‘Being a horror fan and being a feminist are often a conflicting business’: feminist horror, the opinion economy and Teeth’s gendered audiences

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‘Being a Horror Fan and Being a Feminist are Often a Conflicting Business’: Feminist Horror, the Opinion Economy and *Teeth*’s Gendered Audiences.

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Horror has long held a reputation as a genre inhospitable to female audiences. The woman who hides from the screen in fear or revulsion is ingrained in imaginaries of cinemagoing and home viewing. Further, associations between the horror film and violent misogyny make for what Isabel Cristina Pinedo describes as an ‘uneasy’ relationship between horror and feminism (1997: 1), so that the genre as a whole is understood as particularly hard viewing for women. Despite this sense that horror films are largely ‘not for’ female audiences, some of the most enthusiastic horror fans are women. For example, the UK Film Council’s report on film consumption amongst filmgoing audiences in Britain found that women under 35 were the group most likely to report enjoying horror films, to want to see more horror made in the future, and to identify horror as their favourite genre (UK Film Council 2011: 106, 124 and 117). Horror therefore emerges as a genre with a fractious, contradictory relationship with women, where horror is understood as both unwelcoming to women and a genre that women enjoy.

Films that appear to contradict the received wisdom that horror is uninviting to women are positioned as unusual by a contemporary opinion economy focused on discussing and diagnosing the feminist politics of popular cultural texts. These films are seen as offering a feminist alternative to female horror fans because of their inclusion of ‘strong female characters’ or explorations of female embodiment. Their apparent contrast to the horror genre at large makes them ripe for critical commentary, and the ‘feminist horror film’ is thus installed as a subgenre of films deemed to counter the supposedly inhospitable nature of horror for women. However, the identification of this subgenre occurs in a climate of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018), where an increasingly visible feminism is understood as causing injury to men that must be mitigated. As a result, the popular criticism that brings the category of the

feminist horror film into being must also reckon with the harm it is understood to cause men. The perceived harms of the horror film are therefore reoriented towards the male viewer who becomes vulnerable to the horror film's feminism.

In this article, I undertake a survey of the reviews of one such feminist horror film, *Teeth* (Lichtenstein 2007), to explore the complexities of this reorientation. Reviews offer a space where the politics of popular cultural products can be discussed, declared or denied, and where their effects on an audience can be described or, more often, predicted. The opinions presented in response to *Teeth*, I suggest, indicate several areas of interest about the relationship between horror film and gendered audiences. In what follows, I track the framing by some reviewers of the feminist horror film as risky viewing for men, and as bad feminism for women. However, I also find resistance to such interpretations, as other reviewers indicate that the fantasies enabled by the bad object of feminist horror have the capacity to educate, or to provide imaginaries of how the world might be different in relation to gender and sexual violence.

Horror as Bad Object

The horror genre has long occupied the position of 'bad object', and this badness has crystallised around the effects that violent, frightening or gory fictions and images are presumed to have on their audiences. Indeed, as Sarah Cleary argues, concerns about what horror films might do to their audiences have their origins in the proscription of Gothic novels by critics in the eighteenth century (2018). Moral panics about horror films and their supposed effects have been well-documented within media and cultural studies, with particular focus placed on the likelihood that viewing horror films will lead to emotional distress, violence and moral corruption (Kermode 2002; Petley 2002). Audiences positioned as particularly at-risk are often centred in the media effects debate about horror, which has frequently focused on the vulnerability of children to mediated violence (Barker and Petley 2001: 11). At the other end

of the spectrum, adult fans of horror are often positioned as morally corrupt and imagined as becoming more violent as a result of their exposure to horror films, or as already ‘mentally disturbed’ (Hutchings 1993: 7. See also Tudor 1997: 443-444 and Cherry 2002: 44) because of their attraction to violent images.

More specifically, though, horror’s status as a bad object is gendered. Concerns about the emotional state of horror fans notwithstanding, male viewers are positioned as horror’s natural audience, while the genre is often understood as unwelcoming to female viewers, despite ample evidence to the contrary (Cherry 2002; Hill 2002). As Rhona J Berenstein argues in her work on classic horror, male audiences are imagined as typically robust in the face of the horror film: ‘men are thought to be brave viewers who enjoy and remain unshaken by on-screen terrors, while women clutch the shoulders of dates for comfort, cover their eyes in response to images too evil to view, and scream uncontrollably’ (1996: 2). This positioning has also found its echo in scholarship where, as Brigid Cherry notes, ‘most studies of the horror film that have considered questions of gender and spectatorship have concerned themselves with a theoretical male spectator, usually identifying the monster’s gaze as male, and the heroine-victim as the subject of that gaze’ (Cherry 1999: 187). Horror, therefore, is positioned as a comfortable genre for men, but an inhospitable one for women.

