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Crafting Fear: The Horror Film Trailer

Abstract: *My research project investigates horror film trailers in an effort to define the characteristics of this genre and discuss its ideological implications. Focusing on theatrical trailers for American wide-release horror films between 2013 and 2017, I closely viewed a sample of forty trailers to inform my investigation. Horror trailers create an intense emotional experience of both dread and fear, tending to follow a similar narrative structure and employ a common set of stylistic techniques to achieve this emotional intensity. The shared stylistic techniques include elements such as tight framing, innocent imagery, and genre misdirection. The repetition of these elements promotes certain values and beliefs while silencing or marginalizing others. For example, I focus my analysis on how the horror trailer genre portrays gender. Certain characters in horror trailers are commonly cast into roles of feminine weakness and feminine monstrosity, creating a false dichotomy. Further, I argue that horror trailers have persuasive potential to shape cultural beliefs and actions by perpetuating harmful stereotypes.*

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Crafting Fear: The Horror Film Trailer

Movie trailers are everywhere. No longer are the days when trailers were only a theatre affair, shown before a main feature to let the audience know what movies would be released soon. Instead, trailers are nearly unavoidable. Entire YouTube channels are dedicated to showing trailers, for both new films and old. The first trailer for an anticipated film will be a huge event, premiering at conventions and film festivals, or during large television events. Streaming services such as *Hulu* and Comcast's *On Demand* consistently update a collection of trailers for their subscribers to view at any time, day or night.

As much as trailers are a form of entertainment, potentially viewed by far more people than the films the trailers aim to advertise, trailers are also a form of advertisement. These powerful, multi-modal texts aim to persuade viewers to purchase a ticket to see the whole film. In only a couple of minutes, the trailers have to provide an exhilarating experience that the audience will buy-in to the fuller version provided by the feature film. How the trailer accomplishes this huge feat is therefore of rhetorical significance, and worthy of closer study.

Existing research suggests that trailers form sub-genres based on the genre of the film they advertise—for example, a trailer for a romantic comedy has different genre conventions from a trailer for an action movie. Research on horror movie trailers, specifically, is lacking. My aim in this paper is twofold: to map out the genre conventions of horror film trailers, and to argue that trailers for horror films tend to follow a similar script and rely on a shared set of stylistic, narrative, and persuasive elements. Because horror trailers are structured and styled similarly, I argue that they also tend to promote similar values, that, due to repeated exposure, can participate in constructing what is considered “normal” or acceptable in our society.

My analysis begins with a review of trailer and horror genre research. Next, I define the horror trailer subgenre before exploring the different ideological messages horror genre trailers perpetuate, focusing on the trailers' presentations of femininity. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

Literature Review: The Horror of Trailers

Film trailers are audiovisual promotional materials created to advertise feature films to general audiences. The odd name was coined in the early years of cinema when advertisements would appear at the end of a feature (Johnston 22). This trend did not last long, as cinema owners witnessed patrons leaving early; however, the name has stuck. Previously in the primary domain of marketing research, trailers have only recently begun to be seen by some scholars as short narratives worthy of academic criticism.

One of the early scholarly works to look in-depth at trailers in this light is Lisa Kernan's book, *Coming Attractions: Reading the American Film Trailer*. Kernan describes the history of trailers in America, not only discussing how they have evolved, but also emphasizing the significance of trailers' messages and the effects they have on those who watch them. In her chapter about the rhetoric of film trailers, she describes trailers as making one of three main arguments: genre, story, or star. That is, trailers attempt to convince viewers to buy tickets to see films based on the genre conventions of the film being advertised (genre); the narrative features of the film (story); or the actors or famous directors that are associated with the piece (star) (Kernan 41). Using these constructs, she reviews many key examples throughout cinema's trailer history to point out how these arguments are crafted). However, missing from Kernan's otherwise thorough analysis is an investigation of how trailers from different genres might influence her model.

More recently, Charlotte Jensen also tackled the work of trailers by looking intimately at how trailers are structured. In *Reduced Narration, Intensified Emotion*, she focuses on how trailers prioritize the genre of the film, only including “narrative parts from the film which support, and sustain, the basic emotional tone” (Jensen 107). Exploring three different trailers from three different genres—a romantic-drama, comedy, and fantasy—Jensen demonstrates through her analysis that the editors of these trailers compromise the chronology and nuanced complexity of the full-length films. Instead, the trailers present a unified emotional experience that fits with each film’s respective genre, presenting the typical elements that are expected in that genre (Jensen 121). I agree with her assertion that trailers rely on audience expectations for genre conventions and emotional tone, compromising narrative complexity. However, Jensen does not identify the conventions of horror trailers specifically, which is what my project seeks to accomplish.

Different genres are commonly denoted by their inclusion of familiar iconography, settings, or characters (Schatz 456). Horror film trailers are no exception to this general categorization. Horror trailers will often feature familiar settings, such as a classic haunted house, threatening woods, or isolated basement. Iconic images, such as large knives, occult symbols, and blood spatters and pools are also commonly emphasized throughout both the horror film and trailer.

Although iconography is possibly the most easily recognizable genre marker, there are many others that can separate one film genre from another. Horror, more than any other film genre, is also commonly denoted by the anticipated emotional experiences the film creates. Horror films not only create horror; they also create related feelings of shock, dread, and terror (Hanich 8). Particularly relevant to the discussion of trailers are the experiences of horror and

dread. Horror can be considered the frightening, overwhelming imagery, often acts of violence or images of a dangerous monster (Hanich 82). Dread, on the other hand, is an intense, anticipatory type of fear, where the audience is certain something awful will happen, but is not sure of what exactly that horror will be (Hanich 156). In the horror film trailer, these two emotional experiences take prominence, utilizing specific stylistic and narrative elements to support the back-and-forth of these related emotional tones.

