

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

by

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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.

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

There has been more analysis of blood's symbolic or textual significance in the study of literature than in the cinema where it is often perfunctory.¹ The connotative potential of blood in a literary reading is perhaps more powerful than its 'obvious' significance in the visual medium of film. As a substance that proliferates in highly coded ways, post-censorship, blood requires specific attention.

Who dies and who bleeds in a film are, of course, questions that are not necessarily one and the same. Where the body is marked by blood and under what circumstances can have a symbolic significance. Literature on censorship and the transition to a ratings system in the late 1960s identifies blood as increasing in amount and frequency after *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967).

The wider context of this thesis is a reappraisal of the body in postmodern feminist theory in the eighties and nineties. Woman is found to be more closely associated with the body in western philosophy and culture in the work of writers such as Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Blood, as definitive substance of the body, has a strong valency as a feminine substance.

This thesis traces discrete relationships between a mainstream discourse of blood and various resistances to this discourse in three films at the level of *mise-en-scène*. The films that form a focus of this project, *Variety* (Bette Gordon 1984), *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow 1990) and *Mesbes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren 1943), rework the coding of blood as part of a concern with femininity. With intertextual engagement, the first two films resist two canonical 'blood texts' *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976). In *Mesbes of the Afternoon* blood is a key to the question of desire and gender within classical myth and cinema aesthetics.

Variety, *Blue Steel*, and *Mesbes of the Afternoon* have a kind of mainstream representativeness within film criticism or as 'films directed by women.' However, to the extent that I analyse

blood specifically and in detail, this project is relatively new. It is for this reason that I want to begin a discussion and raise some questions rather than propose a ‘theory of blood’ as such.

An analysis of blood at the level of *mise-en-scène* enables a way of writing about film that engages with filmic details and then draws out to wider feminist concerns, especially as they pertain to narrative. I identify in these juxtapositions points at which *mise-en-scène* works as critique and parody and consequently where blood works as a ‘feminist detail.’ The details of blood’s presentation work to displace overdetermined and gendered motifs of desire and sexual difference.

I argue that the presentation of blood in these films works in ways that resist a realist and masculinist tradition. Within this tradition is located the sexuality of the female as victim and blood as a signifier of castration. These representations of blood become part of an eroticised violent aesthetic with the advent of *Psycho*. As theorised in an influential study by Barbara Creed *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, blood functions in horror genres as an abject substance or as fantasy of a woman’s monstrous power to castrate. A discourse that is explicitly engaged in *Taxi Driver* incorporates blood as an extension of masculine phallic embodiment.

Chapter 1 draws upon histories of cinema violence that shape the formation of what I identify to be a canon of ‘blood texts’ that include *Psycho*, *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah 1969) and *Taxi Driver*. *The Wild Bunch* was generative of a whole tradition of the look of blood spectacle. It also serves as a touchstone for blood’s interpretation in action cinema. Production histories of *The Wild Bunch* construct blood as signalling a politically charged realism and new pleasures in spectacle. Chapter 1 also surveys the ways film theory reads blood predominantly in terms of psychoanalysis. Steve Neale argues that the flailing and bleeding bodies in Peckinpah’s Westerns indicate ‘male narcissism’ in demise (283) and disavowal of the homoeroticism engendered by the gaze at the male (281).

Blood most commonly becomes part of the language of castration in feminist film theory. Much of this work stems from Laura Mulvey’s influential essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ where Mulvey writes that the ‘bleeding woman’ is the most basic position available to

women in mainstream narrative cinema: 'Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it' (22). Mulvey's figure of the bleeding woman is a sign or symbol of a more general construction of woman as castrated through language and through image. For Mulvey the male gaze structures this position.

In her essay 'Desire and Narrative' Teresa de Lauretis draws from Mulvey's point that 'sadism demands a story' to focus upon questions of narrative. De Lauretis argues that narrative, as a trajectory guided by the male mythological subject, constructs woman as mythological monster of liminal space. This position, in its monstrousness also presents a form of resistance or female desire: The Sphinx asks Oedipus a riddle; the Medusa embodies the deadly power of a woman's look. Importantly, Perseus slays the Medusa. Her decapitated head is set upon his mirror shield—her dead gaze still works as a weapon. De Lauretis makes an analogy between the image of the Medusa's bleeding head on the shield and the function of woman's image. Her question of how the Medusa felt when she was reflected in Perseus' mirror and then slain is a rhetorical and political question of a woman's desire and pleasure in narrative. I will analyse blood in the selected films with a focus informed by de Lauretis's approach to narrative. It is in the way that *mise-en-scène* signals the space and detail of narrative that this thesis analyses blood.

The Monstrous Feminine, Barbara Creed's analysis of the horror film, refocuses psychoanalytic theories of castration and sexual difference. It also presents most clearly a theory pertaining to blood and cinema. In the first half of her argument Creed draws specifically from Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject in relation to the border, the mother-child relationship and the feminine body. For Creed the horror film employs blood as an abject substance. As such blood is associated with pleasure and disgust and these associations originate from the subject's emergence from the realm of maternal authority and the maternal body. Another advantage of Creed's argument is her identification of the *femme castratrice* in certain strands of the horror genre. This figure rewrites Freud's assumption that woman has been castrated. Female sexual difference within male fantasy is argued to be an active, albeit violent and threatening, power *to* castrate. Blood too becomes detached from woman and femininity in

this schema: blood more clearly threatens or signifies a male victim. Creed's theory of blood representation signals and re-theorises specific aspects of a mainstream masculine blood discourse and fantasy structure.

Chapter 2 looks at *Psycho* and *Taxi Driver* as pivotal 'blood texts' where blood is imbricated in figures of dissolution and saturation of a female story. In both cases a woman's subjectivity is 'painted over' and then 'wiped.' In *Psycho* blood inaugurates a new story of Oedipal consciousness and the repression of masculine sexual desire. The enlightenment consciousness as *tabula rasa* is stained bloody with the unconscious desire of (psycho) Norman. Yet this transition is enabled through the blood of woman. Marion's blood hits the white tiles and then Norman wipes the slate clean. Here blood signifies that the woman's story is, in the words of Hitchcock, 'the red herring' (qtd. in Truffaut 268). It is Norman, as evil son, whose very modern and guilty Oedipal story is told. I will argue also that *Taxi Driver's* particular fulfilment of this Oedipal narrative signals a moment when blood becomes incorporated into phallic identity. A plethora of blood discourses are evoked in this film including disavowed homoeroticism and religious motifs. The gun as phallus is taken to a desperate extreme in a defiant expression of power that incorporates and fuses blood with pleasure and configures a new type of narcissism. Blood is incorporated into the realm of the phallic by necessity in a disenchanted era, one that is also post-censorship.

Considering the overdetermined nature of relationships between woman and castration, between blood and masculinity, it would seem that a project that tries to mark a space for woman's difference would be incompatible with blood's display. How is an active feminine desire and story to reformulate blood? Not surprisingly, in the women's films that I have investigated, blood's presentation tends to be minimal. What I illustrate in this thesis is the calculated means in which a feminist tactic displaces blood's conventional significance. In many ways blood is presented in these three films as incompatible with a female narrative. This, however, involves not simply an ignorance of violence but rather an engagement with, and a reworking of, its terms.

Chapter 3 looks at how Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* intervenes into structures of the law. The female protagonist becomes a member of the New York Police Force. She also becomes

involved in the affections of a Wall Street stockbroker who happens to be a narcissistic, blood-obsessed psycho. *Blue Steel's* quotation of *Taxi Driver's* stock scenes verge on satire. The premise of a lost gun and a woman's appropriation of a gun propels the story. The predicament of a woman in the blue uniform of male authority is presented as complicit, marginal and subversive. The stark colour of blood amidst a saturated blue aesthetic visually questions the eroticisation of the gun, of power, of authority. At the same time blood serves to upset the realism of the story and the *mise-en-scène*. It works as a 'hinge' for the mobilisation of the horror genre.

Chapter 4 discusses how in *Variety* a female protagonist investigates and appropriates the sites of pornography. Ostensibly this film tries to question an *a priori* connection made by some feminists between pornography and violence against women. The narrative almost completely denies the visual presentation of sex and blood despite the demand made for these things by the scene of pornography and the detective story. This film's *mise-en-scène* also critically connects with certain scenes of *Taxi Driver*. Moreover, the status of blood's representation calls into question some assumptions about pornography and realism.

While both *Variety* and *Blue Steel* intervene within mainstream discourses and appropriate existing structures, Maya Deren's *Mesbes of the Afternoon* is an experimental film and defines itself in opposition to Hollywood cinema. However it speaks to a contemporary sensibility of dislocated space, time and identity. Perhaps this film can only be read in a contemporary context. In Chapter 5, I discuss how this film works very closely through some underlying myths, symbolic turns of *mise-en-scène* and feminine subject positions that run through the project. In particular it forms a parallel text to De Lauretis' question about the mythological position of woman in classic Oedipal narrative. In *Mesbes* blood illustrates the paradox of the female as cinematic subject and object. Blood's presentation also upsets its own and the film's status as representation and event. In positing that Deren's film is an inversion of the myth of Medusa and Perseus, I will argue that *Mesbes* works through de Lauretis's question of how the Medusa felt when she saw herself slain in Perseus' mirror. The trickle of blood from the mouth in this film is a minimal amount of blood that becomes a visual condensation of female desire, woman's position as erotic spectacle, and a masculine narrative conclusion. As

such the blood and other details of *mise-en-scène* in the apparently suicidal ending of this film signal and become the key to, the film's figuration of a woman's desire. As such, this film serves as a kind of postscript to the project, and a summary of a reflexive feminist dilemma running through these films of a relation to *the* other and a reflexive positioning *as* other.

BLOOD AS REALISM, BLOOD AS SYMPTOM

Although the subject of blood is raised in film criticism, it tends to function as an example or symptom of a broader concept. Blood's treatment in scholarship is consistent with J. David Slocum's recent assessment of film criticism's treatment of violence in *Violence and American Cinema*: to borrow his words, blood, 'on the whole, tends to be employed as a lazy signifier, conspicuous but typically unexamined' (2). Because it defines certain violent contexts and functions, analysis of blood in particular is a step towards addressing Slocum's appeal for a thoughtful explication of violence. However, blood itself needs to be analysed as an image that signifies beyond the specific details of a realistic violent depiction.

Blood has not always been a feature of the cinema; most notably it is read to be largely absent from films under the Hays Code. This chapter will sift through censorship and film criticism discourses to discuss those points where blood is raised. Although blood is a sensational term, discussion of its presentation in film often occurs under the guise of metonyms such as 'explicit' or 'graphic,' or general terms such as 'gore' or 'violence.' It is therefore difficult to detect when blood is and is not being discussed. This chapter will try to piece together disparate fragments where film discourse talks of blood in order to form a general picture of the way this substance can be read in film.

Coded by absence: Blood and the Hays Code

In *Screening Violence*, Stephen Prince suggests that the 'cold-blooded murder' displayed in the Gangster cycle of films in the 1930s prompted the enforcement of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) Production Code (commonly known as the Hays Code) in 1934 (3–4). Stephen Vaughn's history of the Code's emergence describes the advent of the Code as 'an attempt to bind movies to Judeo-Christian morality' particularly that of the Catholic hierarchy (39) and argues that the Code literally sought to commit cinema

to the Ten Commandments (41). All movie scripts were to be sent to the MPPDA at a script stage to ensure that they complied with the Code's requirements.

Blood's absence from the cinema is generally implied by the Code itself. Requirements that 'Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail' (MPPDA 303), that 'the use of firearms should be restricted [...]' (MPPDA 304) and that 'scenes of actual childbirth [...] are never to be presented' (MPPDA 305) that 'repellent subjects' such as 'third degree methods' 'brutality and possible gruesomeness' and 'surgical operations' 'must be treated within the careful limits of good taste' (MPPDA 307) suggest blood's removal. The Code is vague, however, and does not mention blood directly. Prince states that, 'These regulations placed great constraints on filmmakers and helped to prevent the emergence of ultraviolence in American film during these earlier periods'² (*Screening Violence* 2).

The Code created a situation whereby, 'in countless Westerns and urban crime dramas, shooting victims frowned and sank gracefully out of frame, with their white shirts immaculate' (Prince *Screening Violence* 3). Certainly it seems that bleeding was minimal in gun violence during this period. Linda Williams's rhetorical introduction to American cinema's history of sex and violence in 'Sex and Sensation' supports Prince's observations: 'In American movies before the 1960s, Hollywood's notorious Production Code dictated that characters got shot without bleeding, argued without swearing, and had babies without copulating' (490). Using the end of gangster film *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh 1949) as an example of implicit and indirect violence during the reign of the code, Prince observes that

The action shows Jarrett [James Cagney] at a distance, in longshots that make it difficult to see that he is, in fact, being shot repeatedly. Furthermore, in keeping with the period's film norms, none of the bullet strikes on Jarrett are visualised. The pictorial treatment glosses the scene's exceptional brutality by hiding its details. (*Screening Violence* 5)

Prince contrasts this film to the end of De Palma's remake of *Scarface* (Brian De Palma 1984) where the gangster hero, Al Pacino, is gunned down with automatic weapons: 'The gore is detailed and inescapable. The bullet hits peppering the character are shown in a graphic spray of blood and torn clothing and flesh. Instead of hiding it, the style flamboyantly emphasizes the physical carnage' (5). Prince describes, while not pointing to, a situation where under the

code there is little blood, in comparison to a contemporary era of 'hyperviolence' where there is a revelling in blood amongst carnage and flesh; it is visceral, dynamic, stylised and featured.

Exactly how specific the MPPDA could be about the general use of blood, as distinct from bullet wounds, in the script stage is not clear. Simmons suggests that 'eliminating violence was particularly troublesome':

Because screenplays rarely provide a detailed description of how a fight, murder, or other brutal encounter will be filmed, the Code office was forced to rely on the director's discretion. If the staff suspected that a fight scene might become too violent, Shurlock [The Production Code Administration Director] issued a warning, often reminding the director that it was "unacceptable to show any kicking, kneeling, gouging, or other forms of excessive brutality." (60)

The prohibition of 'gouging' as a point of excess brutality drew a line at the breaking of skin. This comment seems to prohibit bleeding as a consequence of injury aside from bullet wounds. Yet it does not rule out blood's signalling of an elliptical violent act. Simmons suggests that the Code was never able to completely determine screen content and that its treatment was inconsistent (60). There is also a possibility that blood could have indicated a murder without detailing or justifying the act. I do not have space to explore this issue here; it would warrant a detailed study of films of the period and their production. At a cursory glance at stills from violent scenes in films of this era, blood is indeed displayed, albeit minimally, in films during the Code's implementation.