More than merely being bad for women, horror is understood as a bad object for *feminism*, a sentiment which continues in twenty first century popular film writing where the unsuitability of most horror films for women is often taken as a given. Amidst the ubiquitous list articles of feminist horror films on popular culture websites, it is difficult to find one which does not begin with a disclaimer about horror films’ propensities toward misogyny. *Marie Claire*’s list of feminist horror movies begins: ‘horror movies aren’t known for depicting women well. Female bodies are often treated like objects. They’re designed to be looked at, violated, and discarded’ (Robertson 2018), a sentiment echoed by Kayleigh Hughes in her claim that ‘a huge chunk of

horror movies [...] contain major heapings of misogyny and sexual objectification' (2017), while in *Stacked* magazine, Chelsea Robinson notes that 'being a horror fan and being a feminist are often a conflicting business' in the preamble to her guide to feminist horror (2015).¹ Even as these writers express an interest in and enjoyment of the horror genre, its status as bad object for feminism is reaffirmed.

The Role of Reviews

As these examples demonstrate, horror's status as bad object for women and feminism is keenly felt in the work of cultural critics. For this reason, my focus in this article is on the way that tensions around horror and gender unfold in reviews. Reviews are significant in their capacity to illuminate questions and anxieties about contemporary politics, and their ability to shape and crystallise the terms of these debates. As Barbara Klinger notes, reviews serve an agenda-setting function, and 'offer a program of perception to the public, comprising a set of coordinates that map out and judge the significant features of a film' (1994: 70). In the case of horror, the programme of perception offered by reviews is often connected with the presumed vulnerability of gendered audiences to the genre. Despite a wealth of research which complicates the idea that media has clear 'effects' on its audiences (Barker and Petley 2001; Gauntlett 2001), reviewers continue to employ the language of effects in their evaluations. Amidst these preoccupations, reviews also distil the questions about effects that ripple through discussions of contemporary feminisms more broadly: what happens to men in a culture where popularised feminist politics are increasingly available to young women? And are such highly visible feminisms dangerous to young women, given their availability for co-optation and resale for profit, and their overemphasis of individual empowerment and consumption of popular culture? Do women have the capacity to resist these neoliberal forces? These concerns

¹ For more examples of this tendency, see Bonner 2016, Brannagan 2018, Kane 2018, and Rosa 2016.

are intensified in the case of feminist horror, given the historical narrative of horror as a bad object along gendered lines. Reviews can therefore act as a way of tracking these ambivalences about the supposed effects of both horror and feminism, so that the fractures within contemporary discourse about feminism, horror, and the bad object become visible.

The context for this research is the rise over the past decade of what David Buckingham has called ‘the opinion economy’ (2015), characterised by the intensified production of think pieces and discursive ranking, where ‘the premium is on strong opinions, instantly and forcefully expressed’. As Greg Taylor argues, ‘this is an era absolutely obsessed with critical evaluation, reevaluation, and ranking of all manner of cultural products, from movies to burgers to sitcoms to superheroes’ (2015: 29). This opinion economy has been particularly active in relation to feminist media texts, so that reviews employing critical feminist approaches appear in sources from mainstream news to specialised feminist publications (Cobb and Tasker 2016). My analysis draws on a survey of 75 responses to *Teeth* from mainstream newspapers, general film review websites, specialist horror sites, feminist pop culture reviews (what Maria San Filippo refers to as ‘media fan-activism’ [2015: 117]), men’s rights review sites, and personal blogs. This work includes short reviews, detailed think pieces and list articles, cuts across political lines, and is produced at various points over the years since the film’s release in 2007.

Distinctions have historically been made between reviews as short advisory pieces designed to aid audience choice, and criticism as longer reflections designed to be read after watching the film (see Morris 1988: 117-118 and Bell 2011: n203). However, within the landscape of digital criticism, where word counts for reviews may be less constrained, and where shorter assessments can contain spoilers and ruminations on a film’s politics, these dimensions of length, scope and time become less stable. These sources are not interchangeable so much as flattened out in the digital landscape that allows the time, context and intention of their

production to recede into the background. For the purposes of this article, therefore, I refer to all these texts as ‘reviews’.

***Teeth* as Feminist Horror Film**

At this point, a brief introduction to my case study is necessary. *Teeth* centres on Dawn, a teenage abstinence advocate who discovers that she has the mythological vagina dentata. When she is raped by her date, his penis is amputated by her fanged vagina. Dawn’s teeth are responsible for severing the penises and fingers of other sexual aggressors as the film progresses, and in the meantime, Dawn gains a greater awareness of her body’s capabilities, and moves from horrified bystander to conscious initiator of the castrations. The castration scenes are characterised by close-ups of severed appendages, gory stumps and screaming men for both comic and horrific impact. Although the film is over ten years old at the time of writing, it retains a consistent presence in the opinion economy, particularly in the aforementioned list articles of feminist horror films, and recently in retrospective considerations of its gender politics (Kale 2017; Bishop 2017; Robertson 2017).

As with other films that have attracted the ‘feminist horror’ label, *Teeth*’s sexual politics have been interrogated at length online within the opinion economy. The ‘critics consensus’ summary on the review aggregator site *Rotten Tomatoes* describes *Teeth* as ‘smart, original, and horrifically funny [...] a fresh feminist spin on horror movie tropes’ (Rotten Tomatoes, N.D.) It is a film that centralises the ‘strong female character’ that has become so enmeshed with discussions of contemporary media and feminism. *Teeth* can be seen as a representative of post-millennial feminist horror films like *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett, 2000), *Jennifer’s Body* (Kusama, 2009), *American Mary* (Soska and Soska, 2012), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Amirpour, 2014), *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), *The VVitch* (Eggers, 2015), and *Raw*

(Ducournau, 2016) that so frequently attract detailed and prolonged critical attention due to their explicit engagement with sexual politics and embodiment.