Horror's real socio-cultural effects are lamented by Ken Gelder in the opening of his 2002 anthology, *The Horror Reader*. Horror films provide ways of defining “what is evil (and what is good) in societies, what is monstrous (and what is “normal”), and what should be seen (and what should remain hidden) (1).” Although Gelder was focused on horror films and literature, I postulate that his claims can be extended to encompass any cultural product defined as part of the “horror genre,” including film trailers. Works of art that portray the strong emotions of fear, dread, and disgust, and focus on topics commonly categorized as abject are prime for powerful reactions. Viewers are deeply affected by this kind of media, but they generally focus so much on their own phenomenology, they passively accept the repeated messages the pieces portray (Hanich 55). These intense emotional experiences that promote passive acceptance of ideologies are a large part of what makes the horror genre such a strong force in society. Horror film trailers, marked by similar horror conventions of the full-length film, supply similar persuasive functions—demonstrating what is normal and what is not, monstrous or not, in only a few short minutes.

Horror Trailer Genre Conventions

While conducting research, I viewed forty film trailers released between 2013 and 2017 that could be categorized as a part of the horror genre (see Appendix). I considered a trailer a

horror trailer if it was created to market a horror film. The categorization of a film as part of the horror genre was based on consensus reached on popular reviewing sites such as *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, *Rotten Tomatoes*, and *Metacritic*.

In order to keep my research succinct, I chose six specific trailers to act as representative samples of the genre as a whole, picking films from different horror sub-genres. The focused films are as follows.

- James Wan's *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2013)
- Kimberly Peirce's *Carrie* (2013)
- Gregory Plotkin's *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (2015),
- Robert Egger's *The Witch* (2015) (Also known as *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale*)
- Fedre Alvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016)
- M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016)

Although all trailers I watched were considered in conducting my analysis (see Appendix), the listed trailers will be featured as representative examples in the sections that follow. I selected these examples based on the range of horror sub-genres that they represent: historical (*The Witch*), supernatural (*Carrie*), serial killer (*Split*, *Don't Breathe*), ghost story (*Insidious: Chapter 2*, *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*), and psychological (*The Witch*, *Don't Breathe*, *Split*). This range of horror sub-genres demonstrate that, despite how different the individual films may claim to be, the theatrical trailers still exhibit a similar set of conventions.

The following section specifically describes what defines the horror trailer of contemporary, mainstream cinema. I start by describing the general structure of these trailers, then move on to specific stylistic elements that the trailers utilize, including narrative misdirection, the theme of innocence corrupted, shot lengths, transitions, and references to other films.

General Structure

Trailers for horror films tend to follow a specific script, placing scenes in an often-predictable order. This pattern can be seen, sometimes with slight variation, in nearly every contemporary horror film trailer I watched. The typical timeline is as follows:

1. The cast of protagonists and side characters are introduced. The mood is lighter, seemingly unlike a horror film (see Narrative of Misdirection below).
2. The music gradually becomes louder and more eerie as a full scene unravels. The audience starts to understand that not all is well. A loud noise, commonly paired with a quick cut, and a horrifying image take up the screen. It is now clearly a horror trailer.
3. A narrative is strung together through a mix of short scenes of varying lengths. The music gradually becomes louder and more intense with each scene.
4. The music slows, or sometimes stops completely. The trailer presents a full scene, often of a person walking up to something eerie or looking around with a frightened expression. Suddenly, a horrific image is revealed with a loud, piercing noise.
5. Next, there is a quick montage of horrific imagery. The music is at its loudest and the rhythm of the trailer the quickest. Images that reference other horror films and the theme of corrupted innocence commonly occur here.
6. The music reaches a climax and abruptly slows, revealing the title card for the film.

7. The trailer generally ends in one of two scenarios:
 1. Another slow scene culminating in a jump scare, incredibly similar to step 4, or,
 2. A short clip (between 2 and 3 seconds) of the horrific subject or a screaming face in agony.

With this general structure in mind, the following paragraphs will discuss the common stylistic elements that make the general structure so successful.

Narrative of Misdirection

Soft music, smiling faces, calm—these three phrases are not commonly used to describe horror films. However, the horror film trailer is a different story. A large majority of contemporary horror trailers first introduce their film through a type of genre misdirection. Put differently, the audience is led to believe that they are watching a trailer for one type of film, such as a family drama or coming-of-age story, before there is an abrupt shift to the advertised film's more horrific reality.

A prominent example is in the trailer for the 2016 film, *Don't Breathe*. The trailer opens to shots of a broken-down neighborhood. We see a young woman, Rocky (Jane Levy), chastised by an older female character (Katia Bokor) about having swollen lips and asserting that she may be prostituting herself for money. Rocky promises a younger girl (Emma Bercovici) that they will someday move away together. The music is calm, and the tone of the trailer seems more akin to a coming-of-age drama. This mood continues for nearly a minute into the trailer, as Rocky is then seen with two friends and laments of her desire to move away. Next, the trio agree to rob a house and the audience is assured that the girl will finally have enough money to move away. The theme of living a rough life and coming of age is abruptly cut, but not until almost a

complete minute into the trailer, when the man they are robbing (Stephen Lang) shoots and kills one of the teenagers.

A misdirection right from the start of a horror trailer, such as the one described in *Don't Breathe*, keeps audiences on their toes. They know early on not to trust the trailer, as what they are seeing is clearly not what it seems. The misdirection is clearly marked by a sudden appearance of horrific imagery. When the horror of the trailer is revealed, the audience experiences a jolt of music alongside the image of something they are meant to fear (e.g., a murder).