A Rising Tide: Historical Change and More Blood

There are differing accounts as to when violence started to become more 'graphic' and what enabled this to happen. J. David Slocum observes that during the Second World War popular audiences started to complain about the suggestive approach to documentary war footage and 'demanded increasingly direct images of violence, indeed of death and killings, when they concluded that sanitized images failed to reflect the experiences of their loved ones' (7). Slocum asserts that 'With the end of the war and the break-up of the studio system, the Code and its underlying cultural assumptions were subjected to changes marked by increasingly graphic images of violence in films ranging from Westerns to crime and war films' (7). In the sixties the Code generally became more liberal until 1966 when it was announced that the

specific content requirements were no longer required (Prince 6) and that a ratings system would be implemented in 1968 (Fine 119–20). The changes in society and cinema that occurred during this time gave rise to a ‘golden age of American film violence’ in the 1960s and 1970s (Slocum 7). This was characterized by formal experimentation in narrative and style and ‘an emergent willingness to depict violence more graphically’ (Slocum 8). Further, Slocum suggests,

Through the exaggeration of formulaic images of aggression, productions increasingly mirrored cultural preoccupations with violence [...] filmmakers sought to join in a broader discussion about the nature of human aggression and the impact of violent images. (7)

An early academic discussion of violence in the cinema, Lawrence Alloway’s essay, *Violent America*, published in 1971, argues that increased violence in the sixties reflected historical change, technological change and formal trajectories of film genre. Alloway credits Sergio Leone’s films with uniting the violent style of Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films with that of Italian Westerns. ‘Only after this was Samuel Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, 1969, able to cope with violence of Italo-Japanese intensity’ (22). He notes that

One of the most significant developments in recent Westerns is the increased visibility of wounds. The level of information that is available in the other media is bound to have its analogues in the topical medium of film. For instance, it’s reported that Vietnam casualties, for all the speed and caliber [sic] of medical care, have more severe injuries in some respects than soldiers in earlier wars. [. . .] Westerns of the second half of the 50s have responded to developments of modern weapon technology... The impact of bullets from these guns had been persistently understated in past films and now it is being, if anything overstated. One of the first feature films to specify impact and wounds with a new abundance of blood was *Party Girl* [. . .]. (39)

Wounds, injuries, bullet impacts and blood are interchangeable in this discussion of violence, however it is reasonable to assume that this discussion is referring in many respects to the visibility of blood. The dynamics of reflection Alloway sets up between film and television and war and weapons technology, is termed as a ‘response’ that was ‘understated’ and is now ‘if anything, overstated.’ Following Alloway’s suggestion, if a canon of films were to be defined by the ‘new abundance of blood’ then perhaps it should begin with *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray 1958), a *film noir*.

It is often in biographical narratives that blood's emergence is discussed. In his memoirs, president of the British Board of Film Censors from 1951 to 1971, John Trevelyan emphasises changes in technique and style over time:

First death ceased to be immediate and off-screen; instead we saw someone shot writhing on the ground and being shot again, perhaps several times. Next we had wounded men with blood and froth coming out of their mouths. Later, with *The Wild Bunch* in 1969, we had blood-spurts as people were shot, and death in slow motion, and these techniques were copied in other films. (153–54)

The gradual introduction and increasing amounts of blood indicate not only the development of special effects but also a separate, distinct and gradual introduction of blood from differing wounds and types of effusion. In the case of a shooting, it is not the event or even the depicted shooting itself that is violent, but rather the image of blood that can create a realm of unacceptable brutality. Blood and blood movement have a violence of their own in Trevelyan's account.

In her memoir of death at the movies written in 1974, Vivian C. Sobchack analyses her reactions to blood specifically and makes blood definitive of the changes that took place in the sixties:

those movies were unrealistic; they didn't satisfy the very human curiosity that only children cared to voice in those safer times. They never told us what we wanted, albeit hesitantly, to know: the color [sic] and the texture of blood. All of us children, superficially satisfied with the realistic limitations of movie violence, worried over our cuts and picked our scabs and wondered at the rich red that coursed through our insides and occasionally came to the surface. Blood was something we were rarely given enough of on the screen—it oozed rather than spurted, it was most often black or a rusty Cine-colour. Even in medium close-up [...], I can't remember a single movie death which fired my imagination as much as the bright red blood from my own finger. [...] Then, suddenly it seemed, in the mid-1960s, there was blood everywhere. We didn't have to go to war to find it [...]. Blood appeared in living colour more and more in our living rooms. And it was there all around us in the streets, is still there. (112–113)

Sobchack suggests that the stylisation, the making-beautiful and the slowing down of violence then allowed for catharsis. David A. Cook summarises the reception and influence of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah 1969):

As with *Bonnie and Clyde*, the violence of *The Wild Bunch* was revolutionary, was excessive for its time. . . . Their films introduced conventions for the depiction of violence and carnage which others' exploited ad nauseam in the seventies. But both directors insisted for the first time in American cinema that the human body is made of real flesh and blood; that arterial blood spurts rather than drips demurely; that bullet wounds leave not trim little pin pricks but big, gaping holes; and, in general, that violence has painful, unpretty, humanly destructive consequences. (qtd. in Mitchell 188)

In addition to realism, the style of this new bloody cinema is emphasised. Pauline Kael celebrated the style of *Bonnie and Clyde* as the 'cinema of blood and holes' (Slocum 4). This imagery of the body punctured considers the look of the special effects and is indicative of the fact that gun violence was the context in which more blood began to appear. Robert Kolker writes that '*Bonnie and Clyde* opened the bloodgates, and our cinema has barely stopped bleeding since. One of the filmmakers most responsible for the flow is Sam Peckinpah [...]' (49). Blood is generally read as a fascinating explosive special effect in these accounts. Andrew Sarris observes that in *The Wild Bunch* 'The combination of frenzied cutting, and the slow motion and the blood and 'balletic' grace of people dying carried it to the ultimate level. You had the feeling that it became orgasmic. The way he staged it was very erotic' (qtd. in Fine 145).

A canon of classic films of this era is defined by stylised violence. This new style of violence is also frequently read as eroticised. It is generally composed of a central trilogy of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* and *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrik 1971) (Slocum 20). Of other films added, Slocum observes that *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976) are most common as beginning and endpoint (20). Amy Taubin's BFI Film Classic, *Taxi Driver* cites *Psycho*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* as precursors to *Taxi Driver*'s violence (12–13), the last three films indicating Hollywood's registering of 'the bloody nightmare in Vietnam' (13)³.

Notably, all of these films, beside *A Clockwork Orange*, contain a focus on blood and become popularly defined by graphic bloodshed. Generally, however, blood is not extensively analysed in this work on these films. Bloodletting signals a new sensibility inaugurated by

‘shock,’ ‘realism’ and political disenchantment. What tends to be emphasised in the classic films of violence is the balletic style, the slow motion and montage.

Alloway suggests that fast cutting has an intrinsic relationship to recent film of ‘stepped-up violence’ in the post-war period (24). This type of violent film relies on cutting, so that a gunfight, for instance, becomes an anthology of stances, wounds, falls, made tolerable to the public by not dwelling on bullet impact (except for glimpses of galvanic body reactions) or exit wounds (except for glimpses of torn clothing and spurts of arterial blood)(24).

It is possible here to surmise a theory from Alloway’s comments about the relationship between montage and blood. More blood and violence is glimpsed according to the general speed of the montage. This speed or structure of the montage is proportionate to the level of public tolerance to the image of the impacting bullet and the bullet wound. Increasingly visible and severe injuries are registered by the synechdochal phenomena of blood and galvanised bodies.

Despite the fact that the ratings system allowed for more blood and explicit violence, this system also changed the terms. Blood was displayed in a mediated, negotiated, controlled and marketed way for specific audiences. According to Linda Williams,

If cinema, since the 1960s, has become an increasingly obscene arena of representation—in the literal sense of the word as bringing on—scene what was once off—scene—it is not simply because a liberalization of censorship permitted the emergence of erotic and violent contents that were once suppressed. Rather, it is because the very censorship that had kept such contents off—scene from a mass—market audience also had the effect of making them rare, desirable, and hence marketable. (‘Sex and Sensation’ 496)

Further, the ‘rigidly policed and stratified ways in which they [came on—screen] gives evidence of not just labelling, but productive shaping and incitement by the industry’ (496). Following Williams’s suggestions, blood was not simply shown and revealed in a truly realist way when censorship was lifted, rather blood was dosed according to structures of pleasure and marketability.

In *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* Stephen Prince has another view of contemporary 'ultraviolence'. He uses blood depiction in an example that contrasts *The Wild Bunch* with *Taxi Driver* to illustrate changes that he argues are a hallmark of contemporary postmodern cinema displayed by such directors as Quentin Tarantino, John Woo, Paul Verhoeven and Brian De Palma. Prince illustrates how Peckinpah's stylistic innovations in the depiction of violence, including slow motion, montage and the elaborate staging of exploding blood squibs, is the basis for contemporary depictions. He emphasises however that while Peckinpah was a modernist attempting to 'transcend the physical manifestations of violence to probe its consequences for the lives and feelings of the people involved' (238),

By contrast, in the conclusion of *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese attends chiefly to the mechanics of slaughter. At the end of the massacre, he cuts to a baroque high-angle shot (derived from Hitchcock) as the camera [...] tracks through the room to survey the destruction below. The bodies are arranged artfully, and the blood splatters on the wall look almost like a Jackson Pollock collage. [...] The visual design of the shots plays to the spectacle of the film's concluding violence, as Scorsese stops the narrative so the viewer can survey and appreciate the elaborateness of the staging and effects work, of the violence itself as an effect and a design. (*Savage Cinema* 237–8)

This trend towards an aesthetic treatment of more and more 'graphic detail,' characterised here as painterly, is compounded by the fact that the violence has no consequences for the narrative. Prince argues that,

This dispassion is a quality that Scorsese shares with other contemporary directors of ultraviolence, and it is the chief characteristic of modern screen violence, typifying the disconnection of filmmakers from the image they craft and from the emotional response these images ask from their viewers. (*Savage Cinema* 238)

In his *Sight and Sound* article, 'Gunfire,' Jason Jacobs supports accounts of a movement towards greater realism in depictions of death and injury from gun violence occurring after *The Wild Bunch*. He places these changes in a context of the television coverage of the Vietnam War and such events as the shooting of John F. Kennedy. The violence of films after this time is 'spectacular, empty and nihilistic' (38). The causal logic of Hollywood narrative also expressed by the gun's causal logic: 'he bleeds because I shot him' (38). Yet for Jacobs this logic starts to disintegrate at the end of *The Wild Bunch*: although it had a 'heavily

mediated *mise-en-scène* [...] it captured—more precisely than anything before—the reality of gunfire as an excessive and bloody confusion in which it is increasingly unclear who is shooting whom and where the blood is coming from’ (38). For Jacobs, blood spectacle is attractive in itself:

The special-effects bullet-impact squib has a dynamic of its own, an attraction as the spectacle of visible injury. Sometimes it seems that a pumping artery lies just beneath the material of the victim’s clothing, and the bullet operates like a lance to a boil. Alternatively, there is a more messy and explosive form where the ‘boil’ itself detonates outwards in wild and runny rivulets of blood and stringy gobs of gore. The ‘Odessa steps’ ending of De Palma’s *The Untouchables* offers some designer versions of these squibs where each slo-mo detonation has a shiny liquid texture, as if Armani himself had sewn them, as accessories, into the fabric. (39)

Jacobs’ *Sight and Sound* article illustrates a general trend whereby popular discourse, such as film magazines and personal memoir, construct pleasures and specific detailed accounts of blood in film. Academic criticism tends to use blood as an indicator of more ‘serious,’ complex and abstract concepts in the cinema, often relegating blood’s particular significance as instrumental or obvious.

Blood and Psychoanalytic Film Theory

Guy Rittger argues that a new mode of enjoyment is inaugurated by the ‘regime of the exploding body’ with the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*. In traditional film violence, Rittger argues that ‘In place of the “thing-itself,” a signifying or set of signifying gestures—the surprised look, the clutching hands, the groan, the contorted fall—stand in for the absent images of damaged or wounded bodies’ (357). Following Lacanian theory, Rittger suggests that in traditional film, the castrating agency of the big Other, that is ‘the normative socio-symbolic system,’ its cuts and wounds, are ‘covered over by the means of a fantasy structure which substitutes desire and language—the metonymic pursuit of culturally fetishized [sic] objects along signifying chains—for the sacrificed organ, the maternal body’ (358). This neurotic structure of symbolic substitution functions ‘to ward off the suffocating, anxiety-provoking effects of the Real’ (357). By contrast,

the historic emergence of the “regime of the exploding body” signals the advent of a mode of scopic enjoyment and subjectivity which might be properly called “psychotic,” insofar as this new code of representation actively solicits the viewer’s loss of faith in the integrity of the Other and encourages him or her to embrace the fantasy of bodily fragmentation and the return to *jouissance*. Film’s like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, *True Romance* and *Reservoir Dogs* exploit an anxiety-provoking destabilization of the neurotic fantasy structure, perforating the thin membrane which separates the body *qua* stuff of enjoyment from the structuring through alienating and petrifying order of the signifier. (Rittger 358)

Rittger does not specify this directly, but within such an analysis blood becomes a definitive visual and erotic substance of *jouissance* and the breakdown of symbolic exchange (361). It is a substance that indicates the perforation of the body and a violent enjoyment that expresses a ‘speechless desire’ (Rittger 361). Homoeroticism is an aspect of this ‘unsaid’ in the bloody scenes of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) (Rittger 361).

In his psychoanalytic essay ‘Hitchcockian Suspense’, Pascal Bonitzer argues, following Godard, that narrative can only be produced by a gaze, that is, a subjective look of the camera that selects its object. Blood figures in this argument as a stain that then can enable the structuring of the gaze. Bonitzer argues that until around 1920 Hollywood cinema was based upon animated spectacle. However a change occurred with ‘the triumph of editing, the close-up, immobility, the gaze [. . .]’ (Bonitzer 17).

Indeed it was a revolution, and, like all revolutions, it was based upon death and upon a staging of death (a revolution whose symbol in this case was too a severed head, the close-up). Neither death nor crime existed in the polymorphous world of the burlesque [...]. In a world of pure gesture [...] the protagonists are in principle immortal and indestructible [...] violence is universal and inconsequential, and guilt does not exist. The weight of death, murder and crime have meaning only through the proximity of a gaze. (Bonitzer 18)

[...]

For crime drives both the natural order of things and the natural order of cinema of course, by introducing a stain which precipitates a gaze and so brings about a fiction. Evil is itself a stain. (Bonitzer 20)

Although functioning as prior knowledge divested in the narrative that taints a sequence, the stain can also be an image in the scene that induces the gaze (Bonitzer 20). This second type

of stain can be anything—‘the glass of milk in *Suspicion* [...] the black rectangle of the window in *Rear Window* and, within that black rectangle, the red tip of the murderer’s cigarette [...].’ (Bonitzer 20), however, the stain finds its frequent and logical functioning in the image of the blood stain, especially in films by Hitchcock (Bonitzer 21–22).

Blood serves as an obvious example of the stain’s functioning as an image in a scene. However, I would like to suggest that the reason why blood is such an archetypal stain derives not only from its synechdochal relationship to murder and death, nor its literally staining properties. Bonitzer’s reading derives from Lacan’s theorising of the stain as the subject’s own repressed object status. This is explained in terms of the visual field by Renata Salecl in ‘The Right Man and the Wrong Woman’:

According to Lacanian theory, every screen of reality includes a constitutive ‘stain’, the trace of what had to be precluded from the field of reality in order that this field can acquire its consistency; this stain appears in the guise of a word Lacan names *objet petit a*. It is the point that I, the subject, cannot see: it eludes me in so far as it is the point from which the screen itself ‘returns the gaze’, watches me: the point where the gaze itself is inscribed into the visual field of reality. (192)

In this sense, blood as stain may reveal the functioning of a blind spot in the visual field or *mise-en-scène*. The spectator may notice the blood but the characters on screen might not. Blood can thus produce the spectator’s gaze in particular. It thus upsets the notion of spectator looking at a known ‘reality’ on screen, and turns it around to be the screen constructed to ‘look at,’ and thus produce, the spectator.