Many of the reviews surveyed present *Teeth* explicitly as an empowering, feminist film. *Teeth* is described as ‘the ultimate feminist horror film’ (Rosa 2016) and an ‘ingenious film about female empowerment’ (Mighty Ganesha 2008). It ‘reclaim[s] vagina dentata as a symbol of sexual power’ (Robertson 2017) that offers ‘strong commentary against sexual assault and obsession with female virginity’ (Zak 2016), and ‘exposes a cultural, rarely spoken but widely known, fear of vaginas and subverts that to give power to vaginas and women’ (Lindsay 2008). Wesley Morris compares *Teeth* with the work of feminist visual artists such as Barbara Kruger, Georgia O’Keeffe and Joyce Wieland, and observes that ‘there’s something almost subversive about [director Mitchell] Lichtenstein’s affection for his heroine and the pleasure she ultimately takes in re-appropriating a misogynistic myth’ (2008) while another reviewer encourages *Popsugar*’s largely female readership to enjoy the film’s feminist subversion of genre, stating ‘you’ll be a better person for it!’ (Gigglesugar 2008). Reviewers also employ what Ernest Mathijs calls ‘topical practices’ (2003) to connect the film explicitly with real-world gender politics. The toothed Rape-aXe² is referenced in several reviews, either as a real-life equivalent to Dawn’s mutation (Simone 2008; Eggert 2008), or as evidence that the concerns raised in *Teeth* about rape and ‘the constant awareness women must have in order to protect themselves from sexual violence’ have real life applications (Hagan 2016). Even reviews which saw the film in rather more ambivalent terms identified its feminist themes: Dr Blood warns men ‘if you find your lady listening to a lot of the ‘Spice Girls’ and then she asks you to watch this, be warned that she may have something to tell you!’ (2011). For many reviewers, then, the

² The ‘Rape-aXe’ device, a barbed sheath to be worn by women to wound their potential rapists, was invented by South African scientist Sonette Ehlers several years prior to the film’s release. While the device never went into production, the international press generated by its launch ensured an enduring hold over the public imagination. For a detailed critique of Ehlers’ work, see Sarah Nuttall (2004).

feminist horror film becomes a direct call to female audiences to involve themselves in feminist thinking. *Teeth*'s 'conspicuous status as a feminist text' (Kelly, 101) makes it a productive case study for examining the scrutiny applied to popular cultural objects aligned with feminism, and the specific emphasis on what such texts 'do to' or 'do for' their audiences, according to reviewers in relation to horror.

Men and *Teeth*

While horror is frequently positioned as a bad object for women and for feminism, this relationship is reoriented when horror itself is seen as participating in feminist debates. Those films labelled 'feminist horror' are thus positioned as a response to the given of women's natural antipathy to horror and, in the process, the terms of horror as bad object are redrawn. In the process of making horror feminist, feminist horror potentially becomes a bad object for men, particularly when the making of feminist horror is understood as reversing the gendered power dynamics supposedly at work in horror more generally. In surveying *Teeth*'s reviews, the most strikingly common factor is a focus on the effect (observed, imagined or extrapolated) the film has on a male audience³, so that much of the critical afterlife of the film is characterised by the sense that men will find the viewing experience uncomfortable.⁴

Throughout the film's reviews, the potentially disturbed male viewer is referred to, addressed directly, and interpellated via a tone of ironic certainty. Reviewers from mainstream press, niche horror sites and feminist outlets alike all refer to the vulnerability of men to the castration scenes and the vagina dentata concept dubbed 'every man's nightmare' (Vomitron 2009; Danvers 2013) and 'not for the heterosexual male faint of heart' (Bonner 2016). Frank

³ I am aware of the limits of this terminology. My own use of 'male' and 'female' in relation to audiences is informed by the essentialist discourse invoked by the majority of the reviews surveyed.

⁴ Men are rarely figured in terms of their capacity to be upset by horror's distressing effects in film reviews. While film theorists have figured male spectatorship of horror films as a form of pleasurable masochism (Clover 1992; Williams 1991; Lehman 1993; Briefel 2005), this approach is not commonly found within non-academic writing about horror.