Another example of misdirection that most clearly illustrates the surprising jolt is featured in the trailer for *Insidious: Chapter 2*. The opening is categorized by music and imagery more suited to a heart-warming family drama. Gradually, the music becomes more eerie. There is a scene of a young mother (Rose Byrne) looking around the room, concerned for her baby. Although tension has been building, the true misdirection does not occur until, suddenly, a ghostly woman is seen walking behind her, accompanied by a jolt of music when the apparition gets up and walks away. From that point on, the trailer is unmistakably marked as one for a horror film, with intense music and familiar horror iconography such as blood and old children's toys. Iconography, especially that associated with both horror and children, is a common mark of the horror film trailer.

Common Theme: Innocence Corrupted

Children are terrifying—at least, that is what horror trailers suggest. Throughout many horror film trailers, certain elements in the mise-en-scene and sound design, such as the prevalence of toys and nursery rhymes, suggest the presence of children, and thus innocence.

However, the presence of these innocent elements in horror trailers, often juxtaposed with images of ghosts, weapons, cobwebs, and blood, bring across a theme of innocence being corrupted. These innocent objects and songs are not what they seem, adding to the feeling of not being able to trust the narrative. Additionally, as these symbols of innocence are covered in cobwebs, associated with ghosts, or sung at a lower, slower pitch, the music and items are clearly changed by the horror elements of the story.

For example, in trailers for both *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* and *Insidious: Chapter 2*, songs associated with children are heard. In *Paranormal Activity* two young girls repeat “Bloody Mary” in a sing-song tone of voice, similar to how children play. However, the repetition does not end at the typical three times, as the folktale requires. About 30 seconds after the first appearance of the “Bloody Mary” chant, the girls are heard singing it once again, however at a slower pitch, while images of occult symbols and dark shadows appear on screen.

Comparatively, in *Insidious: Chapter 2*, the song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” is sung by a low, scratchy voice of a woman, seemingly distorted as it is heard through a baby monitor. However, even when the scene with the baby monitor ends, the same distorted quality is given to the music being heard. The song is repeated, sung at a slower rate than commonly experienced. The slower speed in collaboration with the distorted quality of the woman’s voice makes the song seem much more unnerving than the song is usually perceived.

In addition to childlike songs and rhymes, horror movie trailers also often incorporate children’s toys and drawings. For example, *Split*’s trailer features shots of child-like drawings plastered on a wall and *Insidious: Chapter Two* features many scenes with toys, such as rocking horses and toy cars. Part of these inclusions, as with the music we discussed before, could be

references to other earlier works that similarly used childlike imagery, such as contemporary, successful films like *The Conjuring* (2013) and *The Ring* (2001), or older classics such as *The Shining* (1980), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Night of the Hunter* (1955). However, references are only a part of the effect of corrupted child-like imagery.

Children could be considered the paragon of innocence, calling back to John Locke's theory of *tabula rasa*, where children are born as blank slates, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (Sullivan & Greenberg 45). Images that remind us of the evil-child, the opposite of said prototypes, brings forth fears of what Julia Kristeva, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, would call the abject—things that do not fit into society's boundaries for different categories of things. Thus, evil children, and I suspect images and music that remind us of such a trope, elicit feelings of discomfort or dread based on the evil child being the opposite of how society typically perceives children. The evil child is seen as corruption of a natural order—in this case a natural innocence.

Visual Framing: Close and Wide Shots

New footage is not created solely for most film trailers. Instead, trailers are a mix of clips and audio from the full-length film, and occasionally include scenes that were filmed to be included in the movie but cut from the finished product for various reasons. Thus, when discussing typical technical features regarding the trailer, it is important to consider both what editors choose to include and what they choose to exclude in the final product.

Generally, horror film trailers aim to restrict our vision, offering only limited information about what is occurring at any given time. This experience is emphasized through the types of shots used, the most popular one being the close shot. A close shot often consists of extreme

close-ups on characters or objects but can also constitute certain framing decisions within a shot. An extreme close-up is described as a shot that shows anything less than a full human face. Extreme close-ups on objects or other body parts, however, are often noted by the object taking up most of the frame (Bordwell et al. 189). Extreme close-ups bring the audience to a close social distance, a distance noted by its lack of privacy, and cause the audience to closely experience whatever the character is feeling (Kress & Van Leeuwen 131). Extreme close-ups on characters in horror trailers generally focus on the eyes, showing the characters in fear of whatever they are seeing. By being so close to the character, the audience feels a sense of intimacy with them.

However, the closeness of a shot can also inspire fear through its lack of information (Hanich 164). The tightness of a frame also restricts the viewer's vision, often cutting out most, if not all, background from the focused image. The camera in a tight frame only shows the audience what it wants them to see. In these tight frames, the audience may see the character reacting to something, but not what they are reacting to. In many scenes from the trailer for *Insidious: Chapter Two*, Renai (Rose Byrne) clutches her mouth with a fearful expression, clearly seeing something horrible, but the audience is not allowed to know what that is. The character's look of horror is all the information they receive, leaving the audience to only imagine what horror could have inspired that fear.

Another example of a close shot within a tight frame is in a pivotal moment in the *Split* trailer. Three girls are trapped in a room, trying to escape, when they decide to look through a crack in a door. When the characters do so, the audience is shown a point-of-view shot from one of them. Much of the screen goes black, with only a slit of light in the middle. The frame is

focused tightly on the image of a woman's leg and heels. Just like the characters, the audience is denied the sight of anything else.