Blood as Generic Marker of Western and Horror Films

Peckinpah’s Westerns continue to be associated with blood in British critic Steve Neale’s theories of visual pleasure in the Western genre. Neale observes that the male figure of the Western is classically characterised by the pleasures of narcissistic identification. As such there is a need to ward off castration and to maintain the pleasurable ideal ego established in the mirror phase.⁴ At the same time, there is a disavowal of eroticism in the contemplation of the male as object of the (male) gaze.

These pleasures are founded upon a repressed homosexual voyeurism [...] in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed. The mutilation and sadism so often involved in Mann's films are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified, so to speak as an object of erotic contemplation and desire. (Neale 'Masculinity as Spectacle' 281–2)

For Neale the clearest examples of the 'the theme of lost or doomed male narcissism,'

would be Peckinpah's westerns[...]. These films are shot through with nostalgia, with an obsession with images and definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behaviour, and with images of male narcissism and the threats posed to it by women, society and the Law. The threat of castration is figured in the wounds and injuries suffered by Joel McCrea in *Guns in the Afternoon*, Charlton Heston in *Major Dundee* and William Holden in *The Wild Bunch*. The famous slow motion violence, bodies splintered and torn apart, can be viewed at one level at least as the image of narcissism in its moment of disintegration and destruction. Significantly, Kris Kristoferson as Billy in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the ultimate incarnation of omnipotent male narcissism in Peckinpah's films, is spared any bloody and splintered death. Shot by Pat Garrett, his body shows no sign either of wounds or blood: narcissism transfigured (rather than destroyed) by death. ('Masculinity as Spectacle' 283)

Neale argues that blood, as far as it indicates castration, remains incompatible with the narcissistic heterosexual identity of the male hero. Also blood marks a body to be disqualified from homoerotic desire.

Carol Clover, Linda Williams and Barbara Creed are less concerned to theorise the cinematic apparatus and, instead, read blood as a culturally mediated representation within horror genres. These theorists are the most widely published and influential writers on fantasy, horror and the body in film theory.

Published in 1987, Clover's essay, 'Her Body, Himself,' on cross-gender identification in the slasher genre, shifted the psychoanalytic paradigm of cinema spectatorship (21). This theory was later elaborated in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Rather than simple identification with the male through Mulvey's sadistic male gaze, her reading allowed for a masochistic form of male identification with the victim-hero 'final girl.' The fantasies played out in the slasher subgenre for a predominantly young male audience allow

fluid identificatory subject positions where action and passivity, sadism and masochism are gendered but not sexed positions.

Blood functions primarily as a marker of femininity. The final girl and the killer display

a shared femininity, materialised in [. . .] the castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at her hands. His eyes may be put out, his hand severed, his body impaled or shot, his belly gashed, or his genitals sliced away or bitten off. The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with. [. . .] With the Final Girl's appropriation of "all those phallic symbols" comes the quelling of the "uterine" threat as well. Consider again the paradigmatic ending of *Texas Chainsaw II*. From the underground labyrinth, murky and bloody, in which she faced saw, knife, and hammer, Stretch escapes through a culvert into the open air. (Clover 49)

The various injuries described here construct blood as having a twofold signification of masculine fears and fantasies played out in the slasher. One is in the bloody act, symbolic or literal, of castration and indicating femininity, and the other is figured as a 'uterine threat.' This uterine image is symbolised by the cave-like and bloody place where the feminised male killer resides. These fluidities of gender identification have an ideological function that comforts the male spectator and fulfils a phallogentric economy of masculine desire. Blood has a reified significance. It functions as a traditional signifier of femininity that can nonetheless mark and re-gender male or female bodies.

In her essay 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess' Linda Williams draws from Clover in her analysis and schematisation of the three 'body genres': the horror film, pornography and the women's melodrama. The subordinated status of these 'low' genres can be attributed to their bodily excess and 'the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion' (Williams 'Film Bodies' 269). Further, 'what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female' (Williams 'Film Bodies' 270). Williams argues the display of excessive violence in the horror film generates an ecstasy that fluctuates between sadism and masochism in its target audience of adolescent boys ('Film Bodies' 273). Blood as a signifier of ecstatic violence classically elicits the spectator's shudder. This blood functions in a similar

way to the substances that define the other two genres: tears in the melodrama and ejaculation in the porn film (Williams 'Film Bodies' 275). However while the melodrama and the porn film may literally prompt tears or ejaculation in their spectators, obviously the spectator of horror does not bleed. The shudder and the scream are reactions to this substance that marks, typically, a female victim.

Like Clover, Williams argues that the horror genre maintains its relevance through change and yet historically attempts to deal with ongoing cultural anxieties surrounding sexual difference and gender. As a form of cultural 'problem solving' the horror film registers a masculine fantasy of castration as the answer to the question of sexual difference (Williams 'Film Bodies' 278). As such it also contains its own temporality that in turn serves to structure desire: anxiety is governed by the sense of 'too early!'⁵ (Williams 'Film Bodies' 279). Within this argument blood is the substance that indicates a premature temporality at the same time as constructing sexual difference in terms of castration and punishing a female victim for an 'ill-timed expression of sexual desire' (Williams 'Film Bodies' 279).

In this context, Barbara Creed's reading of Kristeva and Freud is the most extensive theoretical account of blood's presentation in film. Creed's feminist intervention into the study of horror film was signalled by her article, published in *Screen* in 1986, entitled 'Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection' and was later elaborated in her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Creed's emphasis on the monstrous feminine in the horror film displaces a critical and feminist focus upon the female victim.

In the first half of *The Monstrous Feminine* Creed draws specifically on Kristeva's theory of the abject in relation to the border, the mother-child relationship and the feminine body:

The place of the abject is 'the place where meaning collapses', the place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' (Kristeva, 1982, 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (9)

But, abjection 'fascinates desire' as much as it repulses (Creed *The Monstrous Feminine* 10). For Creed abjection of the maternal in horror film works as a replay of the abjection experienced

when the individual starts to break free from the mother. A prohibition is also placed on the maternal body, as a defence against autoeroticism and the incest taboo. This prohibition is gradually realised by the child as he/she strives for autonomy and a proper place in the symbolic order. As part of this process the mother becomes an abject figure. The child not only desires separation but is also terrified by it and easily succumbs to the blissful dyadic relationship with the mother. Hence the association of pleasure and disgust with the mother. The mother's authority over the child also governs the realm of the 'clean and proper body' and so becomes associated with the substances of the body and the process of separation from them (Creed *The Monstrous Feminine* 11).

Virtually all horror texts represent this maternal authority as what Creed calls the 'monstrous feminine.' Consequently there is a play with the audience and the protagonist's disgust and loathing (of paternal authority), and also a pleasure in perversion (the semiotic enjoyment of the child's playing with the body and its wastes before separation from the mother). 'The modern horror film often "plays" with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body where the body never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother' (Creed *The Monstrous Feminine* 13). Blood itself is then defined by abjection and its capacity to signify the monstrous feminine in the horror film.

For Kristeva, religion has historically played the role of purifying the abject through catharsis and, with the disintegration of the religious rituals that purify the abject, art takes over this role. Horror film works in the same way for Creed and is an ambivalent representation of, and reconciliation with, the maternal body. Blood becomes a ritualised substance in this secular realm: '[Kristeva] argues that within the practices of all rituals of defilement, polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental, which threatens identity from the outside; and menstrual, which threatens from within' (12). Blood signifies within this menstrual category. Creed further quotes Kristeva on blood's significance:

Blood, indicating the impure, takes on the 'animal' seme...and inherits the propensity of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic

crossroads, the propitious place for abjection, where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together. (*The Monstrous Feminine* 62)

Creed also specifies blood's role in various subgenres of the horror film:

blood as a religious abomination becomes a form of abjection in the 'splatter' movie (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*); [...] blood as a taboo object within religion is central to the vampire film (*The Hunger*) as well as the horror film in general (*Bloodsucking Freaks*); human sacrifice as a religious abomination is constructed as the abject of virtually all horror films; and bodily disfigurement as a religious abomination is also central to the slasher movie, particularly those in which woman is slashed, the mark a sign of her 'difference,' her impurity (*Dressed to Kill*, *Psycho*.) ('Horror and the Monstrous Feminine' 253–54)

Creed also elucidates fears of castration:

The horror film's obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of woman, where her body is transformed into the 'gaping wound', suggests that castration anxiety is a central concern of the horror film—particularly the slasher sub-genre. Woman's body is slashed and mutilated, not only to signify her own castrated state, but also the possibility of castration for the male. In the guise of a 'madman' he enacts on her body the one act he most fears for himself, transforming her entire body into a bleeding wound. ('Horror and the Monstrous Feminine' 256–7)

In a shift of emphasis, blood then becomes more centrally a symptom of male fears and anxieties about castration and the origins of sexual difference. In her re-reading of Freud's case of 'Little Hans' Creed argues that rather than this case illustrating male fears of castration by the father, the mother is the figure who is feared for her ability to castrate (*The Monstrous Feminine* 88–104). Creed's identification of the *femme castratrice* and her elaboration of the imagery of the *vagina dentata* associate blood with an active and thoroughly 'other' feminine threat. In this schema blood is tied more to fears of male victimisation and moves outside signification of the castrated female victim. The woman has an active and other power not defined anymore by her 'lack.'

Creed's account of blood engages a psychoanalytic reading that describes fantasy structures for the male spectator in order to theorise the relation between blood and woman. While it is limited to one particular genre, this is nonetheless the only theoretical account that elucidates, in an extensive and detailed way, how blood works in the cinema. As such, it has been a useful starting point for this study.

Conclusion

Thus, blood appears in censorship discourses and psychoanalytic film theorisation in a similar way to its functioning in film narrative. Blood operates as a trace or symptom of a wider story: a story of increasing violence realism and stylistic excess; a story of the Real, *jouissance* narcissism and the stain; a story of castration and sexual difference. There are exceptions to this pattern, such as in the work of Barbara Creed, but it is rare that blood is treated to extended analysis.

Discussion seems to be limited to specific genres that are mainstream and often traditionally masculine, or dominated by phallogentric fantasy structures. In the discussions of gun violence in the Western and gangster genres the analysis tends towards concerns of realism, historical context, spectacle, eroticism, special effects, stylistics and generic appropriation. In the analysis of horror, blood is analysed as part of broader psychoanalytic fantasy structures that construct attraction and fear around woman as castrated victim, woman as castrator, woman as maternal body. Both of these approaches and bodies of knowledge will inform my analysis of *Psycho* and *Taxi Driver* as seminal 'blood texts.' These texts form influential templates for a mainstream *mise-en-scène* and narrative of blood and will serve as springboards for discussion of blood in the films in subsequent chapters.

DISSOLVE AND SATURATION: *PSYCHO* AND *TAXI DRIVER*

"Some day a real rain'll come and wash all the scum off the streets." Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*.

As outlined in the Introduction, *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976) frame a canon of texts that inaugurate a new era of violence. *Taxi Driver* gains much notoriety from the deluge of blood in the massacre scene. Although popular discourse constructs a fascination with the chocolate sauce reputedly used in *Psycho*'s shower scene (Halliwell 656), *Psycho* is today less obviously a film that is defined by blood. I would like to suggest that *Psycho*'s famous shower scene was considered bloody at the time of its release when the display of blood was quite rare. President of the British Board of Film Censors, John Trevelyan, for instance defines the violence in terms of Marion's being stabbed fourteen times and the 'shots of blood all over the place' (160). I would also like to suggest that this scene relies upon a certain aesthetic of blood that then has an intrinsic symbolic function in terms of the shift it inaugurates in the narrative.

Taxi Driver and *Psycho* are united by how blood relates to each narrative and the way this function is embedded in the ritualised and highly mediated *mise-en-scène*. Both films also cross psychological thriller with horror film (Taubin 13) and merge and aestheticise figures of sex and violence. Rather than indicating realistic violence, these films illustrate the highly coded ways in which blood operates to exceed the signification of castration and penetrative sexual desire. Blood poetically visualises processes enacted by the narrative. I will look at these films in detail as case studies and as classic 'blood texts' whose figures are appropriated in the films discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Blood, a Swirling Drain and White Tiles

Psycho's shower sequence has 'evoked more study, elicited more comment, and generated more shot-for-shot analysis from a technical viewpoint than any other in the history of cinema' (Spoto qtd. in Clover *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* 41). Blood, however, is not conventionally the focus of this attention⁶—a gap that is significant considering that this film announces an excessive level of violence to censors and critics (Trevelyan 160; Taubin 12–13; Williams 'Sex and Sensation' 491) and sets in motion the new particularly bloody genre of the slasher.

Steve Neale outlines *Psycho*'s relationship to the horror genre in terms of the 'modern':

the advent of *Psycho* in 1960 is generally regarded as turning point, as the beginning of something new: as the film which located horror firmly and influentially within the modern psyche, the modern world, modern relationships, and the modern (dysfunctional) family (Derry 1988: 163–4; Williams 1996, 16; Wood 1986: 87); as the film which marked a definitive rapprochement between the horror film and the psychological thriller and which helped inspire the slasher, stalker and serial-killer films of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Clover 1992: 23–4; Schoell 1985; Tudor 1989: 45–6, 99–100); and as the film which marked the ending of classical Hollywood, and with it the certainty and safety of classical narrative and generic conventions (Maltby 1995: 218–219; Tudor 1989: 190–5). (*Genre and Hollywood* 96)

Linda Williams places the advent of *Psycho*'s particular mix of sex and violence as analogous to that of *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell 1960) released the same year and made in Britain. Sex is the 'dirty secret' of both films that is finally 'let out of the closet' (Williams 'Sex and Sensation' 491):

In effect, the hallowed avant-garde belief that sex was the privileged means of cutting through artificial civilization to arrive at a supposedly primitive (but just as often uncritically phallic and misogynistic) bedrock of human existence had become the newly discovered 'truth' of the mainstream. Sensational, 'transgressive' sexual representations were now *de rigueur*. The avant-garde no longer held the franchise. (Williams 'Sex and Sensation' 495)

Clover argues that all post-1974 slasher films owe a 'spiritual debt' to *Psycho*. She observes that 'it is a rare example that does not pay a visual tribute, however brief, to the ancestor—if not in a shower stabbing, then in a purling drain or the shadow of a knife wielding hand' (Clover

Men, Women, and Chain Saws 26). As illustrated by Clover, this film's influence operates at a very detailed level.

The shower scene's negotiation with censorship requirements resulted in a frenzied cutting style and elaborately staged framings: a collage of a (white) woman's near-nakedness, diagonal knife moves, a cross-dressing man and disembodied, diluted, swirling blood. I would like to emphasise that the blood, shot without a source, indicates that the knife has penetrated flesh (see Figs. 8–10). Like the thudding sound of the knife, blood's increasing quantities and repeated imaging makes it an index of an invisible act: it structures the ellipsis of the knife slashing the woman's body.