Digiacommo floridly remarks that ‘you can almost hear men’s designers everywhere ordering up codpieces for their spring collections’ (2008). The cringing of men is presented as an inevitable response to the film, as reviewers predict that ‘if you are a guy [...] this movie will make you cringe at one point or another’ (Baumgartle 2008), or that cinemas will be filled with ‘guys acting squeamish as hell’ (RoG 2008). There is a tension between humour and horror throughout most of the reviews, but there is no doubt that men will find the film distressing. Jared Hindman explains: ‘I suggest anyone who likes sex and has a vivid imagination like myself to stop reading this right away and avoid the film. Of course, this message is really for the guys out there’ (N.D.a). Elsewhere, Phntmbanana writes that ‘unfortunately some spoilers are needed to let anyone thinking of watching this movie (especially men) know what their getting into’ (2007). In these reviews, the male audience is seen to be inevitably vulnerable to the images and narrative of castration available in *Teeth*, and the feminist horror film provokes a warning response from reviewers.⁵

The source of this response can be found in the insistence of *Teeth*’s reviewers on male audiences’ inevitable identification with the castrated rapist characters, even as scholarship on horror and spectatorship has argued that audiences do not necessarily identify with characters along gendered lines, or in relation to gendered roles such as aggressors and victims (Clover 1992; Williams 1984; Kord 2016; Barker and Petley 2001). The film itself certainly does not use camera work to prioritise the point of view of the rapists above that of Dawn. However, Andy Crump proclaims: ‘Gentlemen, cover your nether-regions’ (2015), while Paul Metcalf warns that ‘any males watching this movie should prepare to cringe because it features quite explicit mutilation of the one thing most men pride the most’ (2009). Anecdotal descriptions of physical discomfort and leg-crossing amongst male audiences underpin several reviews, so

⁵ Despite this unusualness within horror criticism, the spectre of the leg-crossing male audience looms elsewhere in media culture in the face of threatening female figures. For example, Anne Helen Petersen discusses the repeat appearance of Hillary Clinton’s “castrating power” in media commentaries (2017: 147).

that men are figured as physically vulnerable because of their identifications. Miss Lyon Simone describes the reaction of a friend's boyfriend: 'He was turned off by the movie's basic story [...] What guy turns down a horror movie? After the first 30 minutes of watching *Teeth*, I could see [his] point' (2008). Peter Bradshaw describes his own response in exaggerated detail: 'leaving the cinema, women in the audience laughed and grinned and trilled a merry tune. I, on the other hand, attempted to leave and catch a bus home while remaining at all times hunched over with my legs tightly crossed' (2008), while Mighty Ganesha also reports a mixture of leg-crossing and hilarity (2008).

The reviewers' descriptions recall Linda Williams' framing of horror as a genre that causes bodily responses. However, even as Williams challenges the 'assumption that the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations of the bodies displayed on the screen' (1991: 12), *Teeth's* reviewers correlate the bodily responses of male audiences with those of male characters. Alternatively, although these reviews emphatically link physical bodily response to gendered reception, such responses are not necessarily a result of gendered identification with the characters or narrative, but might instead be affective sensations created by a haptic engagement with the film. Anna Powell suggests that 'the haptics of tactility-made-visible' (2005: 89) may play as important a role in the responses of horror audiences as representation or narrative. For Powell, the processes of hapticity, ('interaction between vision and bodily feeling or tactility') as well as kinaesthesia and synaesthesia, function as 'part of the filmic assemblage' in our engagement with cinema (2005: 116). It does not necessarily follow, then, that male audiences will inevitably identify with the castrated male characters as a result of shared masculinity. However, in the reviews, male leg-crossing in the face of the feminist horror film becomes as anticipated and inevitable as the turning away that historically characterised the imagined female horror audience. *Teeth* is particularly well-placed to elicit such assumptions, given its explicit scenes of castration. However such assumptions are also

made of horror films where men are the target of less genitally-focused female violence such as *Jennifer's Body*, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* or *Ginger Snaps*, the latter of which Kim Newman writes may also 'an educationally uneasy watch for the teenage boy genre fanbase' (2000). Feminist horror, then, becomes a bad object because of male audiences' identification with injured male characters.

The reviews often require that feminist critique is delicately balanced with men's wellbeing. This becomes particularly apparent in reviews which condemn *Teeth*'s representation of male characters, as although the film may be praised for its feminism, this feminism is perceived to occur at the expense of male representation. Significantly, this narrative can be found in men's rights advocacy spaces, cult film blogs, and feminist writing alike. A reviewer on *Men's Movie Guide* writes: 'virtually every male in the movie [...] is portrayed as the lowest form of human life - evil, sex fiends who just want to nail this "attractive" female "victim".' (Mrdoesn'tgiveadamn N.D.) In a feminist review, concerns about the film's unsympathetic male characters are also raised: 'this is a skewed view of the world and one I don't subscribe to' (Finn 2016). Elsewhere, a horror reviewer presents his concerns about the representation of men in rather different terms of disappointment: 'from a heterosexual man's point of view, I was somewhat appalled at the portrayal of my brothers in twat in this film. I mean these guys are all pathetic rapists in training' (The Arrow 2008). In these reviews, the realism of men's representation becomes crucial, even in the context of cartoonish violence and a mythological allegory made real. The occurrence of this narrative in pro-feminist, men's rights and cult film spaces alike indicates the prevalence of concerns about the (mis)representation of men in the film. The feminist horror film, then, becomes a threat to men who are presumed to identify with irresponsibly represented male characters.