Tight framing can also help in the re-editing of scenes to imply certain events will occur in the film, regardless of if they actually will. A close shot will cut out any details from a scene that could reveal any chronological manipulation in the story. For example, in *The Witch* trailer, a combination of shots is included of the father (Ralph Ineson) firing a gun, cut to a stream of blood pooling in a stack of hay, and then a quick shot of the young son (Harvey Scrimshaw) writhing in pain with blood on him. Each of the three shots is framed closely, making it easy to miss the changing backgrounds in each shot. A typical watcher would likely assume these three shots are somehow connected, wondering how a father could shoot his son. Through the selection of shots with tight framing, the editors can imply this scenario for viewers, even though in the full film these shots are not at all related.

Transitions

Transitions are editing techniques used to connect one frame to another, or one scene to the next. In contemporary films the most common editing transition is the simple cut: putting one frame next to another (Bordwell et al. 217). However, in the horror trailer genre, different transitional techniques are far more common.

The two main transitions that are used in the horror trailer are cuts to black and slow fades. The cuts to black largely operate as punctuation marks, abruptly cutting a scene, usually right after a horrific discovery and accompanied with piercing music. If a cut leaves the screen black for a moment, the audience has a second of pause as the image or audio they last experienced is stamped on their mind. One of the most prominent examples of this occurs early

in the *Witch* trailer. As the family is shown from behind, raising their arms in prayer, the camera slowly zooms into the image of the woods, music intensifying. Suddenly, the scene cuts to a black screen and the music goes silent.

However, at times the cut to black will occur quite differently. If the cut to black is incredibly short before cutting back to a new shot, the experience is nearly opposite. The scenes move more quickly, speeding up time as it cuts from shot-to-shot, the quick peak of black creating a flashing like effect. Near an intense montage in the *Don't Breathe* trailer, the scenes slow for just a moment, showing Rocky (Jane Levy) pausing before a light turns on behind her, revealing a captive woman. As the woman jumps at her, the scene quickly cuts to black and returns to the scene, repeating this pattern seven times. The quick cuts emphasize the woman's movements but stops the audience from getting a clear look at her. Thus, instead of emphasizing the woman's captivity and showing her gesture forward as a cry for help, the quick cuts to black distort the audience's ability to gain a full picture. Instead, the captive woman is only a terrifying image attacking the main heroine.

The other main transition employed in horror film trailers is the slow fade. Most commonly, this transition is used after a cut to black in which the screen is black for a few seconds. Then, the scene will fade back in, usually opening to a different scene, filled with more suspense or mysteriousness than the last. These slow fades work to delay the scenes in the trailer, seemingly indicating some passage of time, such as in the case of an example from *Insidious: Chapter 2*. Renai (Rose Byrne), is shown being comforted by her husband. The scene cuts to black, then slowly fades back in to a shot of Renai under a red light, looking over a sleeping baby. The scene next slowly fades out to a short clip of black, then back in. Renai is shown in a medium close-up looking to her right, the framing unbalanced to put Renai on the left side of the

frame and open space on the right. The music emphasizes this tone shift here, as the trailer's previous soft music has faded out to complete silence, preparing for the music of a child's toy to disrupt the silence.

These two transition techniques often coincide with one another. For example, in an intense moment within the trailer for *Carrie* (2013), the scene cuts to a close-up of the mother (Julianne Moore), begging for something from her daughter (Chloe Grace Moretz). Next there is a reaction shot of the daughter responding, before cutting back again to the mother opening a closet. The scene then abruptly cuts to black as we hear the mother say, "Get in your closet." The scene slowly fades back in, revealing the daughter slowly backing away, shaking her head. In the next shot, the mother jumps at her daughter with an intense jolt of music. The scene cuts to black once again for a moment before cutting back in to the scene, showing the mother shoving her daughter into the closet. As she throws the young girl inside, the scene does a quick cut to black, before cutting back in, illustrating a similar flashing-like effect such as the one in the *Don't Breathe* trailer. The various transition techniques commonly shown in horror trailers are all effectively utilized in this one short scene in the *Carrie* trailer, building the scene's intensity with each transition.

References to Earlier Films

As discussed previously, trailers must communicate a lot of information about a film in a short period of time to get the audience to invest in seeing the full film. One of the most pervasive strategies trailers utilize are references to other horror films. Audiences who are already fans of horror movies can catch these references, whether they are fully aware of them or not, and thus start to associate the film that is being advertised to the older film that it references.

Thus, the trailers imply that, since the older film was enjoyable or scary, the current film that they are advertising will be too.

References to other horror movies are nearly unavoidable in the horror trailer genre. One of the prominent examples within my sample is from the trailer for *Don't Breathe*. The last thirty seconds of the trailer consists of the two teenage characters (Jane Levy and Dylan Minnette) sneaking around a basement, trying to escape from a man who is hunting them. The scene is shot in a way that mimics night-vision as the audience is shown close-ups of Rocky (Levy's character) feeling around the room and trying to see in the dark. The scene immediately calls to mind the famous climax from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1999), in which Clarice Starling is searching around a darkened basement for the serial killer Buffalo Bill. The famous scene is shown partly through the eyes of the killer wearing night-vision goggles. *Don't Breathe* is perhaps referencing this Academy Award-Winning film not only to pay homage to it, but also to convey the message that this film will be similar to the iconic one. This is beneficial not only for associating *Silence of the Lamb's* name recognition and critical success with *Don't Breathe*, but also perhaps to attract audience members who may not be typical horror watchers, as *Silence of the Lambs* often attracts, signaling that this film will not be a 'typical' jump scare filled horror film, but instead more like a high-brow thriller.