I am going to return to this scene to illuminate its formation of a modern blood aesthetic. The shock of sex, usually mobilised by the avant-garde, translates into popular and yet 'serious' blood painting. The blood on the tiles also works as an abstract announcement of Norman's story. The definitive images of this scene are those of blood dispersing into water, culminating in a swirl down the drain and dissolving into a shot of Marion's dead eye in a context of overwhelming white.

While the very presentation of blood is a gesture to realism, blood stylistics are quite apparent in the sequence. The orchestration of blood is oblique, delicate and yet visceral. The continuous spray of water allows for the blood to be staged and restaged: it is presented and then the slate is wiped clean. The 'slate' consists of the white tiles and, to a certain extent, Marion's body. The sense created by the continuity of the water is of an excruciating inevitability but also disbelief. Every stab seems as if it didn't happen, was hypothetical or could be repeat *ad infinitum*. This is a vacuum. The blood's appearance and then dissolution plays out variations on a theme of stabbing.

As Creed points out, Norman's 'castration' of Marion makes him the castrator mother rather than castrated (*The Monstrous Feminine* 148). This Oedipal structure turns Marion into Norman as victimised by mother. So the blood, in this projected sense, is symbolically Norman's. Norman's playing as his mother takes the structure of Freud's description of the child's *fort-da* game (see Grosz *Jacques Lacan* 60). The blood is there, it is not there: blood is presence and

then absence. Blood then enacts the psychological structure of castration, fetish and desire. This structure of Norman as his mother—another kind of presence and absence—enables the superimposition of Norman's desire, psychosis and story over Marion's. Moreover, Marion's blood is a visualisation of Norman's split psychosis: blood is its painterly watercolour.

In 'Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion' Raymond Bellour analyses the way that '*Psycho* contains two narratives, slipping one under the other, one into the other' (10):

the "first story" is supported by its inscription within the "second," both at the level of narrative identifications and at that of the logic of its occurrences. [...] The singular genius of the film consists of indissolubly mixing together the two narratives that it is composed of by using the meeting of the two characters as the means of their substitution. (108–9)

Although he does not explore this in his essay, Bellour's idea of an indissoluble mixing of narratives is visually suggested in the *mise-en-scène* by blood and water. Each dispersal of blood indicates the mixing of stories so that one story will eventually be dissolved in another. Marion's story remains but only as a support for Norman's ambivalent psychology—the soluble base and carrier of Norman's psychotic paint.

Although the blood is Marion's and the water is from a space 'owned' by Norman, symbolically these substances relate to the characters in the opposite fashion. The water accompanies the dénouement of Marion's story, her drive from Phoenix with the money for Sam. The storm forces her to detour onto another road—the road of the motel and Norman's story. The rain, like the shower, prevents her from being able to see. The water, paradoxically, is also the facilitator of Marion's desire: the substance of her autoerotic rapture in the shower.

These figures of alternation, absence and presence and the substitution of stories find their poetic expression in the water dissolving the blood and also the construction of a dissolve in the editing process. A dissolve is the very thing that merges our view of the water and the blood with our registering of her death in her still open eye. The swirl down the drain and the

dissolve edit is the dissolution and the draining of Marion's very subjectivity—her eye/I—and also her story. Marion's is a life and a story going 'down the drain.' (see Figs. 13–17)

Hitchcock describes the killing of star Janet Leigh in the first third of the film as a way of catching and shocking the spectator. She is a 'red herring.' That is, we follow Leigh's story as one structured around the question: 'will she get caught with the stolen money?' Then this question is nullified and answered by her being murdered and the money's being ignored. Her story serves only to 'heighten the murder' (Truffaut 268).

In my view it is blood that inscribes Marion's body as red herring. Blood also substitutes for the car and the money, that is, Marion's road movie. As symbol of Norman's overriding psychosis, blood signals that the road movie stops and a journey into a male psyche begins. Blood operates as an inverse currency of narrative, the final red debt. The blood is flushed down the plug-hole in the same way that Marion flushes the monetary calculations down the toilet. These events on either side of Marion's shower are accompanied by the same gurgling sound. In this way the blood is made the equivalent to money owed: both are kinds of debts, both relate to desire and guilt in this film. This first flushing signifies that Marion's story will go on; she will not repay the money. The second draining, inscribes the water and Marion with Norman's sexual guilt; his debts to his mother.

Norman's clean up indicates a lot of blood—enough to replace the money—as does his remark 'Oh God! Mother! Blood! Blood!' Notably, these words occur at the end of a pan shot that began with the plug-hole-swirl-into-eye dissolve. The shot then pans in 180 degrees and moves over the newspaper containing the money by the bed to the window of mother's room. This shot draws attention to the money and the subsequent fact that the money is not noticed and appropriated by Norman. The way this shot of Marion's eye and the money is sealed on either side by the imagery of blood conclusively announces that an Oedipal story of blood and mother has replaced Marion's story.

Norman's abnormality and the shock of the murder lend a kind of uncanny irony to his cleaning up. A man cleaning blood on film in 1960 is outrageous in itself: for Truffaut it is a central event in the film's construction of a 'scale of the abnormal' (277). Blood is the black

substance of black comedy. Norman, as 'normal man,' is feminised by cleaning up the blood with a mop, a prefiguring of our knowledge of his dressing up as his mother, a coda to the actual act. Truffaut suggests that we admire and sympathise with Norman for this 'job well done' (272) but I would argue that Norman is stained by this very cleaning up.

The exclamation 'blood...blood!' when Norman runs down the stairs demonstrates and wards off the guilty stain. Norman is reinstating his normal self here in this theatre. On the veranda, after seeing the body, Norman leans on a pole and briefly looks at his long fingered hands. This raises the possibility of blood on his hands. But supposedly he has not touched the body; 'his mother' has. Later, and as in *Macbeth*, Norman's mannered and desperate washing of blood off the hands is a motif of guilt and associated with the figure of accomplice (Fig. 19). Here Norman's split consciousness is analogous to Lady Macbeth's when she sleepwalks—'Out, damned spot!' (Shakespeare *Macbeth* 5.1.19–43). As Lady Macbeth, he is the spur to his own mother-king-wife, that is, the spur to his (m)other half. Blood is the substance that expresses the unconscious at work: its cleaning as the performance of repression.

Following the clean-up Norman collects Marion's possessions and puts them in the boot of the car. He wraps Marion in the white curtain, carries her over the threshold and lays her also in the boot. This is a wry and ironic evocation of the original story of Marion's desire to get married. Here she has a white gown and the money and the new car. Norman's desire for sex here too is acerbically expressed: he lays her on the virginal white sheet and there is blood from her 'deflowering' (Fig. 18). This is a marriage turned upside down and reversed—it is the deathly honeymoon in the hotel that occurs before the crossing of the threshold, the bridal costume and car thus concluding rather than beginning the event (Figs. 20–24).

Norman's detestation of the blood is to do with the threatening of boundaries, between himself and his mother—self as killer. This fluid too reminds us of life, of living flesh, something that his mother is not: she is drained and dried. So the blood on his hands threatens not only to merge himself with his mother as the killer but also serves to distinguish that which is different between himself and his actual mother.⁷ The drained, dried and

fleshless quality of his mother is echoed in the draining of Marion's blood down the plug-hole. Significantly Marion is placed in an inky looking swamp, a place that never drains and is never dry. The car is sitting as a time capsule of her life's traces. Finally, the car is re-surfaced, her story, contained, not drained, is retrieved. But the credits roll.

Truffaut suggests that we 'side with' Norman at the point at which he 'wipes away the traces of the killing' (272). 'Wiping' and 'traces' implies that it is more the getting rid of the blood than the disposal of Marion and her possessions, that instigate this switch. The wiping of the blood, the wiping of Marion, re-opens a white space for Norman's story. Her body white, and finally wrapped in white, the modern hotel shower white and then wiped back to white, the clean sheets, renew the *tabula rasa* of Norman's mind. Blood is Norman's penetrative mark upon, or rupture to, this *tabula rasa*. The blood also becomes Norman's self-created Rorschach test image⁸. We see this Rorschach-like pattern on the tiles next to Marion's body in a shot through the door (Fig. 25).⁹ A splattered projection of repressed desire for Marion, this is also his own form of therapy or problem solving, his own abstract painting.

The sense of whiteness and transitoriness, of fleeting visitors, and staged events makes the motel analogous to a modern gallery. Perhaps it is in this space, with the inauguration of eroticised violent aesthetics of montage and splatter, that the traces of the avant-garde can be seen in this popular film. The motel bathroom epitomises the clean and proper body, the clean mind. Like the modern white gallery it is a site for many events, and its space is cleaned and re-cleaned to look sterile, like new, neutral, unoccupied and bodiless. While the blood splatters on white appear like a form of painting, Norman's museum-like exhibit of taxidermy is in the next room. Yet, of course this exhibit does not occur completely in white, neutral space. The paint is from an appropriated female body and is splattered on her white skin. This woman, like the tiles, becomes the white canvas of Norman's subjectivity, imaged in blood.

The Effect of Red

Bernard Herrmann, famous for his soundtracks to Hitchcock's films died just hours after finishing the soundtrack to *Taxi Driver* (Taubin 77). The film is dedicated to his memory. Herrmann uses *Psycho*'s theme as the last three chords of *Taxi Driver*. Just before these chords

sound there is a repeated sequence of two shots: one pictures a movie bill 'Mafia wants blood'; on the other the words can be just deciphered: 'Blood on the ... [street?]'. These images, the sounds of *Psycho* and Herrmann's death create a poetic effect: the ending of *Taxi Driver* works like an elegy. *Taxi Driver* speaks to the era of bloodletting that *Psycho* inaugurates. It marks a breaking point at which blood can no longer be taken seriously. This is a point, I suggest, of blood 'saturation' in a literal and figurative sense.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper 1974), a film inspired by the events that inspired *Psycho* (Halliwell 807), appears on billboards in *Taxi Driver*'s opening *mise-en-scène* (5.16–19). For Carol J. Clover *Psycho* is a serious horror movie, as distinct from the complex alternation between registers of parody, seriousness, disgust and excess (41) that operate after *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and until *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'s sequel in 1986 (26). *Taxi Driver*'s ending seems to nominate *Psycho* as elegiac muse, as a beginning point, whilst only just managing to retain a sense of seriousness in its own bloody conclusion. *Psycho* was released at a point of zero blood saturation: the blood was dilute, crisply minimal and yet still shocking. Despite their location at beginning and end of an era, *Psycho* and *Taxi Driver* are united by the significance of blood to their respective *mise-en-scènes* and narratives. Blood serves multiple purposes. It is the penetrative and psychological paint of distorted sexual desire, the sacrifice of a female story, the mark of a psychotic male story, a story renewed. In both films, blood allows for certain effects and temporalities. Yet the amount of blood in these films sets them apart, as does the fact of colour.

Of course, on the black and white film stock of *Psycho*, the blood is black and shades of dark grey. This allows for the use of chocolate sauce (Halliwell 656). Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors from 1958–1971, John Trevelyan notes that in this film 'The girl was stabbed fourteen times, and we had shots of blood all over the place, fortunately in black and white and not in colour' (160). Trevelyan suggests that, due to the amounts of blood, if this film were shot on colour stock it would have been censored in a different way: presumably more harshly. More than the frantic cutting and oblique shots, the water itself seems to censor the blood in this scene. In the clean-up it is hard to determine what is blood and what is black in the shades of black and white.

The differences, in this respect, to the remake of *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant 1998) are instructive. This film is a shot-for-shot reproduction in colour and with slightly more blood. The details of blood in the scene are in dialogue with the original.¹⁰ Marion's (Anne Heche's) fingernails and toes are painted exactly the same red. This detail draws attention to blood's artificiality and colour, already offset by the gleaming white bathroom décor. It is newly pictured on Marion's legs during the stabbing and there is more in the bath water. As Anne Heche slides down the wall, a dense amount of blood from her back smears down the tiles, half-way through the shot. This blood is streaky in the way that Janet Leigh's wet hair connotes bloodstreaks against the tiles in the original. Whereas Norman announces 'Oh god! Mother, Blood! Blood!' in the original, he manically continues to yell 'Blood, blood, blood, blood, blood...' as he runs down the steps in the remake.

There is also more blood on the floor in the cleanup. During the operation, the lines of blood down the bath have disappeared at the point when we see Norman mop large splatters on the floor tiles. This is a reversal of the original where, when Norman mops the lines down the bath, the blood pictured on the floor next to Marion's body has miraculously disappeared. When Norman washes his hands in the remake, his cleaning of the sink puts more blood there that he then has to re-rinse.

In these reflexive comments upon the original, blood is singled out as a defining element of the scene. The blood has a greater impact because of its bright, almost plastic, crimson redness than its increased quantity. The swiftness of the cleanup, just eight seconds longer than the original, is less convincing because of the colour (the visibility of pink traces on white, instead of grey).

This contemporary problem raises the problem of the advent of red blood more generally within the post-1968 system of ratings. Could the simple advent of colour have necessitated a longer screen-time to deal with the redness of blood? In other words, it seems that the advent of coloured blood demanded its more thorough filming, and, following from this, altered narratives to deal with blood's now more obvious and visual impact as a staining substance.

In *Taxi Driver* it is the colour of the blood itself that is censored. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors' Association wanted *Taxi Driver's* shots of blood to be cut right down for an 'R' rating. Scorsese's response, however, was to make the blood less red. Originally the blood was a very 'fresh crimson' (Taubin 68). Cinematographer Michael Chapman enthusiastically compared the redness of the blood to the red of a Robert Rauchenberg painting ('The making of *Taxi Driver*' *Taxi Driver* DVD). Both he and scriptwriter Paul Schrader strongly objected to the proposed changes but they were, however, accepted by the MPPDA (Taubin 68). The massacre sequence was subsequently 'desaturated' with the superimposition of a black and white print of the film. Yet the painterly compositional aspects of the scene remain. The sequence of tracking shots through the hallway is like a frieze of Jackson Pollock splatterings and drips¹¹. Amy Taubin draws attention to how artist David Wojnarowicz expressed the painterly aspects of the blood in this scene when he reframed the famous shot of Travis with bloodied finger cocked like a gun to his head (Fig. 39). Wojnarowicz photographed himself with the same pose but with his hand painted blue, his face yellow (Taubin 14). This gesture literally points to filmic blood as artificial and staged paint; blood as colour.

On celluloid and Digital Video Disc *Taxi Driver's* massacre scene looks significantly different to the rest of the film: it has a b-grade or documentary look that contrasts with the glossy primary colours of the rest of the film. Taubin lucidly interprets the effects of this change: 'Finally his murderous desire is as one with his action and his [Travis Bickle's] paranoid vision is so encompassing that it colours the *mise-en-scène* itself' (21). The changing of the film stock when the massacre starts is important to the sublimated erotic register of this scene: I will argue that it pushes the look of the *mise-en-scène* into the realm of the pornographic.

Blood Hydraulics and Narcissus' Pool: *Taxi Driver*

It was really neat, though. It was red sugary stuff. And they used Styrofoam for bones. And a pump to make the blood gush out of a man's arm after his hand was shot off. (Jodie Foster qtd. in Fuchs, 33)

"Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the come off the back seat. Some nights I clean off the blood." Travis Bickle, Taxi Driver.