Reviewers are disproportionately concerned about the effect that this film about the repeated sexual assault of a woman will have on male audiences, whereas reviews that raise concerns

about the wellbeing of women as viewers are far less prevalent, and are discussed below. Whether the film's subject matter is seen as (in some cases comically) distressing to male viewers, or its representations of men are criticised as troublingly unrealistic, the feelings of male viewers appear to take precedence. Significantly, this finds its mirror in the film itself. In her scholarly critique of *Teeth*'s feminist politics, Claire Henry argues that 'the film represents male castration as the true horror and violence within the scenes of rape and revenge' (2014: 60). Dawn's horror is frequently about what her body has done to other (male) bodies. This, I suggest, is less a specific failing of the film, than a way that *Teeth* speaks to the same cultural context as the reviews. The fallout of rape and sexual violence against women is marked by an overemphasis on the wellbeing of men accused of such crimes. In the United States, contemporary media discourses around young white men accused of rape, and defence cases such as that of Brock Turner, so often appeal to the tragedy of tarnished careers or the damage to creative or academic genius. This makes it telling, rather than necessarily damning that Dawn's initial instinct in *Teeth* is distress over what she has 'done to' her first rapist, and remorse over her inability to preserve her pledged purity, rather than grief or anger over her rape. Both this tendency in the film, and the privileging of the impact on the male viewer are indicative of wider facets of rape culture and its insistence that the feelings of men must be prioritised.

***Teeth* as Bad Feminism**

Although its reviews position *Teeth* as bad for men, the film retains some of horror's more conventional bad object status in some critics' assessment of its meaning for women. Several reviews identify the film as bad for or misleading to female audiences precisely because of its claims to feminist horror status. As Buckingham argues, the opinion economy often insists on political purity in its visions of media products as either inherently emancipatory or repressive: 'either it is a manifestation of oppression, or it is a critique of it. And if it is not one thing, it

must surely be the other' (2015). This means that nuances are elided, and a text becomes vaunted as feminist or condemned as anti-feminist. While some reviewers see the film as educational or empowering, as outlined below, others identify *Teeth*'s apparent connection with feminism as harmful. Roni Canieso places it in her list of films that 'secretly taught you to be afraid of women's bodies' in a post for the feminist site *Wear Your Voice Mag* (2016). Elsewhere, the film is accused of 'trivialising' feminism by failing 'to adequately account for Dawn's pleasure as she goes on her dick-chopping rampage' (Gonzalez 2007), and of failing to 'offer any realistic alternative' for Dawn to triumph over her rapists (Eggert 2008). Kira Cochrane argues that 'while the central plot twist might *seem* a strong, funny way to address [endemic violence against women], it falls flat on a few levels' (2008, my emphasis)⁶. In Cochrane's account, the film is criticised for its duplicity: while giving the appearance of feminism, it is really working to lure female audiences into a false sense that the film is empowering, blinding them to its obvious limitations. Again, this tendency is not unique to *Teeth*, but can be found throughout feminist horror reviews up to the present day. A recent example is *Assassination Nation* (Levinson, 2018), about which one reviewer claimed '*Assassination Nation* is more than a film — it's a feminist manifesto' (Flint 2018), while another responded 'enough with the feminism-as-male-titillation, please' (Woodhead 2018). As in the case of *Teeth*, the film's capacity to be read as feminist is precisely what makes it bad for women, as it is perceived as a trap into which unwitting viewers may fall.

The tensions between the readings of *Teeth* as productively feminist (as discussed in more detail below) or as misleading 'postfeminist trap' (Henry, 57) points towards the weight that such texts bear. *Teeth*'s sexual politics are certainly questionable: recently Lichtenstein

⁶ This sentiment is echoed in some scholarship on the film, as Henry argues that though *Teeth* and similar films "address contemporary feminist social issues and *appear to* attack old myths, their primary concern is to contain the threat to masculine power represented by the teen castratrices, to assert phallocentrism in sexual relations, and to construct contemporary patriarchal cautionary tales" (2014: 58, My emphasis).

described the much-criticised ambiguity around consent in a scene involving drugs and alcohol as a ‘mistake’ (Kale 2017). There are also valid critiques to be made about the buying and selling of spectacular feminism in popular cultural products (Gill 2016; Zeliser 2016; Banet-Weiser 2018). However, the disconnect between the film’s frequent inclusion on lists of favourite feminist horror films, and the implication that *Teeth* is instilling a false consciousness in its female audiences is an uncomfortable one. Popular culture and its consumers have been routinely dismissed as feminine and passive (Huyssen 1986: 44-62), particularly within cultural criticism. As Buckingham argues, ‘elite discourses about popular culture have traditionally been suffused with patronising assumptions about the audience, based largely on a contempt for women and other members of the “lower orders”’ (2001: 64). The reporting of *Teeth*’s female audiences as vulnerable to its duplicitous representations risks reproducing this. Catherine Driscoll warns against installing the girl (a version of the naïve or wilfully postfeminist young female consumer) as a figure of ‘calculating complicity’ in her relationship with popular culture (2013: 288), but the reviews concerned with *Teeth*’s risk to female audiences seems to do just that in criticising the female viewer for not knowing what is bad for her.⁷ The horror film, in these accounts, remains a bad object for feminism precisely *because* it purports to be feminist.

