

ONLY A TRICKLE?  
BLOOD IN DETAIL AND THREE WOMEN'S FILMS

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts

University of Tasmania

August 2003

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis constructs an analysis of the representation of blood in a selection of American films. This analysis does not aim to construct a representative theory of blood, rather, it examines discrete instances and certain relationships between a mainstream discourse of blood and various resistances presented by women film directors.

In particular these films present critical approaches to blood at the level of *mise-en-scène*. The specific presentation of blood works in ways that resist a realist and masculinist tradition that codes blood as a marker of the feminine.

An analysis of blood in *mise-en-scène* is used to reflect upon wider questions of narrative. I use this methodology in the absence of film criticism identifying blood as a specific object of extended analysis. Three theoretical essays form a general backdrop to the project: Barbara Creed's influential study of horror, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, where blood indicates abjection, castration and the *femme castratrice*; Steve Neale's essay 'Masculinity as Spectacle' that reads blood as indicating disavowed homoeroticism and doomed narcissism in the Western; and Teresa de Lauretis's essay 'Desire in Narrative' where blood is a marker of the story of the mythological male subject.

I isolate two films—Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976)—as inaugurating certain mainstream aesthetics of libidinal violence. Blood here is the paint of penetration and distorted pleasure, however blood also serves to erase a female narrative.

In the three films that form the focus of the project, blood is frequently an intertextual 'key' that 'undoes' the overdetermined patterns it speaks to. Bette Gordon's *Variety* (1983) and Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990) evoke scenes from *Taxi Driver* and *Psycho*. In *Variety* sex and blood are the red herrings to an open-ended investigation into the scene of pornography. *Blue Steel* explores the allure of the gun for a female protagonist while detaching the gun from blood as libidinal. While both *Variety* and *Blue Steel* intervene into existing structures and genres, Maya Deren's *Mesbes of the Afternoon* (1943) is an experimental film and defines itself in opposition to Hollywood cinema. However, this film serves as a postscript to the project in its poetic displacement of *mise-en-scène* and a female subject position. This film speaks to de Lauretis's concerns in 'Desire in Narrative' in its evocation of the myth of Perseus from the

Medusa's point of view. Blood functions as a literal condensation of dreamed and lived events: it is ambivalent realisation of woman's figuration within cinematic myth.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to give immense thanks to my supervisor Dr Jenna Mead for her patience, inspirational guidance and lucid editing assistance.

Thankyou also to Janette Field and Helena Shipway who offered generous support and assistance with proofreading, as well as Aaron Roberts for help with the pictures and printing. Thanks to Scott Lloyd for some inspiration from afar.

I would like to thank the University of Tasmania for granting me a research scholarship to undertake this degree.

I am extremely grateful to the School of English, Journalism and European Languages and the Research Higher Degrees Office who accepted my proposal for a research and conference grant. This gave me the opportunity to attend and present a paper at, 'Borderlands: Remapping Zones of Cultural Practice and Representation' March 30-31, 2001— an interdisciplinary postgraduate hosted by the Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The grant also enabled me to obtain illuminating writings and photographs from the Maya Deren estate.

Thankyou also to the staff at the Department of Special Collections, Boston University, for their friendly assistance and permission to use materials from the Maya Deren Collection.

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