Blood pumps have been used in mainstream American cinema at least since *Psycho*¹². But when Travis is shot in the neck blood is pumped through a tube in successive squirts, rather than a single squirt. The 1999 Digital Video Disc includes amongst other features, a storyboard sequence of the final massacre and a 70-minute documentary on the making of *Taxi Driver*. This information regenerates the popular obsession with the unprecedented amount of blood and gore in this film at the time of its release by imparting new details about how the massacre was put together. Special makeup artist Dick Smith enthusiastically describes the elaboration of blood spurt technique along with the explosion of a false hand (Fig. 35) and a very bloody shot to a head (1:38.27). A piece of rubber flesh effectively conceals the tube completely. At the imaginary point of impact a flap of rubber skin attached to a fine piece of twine covering the blood tube is pulled from off-screen. This gives the impression that the bullet has cleanly skimmed skin and vein.

The blood pump in this scene develops special makeup effects as a realm of blood hydraulics: film blood is pumped like water, in a rhythmic spout. The aural, visual and kinetic qualities of this blood are of flow and saturation, of splash and profuse runnings. As we hear blood spilled there is a shot of Iris crying and the sound of the blood is cathected with the sound of her tears (Fig. 38, 1:37.13–21). The link between blood and water expressed in the *mise-en-scène* of the massacre is prefigured in the film's opening shots. They link the restless and increasingly violent gaze of Travis with wet streets. His face is red-lit and the street is slick with red lights. Steam emerges from grates, water spouts from fire hydrants and beads on Travis's side rear-view mirror. Imagery of water pressure—bursting hydrants, steam from grates, splashing puddles—is in dialogue with Travis's psychological pressure, his bodies increasing hardness and threatening explosivity.

The water imagery is accompanied by a saturation of redness in this film. Red features in almost every street shot, either as a filter that creates red stained shadows, as street lights and signs or in costume or decor. Palantine's campaign headquarters has red walls and is covered with red carpet. The porn theatre is lined with deep red seats. Betsy (Cybil Shepherd) wears red and white swirls; one taxi driver always wears a red shirt and Travis wears a red and white

checked cowboy shirt. Water and redness become symbolically conflated in the fluid image of blood.

What is missing from the DVD documentary is an interview with Scorsese about the massacre. One such interview was published in the *Village Voice*, just after *Taxi Driver*'s release and entitled 'Martin Scorsese tells all: Blood and Guts Turn me on!' (Scorsese 59–70). Richard Goldstein and Mark Jacobson's interview encapsulates a central representational and symbolic ambivalence of blood in particular:

"Why do people always bleed from the neck in your movies?"

"...For anybody it's... I think it's—you really, to me, you really want to know?"

"Sure..."

"To me, I like the idea of spurting blood, it reminds...it's like a...God, it's...it's really like a purification, you know, the fountains of blood...but it's realistic, all realistic. That's my own head, you know...the guy puts the blood...I said, give me a little more...he says 'there's gonna be a lot,' I said, that's gonna be okay [Laughs]. And...that's it, no explanation for it, nobody asks any questions. I like the idea of getting shot...I can't, I can't respond to that, I mean just why he gets shot in the neck, but...it's a personal thing, but like...it's based on something I have...whatever."

"Okay, I'll accept that."

"Oh boy."

"You want us not to print that stuff about your neck?"

"About the neck? No, you can run it. What about it? I do what I feel, not what comes out of my head, it's like a fountain, washing, the fountain, like in the Van Morrison song, you know. 'Wash me,' you know, the whole idea of standing in the waterfall?" (Scorsese 68–69)

Both *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese 1973) and *Taxi Driver* conclude with Harvey Keitel and Robert De Niro getting shot. On both occasions De Niro spouts blood from the neck. In *Mean Streets* the car, containing Johnny (De Niro), Charlie (Keitel) and Teresa (Amy Robinson), runs over a fire hydrant that then spurts water up onto the street. Scorsese resists the obvious cliché of the phallic gun in this interview. The imagery is, in a sense, purified by an emphasis on a water analogy and a religious discourse. These symbolic resonances can be

seen to be tangibly operating in the language of injury, blood effusion and body marking in corresponding scenes in *Taxi Driver* and *Mean Streets*. In *Taxi Driver*, one shot that obliterates half of the brothel doorkeepers hand and then a stab right through his other palm evoke the blood of stigmata. Travis's apocalyptic rain is a second-coming; he fails in his first attempt to kill his nemesis Palantine. He manages to redeem himself and the prostitute; he cleans the streets, as saviour. Travis lives on; he has no wounds. The narrative too is miraculously clean and redeemed.

I want to suggest that successive spurts of blood from the neck in *Taxi Driver* (Figs. 33, 34), relate the neck to the penis, the blood to semen. This explicit imbrication of figures of sex and violence symbolises the extremity of Travis's psychosis. On the levels of *mise-en-scène* and narrative, there is a cathecting of phallic flux, an imaginary semen flow, with the flow of someone else's death, the flow of blood¹³. Blood, nonetheless, hovers—like Scorsese on the topic of blood in the interview, like the camera itself panning out of the scene down the hallway—between a concrete realisation of blood as semen built up over years of allusion in cinematic gun violence and the more flattering spiritual discourse of blood as water. This 'blood hydraulics' creates a dual allusion tied up with a mind/body or spirit/body split: of on one hand the visceral libidinal relationships between male bodies, guns and blood, and on the other, blood as essence of the soul, as enacting spiritual catharsis, as redemptive sacrifice, the cleansing of sin.

The first instance of the congruence of blood and semen in *Taxi Driver* occurs when Travis says, "Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the come off the back seat...sometimes I clean off the blood." As he begins to say these words the water from a burst fire hydrant dumps on the windscreen. Travis turns the wipers on. The image of fountain-like water converges with a relationship between semen and blood in the back seat of the car. He must wipe off all of these things. This association also occurs just after a businessman and a prostitute cavort in his taxi, introducing an association between of prostitution and blood, sex and violence, although this event is omitted from the diegesis. This congruence of images also creates an overdetermined symbolism and pretext for the

interpretation that a repressed male sexuality expressed through violence, that semen will be the same as blood.

The erotics and hydraulics of blood are consonant with the narcissistic structure of 'Travis' pleasures, pleasures famously displayed in the 'You talkin' to me?' sequence with the gun and the mirror (1:02.57–04.17). The visual aestheticisation of blood begins with the opening of the floating overhead sequence where we see pools of blood shimmering silver, like narcissus's pool (1:39.00–37). The mirror-like surface of the blood is a realisation of the mirrored pleasures of identification and of watching. This image speaks to Travis's subjectivity as narcissistic and as imaged in blood. Our identification with him on this level constructs an aesthetic pleasure in blood. Apart from the obvious and related analogy of gun as penis that is exploited in American cinema, Scorsese specifically makes a connection between blood and semen in his films. In *Mean Streets*, this fantasy occurs within the context of a pressured relationship between Keitel's character, Charlie, and De Niro's character Johnny. Johnny's debts to a Mafia associate thwart his friendship with Charlie. After attempting to sleep in the same bed with Johnny after a long night, Charlie looks through the window and imagines, or sees Teresa, his girlfriend, naked. At the same time his voiceover recounts a dream of coming blood. Charlie also has a troubled relationship with Teresa. Some of these troubles are caused by the fact that she is Johnny's cousin. Blood as semen seems to express thwarted sexual relations with women in Scorsese's films. Leslie Stern suggests that this connection of blood and semen constructs male sexuality in terms of guilt (48).

Charlie's voiceover recounting his dream occurs after failed attempt to share a bed with a man. The dream marks then what Steve Neale has identified as an expression and a disavowal of homoeroticism in relations between men ('Masculinity as Spectacle' 281). However, in a different pattern to what Neale identifies in the Western, this dream indicates a merging of male sexual identity with blood rather than blood's signification of castration. This dream in *Mean Streets* nonetheless prefigures what Amy Taubin has identified be a repressed desire between De Niro and Keitel in *Taxi Driver* (66, 69). A disavowal of homoeroticism then precipitates a bloody and homophobic exchange.

Charlie's voyeuristic looking at Teresa in a window in *Mean Streets* is a motif also of *Taxi Driver*. Scorsese himself appears as Travis's sadistically motivated passenger spying upon his unfaithful wife and seeking gory revenge. In an often quoted line, Scorsese's character asks 'Have you ever seen what a .22 magnum can do to a girls pussy? . . now that you gotta see.' Leslie Stern makes a connection between the visual and pornographic qualities of this imagined projection and Travis's use of his finger as gun cocked at the porn movie screen (65–66). Later, after the massacre, he sits covered in blood and his finger, now dripping, mimes three shots, this time to his head (Fig. 39). He has run out of bullets; he can't shoot; he is spent and blood expresses a saturation point and exhaustion. Blood, semen and a pornographic violence become overdetermined in Scorsese's cinema.¹⁴

The massacre's register of horror in *Taxi Driver* constructs the prostitute's room as a bloody womb: bloody because it is covered with a figuration of phallic flow, not because it symbolises castration or the archaic 'other'. The withdrawing final pan down the stairs, pauses upon the blood splatters on the wall in close up. The soundtrack drums a single beat, a pulse of blood, a pulse of desire. There is a sequence of shots of discarded guns, each surrounded by artful compositions of blood pools, sprays drips and dots (1:39.38–40.02). Finally the camera moves over Keitel's dead body, closing in on his crotch (Fig. 40, 1:40.03–07). In a close up his gun is framed neatly along his thigh crease and blood covers his hand and his leg (1:40.08–15). Scorsese's representation of Keitel as coming blood in *Mean Streets* has almost come true here. Both Travis and Sport have 'come.'

The nightmarish unreality of this scene, its solution, amongst other things, to Travis's insomnia, makes this an answer to the dream in *Mean Streets*. It is Travis's dream of Sport. This scene combines fantasy with the doco-realism of pornography when the colour is 'desaturated':

It's suddenly apparent that the entire film has existed for the purpose of this sudden change of register. [...] Travis who's an insomniac, doesn't dream. He goes to porn movies instead. As he bounds from his cab to confront Sport, he must feel as if he's walking into one of those movies. [...] The music drops away, the colour fades and Travis, moving fast, is in Sport's face, clapping him on the shoulder, jawing with him, then stepping back, pulling out a gun, sticking it into Sport's gut, and pulling the trigger. "Suck on this," mutters Travis, as he shoots. It's a familiar enough expression, but the

double entendre clinches the connection between bloodletting, the porn movie running in Travis's brain and the castration anxiety and homophobia erupting in his tortured unconscious. (Taubin 69)

The pornographic sense created by the stock speaks to Travis's violent penetration of the whorehouse as an expression of his problems with women and a disavowed homoeroticism. The spontaneous insertion of sex within the simple narratives of porn is mimicked by the sudden and incongruous eruption of violence in *Taxi Driver*. In the *New Yorker* just after the film's release, Pauline Kael explained this dynamic in the following way.

[The film has] an erotic aura. There is practically no sex in it, but no sex can be just as disturbing as sex. And that's what it's about: the absence of sex—bottled up, impacted energy and emotion, with a blood-splattering release. The fact that we experience Travis's need for an explosion viscerally, and that the explosion has the quality of consummation, makes *Taxi Driver* one of the few truly modern horror films. . . . And, given his ascetic loneliness, it's the only real orgasm he can have. (qtd in Fuchs 50)

Kael's point is that the story of Travis's lonely character structures the eroticism of the massacre. So the 'sex' in the massacre is not only created by the blood and the film stock, it is also supported by the narrative itself. Other comments stated at the release of the film, further support this sense of the whole film structuring the erotics of the scene. Frank Rich said in *New York Post* that "The slaughter sequence of *Taxi Driver* rocks the screen and the audience as an orgasm might—and Scorsese has given the entire film the shape of a sexual act" (qtd in Fuchs 50). These comments were actually used in an advertisement for the film. In his article, 'Hackie in Hell,' in *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll described the film's "positively erotic sense of guilt" (qtd in Fuchs 50).

This blood-as-semen imagery surrounds women in *Taxi Driver* but it does not literally incorporate women in acts of sexual violence despite woman's implication this pornographic gun-semen-blood equation. The displacement of blood onto spiritual and homoerotic registers disrupts the focus of woman as sexual victim set up in *Psycho*. Iris does not bleed in Travis's narcissistic and phallic projection. Indeed, Travis's motive was ostensibly to save Iris. It is questionable, however, whether she wants to be saved and, and to this extent the massacre is a vain display of Travis's which paints over her concern. Iris is not killed but her eyes and her 'I' are reduced to tears in a blood bath. I would like to suggest that the imagery

and impetus of blood, as part of Travis's desire, is enough to erase her story. She does not speak again in the narrative, her parents and Travis speak for her. So after her story is flooded, her subjectivity is wiped and Travis is redeemed like the streets in his vision. In *Psycho*, Marion's drained eye, that at first shows a single tear, is superimposed by swirling blood and water. Iris's link to Marion is signified, in this sense, by her name and her tears. The sound of blood splashes at the point of Iris' crying during the shooting is part of the same process. But the function of this event is not to dissolve, rather it is to saturate a woman's story.

In my reading of the mainstream representations of blood, it is no co-incidence that both *Psycho* and *Taxi Driver* employ the imagery of blood and water in their stories of sexualised violence and male psychosis. *Psycho* relies on a knife, evoking fears of castration and expressing a bloody penetration, *Taxi Driver* relies upon the gun and its evocation of homosocial relationships, libido and explosive virility. The weapon and the blood are both tied up with a confrontation with the enigma of heterosexual desire, the enigma of woman. In both cases the appearance of blood, cathected with the imagery of water—in *Psycho* the draining of blood and water, in *Taxi Driver* tears, Narcissus' pool, wet streets—signifies the end of a woman's story and its superimposition with a masculine desire and psychosis. In *Psycho* blood dissolves with water and the dissolve edit to the eye expresses the dissolution of Marion in the narrative itself. In *Taxi Driver* the deluge of blood, its painterly splashes and spray is the painting over, the bloody saturation of Iris's story. The windscreen wiper on Marion's car and the windscreen wiper on Travis's taxi are both preludes to this complete wiping, the ritualistic marking, of a woman, and of difference.

BLUE STEEL AND BLOOD SPLATTER

When Rembrandt died, he gathered everyone around him and said, “Mehr Licht, mehr Licht” (more light, more light), joked Ron Silver, the murderer in Blue Steel. When Kathryn dies, she’ll be saying “Mehr Blut, mehr Blut,” “more blood, more blood.” (Johnston 41–42)

What do you say when you get questions about being a woman making these kinds of movies? You mean the ‘Why does a girl like you make movies with so much blood in ‘em’ questions? (Bigelow n.p.)

Kathryn Bigelow’s Hollywood action films are sensationalised because she is a woman. Her supposed transgressions of genre into an ‘unfeminine’ realm of violence are metonymically characterised by the supposedly excessive bloodiness of her films. I have chosen to discuss *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow 1990) because of its specific reflection upon the cinematic pleasures of gun violence. I will focus upon how this film’s presentation of blood is consistent with the action genre but contains moment of contemplation and excess that signify codes from other genres such as horror. This reflexive approach to blood in particular is in conversation with bloody moments in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960). Bigelow’s sensual and meditative style self-consciously and critically highlight’s a sense of blood’s allure. I would like to follow Andrew Hulktrans’s suggestion that ‘visceral action sequences’ are combined with ‘contemplative pauses to examine the *mise-en-scène*’ (80).