A more nuanced approach to the film and its female audiences can be found in discussions of survivors of sexual abuse. The film is repeatedly understood as both contentious and likely to cause distress to survivors, and as something that can be approached sensitively and critically, and a negotiating female audience is sometimes presented. In her review, Belle Artiquez foregrounds the complexity of the issue, stating that the contrast between her own horrified response and the jovial responses of other audience members ‘serves to prove that women are capable of understanding the discomfort of the plot, of the numerous sexual assaults Dawn

⁷ Sarah Projansky also discusses widespread assumptions that media is “bad for” girls (2014: 181)

faces, the reaction she has to her own body (hating and simultaneously fearing it) and then her final understanding that she has to own it, be in control of it and her sexuality' (2015). Following one enthusiastic review of the film's feminist politics, a commenter expresses concern that the film presents a comedic approach to sexual violence which is not mitigated by the heroine's ultimate victory, and contends that the film would not be enjoyable to any victims of sexual assault watching. In her response, the review's author foregrounds the importance of genre for a negotiated reading, noting that the film's absurd excesses enable the audience to create some distance, adding that the film can include sexual violence and feminism at the same time. In these reviews, not only are female audiences presented as complex and reflexive, but the politics of genre are raised, so that comedy, horror and fantasy are foregrounded as crucial in the negotiation of response.

In these responses to the film, *Teeth*'s audiences are understood as multifaceted, flexible, and aware of genre conventions and the tensions between fantasy and real-world gender politics. These reviews echo the work of Annette Hill (1997 and 2002), who identifies some of the complex ways that viewers negotiate violent media. In her qualitative research with female viewers (2002), Hill reports women's feelings of achievement and self-awareness in watching violent films, and their capacity to differentiate between real-life violence that they had experienced, and the fictional screen violence they enjoyed or endured.⁸ In the reviews above, this complexity is alluded to so that female viewers are not presented as passive recipients of dangerous violent images, where those who have experienced sexual violence will inevitably be harmed by the images. Instead, female viewers are understood as active and negotiating, capable of diverse responses to the same material. There is, therefore, a tension in these reviews. While some reviewers understand *Teeth* as bad feminism designed to trick unwitting

⁸ Concern about sexual violence and audiences emerge in academic responses to the film too. Maria Pramaggiore (2015) and Aalya Ahmad (2014) both describe their experiences of using *Teeth* in educational settings. In both instances, support needs were considered and accommodated around the film's screening.

audiences, others interpret the film as a polysemous genre text that might provoke different kinds of responses from negotiating viewers.

***Teeth* as Feminist Education**

While *Teeth* may be understood as evidence of bad feminism by some reviewers, in other reviews, the sense of feminist horror as bad object is interpreted rather differently, so that it is precisely this badness that enables the film to be a vital feminist tool. The prospect of revenge as a viewing practice is raised by the reviews. Men's presumed discomfort (as discussed above) about feminist horror is proposed as able to turn the tables on male audiences. Discussion of these bad male feelings looms large in discussions of the film's ambivalent feminist potential. Artiquez notes that 'while many men will feel a kind of sympathy pain for the characters (who are rapists by the way), and apologise for showing it in blogs because the writer too felt a pain when posting it, I'm left wondering why women are expected to watch rape in film and TV and not feel the same?' (2015)⁹. It is this double standard that several other reviewers pick up on when they raise the pleasurable spectacle of squirming men (Moore 2008; Mighty Ganesha 2008). Dr Blood writes that 'Girlfriends and wives everywhere can now get revenge for being dragged along to see all those 'Torture P*rn' films over the last couple of years' (2011), implying that the viewing of *Teeth* might itself counter the experience of watching horror centred on violence against women. Kate Hagen connects this cathartic argument with a brief escape from the real-life effects of violence on women, and argues that 'in the face of the real-world, horrifying statistics about conviction rates and sentencing for rapists, what's one to do but delight in watching would-be rapists get castrated by a teenage girl whenever anything that enters her without express permission?' (2016). This approach operates as an extension of

⁹ Artiquez's mention of another blogger's apology refers to an article on *French Toast Sunday* (Lindsay 2012), which apologises both in advance and in retrospect for posting a post-castration image from the film. Other "gross-out" images from the same article did not receive the same apologies.

Cherry's interviews with female horror audiences who state that watching men "get the raw deal" in being savaged in horror films has a cathartic revenge fantasy element for them (1999: 199). In the *Teeth* reviews, it is implied that the reversal of the 'usual' pattern of female discomfort and male pleasure at horror films (Pinedo 1997: 6) might act as its own form of revenge for onscreen and societal power imbalances.

