be seen as "A very Canadian deconstruction of traditional (American) masculine ideology - an exposition, and indeed, a subversion of the values it purports to espouse" (Pike 181). *Ginger Snaps* is not a film that asks male spectators to identify with a male victim/monster, but a film that is directed towards a female spectator, and their identification with the Fitzgerald sisters.

Ginger in her monstrous transformation does not only represent patriarchal ideologies of masculinity and male anxieties towards female sexuality but also represents a female anxiety of menstruation and womanhood. The Fitzgerald sisters fear starting their menstruation cycle, which to them represents the essence of femininity and womanhood and a weakening of their individuality and personhood. Simone de Beauvoir argues that "the menses inspire horror in the adolescent girl because they throw her into an inferior and defective category. This sense of being declassed will weigh heavily upon her. She would retain her pride in her bleeding body if she did not lose her pride in being human" (354). Ginger, however, grows to embrace her monstrosity and the film then

"[presents] two subversive forms of female subjectivity: Ginger...learns to derive pleasure from her monstrous identity and the power and sexual satisfaction it affords, while Brigitte...constantly struggles against her developing monstrosity and the bloodlust it produces, withdrawing from the system of sexual exchange that destroys the feminocentric kinship she values" (281).

Women, within a patriarchal ideology and within horror films, are pigeonholed into specific roles that have been assigned to womanhood: a bitch, a slut, a tease, or a virgin. Fawcett subverts the role of a monstrous bitch and the slut with Ginger, having her embrace her excess of violence and sexuality which become so exaggerated they "are exposed as masculine constructions" (182). Fawcett also exposes the destructive nature of these patriarchal categories, as the sisters become separated from each other as they align with different notions of femininity. The separation is complete with Ginger's death as she embraces the monster that society, and the horror genre, view her to be. This is not the only way in which Fawcett subverts this form of femininity; another subversion comes from the use of suburban domestic space within his film.

The domestic sphere is traditionally viewed as a feminine sphere, exclusive to women and the family (while men control the public sphere) in genres such as melodrama and horror. Both genres use the home as a means of contention, changing the *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*. This transformation is used in melodrama to address the problems and restriction of the domestic space, and in horror to bring a sense of anxiety and unease. Fawcett creates a Canadian suburban landscape, filming in Canadian locations that are "based on the Canadian suburb where John Fawcett was raised" (Barker, Methijs, Mendik 68). The suburbs are first revealed as *unheimlich* in the opening scene. The audience is presented with a quiet suburb but then the focus is brought to on the neighbour's backyard where it is revealed their pet dog has been brutally killed. The

Fitzgerald sisters also make the suburb *unheimlich* through their school project in which they photograph themselves being killed by domestic items, such as a garage door and a gardening hoe. Juxtaposing the scenes of violence with themes of the domestic not only generates the *unheimlich* of the domestic but also of that of the so called feminine. It is the domestic which is killing women. The *unheimlich* domestic is not generated by the male anxiety of the feminine but by female anxiety of the restrictions of the domestic sphere and femininity. *Dead Ringers* on the other hand reveals the destructive nature of male anxiety of the feminine, more specifically castration anxiety, by making the men into monsters instead of the castrating woman.

*Dead Ringers* also characterizes the female vagina as grotesque. The grotesque, however, does not come from a female's adolescence or the starting of the menstrual cycle but from the mutation of Claire Niveau's (Genevieve Bujold) vagina. Claire is a woman with three cervixes and is unable to become pregnant. The twin gynaecologists' Beverley and Elliot Mantle (Jeremy Irons) fascination with female genitalia is what sparks not only their relationship with Niveau but also begins their descent into madness brought on by castration anxiety. Niveau becomes first Bev's and then Elliot's lover. They both sleep with her disguised as Beverley. When she realizes what they have done she is disgusted by their actions but ultimately stays exclusively with Beverley. It is this choice that starts the anxiety of separation between the twins, as well as an anxiety of castration. Barbara Creed describes Castration anxiety differently from Freudian analysis. According to Freud, castration anxiety produced by an infancy belief that the mother is phallic, and the discovery that she has no phallus causes castration anxiety. For Creed, however, castration anxiety is "a terrifying phantasy of sexual difference" (Creed 158). The threat of castration is "not something enacted in the real; it is *always* symbolic" (160). The symbolic castration manifests itself to Beverly in the form of Beverly's dream in which Claire is ripping the flesh that connects the brothers as conjoined twins within the dream. This castration anxiety causes Beverly's spiral into madness, using the female body as a screen on which he has projected his fantasies of women ever since childhood. He devises a grotesque set of gynaecological tools that resemble tools of torture "manufactured for working on what he increasingly perceives as the mutant reproductive systems of women" (Gittings 278). He relates the source of his separation and castration anxiety to the vagina and unlike *Ginger Snaps*, the female reproductive system is made grotesque is through the brothers' increasingly sickening view of the female body. Beverley's fascination with the vagina has turned into an obsession of creating the perfect vagina which every female he experiments on fails to have; a need to "uncover and control the mysteries of the womb" in their roles as gynaecologists (Creed 133). The castrating woman is not the monster within the film, rather the monster within the minds of the twins, in which "the Mantles' phallic masculinity, manifests in their misogynist fantasies of monstrous, mutant women" (Gittings 280). This subverts the assumption that, as Barbara Creed puts it in her book *The Monstrous Feminine*, "the *femme castratrice* controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object... the male spectator, who identifies with his screen surrogate, is clearly placed in a powerless situation" (153-155). As mad gynaecologists, the brothers are not the victim of the *femme castratrice* but in fact hold control over the source of castration, the

vagina. Beverley performs sadistic examinations on the female body, while the female victim becomes his object. The male spectator does not identify with the supposedly powerless situation but is shown through the excess of Beverly's misogynistic violence the masculine construction of the female grotesque.

Both *Ginger Snaps* and *Dead Ringers* generate an excess of violence and sexuality within the films as a means to deconstruct the horror genre and its tropes. Both interrogate the notion of the female reproductive system as grotesque, *Ginger Snaps* presenting grotesque characterization as destructive to women while *Dead Ringers* exposes the misogynistic violence that comes about from patriarchal ideology. *Ginger Snaps* takes on the feminine perspective exploring not only the destructive nature of not only the monstrous feminine, but also the domestic suburbs and gender roles while *Dead Ringers* deconstructs the maternal castrator and male castration anxieties through the mental deterioration of a Canadian gynaecologist. It is important to note that "the same excess that 'interrogates' also 'indulges'; popular genres are double-edged, not unified in texts and viewers were able just as easily to accept the constructions, however excessive, as to see through them" (Pike 182). *Ginger Snaps* and *Dead Ringers* are also part of the horror genre and incorporate the genre's tropes into their narrative and aesthetic. Genres also include audience expectations and these films subvert and deconstruct these expectations, while at the same time indulging them, to interrogate and create a dialogue with the Hollywood version of the genre. *Ginger Snaps* and *Dead Ringers* indigenize the horror genre into an English-Canadian cinema, reflecting on Canada's relationship with America; being simultaneously like America and unlike America. English-Canadian culture is at once assimilating with a monolithic American culture but at the same time able to deconstruct that culture, much like how popular Canadian genre films at once adhere to generic tropes while also interrogating those tropes.

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