References to other films in the same franchise can serve a similar function. The 2015 remake of the film *Carrie* made sure that the audience knew it was related to the original film from 1976. The trailer emphasized two iconic scenes that appeared in the previous film—the iconic locker room tampon-throwing and Carrie's prom night massacre. In *Insidious: Chapter 2* and *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*, the films call back to earlier installments in the series. In the first few seconds of the *Insidious: Chapter 2* trailer, the text, "Their child inherited

a gift” displays on the screen, and Patrick Wilson’s character says, “We have our son back.” The trailer is careful to not give away exactly what happened in the first film but does make an obvious nudge to a knowledgeable audience who has seen the first one. Those original fans will know what the text and Wilson’s character is referring to. They might remember how they felt during the first film, so they can come to expect a similar experience from viewing the sequel.

Similarly, but perhaps more subtlety, the *Paranormal Activity* trailer primarily references earlier chapters in the series by the little girl’s mention of a character named “Toby,” a ghost that had appeared in the *Paranormal Activity* films previously. Again, the reference is not obvious to audience members who have not seen the previous films, which is important, as the film is meant as a spin-off rather than a continuation of the previous storyline. However, those who have seen and enjoyed the previous *Paranormal Activity* films might be reminded of the terror they experienced previously and feel assured that the stories will be connected.

Discussion of Horror Trailer Genre Conventions

The genre of the horror film trailer can be described based on a shared general structure and similar stylistic decisions—misdirection, innocence corrupted *mise-en-scene*, shot lengths, transitions, and references to other works. The collection of all these techniques create a type of ‘genre script’ for the horror film trailer—that is, a list of general expectations the trailers are edited to follow. This script, however, is constantly evolving. This genre analysis focused on horror film trailers from the last five years (2013-2017). If a similar analysis had been conducted twenty years ago, different scripts may have been discovered. Similarly, I expect that in the next ten years, trailers will change based on audience expectations and through the success of different films.

Despite the constantly evolving nature of these scripts, pointing out the patterns in movie trailers is important and valuable for understanding how these narratives can affect cultural beliefs. The ideological message in one trailer may not necessarily be an issue. However, as all horror trailers follow a very similar script, they also tend to promote similar ideologies. Isolated cultural messages may not be persuasive, but those repeated time and time again may have a stronger effect. As the genre script of the trailer changes with time, so does the ideology and cultural shaping beliefs with it. Defining the genre script is the first step in discussing the effects that trailers can have on those who watch them. In the following section, I will look at only a few of the endless number of ideological implications of horror trailers, and how they might participate in shaping viewers' beliefs and actions.

Victims and Monsters: The Dichotomy of Femininity in the Horror Trailer

Although trailers could be ripe for various other focuses of criticism, this analysis will focus on one the most prevalent: presentations of femininity in both male and female characters. The horror film genre has long been a focus of feminist criticism, owing to the works of scholars such as Carol Clover and Barbara Creed. In her famous analysis, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Clover analyzes the horror sub-genres of slasher, possession, and rape-revenge films. She discusses how different gendered conventions affect how audience members will identify with protagonist characters, while Barbara Creed, on the other hand, focused on the monsters of horror films in her book, *The Monstrous-Feminine*. She argues that the monsters of horror films represent the abject mother figure, portraying feminine characteristics that link it to the fear of a castrated, castrating, or phallic mother of Freudian psychology.

Both Clover and Creed's work discuss femininity, a trait commonly, though not exclusively, associated with women. This trait is largely shown as a dichotomy in contemporary horror trailers, not too unlike what has been seen in horror films of earlier years. Either femininity is shown as weak, such as in the case of young women and mothers who are portrayed as helpless victims, or femininity is portrayed as monstrous. Femininity, when associated with someone who is not a mother nor a virginal young girl, is a sign of mystery and danger. These ideas are perpetuated most prominently using camera-subject interactions, editing associations, and the character's own physical appearances. Using these elements, I will discuss in detail how femininity is portrayed in some characters as weak, while in others it is shown as monstrous. Finally, I will end the section with an evaluation of the horror trope, "The Final Girl."

Young and Beautiful: Weak Femininity

Femininity as associated with weakness has a long history, far pre-dating horror as a genre in literature and the invention of film as a medium. The display of feminine characters as being weak is most commonly shown with female characters who are also deemed desirable by the social majority. In the case of horror trailers, these characters tend to be young girls and beautiful mothers. Since women who are desirable in society are also the ones most commonly shown as weak, the trailers suggest that the ideal form of womanhood and female femininity is to be victimized. Not only are characters who fit into these roles shown as weak, but their femininity is often heavily emphasized (or even exaggerated).

There seems to be an unspoken rule in horror film trailers that the more feminine a character is, especially if she is younger, the more likely she is to be a victim. The most feminine characters in a trailer are often the ones that are shown crying and screaming the most, and/or seem to be the focus of the monster or killer's attention. These characters are pointed out by their

associations with traditionally feminine items and physical appearances. The most obvious example of this connection are all three young girls from the trailer for *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*.

The trailer opens to an image of two little girls, both in long white nightgowns with flowing long hair. One of the little girls is sensing something, as it is revealed that the image we are watching is actually from a videotape the film's protagonist has discovered. Moments later, another little girl, Leila (Ivy George), enters the room. She is revealed to be the main character's daughter. Leila is also shown with long dark hair and is wearing a pink and blue, feminine pajama set. The trailer primarily focuses on Leila for the remainder of the narrative, revealing her to be the victim of a paranormal possession. In the scenes that follow, Leila is shown standing in front of a mirror in all white, her long hair undone. For the rest of the trailer, Leila is primarily seen in this dress, similar to the little girls from before. Additionally, the audience is shown Leila's bedroom with similar feminine characteristics, such as dolls and multi-colored polka dots.