Here, men's viewing experiences remain foregrounded but it is implied that such experiences may be productive rather than purely distressing. Other reviews take this further and claim that expected male responses to the film might be *useful* in educating men to feminist ends. Crump makes a hyperbolic argument for *Teeth*'s didacticism: 'the premise alone is enough to make most male viewers consider joining up with the nearest monastery and going celibate for a while, or for the rest of their lives' (2015). Brian Eggert suggests that the film warns specifically against predatory and coercive behaviour by providing 'a harsh parable, perhaps even a message to slimy men [...] Lichtenstein will have scores of men asking themselves What if? the next time they're in bed' (2008). While these claims imply that the film may cause panic, other reviewers channel *Teeth*'s 'what if?' proposition to more critical feminist ends. The film appears in Alana Bennett's article '8 Movies Feminists Should Watch on Dates', where she recommends 'watching your date squirm and then (especially if your date is one of those people with a penis) using that to talk about the role of sex and female genitals in society' (2008). Bennett's approach suggests that discomfiting feminist media might act as both a teaching tool and litmus test for potential partners. Rick Baumgartle notes that 'while as a man I definitely squirmed a bit during this one I also, as a man who is trying to be a better feminist, enjoyed a horror flick that drove its point home with a sledge hammer [...] if it starts the kind of conversation I think it will then the movie has already done its job' (2008)¹⁰. In these reviews,

¹⁰ Despite his exhortation that men should avoid the film, Jared Hindman starts just such a conversation by inviting women to give their perspectives on *Teeth* (N.D.b).

then, the bad feeling elicited by the feminist horror film is understood as educating male audiences via their own discomfort.¹¹

***Teeth* as Aspirational Technology**

This resistance to the notion of the film as a straightforwardly bad object continues in the reviewers' thoughts on the positive role that the film might play for female audiences. The fantasies offered by the bad object of the horror film emerge as something that might be productively engaged to inspire a rethinking of the female body. In some cases this is a fairly straightforward framing of the film in terms of body positivity or raising consciousness. One reviewer claims that 'what's most important for Dawn is she discovers her vagina is not a curse but a source of power' (Bishop 2017), while Robertson views the film as a rallying cry, because 'it shows us that no matter how people try and present them, our bodies are a gift, not a curse. Sometimes we just need some fictive teeth remind us what we're really worth' (2017). In these cases, feminist horror film becomes a direct call to female audiences to involve themselves in changing patterns of thought about femininity and the female body.

Beyond this, though, attention to *Teeth's* reviews reveals a theme of aspiration that further complicates the gendered politics of the film's reception. Some of these reviewers provide a productive way of reading the film which might address concerns that *Teeth* offers a 'postfeminist trap' to women that privileges male perpetrators of rape and does not offer a satisfactory response to rape culture. From the very earliest discussions of the film in 2007, feminist critics responded to the concept of *Teeth* in terms of hope and desire. For example, on Feministing.com, Jessica Valenti titled a blog post 'Want.' in anticipation of the film, which

¹¹ Interestingly, the reviews do not entertain the possibility of male audiences identifying with Dawn as part of the film's educational potential. As Clover argues, horror films often invite male audiences to identify with female protagonists, as in her argument that 'The Final Girl is [...] a congenial double for the adolescent male' (1992: 51), and her observation that rape revenge films primarily represent the victim's point of view (1992: 140 and 152).

she clarifies is both ‘to see the movie, and to have a killer vagina’ (2007). The combative monstrosity that poses such a concern for the imagined male audience discussed above offers an appealing prospect for some of *Teeth*’s reviewers.

Several of *Teeth*’s female critics indicate that the film offers a persuasive fantasy connected with the relief of automation. Here I am adapting Stacey and Suchman’s definition of automation as ‘the replacement of human bodies with machinic labour’ to refer to *Teeth*’s representation of the replacement of the work of human (frequently female) labour in preventing rape with the machinic, automatic response of the vagina dentata (2012: 2). Lindsay’s review for *Female Impersonator* contains the line ‘Seriously, I wish I had teeth in my vagina. Soooo bad’ (2008), and Miss Lyon Simone asks ‘is it a dream come true?’ (2008). Cochrane’s discussion of *Teeth* and the rape revenge genre acknowledges that ‘there is definite wish-fulfilment for female audiences in seeing brutality addressed in direct and often inventive ways’ (2008), even as she argues that the genre’s bleakness undermines its potential. This is also apparent in another review of *Teeth*, which expands the fantastic capacity to respond to rape to all potential victims: ‘if only we all, men and women, could instantly react against our aggressors in such an assertive manner’, later adding that ‘it’s saying, what if this were real?’ (Exploring Feminisms, 2011). The language of wanting and wishing in these reviews points to the way that vagina dentata functions within popular culture as a site of (conditional) fantasy for many feminist reviewers.

The automation of the body and of sexuality has often been framed in negative terms. Peter Wollen (1993: 35-71) and Andreas Huyssen (1986: 44-81) both provide useful histories of the sexism at work in many historical, theoretical and speculative accounts of the automation of labour, while Jack Halberstam outlines approaches within feminist theory that demonise science and warn of the threat of automated technologies to womanhood (1991: 454). Equally, Emma Rees’s work on cultural representations of the vagina emphasises the frequency with

which the vagina is ‘autonomised’, represented as disembodied and acting separately from the rest of the female body or female subject (2014). Rees argues that this is particularly used by male artists to ridicule women, and by female artists to indicate alienation and ruptures of the self. The language of desire employed by the reviewers of *Teeth*, however, suggests an approach to the automated body more akin to Shulamith Firestone’s advocacy of technological interventions that might free women (1979: 183), or as a reclamation of automation that so often functions to outsource women’s work to technological devices for the convenience of an imagined male user (Hester 2017: 47) so that the female body might be automated in order to improve life for women and counter the everyday anxieties and inconveniences of their lived embodiments.