I will give a synopsis of *Blue Steel*’s narrative because it is a film that is less well known than *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976). *Blue Steel* engages the genre of police procedural film. The narrative follows enthusiastic rookie cop Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) in her first weeks after being sworn in to the New York City police force. On her first day out on the job she shoots a store robber who looks like he is going to shoot

her. A Wall Street stockbroker called Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver), who is also in the supermarket, quietly steals the robber's gun, becomes obsessed with Megan, and starts killing people. Megan is suspended from the force because the robber's gun is not found on the scene: senior officers read her as 'trigger happy.' When investigators find Megan's name engraved on the bullets found in Eugene's first victim, Nick Mann (Tom Clancy), senior investigator, starts to look for the killer with Megan's help.

Meanwhile Eugene is romancing Megan, who did not see him in the supermarket and doesn't know who he is. Having killed two men and a prostitute, Eugene becomes insane. After an engagement with Megan where Eugene tries to involve a gun as a sex prop, the reality of the situation dawns upon Megan and she attempts to arrest Eugene. The police force's continuing refusal to accept Megan's word in relation to small amounts of evidence concerning Eugene creates much suspense. Eugene's lawyer argues that the fact that Eugene is a stockbroker makes it highly unlikely that he is a serial killer and this view is accepted by Stanley the police chief (Philip Bosco). Gun obsession, megalomania, blood lust, and death as esoteric spiritual quest are gradually revealed to be Eugene's motives.

Eugene kills Megan's best friend before a final and extended three-phase duel with Megan. She looks for him in Central Park and manages to prevent him killing Nick, the senior investigator on the case; who she, incidentally, has handcuffed to the car in order to take on Eugene by herself. Eugene escapes in the midst of heavy peak-hour evening traffic. That night Megan and Nick, stressed and exhausted, become sexually involved. Eugene spies upon their romance and shoots Nick in the stomach when he goes to the bathroom. Eugene then attempts to rape Megan who manages to throw him off. After the ambulance and police arrive, Megan is kept in the hospital for observation. There she knocks out the security guard and dons his police uniform. She then catches up with Eugene in the subway and gets shot in the arm. She chases him out of the subway to an alleyway that becomes the scene of a protracted final duel where Eugene just will not die. After an explosive dance around cars and street trolleys, Eugene runs out of bullets and Megan finally kills him. The last shot is of Megan, almost catatonic, carried out of a car by two policemen.

The Gun, the Shot, the Blood

In *Blue Steel*, blood is secondary to a consideration of the attraction of the gun. This film literally and figuratively puts gun violence under a microscope to achieve what Lizze Francke describes as an unstitching (7) of cinema's narratives.

Blue Steel overtly structures its narrative around a gun. The film's title, the pre-credit sequence and the narrative's search for a lost gun alert us to this basic motif. 'Blue steel' itself is US slang for an erection (Powell 'Blood on the Borders' 145). This film is concerned then not only with the gun as lost object but also as a phallus, specifically a detached phallus and with how a female protagonist might relate to this symbolic (see Powell 'Blood on the Borders' 145–146). This overt and humorous focus also speaks to this film's questioning of the gun's eroticised relationship to blood. There is an aestheticisation of the gun that forms a reflexive acknowledgement of the fascination that drives the killer. This fascination also alludes more broadly to cinema's romance with the gun. This clear focus on the gun itself, then, serves to make blood and gore strange and displaced. Megan has a fantasy of sealing herself in a police uniform with a gun (see Powell 'Blood on the Borders' esp. 146)—a symbol of power—that she detaches from a male body. Eugene has a sexual fantasy involving blood and the gaze shared between killer and killed at the point of death. The praxis of the gunfight paints a language of the body in red that, in evoking horror codes, moves the fantasy of wearing a man's blue clothes and of holding a gun into hyperfiction.

The first two sequences of this film reflect upon the gun as an object and as embodying its own 'motive' to shoot. These sequences are also removed from any association with blood. The pre-credit sequence traces the contours of fascination in an intimate consideration of the gun as an overdetermined sign.¹⁵ The camera's gaze actually enters the barrel of a gun with the aid of Innovision fibre optic camera technology (Rascaroli 237). Slow aestheticised shots, bathed in steely blue—these close-ups are so close that abstract images become recognisably a gun only some way into the sequence. This sequence forms a miniature figuring of the film's movement into patriarchy's private spaces—inside a family that endures domestic violence and inside the police force.

This sequence also evokes a central mirroring in cinema, a play between the shot of the camera and the shot of the gun, the penetrative gaze of the camera, the penetration of a bullet. The common process of the 'shot' takes on a reflexive significance. This is a relationship explored in Laura Rascaroli's essay 'Steel in the Gaze' (237, 241). This very intimate analogy of gun and camera raises questions of what and who is shot and who, invisibly, is shooting, is looking. Does the visual presence of a gun in a film necessitate its use? The other gun provokes Megan to shoot in a classic anticipatory dynamic analogous to a shot-reverse-shot sequence. Eugene, who is unseen, assumes that it was Megan's desire to kill and so he is then motivated to shoot. Does the camera shoot the gun or does the gun shoot the camera? How much does the gaze itself imply an intrinsic objectification, even the death of its object, in capturing its existence? The analogy between gun-shot and camera-shot then speaks to another equation: woman as classic and definitive image of the cinema and the camera's gaze. Blood and woman, by this logic, are intimately related; they are produced by 'shots' from a camera, from a gun. But what happens when a woman is behind the camera or behind the gun? Is the camera inherently male; is the gun inherently an embodiment of the male organ? This film seeks to unhinge these gendered assumptions with its excessive adherence to, and inspection of, stereotype and cliché.

The second sequence of the film follows Megan in police uniform with a gun and edging along the hallway. She walks into a smoke filled room with fringed light shades and glass-beaded doorways and sees a man with a gun, struggling with a woman. Here, *Blue Steel* has an echo of *Taxi Driver*'s massacre scene. This hallway is painted red and the room she enters displays the clichéd prostitute décor. Megan assumes that the woman is being victimised and 'shoots' the man. At this point it becomes apparent that this scene is a police training exercise. The shots are fake because there is no blood. The woman, who looks uncannily like Jodie Foster (Iris in *Taxi Driver*), then picks up the gun and 'shoots' her.

The erasure of Iris' subjectivity to the level of incoherent sobs in *Taxi Driver*'s massacre is the kind of dynamic unsettled in this opening scene. An assumed affinity between Megan and the woman based upon being female, is also denied. Anna Powell writes that 'This situation immediately implies that Megan wants to champion women against male aggression by using

its own, phallic tool' ('Blood on the Borders' 145). In analogous situations of entering a 'private scene,' Megan and Travis both assume that an oppressive relationship is occurring and in their heroic actions then claim a kind of sovereignty over the woman. Megan and Travis do not question whether this woman wants to be saved. The point is not made important in *Taxi Driver* but in *Blue Steel* this is Megan's first mistake: the woman shoots back. Megan assumes that patriarchy is monolithic. Who is Megan complicit with here—the woman or the man? Did gender really matter in this context? There are female victims in this film—like Megan's mother who is a victim of domestic violence; there are also women with guns. So there are no easy equations. The convergences in *mise-en-scène* and scenario with *Taxi Driver's* massacre allow these questions to be asked. The terms of an iconic scene are altered by changing the gender of the shooter, thus questioning the gun as ejaculatory and removing the blood from the shots; blood that paints over Iris's concerns in *Taxi Driver*. The lack of blood in this context means that we can see the other woman and consider her agency.

Megan's neglect in realising where the gun has gone after it has been dropped and that someone else could use it are exactly the same mistakes she makes on her first day of the job. Her failure to pick up the gun of the person she shoots then precipitates the whole narrative of the film proper. This first sequence, however, is also a prefabricated scene. On this level, it speaks to *Blue Steel* as a whole as well (a reminder that there is no real blood in this film either). The absence of blood in *Blue Steel's* opening scene serves to offset the hyperreality of the blood in later scenes.

Later the film focuses on a bloody body of an anonymous man shot at point-blank range by Eugene. Nick gestures to the crowd surrounding the aftermath in an unnerving frankness. His rubber-gloved hands are starkly bloodied. The lack of glamour in the violence and the body shown are most clearly illustrated when blood is displayed. Despite this the blood still serves to offset his manliness, professionalism and his detachment from 'the body.' Nick posits the body as a source of knowledge when he says to Megan, who is looking for clues, 'The body is right here' and we see the bloodied torso. Nick asks Megan to look at the body to work out the details of the shooting such as the type of gun. This can be seen to be a reverse of the

pattern that glorifies the gun, revels in the shooting and then ignores or disposes of the bodies. This focus forms a reflexive examination, a reversal of the trajectory of gun violence.

Megan is put off by the bloody body not only because of her naivety but because her name is on the bullet that penetrated this body. She is implicated in more complex ways than simple trajectories and injury. A simple phallic equation is made complex here through the incorporation of Megan as Eugene's gun hero. Blood becomes an index of the knowledge gained by a character implicated as shooter, victim, cop and subject of sexual fantasy.

Hunt's notion of sexual penetration is to carve her name into bullets that he then fires into the flesh of randomly chosen victims. The potent line of her outstretched arm in the supermarket scene [...] now extends through Hunt to fatally fuck strangers. Phallic imagery, yes, but rendered richly complex by an unimpeachably female hand. (Murphy, 52)

The consideration of the bloodied body as a perverse sex object moves into a consideration of the perversity of blood erotics in particular. This is the after Eugene is pictured madly exercising in his apartment, yet this scene too is an 'exercise.' It is a substitute for the 'gun sex' he wants to have with Megan. We hear what seems to be Eugene climaxing out of frame whilst the camera pans over the city. The pan stops Eugene's apartment and reveals he still has his clothes on. He undoes his fly, takes his shirt off and grabs the prostitute's knitted yellow blood-soaked dress. He wrings it out on his chest and face as you would water, in head and shoulder and head-shots. As the blood comes out in goops, he rubs it into his arms and chest. This wringing out is like the opposite of bathing, or of wiping off sweat from exercise, literalising the disgusting paradox of the blood-bath. At no stage do we see the weapon or the prostitute. She is evidenced by the bloody dress, a metonym. The victim and the weapon are elided to allow for the consideration of blood.

An incorporation of the blood, as the red liquid of fantasy, paints a psychosis on his body itself. Eugene puts the blood on when he takes his clothes off: he wears the blood here as his identity. So he has transferred all desire for the prostitute, even as object-victim, onto his own body. While wearing the patriarchal blue uniform and using a gun is an uneasy complicity to sustain for Megan, her nemesis Eugene's wearing of blood has no glory. This imagery

substitutes the scarlet woman, in the figure of the prostitute, for the scarlet man. The motif is constructed in this exchange as part of a psychotic and horrific cinematic fiction. As Anna Powell points out this is the point when Eugene turns into a werewolf, where he moves into the mythological and pulp fiction realm of 'Jack the Ripper' ('Blood on the Borders' 154). This gory scene, whilst having a relatively rare contemporary impact of shock, is also a point of extreme self-awareness and a detachment from the 'reality' blood is so often meant to register. Multi-genericity and intertextuality inflect subsequent events of bloody display.

Loaded Signifiers and Bleeding References

Excessive blood is just one instance of *Blue Steel's* excesses of genre. Here I follow Needeya Islam's argument: 'In Bigelow's films, effective critique uses the means and methods of its object of interrogation, so in a sense generic codes are responsible for their own undoing. While infraction of a law can have the effect of strengthening it, excessive adherence can also throw its very premise into question' (95–96).

Although Islam is not concerned with blood in particular, this idea is a useful way of thinking about blood in *Blue Steel*. This film's use of blood is carefully staged in a realist fashion, serving to unsettle some of the subtexts of eroticism that run through blood's portrayal in the realist cinema the film engages. Bigelow makes films where 'The idea of the genre film is sustained not by necessarily making orthodox genre films but rather, films about genres and generic codes. These are articulated largely through excess, dislocation and the conjuncture of seemingly incompatible registers' (Islam 93). For example, in her discussion of the roadhouse sequence of *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow 1987), Islam observes that the use of blood allows for the mobilisation of horror conventions in a Western.

The visceral rendering of the confrontation, the excessive violence and blood, pushes the film towards horror, yet the dramatic structure and rhetoric remains that of a Western. The two genres are imbricated (this becomes particularly apparent with the silhouette of the gang on a hill as they approach) yet the film still exceeds both categories. It becomes an articulation of the workings of genre as an informing category itself and its efficacy as a critical tool. (105)

Following this observation I will illustrate how, in *Blue Steel*, blood in particular works as a hinge that allows this film to move into the slasher and werewolf horror subgenres. I would like to suggest further that in *Blue Steel* blood is a substance of a critical dialogue with moments from other films, such as *Taxi Driver* and *Psycho*.

In a context of the blood bath, it is perhaps appropriate to discuss the way in which the figure of Eugene recalls Travis. Eugene is a reworking of the 'New York killer', the killer made almost lovable in *Taxi Driver*. Unlike Travis, the down and out Vietnam veteran, however, Eugene is a successful businessman.¹⁶ Nonetheless, like Travis, Eugene becomes obsessed with guns, plays child Narcissus with a gun and a mirror, and he begins to work out obsessively. Eugene's loss of sanity is registered in these stock quotes from *Taxi Driver*. At the same time his body is made to look flabby and unappealing, nothing like Travis's ripped physique: his killings are immature. His delirium is excessive; there is nothing like Travis's dignified existential monologues. His working out is so frenetic and forced it becomes ridiculous. Eugene is a satirical figure.

I would like to suggest that there is also another important reference to *Taxi Driver*. This is senior investigator Nick Mann's joke about the prostitute in the back of the cab. He barges through the door and interrupts a scene where the Police Chief Stanley disqualifies Megan from the force for shooting the store robber:

Nick: "Hey: You gotta hear this...[mumble from Stanley] No it'll just take a second, you'll piss yourself. This guy's in from hackysack right. It's Saturday night, he's got a hooker in the back of the cab, her head is buried in his lap: Life is good...right? The taxi hits a pothole, her head pops up...What do you think? She's still got his dick in her mouth! His bleeding all over the place but he don't wanna go nowhere. He don't wanna go to a hospital cos he's somebody, right? The cabby he's pissed off because there is blood all over his backseat. The hooker pulls out a needle and thread...Stanley, she sews his dick on backwards!" [laughs]

Megan: "I wonder what he's going to tell his wife," [goes to leave]

Stanley: "Officer Turner! [to Nick] 24 hours in the force and she's already blown some poor slob's face off."