The white nightgown creates an association between the girls and an innocent chastity often desired of young girls and women. Leila's multiple scenes in front of a mirror also suggest the association between her and vanity, another trait commonly associated with femininity. Her feminine characteristics are strongly emphasized throughout the events of the trailer, following her possession and family's fear for her. The young girl's weakness is even further emphasized by her relationship with the audience, mediated through the camera. Young Leila is often shown from a high-angle, the audience looking down at her. As the trailer is filmed from a first-person perspective, it makes sense that Leila is looked down upon, as she is shorter than the male characters who are commonly holding the camera. However, this does not change the effect her

position to the camera has on the viewers. This relationship suggests that Leila is not only smaller than the audience, but she is also much weaker.

Leila's femininity, as displayed through her physical appearance and associations with the world around her, closely connects with the displays of her weaknesses through the events of the trailer and the camera requiring the audience to often look down on her. Thus, the trailer suggests that these two things are closely related. It is no coincidence that Leila is a feminine little girl. Like possessed girls in other countless horror films, Leila is not a girl who plays baseball and rides on bikes with other little boys. She is instead portrayed in as feminine a light as possible. The extreme femininity in relation to the theme of childhood innocence (emphasized with the popular white nightgown), suggest that it is the girl's weaknesses as both unmistakably young and unmistakably feminine that makes her weak, and therefore, more open to spiritual possession.

The concept of the most feminine characters being the weakest is not exclusive to children in horror trailers. In the trailer for *Split*, three teenage girls are kidnapped by a man and trapped in an underground labyrinth. Two of these girls (Jessica Sula and Haley Lu Richardson) are portrayed as being far more feminine, both wearing skirts and much more make-up on their faces, in comparison to the plain face and masculine dress of the third girl (Anya Taylor-Joy). In the beginning of the trailer, the girls are also shown skipping and giggling together on their phones. In comparison to the more masculine-presenting teenager, these two girls are portrayed as much weaker. Except for the opening scene before they are kidnapped, these two girls are consistently shown screaming or afraid. One of these girls is even seen being dragged out of frame by an unseen monster, not fighting back against it. Although the other teenage girl is shown afraid at times too, she is given far more screen time and displays a much wider range of

emotions. The third girl is calm through some scenes, picking up clues as to what is happening and talking calmly with her captor. She is even seen firing a weapon at one point. The more masculine girl in the trailer is clearly an example of the “Final-Girl” trope, something I will talk about in more depth later, while the other far more feminine girls are shown as weak and helpless victims to their situation.

Mothers are another type of character commonly categorized as helpless victims—but only a certain type of mother. The age and appearance of a maternal character seem to dictate what end of the femininity spectrum she will occupy. Whereas mothers who are older are driven to the monstrous end of the horror spectrum (discussed later), the young, beautiful mothers are portrayed as devoted to their husband and children, but also tragically useless in the face of danger.

Take for example, the mother character from *Insidious: Chapter Two*. Rose Byrne plays Renai, the mother of two children who both seem to be the targets of a ghost haunting. In one of the early scenes in the trailer, Renai is seen putting her baby to sleep and then waiting downstairs. She hears the sound of toys and then is shocked by the image of a ghostly woman. Suddenly, she hears the voice of a woman over the baby monitor and runs towards her child. This scene seems to be the first and last act of agency Renai is allowed. Beyond this scene, she is largely seen looking afraid or being consoled by another person. Her husband (Patrick Wilson) is clearly the hero of the film, going into dark places to confront the ghosts in the house and talking with the paranormal researchers. Renai, on the other hand, is far too afraid to do anything else, instead leaving the protection of her family to her husband.

The beautiful young mother figure is unmistakably feminine, as the dominant ideology dictates that an acceptable feminine woman is to keep herself looking beautiful and to take care

of her many children. Although Renai is portrayed as the weakest female character in the trailer, she is not the only feminine character, as most of the shown antagonistic ghosts seem to be feminine women as well. However, their femininity is quite a bit different. Instead of being shown as weak, they are shown as unmistakably monstrous, similar to other female antagonists of horror film trailers.

Witches & Others: Monstrous Femininity

On the other side of the dichotomy is femininity being portrayed as monstrous. The connotations behind femininity seems to switch when those characteristics are associated with someone or something that is not considered a socially acceptable form of it. When feminine characteristics such as menstrual blood, menopause, or womanly knowledge are present within a character, their femininity is something to be feared. This fear of femininity is also present when feminine characteristics are attached to male characters. In “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” Barbara Creed describes the concept of the monstrous-feminine as “shocking, terrifying, horrific, and abject,” a list of characteristics also commonly used to categorize the monsters of many horror films (37). When these horrific monsters are combined with feminine attributes— or associated with feminine imagery, the theme of the monstrous-feminine is in full force.

The witch is a classic presentation of feminine monstrosity (Creed 37), and this is the motif most prevalent in the 2015 trailer for *The Witch*. Although the titular witch is never clearly shown, every mention of the character is juxtaposed to an image of the teenage girl in the trailer, Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy). Although Thomasin has the youthful face and long hair of a typically weak-feminine character, the camera angles and editing associations between her and symbols of monstrous femininity mark her as otherwise.