Teeth emerged in a culture in which rape was and is understood to be predominantly the concern and responsibility of women and girls. Rape-prevention strategies from the police, universities and governments have, until very recently, almost exclusively focused on encouraging women and girls to keep themselves safe, on taking self-defence classes, on wearing appropriate clothing, on staying away from dark places, on sticking together, on not getting too drunk (Hall 2004; Rentschler 2015). Proposed products such as the Rape-aXe, and colour-changing nail varnishes, drinking straws and glasses that can detect the presence of date-rape drugs in drinks emerge in the popular press and social media from time to time, and are met with a combination of praise for their innovation at ‘solving’ the problem of rape, and criticism for once again placing the burden of responsibility on women and girls as potential victims who need to make the right consumer choices.

Teeth therefore offers a response to the myths of female responsibility encapsulated by US congressman Todd Aiken’s infamous 2012 claim that abortion is not necessary because ‘if it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down’ (Gentilviso 2012). *Teeth*’s teeth offer a fantasy of what might happen if female bodies really did have that

kind of power, an alternative to comedian Wanda Sykes' famous 'detachable pussy' routine about the fantasy of freedom to move freely through public space that leaving their genitals in a drawer at home might grant women (2006). *Teeth*'s reviewers find in the film a 'what if?' approach to the realities of gendered bodies in space. The line, 'your mouth was saying one thing babe, but your sweet pussy's saying something different', uttered by one of the film's soon-to-be castrated rapists points towards this reading. What if the contradictory 'her lips said no but her body said yes' rhetoric of rape apologists could be gleefully contradicted by a fanged vagina? While automation does not, in actuality, involve a complete relinquishing of human labour (Stacey and Suchman 2012: 26-28; Kennedy, Nansen, Arnold, Wilken and Gibbs 2015), for a number of reviewers, *Teeth* presents the fantasy of the automated body as one that can be left to its own devices, without the rupturing of the self that Rees identifies in so many artistic accounts of the autonomous vagina. As Wollen, drawing on Gramsci, points out, automation has not only been understood in negative terms, but also more optimistically, so that the automation of the labouring body allows the worker to 'become a free intellectual' (1993: 51). In the context of *Teeth*, release from the demands of constant vigilance and self-monitoring might allow women to move, think and exist more freely. Rather than the consumer solution of Rape-aXe and its ilk, the reviews point to a desire for the labour of attention to be taken care of by the body.

Teeth's solution to rape culture is hyperbolic and limited, but despite this, the film inspires desire in some of its female reviewers. In spite of the genre's purported bad object status for female audiences, women do recognise the ambivalence and contradictions of their enjoyment of horror films (Cherry 1999). More specifically, horror films are experienced by embodied audiences from within cultural contexts. As Janet Staiger argues, 'contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives' (2000: 1). The

pleasures that a vagina dentata fantasy provides to reviewers are contingent on the contexts of rape culture and its accompanying fears and frustrations. The bad object of the horror film is not only made feminist in these readings, but also becomes a tool for imagining that things might be otherwise.

Conclusion

The reviews of *Teeth*, therefore, reveal the specific tensions about audience and effects underpinning the notion of the feminist horror film. In the context of horror's bad object status, the reorientations involved in making the horror film feminist are presumed to render the genre bad for men in the audience in a zero-sum game. This is precisely because male audiences are assumed to naturally identify with those male characters typically understood as perpetuating horror's misogynist tendencies, so that the imagined male audience en-masse becomes an uncomfortable collection of leg-crossers as a result of these identifications. Media effects models are specifically deployed as concern about what the feminist horror film will do to male audiences, and replicates a cultural tendency to displace concern from those vulnerable to sexual violence onto a generalised male audience seen as at risk of injury from feminism.

Despite the reshaping of horror as feminist, for some reviewers the notion of horror as bad for women lingers in the suggestions that *Teeth* is dangerously postfeminist, presenting the appearance of feminism, but misleading its audience into believing that the film is a good thing for women. Within the opinion economy, the feminism of popular culture frequently operates in a binary fashion, so that a film is either feminist or it is flawed and unusable for feminism.

However, the status of *Teeth* as simply bad for men, or as facilitating false consciousness for uncritical feminists, is not universal for its reviewers. Instead, the factors that make the film a bad object may become workable fantasies, whether through the understanding of bad male feelings as educational and productive, or through the sense of desire for female reviewers.

Here, the feminist horror film may encourage reflection and learning for male audiences, or, for women, may encourage fantasies of automation and freedom from exhaustion about the labour of vigilance that is so often central to rape-prevention strategies. The bad object of horror is therefore not as simple as it may seem, nor is the political reorientation of a ‘bad’ genre toward feminism a straightforward manoeuvre. What reviews of *Teeth* demonstrate are the many ways in which cultural commentators negotiate the bad object of horror and its relationship with feminism, the anxieties attached to the feminist horror film in relation to gendered audiences, and the possibilities for thinking otherwise that feminist horror might enable.

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