This joke can be read as a satirical reworking of the imagery of blood on the backseat in Travis's monologue in *Taxi Driver*. 'Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the come off the back seat, some nights I clean off the blood.' In *Taxi Driver* Travis says this after a prostitute and a businessman take a ride. Stereotypically the prostitute in film is a bleeding victim. The scripting of Nick's joke exploits an indeterminacy in Travis's monologue as to who is victimized and in what kind of context. Travis constructs a sordid and sinister scene, but there is something also about Travis's monologues and their laboured seriousness that makes them laughable. Nick's joke however turns Travis's scenario of prostitute and businessman into slapstick. This site of blood and come is ridiculous and absurd. The messiness of the scene illuminates the messiness of the body and violence.

Ostensibly the joke is on the businessman who gets his penis sewn on backwards because of having too much pride about his position, manhood and power pointing to an incongruence between phallus and penis. The joke is also however on the prostitute because of the very fact that she attempts to sew. She is disarmed of the threat of *femme castratrice* because she cares and tries to mend things. This joke is redoubled by the fact that the prostitute is not a good seamstress—a joke that illustrates an incompatibility between domestic femininity and prostitution. The blood itself creates a situation where she cannot see properly.

The gag is then transferred onto Megan who is accused of having shot a man with a similar incompetency to that of the prostitute. Megan actually shoots a man in the chest but Stanley exaggerates the description to a point of messy incomprehension where the robber's face has been 'blown off'. Stanley's emphasis is consistent with the focus here on male vanity and the threat of a woman who can't 'do the job.' This scene points to a woman's lack of precision and incompetent use of vision when she uses a gun or a penis. This sense of ridicule redoubled by the film's association with the workings of chance (a pothole, the stolen gun) and the idea messy and bloody form of injury is caused by a woman's mistakes.

References to *Psycho* animate the next bloody stage. Kathleen Murphy describes these allusions and their evocation of the primal scene:

slant rhyming *Psycho*, Megan's bleeding bad dream hides out in her bathroom, getting off on the amplified, distorted sound effects of lovemaking in the next room. Acting out seminal Freudian fantasy, Hunt crashes the sex movie, "killing" father – Megan's cop lover – and, usurping his role, raping the gun-lover who mothered him into psychotic life. (52)

I would like to add that this mirroring of *Psycho* serves to make blood's relationship to the gun masturbatory. Before Nick and Megan arrive at Megan's apartment, Eugene pulls the bullet out of his arm, blood coagulating in a stark white bathroom, bright red fluid shot spinning down the plug-hole like the end of the shower stabbing clean up scenes in *Psycho*. Rather than ending, this shot begins another scene of sexual violence. While Eugene is in Megan's bathroom, as Megan and Nick have sex, we see him pull out the gun with a bloodied hand as he listens. Here the idea of the peeping Tom, the penis as gun, and blood as erotic come-like substance are merged into primal scene. This is the primal scene. Where Norman looked through a peephole from his office at Marion undressing in the white bathroom, here the partially disrobed Eugene is the voyeur-listener *from* the bathroom. He himself is bleeding. The *mise-en-scène* of the psycho is turned inside out.

Later, a bathroom towel is used as a silencer when Eugene shoots Nick in the bathroom. This links the primal scene to the previous scene with the prostitute where the knitted yellow dress functioned as blood towel. These opportune and metonymic adaptations—a dress as a towel, a bathroom towel as a silencer—are also linked to another substitution: semen on the prostitutes dress; the peeping Tom's semen on a bathroom towel. All of these links are acknowledging the slippages allowed for by of a cinematic signification of the gun as sexual instrument. This film pushes the capacity of these signifiers to the point where they demystify aspects of cinematic fantasy and gun fiction in the very act of making them extreme—the primal scene, the gaze as gun, the bizarre iconicity of gun, penis and blood. These cinematic signifying chains of desire are in a sense 'undressed,' to the point of nakedness, through the figure of Eugene. He is 'too much.' So despite the film's seductive and beautifully crafted surfaces the process of revealing dispels the allure of its reflexive motifs.

This process is made self-consciously fictional through the mobilisation of multiple genres. Islam notes Megan's androgynous role at the end of the film recalls the Jamie Lee Curtis's

type-casting as the final girl in B-grade slasher films (112). When Megan throws Eugene off after his attempt at rape, he flies back in an exaggerated motion. Megan's powers move into the super-realm of the horror comic, and the final girl—the match to Eugene's werewolf.

These visceral scenes shift into a sense of cross-generic parody since humour is germane to the horror genre. Eugene's werewolf is found scratching in the dirt of Central Park, looking for a weapon, the streetlight appears like a full moon: 'Later, Megan tracks him by a trail of bloody footprints, another werewolf characteristic' (Powell 'Blood on the Borders' 154). To the extent that blood signifies Eugene's lycanthropy, it serves as the red punctuation of hyperfiction.

Eugene's blood hunger is inversely related to Megan's practical bandaging of her bleeding arm. Yet these characters' relationships to blood code them as figures of the horror genre. In Megan's case, her bandaging of her bleeding arm is another instance of final girl ingenuity and resourcefulness (Clover 39–40). Megan does not heroically bleed small amounts from a scratch, an 'honourable wound', as is conventional for the male action hero (Schubart 196)¹⁷, but uses her tie as a tourniquet to block the blood flow. The use of a security policeman's tie is a pun on 'dressing' a wound. Hence there is a reflexive mixing of genres and the mixing of masculinity—in self-sufficient heroism—and the traditional feminine role of nursing a wound. On the other hand, Eugene, as the loup-garou, keeps bleeding and doesn't die, and yet we know his time is up in this early morning light.

Slow Motion, Rich Colour and a Playful Surface

Graham Fuller describes Bigelow's aesthetic as having a 'highly developed taste for luridness and sheeny blood-slick surfaces' (Bigelow 'Big Bad Bigelow' 42). The aesthetic of rich blue colour in this film and extended slow-motion, I want to argue, serves to make strange the red appearance of blood.

Fast cutting, originated by Akira Kurosawa, Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah, is now the extremely frenetic and normative style of the action film. Although slow motion is part of this technique, Bigelow's slow motion cuts are noticeably long and relentless. Prince's study, *Savage*

Cinema, of Peckinpah's model rendering of violence argues that too much slow motion dispels physical tension and charge. 'Slow motion had to constitute a brief interlude, disrupting the texture of the scene to offer a privileged glimpse at the metaphysical mysteries of violent death' (64).

Brevity accentuates the poetic effects of slow motion. Too much slow motion, or for too extended a period, would rob the scenes of their kinetic charge and their physical edge by making the action seem like it is occurring underwater or in a strange condition of weightlessness. (63–4)

Blue Steel does exactly this, especially, in the first supermarket shooting and in the final scenes of the film. Not only does the camera glimpse 'the mysteries of violent death' but beyond this, there is a reflection upon the fascination with the mechanisms, the shots, the guns, the bodies themselves and the way these elements are choreographed. This gives enough time to consider the violence's very artifice at the level of *mise-en-scène* to the point where blood squibs are visibly detonated. Perpetual recoil allows for the symbolic, intertextual and multi-generic references to be registered in the viewer.

Particularly in its first and last scenes of violence, *Blue Steel* employs a weightless aesthetic and aqueous nighttime visuals. Stephen Shaviro describes Bigelow's 'painterly compositions' in terms of this blue slowness:

Plot development is suspended while the camera lingers on the details of gore and destruction, as when Eugene bathes his body in the blood of a woman he has just killed. [...] The cool nocturnal blues of the visual field are tinged with hot blood reds. Many of the night-time action scenes are filmed with a telephoto lens, flattening out the image and causing movement toward or away from the camera to unfold with an agonising, hallucinatory slowness. Bigelow's style unites a continual modulation of light and an isolating, fetishistic attentiveness for detail with concise action editing and a propensity for slaughter: the bizarre, postmodern marriage of Joseph Von Sternberg and Sam Peckinpah. (4)

The use of a telephoto lens effects a slowness of movement and a distortion of depth. I want to suggest that this lens, along with the look of modulating light shafts, contributes to the 'underwater' effect. However, Shaviro is right to highlight the effect of 'hot blood reds.' In this thick anticipatory atmosphere blood is a stark reminder of bodies, materiality and death.

The blood splatter, enabled by the remote detonation of fake blood, called ‘squibs,’ is an innovation that first hits the mainstream on a large scale with *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah 1969). This style of blood trajectory—explosive and messy, and often incorporating flesh and gore—is standard in the action film and is the dominant form of blood kinetics used in *Blue Steel*. There is no pumping liquid or sustained blood spouts. This splatter spectacle, especially in the final scene, is tied up with a general pattern of kinetic movement based upon repeated cuts. The shattering glass also evokes the final scene in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967). The unrelenting ending pushes the threshold of believability of how many gunshots a body can take; how many perforations. This convention constructs an imaginary of the body’s temporal and physical limits. A fascination infuses the suspense of this convention in action film as well as horror. The beginning and final scene of violence draws attention to these pleasures and generic affinities.

The supermarket scene sets in motion a chain reaction of shatterings and splatterings in a brief moment. This pattern then seems to be echoed in a meditative and drawn-out sense in the final showdown scene between Megan and Eugene. When Megan shoots the store robber, the shots are slow enough and repeated enough that you can actually see the blood squib packs under his shirt. They don’t quite work as a flabby chest. The gore is inter-cut with shots of the gun flying up, spinning in slow motion, echoing the movement of the match cut of bone and space shuttle in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrik 1968). This gun matches Eugene and Megan and inaugurates their mutual implication in the subsequent story. The quotation of Kubrik’s famous shot reflexively attributes a ‘profound’ and very cinematic significance to the gun. It becomes a source of ‘knowledge’ and a trope of epiphany. This gun movement spinning and flying upwards in the supermarket is mirrored in the shot after Megan finally kills Eugene at the end of the film. Released from Megan’s hand it spins and bounces in slow motion onto the car seat. The narrative import of the gun, along with the reaction shots and reverse shots of Megan and Eugene, are structured in a self-consciously cinematic dialogue with the special effects spectacle of blood in these opening and closing scenes.

The overflow of Megan's shots in the supermarket is mimicked by replays of the same slow motion view of the robber flying backwards, hyper-realistically, and shattering the window that peels down like a waterfall. These shots, in revealing the techniques of blood simulation, enact what many young viewers do at home with video players in order to unpack how the scene was constructed. The shattering glass and the splattering blood form a unitary slow motion aesthetic—making the scene more about repetition and slow motion than gore itself. The indulgence of the conventions of slow motion and repetition work to suggest that action cinema is very much about style, aesthetic and the construction of an excessive kinetic scene rather than the 'reality' or 'metaphysical mystery' of death.

The final showdown turns upon its references to other genres and films in a slow awakening to blueness. Peckinpah's dying nostalgic West and the sunset showdown are turned into a shady blue dawn rush-hour epic. Turner steals the policeman's uniform, an urban change in costume that reverses Travis's donning of Western styles with mohican hair and cowboy boots in *Taxi Driver*. Megan walks through the blue fire-hydrant steam as those familiar Bernard Hermann style drums roll. She is shot in the arm, the outside of her top arm is skimmed, and Eugene is shot in the neck in the final sequence of this film. Both injuries, incidentally, or perhaps even self-consciously, are the same injuries that occur to Travis in the final shooting in *Taxi Driver*.

There is prolific and unprecedented use of slow motion here and the underwater sense becomes excruciating. Shattering car door windows becomes a signature that echoes the opening shooting. Again, and especially amidst the film's heavy blue filter, the glass seems to splash like water. In the car she shoots from, blood oozes down Megan's arm and Eugene lopes about the street like a zombie until his bullets expire. Blue-eyed Megan still shoots him although he is defenceless. Finally she drops the gun. It lands in slow motion forming a kind of perfect imagistic symmetry, the reflexive *2001* point in its echo of the spinning upward shot of the gun in the store robbery. However it is doubtful that Megan experiences the moment of change that is symbolised for the human species in *2001*. Megan does not need to shoot Eugene dead but she does, for revenge. This has been read as revenge against her father, against patriarchy against men in general: an almost cliché feminist and final girl move

by the woman with the gun, the woman as action hero. She manages to wear the uniform that was taken from her and that she was so excited to wear. She shoots too many bullets as in her first shooting. The police force will not understand her motive or the nuances of the situation this time either. Also, Eugene manages to fulfil his erotic dream of looking into the eyes of Megan at the moment of an orgasmic death. Both figures are driven to fulfil their fantasies and nothing has really changed. The police arrive, swimming in slow motion around the car, the guns moving them like sharks. They pull Turner out of the car.

The juxtaposition of an aqueous aesthetic with blood illuminates just how insoluble, how staining, blood is in this blue fantasy of gun exchange. A strategy that Shaviro illustrates to be of proximity and unnerving immersion (4) makes the blood 'too much' not so much because of quantity but because of closeness and slowness. Blueness makes blood stark; it is being used to comment on the fantasies surrounding the formal motifs of gun violence in cinema and to mark multiple genres and texts. Blood seems to stain a 'blue movie' set in the blue spaces of patriarchy, a movie that is also in some ways, about cinema's sado-masochistic romance with the gun. Because blood is a tool that enables multi-genre play in this film blood it is not, as some critics have suggested, excessive in *Blue Steel*. Blood is excessive only as an expression of Eugene's psychosis and to the extent that he conjures up other genres, notably the thriller/horror genre's code of the werewolf. Blood is the very substance of the slasher; blood signifies a move into the slasher and horror genres—with the final girl and the werewolf at key moments. Blood also enables intertextual juxtapositions and parallels with *Taxi Driver* and *Psycho*. My aim has been to illustrate how blood itself allows for the conjunction of generic codes to occur. Perhaps it is not amount of blood but blood's rich colour that creates a sense of excessiveness. Blood is a fluid that animates this limpid cinema in a colour that is all too startlingly scarlet. The red punctuation of the blue foregrounds blood itself allowing it to work as an intertextual and generic hinge, and alienating its presence from the 'blue fantasy' of the gun as phallus.

DEATH 'OUT OF WORK' AND *VARIETY*

Variety (Bette Gordon 1983) is Bette Gordon's first feature film. Available relatively widely on video, *Variety* gets a kind of mainstream distribution. On a cover distributed by CEL (Communications and Entertainment Limited) there is a still of Christine (Sandy McLeod) in a dark blue porn-star corset, black suspenders and stockings, her hair up messily, red-lit as she sits on the bath (Fig. 41). Notably this image is not actually found in the film. Rental outlets class this film as a thriller. This misrepresentative image of Christine on the video packaging markets the film as low-budget soft pornography. The cover caption reads: 'Christine is about to experience obsession...sexual obsession she never thought possible.' What the cover doesn't convey is the sense that this film is a kind of *noir* detective flick where the woman investigates.

This film is ostensibly about trying to trace a female story within a space constructed for men. Insofar as the film does not show Christine involved in acts of sex or violence it seems to assert that they are incompatible with a female story or desire. Blood is represented in one porn film within this film, and as such, acknowledges assumed links between pornography and violence against women. But the effect is to invert cinematic codes of sex and violence with the *femme castratrice*. It also undermines pornography's status as a representation by emphasising blood's role as a prop in an artificial staging of desire. An evocation of *Taxi Driver's* (Martin Scorsese 1976) seedy New York streets serves to deflate them of bloody menace or glamour.