Most commonly, Thomasin is shown at a high angle, making her appear smaller and more submissive (characteristic of weak femininity), especially in comparison to the low angle the father figure (Ralph Ineson) is commonly seen in. However, in the few scenes where Thomasin is shown from a low angle, appearing more powerful and dominant, she is most associated with monstrous imagery. In one of the main scenes in the trailer, Thomasin is shown at a low angle as she plays peek-a-boo with her baby brother. The scene goes back and forth with point-of-view shots from the two characters, before her baby brother suddenly disappears. When Thomasin realizes the baby is missing, the camera acts as her eyes as she sees the empty blanket, then looks up into the dark opening of the forest. The elements of the scene, Thomasin's dominant position in the camera and the foreboding nature of the forest, places the teenage girl as either a cause or complicit in the disappearance of her brother, especially in conjunction with later scenes of her mother (Kate Dickie) seemingly scowling and putting blame on her for the disappearance. Later in the trailer, Thomasin is also juxtaposed with images of blood, alluding to the monstrous feminine theme of menstrual blood (Briefel 21), and the witch-associated imagery of a large, black Billy-goat (Ezzy 33).

In other trailers, the antagonists may be supernatural or paranormal, but they are also often unmistakably female, matching characteristics often associated with the mythical witch. The ghosts from *Insidious: Chapter Two* have pale or grey toned skin, long fingernails, and oily, long dark hair, also similar to the antagonists of films such as *Rings* (2017) and *Evil Dead* (2013). Additionally, a few of the ghostly women from the *Insidious: Chapter Two* trailer also share characteristics with the next common monstrous-feminine trope—older women.

While the mother in *Insidious: Chapter 2* is young and beautiful, fitting into the weak feminine trope, the ghosts fit better with mothers like the one seen in the *Carrie* trailer. Where

Rose Byrne's character, like Brit Shaw's character in *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*, is portrayed as young and beautiful (Byrne was 34 when the film was released, Shaw only 27), Julianne Moore's mother character in *Carrie* is not. Not only is the mother character much older (Moore was 53 at the time), but her hair is often shown as disheveled, and the wrinkles on her face are clearly emphasized. Although Moore's character is feminine, being a mother and even presenting femininely with long hair and dresses, she is not acceptably feminine. Her haggard appearance is juxtaposed with her use of sharp objects (knives and scissors) and her violent actions towards her daughter. Older women in horror trailers are far exceeded in numbers by more youthful women; thus, it is relevant that on the few occasions they are portrayed, they are most commonly associated with monsters.

Of course, not all horror movie monsters are women; however, they are still often feminine. For example, in the trailer for the movie *Split*, an important turning point in the trailer is when the kidnapped girls are yelling for what they believe is a woman to come and save them. The woman is quickly revealed to be the man who kidnapped them (James McAvoy), taking on a different personality. This is the moment in the trailer where the audience realizes that the kidnapper also has multiple personalities and is much more dangerous than previously thought. It is no coincidence that this revelation occurs when the character is in a feminine personality. While the stigmatization of mental illness has a long history by itself, so does the perverted villainization of cross-dressing, the belief that men who like to dress as women (or perhaps want to be women) are perverted and villainous.

The image of James McAvoy's villainous character being dressed as a woman brings about an idea closely connected to feminine monstrosity: the concept of queer monstrosity. Critic Robin Wood often lamented about horror film monsters being understood as Others, particularly

sexual others such as women, bisexuals, and homosexuals. Harry Benshoff further explores this point in his article, “The Monster and the Homosexual,” where he focuses on the coding of horror movie monsters as queer identifying. Monsters, especially queer coded-monsters, are considered a threat, a personified construction of the threat of queer attraction on a heteronormative society (118). A common coding strategy of the monstrous queer is exactly what James McAvoy’s appearance in the trailer presents, a man who is evil, perverted, and has feminine characteristics—such as dressing like a woman.

The Case of the Final Girl

Of all the trailers that I viewed in my sample, nearly every female character could be grouped into the weak or monstrous feminine tropes. However, there are a few clear outliers. These women, such as Casey (Anya Taylor-Joy), the main girl from *Split*, and Rocky (Jane Levy), the main character in *Don’t Breathe*, fit more appropriately into the trope of “The Final-Girl.”

The Final-Girl is described by Carol Clover as the often-female character in a horror film who survives far beyond the other characters in the movie. She is usually left to face the monster or killer alone, to either escape or perish. She often fights back but is also defined as being “abject terror personified” (Clover 35). Although the final girl is most often a female character, she is not included in my feminine dichotomy for one major reason, as described perfectly by Clover when she wrote, “just as the killer is not fully masculine, [the Final-Girl] is not fully feminine.” These female characters are specifically marked by their masculine characteristics. They are often given gender-ambiguous or male names, are praised for their intelligence, and often have practical skills, such fixing cars (Clover 40).

Casey and Rocky fit this trope perfectly, marked primarily by their intelligence and being different from the other girls in the trailer. Rocky has all male friends and scoffs at another woman's assumption that she is sleeping around. Casey dresses differently from the two other girls she is kidnapped with, dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, all in dark colors. The other girls, comparatively, wear skirts with lighter colors. Where Casey is calm and insightful throughout the trailers, the other two girls are primarily shown in hysterics. Both Casey and Rocky are also shown to have 'practical' skills. Rocky makes a living robbing houses, while Casey seems to have a talent for surviving kidnapping situations.

The Final Girl, although not feminine, still reveals a lot about femininity and women in horror films. She is meant to be relatable to the young male audience because of her masculine characteristics (Clover 51). However, she is not a male because of the horrible things that happen to her throughout the trailer. The Final Girl is often tortured and shown terrified, things that are more acceptable for female characters to be and not so for male characters (Clover 51).

Compare the shots of Rocky from *Don't Breathe* to those of her male counterpart, Alex (Dylan Minnette). Whereas plenty of shots fixate on Rocky's fear, the camera largely ignores Alex's. Not only is Alex shown not as dramatically afraid as Rocky, he is also shown from farther away. Whereas Rocky is shown scared in close-ups and extreme close-ups, Alex is rarely seen beyond the medium close-up. Thus, the viewer can separate themselves from his fear far more than they can separate from Rocky's. By these shot differences and difference in frequency of appearances, the trailer suggests that fear and victimization is only appropriate in women, supporting Clover's assertion that the Final Girl is only a girl because of that said victimization (Clover 51). Men can relate to her because of her masculinity, but her being a girl makes it more acceptable for her to be afraid and a victim.

One could argue that given trailers' short run time, the creators must rely on clichés and other tropes to portray a lot of information at once. However, that does not change the implications that these trailers may have on shaping the beliefs of those who watch them. Although all characters may have to fall into some cliché to portray a large amount of information at once, it is significant that female characters always fit into one of two clichés, as do male characters always seem to fit into certain archetypes (a topic beyond the scope of this essay, but worthy of study). If trailers could shuffle these tropes around, not specifically focusing on the conventions of gender to determine which trope they will feature, the harmful ideological messages would not be repeated as often and would not potentially shape people's perceptions of women as either weak or monstrous. Why are female characters rarely portrayed as the brave hero? Why are male characters not allowed to scream in fear?

Conclusion

Horror trailers are an individual subgenre of film trailers that can be defined by a particular set of genre conventions and that follow a similar script of what is acceptable and expected of horror films. They tend to share a narrative structure, focusing on an emotional experience of fear and dread, and they contain similar stylistic features, such as references to earlier films and tight framing. As horror trailers follow a similar script, they also deliver similar messages, especially regarding femininity. Feminine characters in horror trailers form a false dichotomy—that they must either be weak victims or monsters.

There were a few limitations to my research. I limited myself to films that received a wide American release and kept to trailers made for primarily American audiences. Horror trailers created for non-American audiences, or for a more limited release, may not fully fit into

the script described. Additionally, although my research was restricted to the trailers listed in the Appendix and featured throughout this paper, I was unable to completely isolate myself from other trailer-viewing, and it is possible that trailers beyond that list affected my interpretations.

It is also necessary to mention that while horror film trailers do seem to follow a similar script that privileges a heteronormative patriarchal ideology, there are cases in which the full-length films attempt to overturn such ideologies. Roger Egger's *The Witch* (2015), a film whose trailer is heavily featured in my analysis, is one such film. The story follows a puritan family, exiled from their homes and sent to live on their own. The family, now isolated on a small farm surrounded by woods, is soon terrorized by what they believe is a witch. As the film continues, the family begins to turn on one another, believing that any one of them could be the witch.

The narrative of the full-length film is much different from the trailer. With a longer period of time to establish additional themes and plot points, the young girl in the film, Thomasin, is painted less as a monster, as she is in the trailer, and more like a victim. Her parents' fear of the innocent girl is the true villain. Even though the full-length film challenges the concepts of the monstrous feminine, especially questioning horrifying connotations of a young woman's sexual awakening, the trailer further perpetuates the notion of female power and sexuality as terrifying.

The mismatch between horror trailers and the films they advertise is problematic because it misleads film consumers—who purchase a ticket expecting one film, to instead walk into something completely different—but this mismatch also has much more sinister implications for society. Given the wide exposure and access people have to view trailers—seeing multiple trailers in front of a feature film at the cinema, trailers on television, as advertisements before online videos, or searching out these trailers online on their own—trailers are likely viewed by a

much larger audience than the films they advertise. This greater exposure spreads their messages further than the film itself could ever imagine. Because the trailers may bring across more problematic social attitudes through following tried and true stereotypes and genre conventions, both the audience and the film are being done a disservice. Given the genre conventions of horror film trailers, feature films that are progressive and innovative may instead be better remembered by their trailer as just another typical horror film.

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Appendix: Trailer Filmography

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| 1. Amityville: The Awakening (2017) | 22. The Lazarus Effect (2015) |
| 2. Annabelle (2014) | 23. Oculus (2013) |
| 3. Annabelle: Creation (2017) | 24. Ouija (2014) |
| 4. Blair Witch (2016) | 25. Ouija: Origin of Evil (2016) |
| 5. The Boy (2016) | 26. Paranormal Activity: The Ghost
Dimension (2013) |
| 6. Carrie (2013) | 27. Poltergeist (2015) |
| 7. The Conjuring (2013) | 28. The Purge (2013) |
| 8. The Conjuring 2 (2016) | 29. The Purge: Anarchy (2014) |
| 9. Don't Breathe (2016) | 30. The Purge: Election Year (2016) |
| 10. Evil Dead (2013) | 31. Rings (2016) |
| 11. The Forest (2016) | 32. The Shallows (2016) |
| 12. Friend Request (2016) | 33. Sinister 2 (2015) |
| 13. The Gallows (2015) | 34. Split (2016) |
| 14. Get Out (2017) | 35. Unfriended (2015) |
| 15. The Green Inferno (2013) | 36. V/H/S/2 (2013) |
| 16. Happy Death Day (2017) | 37. The Visit (2015) |
| 17. Insidious: Chapter 2 (2013) | 38. Wish Upon (2017) |
| 18. Insidious: Chapter 3 (2015) | 39. The Witch (2015) |
| 19. It (2017) | 40. The Woman in Black 2: Angel of
Death (2014) |
| 20. It Follows (2014) | |
| 21. Jigsaw (2017) | |