Released in 1983, *Variety* initiates the kinds of questions that Teresa de Lauretis poses at around the same time in her essay 'Desire in Narrative'. Both *Variety* and this essay are concerned with the extent to which 'woman' is necessarily implicated in death within structures of male desire. Insofar as it represents Oedipal structures of narrative, de Lauretis

suggests that cinema is 'death at work', a statement first made about the cinema by French experimental filmmaker Jean Cocteau.¹⁸ Pornography has been argued to epitomise the very workings of this nexus of desire and death and to symbolise the functioning of cinema more generally (de Lauretis 136). De Lauretis suggests that the story of the male mythological subject mutually implicates the gaze, sexual desire and death within a sadistic narrative logic. Woman is positioned both as object and obstacle of a liminal and 'other space' traversed by the male protagonist (de Lauretis 118). An analogy between cinema and the Medusa myth, in terms of its confrontation with a monstrous female gaze, leads de Lauretis to suggest that the slain Medusa is the position afforded to women on screen as well as female spectators. Her position, whether as a figure of threat or desire, constructs her final lack of agency and her dead gaze. Notably de Lauretis uses *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) as a classic example of this pattern (134). For de Lauretis gender is differentially inscribed in cinematic narrative as part of a mythological structure of 'death at work.' In *Variety* these structures of narrative are acknowledged and 'worked with' at the same time as being resisted.

Self-consciously a feminist film, *Variety* places itself in a critical but also acquiescent dialogue with pornography.¹⁹ Gordon uses the ideas established in Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' as her point of departure in making *Variety*. 'I thought: what about a woman who sells tickets in a porno theatre? It took the classic case of Hollywood cinema and allowed the woman to be a voyeur and a spectator' (Gordon 92).

Christine is an aspiring young writer needing money to get by. She lives alone in her small New York apartment, eating food from the packet, listening to messages on her answering machine. Occasionally she goes swimming with friends, hangs out with girlfriends at the bar or with her journalist boyfriend at the coffee shop. Desperate for money and out of work, she takes a job as a porn ticket seller. At the ticket booth on 42nd Street, Christine watches passers by and tries to fend off invitations by the male patrons. Although slightly disturbed by pornography she becomes curious. She peruses porn magazine vendors and observes the men who go there. She spontaneously recites some of her own pornographic writing to her boyfriend. She also begins to receive anonymous dirty phone calls on her answering machine, alongside her mother's unrelenting messages.

Luis, an older man in a grey suit is a low-key patron of the porn cinema who politely invites Christine to a baseball game. She starts following him and spying on his activities. She later suspects that he is tied up with a Mafia racket operating at the meat-packing district. But this is a curiosity that leaves a whole lot unexplained. We never really know what exactly or most powerfully motivates Christine. When she goes to steal Luis's diary in a motel she ends up having to leave quickly. She only manages to hang onto his porn magazine. The resulting knowledge she gains is esoteric, yet her investigation is prioritised over her boyfriend's conventional journalistic research into the Mafia corruption.

Variety's engagement with pornography is multi-faceted. Christine becomes more implicated in her own private sexuality towards the end of the film. She constructs and explores herself as sexual object and pornographic story –teller. In this way Christine becomes both object and decoder. Her own 'experimental' porn stories are a translation of porn image to word: a kind of theorisation of the pornographic image that may or may not articulate her own fantasy. Resistance, exploration and immersion are combined as approaches to pornographic desire and narrative. This is an act of demythologizing and 'making banal.' A space of tension and relativity is opened up to create a sense of absurdity where 'nothing happens': no blood, no sex.

Variety investigates and appropriates pornographic codes and its red motifs. To this extent the film begins a project later outlined in Laura Mulvey's 'The myth of Pandora: A Psychoanalytical Approach': *Variety* is a reflexive engagement with the enigma and 'terrible place' where femininity is represented. If pornography, the porn cinema and the peep show are versions of Pandora's box, what are the evils to be found? Who owns this box? Does it really represent woman? Do the red fetishes of pornography—red lipstick, painted fingernails, or red snakeskin heels—indicate blood and woman's castration within a male economy of desire?

She was wearing red lipstick...A man was bleeding...

Although Pandora has been used for so long as an allegory of releasing trouble into the world, from a feminist point of view her look of curiosity represents a willingness, on the

part of women, to investigate those aspects of the feminine that are, symptomatically repressed under the regime of fetishism. Feminist theory must then decode, articulate, and analyse these symptoms in order to transform the look of curiosity, the desire to know, into understanding so that the status of the female body as signifier can be challenged and transformed. (Mulvey 'The Myth of Pandora' 18)

Variety engages this feminist process allegorised in the figure of Pandora, presenting the red accoutrements of sexual allure in such a way that they signify outside an association with fetish and castration. *Variety*'s opening is one such occasion. Christine and her friend are in the pool change-rooms. Christine borrows her friend Nan's red lipstick and feels the need to justify herself. Christine is bemused with the name of the lipstick: 'sim-city?' she asks. Nan says, 'Yeah, love that lipstick,' in a slightly ironic tone. The question arises as to what does lipstick simulate or represent? Red lips, a 'woman of the city' or something else? Afterwards, Nan suggests that the job ticket selling is not for her: implicitly the lipstick might not be either. The summary implication is that Christine is a 'good girl.' Christine says that she wears lipstick because her mum does and because she wants to get a job; then she states that she doesn't know. Christine's explanation plays with and challenges a straight-forward idea of lipstick's relationship with the pornographic, the *vagina dentata*, and the maternal monstrous feminine, and, more generally, the 'bad girl' or *femme fatale*. The diffusion of these possible significations means Christine is neither good nor bad and neither is red lipstick. It does not signal blood from a castrating female mouth nor does it signal Christine as a vulnerable sex object. From Christine's point of view it is a means to an end, a way of getting a job, a tradition of femininity handed down from her mother and, perhaps, a source of pleasure. Much of *Variety* is a frank refusal of sensation. This takes the form of a reflexive questioning of the obvious, in this case, red lipstick.

By the time we hear her last most confronting porn story Christine speaks of a red pussy, a strawberry and painted toenails. The first is a literalisation of what should be fetishised and disavowed according to a psychoanalytic reading of sexuality; the second something red that does not fit the fetish; and we don't know the colour of the toenails. She speaks her porn stories bluntly, in a monotone, and from her own point of interest, quelling the conventional emotional or hysterical mode of feminine sexuality.

In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* Linda Williams suggests that in both horror and pornography 'woman' and blood become mutually implicated in a seemingly masculine desire for the display of the body opened or involuntarily revealed. Following the work of Carol J. Clover, Williams explores the connections between slasher films, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and pornography:

such [slasher] films rarely rape, they more often kill; but killing functions as a form of rape. The violence is frequently presented as having origins in unresolved Oedipal conflicts—not surprising in a cycle of films that seems indelibly marred by Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Like pornography, the slasher film pries open the secrets of normally hidden things. (*Hard Core* 191)

Later she compares *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974) to *Snuff* (Michael Findlay, Roberta Findlay, Horacio Fredrikson and Simon Nuchtern 1976), a film that Williams classes as a kind of horror. *Snuff* is a fictional story of the making of a 'snuff film': a recording of the actual rape and killing of a woman rumoured in the 70s to have occurred in South America. Williams suggests that *Snuff* has altered the way that pornography can be read.

That significant parallels hold between these two illegitimate, low-budget genres [pornography and the slasher] with particular appeal to male viewers is undeniable [. . .] What seems particularly disturbing about such visions, in the case of not merely *Snuff* but of violent aggression within pornography proper, is the sense in which a new form of the "frenzy of the visible"—here an involuntary spasm of pain culminating in death—becomes imaginable as a perverse substitute for the invisible involuntary spasm of orgasm that is so hard to see in the body of the woman [. . .] Read in the context of pornography as opposed to horror, a flinch, a convulsion, a welt, even the flow of blood itself, would seem to offer incontrovertible proof that a woman's body, so resistant to the involuntary show of pleasure, has been touched, "moved" by some force. (*Hard Core* 194)

Williams suggests that *Snuff* signifies a trend where it becomes imaginable that blood can register proof of a woman's pleasure or orgasm itself. Blood is within this genre nonetheless visually registers the man's capacity to produce a woman's pleasure; it is a gauge of the phallus. This shifts Mulvey's classic feminist emphasis on the idea of woman taking the position as 'bearer of the bleeding wound' stated in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' insofar that blood marks sexual difference not so much in registering castration but in marking penetration and male sexual prowess.

De Lauretis's questions about pornography and death depart from Freud's analysis of the Medusa. The Medusa's gaze threatens to turn a man to stone and thus kill him. Freud points to how Medusa's power makes a man rigid. Cixous jokes about this threat being the very condition of male desire for woman: men 'need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on!' (255). De Lauretis elaborates these ideas. 'Freud may not have known it, but in that two-page paper he put forth the definitive theory of pornographic cinema and, some have argued, of cinema *tout court*. Death at work. But whose death is it, whose work, and what manner of death?' (136).²⁰

An analogous question I want to ask here is does the metaphor of 'death at work' translate into the image of blood in pornography itself and who is bleeding? Following Williams, is blood the evidence of a penetrative masculine desire to see 'evidence' of female pleasure? *Variety*'s presentation of a porn film does present blood, but this blood is not from a bleeding woman but a bleeding man.²¹

Over halfway through *Variety* Christine follows Luis into a peepshow (1:02.46). She runs into a man exiting a prostitute's room and doing up his fly. They are both disturbed by this. She puts a coin in a machine that shows her a porn film (1:03.26–36). A man is pictured with blood running out of his mouth. The shot pans to his neck slashed and his chest stabbed. The blood is fake bright red. In the next shot a girl bites her fist, with wide-eyed false angst, clutching a bloodied knife. The fantasy here is of a woman killing a man. When this film opens the Pandora's peepshow box it does not reveal an 'evil' of victimization. On the contrary: the *femme castratrice* is a turn on. In an assertion of male masochism, this film's presentation of the blood of a man is an occasion for desire.

The turn on also seems also to be defined to a significant degree by the staged nature of the budget *mise-en-scène*. The man lies there injured, perhaps dead, while the woman simply plays along with a thinly affected expression. The blood indicates the fakeness and is the occasion for self-consciousness. This film within a film appears almost as pornography's 'answer' to a feminist assertion of the genre's inherent violence against women. The contrivance of this excerpt points to failed performance, that is, pornography's lack of effect at the level of

representation, whether sexual or violent. This scene suggests a Warhol-like pleasure in 'bad acting,' and sordid, flaccid humour. The joke resides in overdetermined generics that speak to the parodic aspects of schlock depictions of violence in films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Variety thus presents pornography and the issue of violence against women as a question of *mise-en-scène* and conditions of production. Making the violence in pornography a literal issue of blood displaces a focus upon the violence of symbolism and the cinematic apparatus.

These figurative concepts equate castration and woman but do not spell out how this equation would translate into specific contexts. No one is literally represented as 'victimised' because this excerpt reveals its own conditions of production to such an extent. The seriousness too of any act of victimization, insofar as it is a product of artifice, is put into doubt. A 'real' or 'truthful' representation, of woman or man, is not the issue here. Rather pornography is presented as a construction, a fictional form that plays with signifiers such as blood and the body injured.

As a film-within-a-film the porn films seen in the peep show box and at the *Variety* cinema are once removed: they are objects of knowledge or investigation; and also re-constructed events. Pornographic cinema becomes Pandora's box for Christine as Pandora-like figure. Like Pandora she is curious. She becomes implicated in it as a pornographic figure through costume and storytelling. She herself becomes an enigma and pornographic figure to the cinema's patrons:

Pandora's curiosity about its [the box's] contents may be interpreted as a curiosity about the enigma that she personifies [...]. And her desire to see inside the box can be *re-represented* as a self-reflexive desire to investigate the enigma of femininity itself, literally figured as reified and alienated into a displaced space. (Mulvey 'The Myth of Pandora' 11)

The metaphorical box, for Christine is, at one stage the peep show; the second stage Variety cinema's film projection box (9.04–9.50). Both are dark spaces of pornography that claim to represent woman. What Christine finds however is uncertain meaning. Pornography is a slippery signifier always out of her grasp: she never really finds the 'truth' because her very movement into its spaces serves to confound its conditions. Her presence upsets the viewing and projecting process.

Taxi Driver, the Blind Spot and 'Work'

The porn film in the peepshow evokes Scorsese's fantasy of a bleeding neck. At the same time as decoding an association between pornography and castration, pornography and penetrative violence or the 'body opened,' *Variety* intervenes upon the space of *Taxi Driver* to comment on one of its key scenes. This film goes to a site where blood and semen are overdetermined.

Variety evokes *Taxi Driver*'s backseat when Christine finds herself in the backseat of a private car with Luis (35:17–39.05). The driver's suspicious and beady eyes are shot in the rear view mirror. This is a quotation from *Taxi Driver* that is made more potent by the driver's resemblance to De Niro. In *Taxi Driver* giving a lift to a businessman and a prostitute occasions a monologue that tells of cleaning the come, or sometimes the blood, off the backseat. A similar sequence of shots occurs when Travis picks up presidential candidate Palantine who complains at first that they should have taken the limousine. For Christine this scene on the backseat is the beginning of a kind of risqué date to a baseball game²²—slightly sordid and also mundane—but what of sex, or the risk she takes not knowing this man? Is she acting like a prostitute and, if so, does this put her at risk? This scene raises questions about promiscuity and a classic scenario of rape and violence. But nothing happens: Christine's date leaves suddenly before the game begins and so this deflated event serves to parody *Taxi Driver*'s sensational backseat.

In its movement more generally, *Variety* presents itself as a version of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* in reverse. It goes back over the territory, the *mise-en-scène*, the figures, in an attempt to make a space for a female protagonist. A desire or knowledge other to Travis's phallic, narcissistic pleasure is a blind spot in *Taxi Driver*. This blind spot is exactly where Christine is placed. When Travis first encounters Iris she gets in the back of his taxi and struggles with Sport. 'Variety photoplay' is advertised on a sign behind his car (29:21.30–22.19). Following this scene he takes Betsy on a date to a porn movie. Travis only looks in his rear view mirror and the quintessential image in this mirror is Betsy in the final shots of *Taxi Driver*. As such woman is a projected angelic fantasy for Travis.²³ Christine figures a complexity that confounds the duality of angel-whore, a difference that Travis cannot see. The 'Variety'

cinema theatre sign is in the background of a shot of *Taxi Driver* that contains Iris and her friend just before Travis buys time with Iris (1:11.50–57). Christine works in the ticket box on the footpath outside this theatre. She is in a background space and also an in-between space: between Iris the prostitute, on the street, and Betsy, the political campaign worker, behind the window. People look at her as she is in an equally advantageous position to look at them. This is a blind-spot because, as a seeming spectacle framed to be looked at in the window, she herself is separate, sealed and able to look, follow and desire. This is the kind of agency that Travis cannot see in Iris. In the ticket box, Christine is the anonymous voyeur to the extent that men see her as a projection of ‘woman.’

Structurally, *Variety*’s intervention into the *mise-en-scène* of *Taxi Driver* is an appropriation of the scene in which Travis takes Betsy to the porn movie. Christine is a reworking of the Betsy figure, that is, the idea of the woman at a porn film. Betsy is offended and disgusted at Travis’s idea of pornography as a ‘date.’ Betsy is simply the misplaced date—sex object victim and she has no real role besides as fantasy figure. Yet there are enough intertextual convergences with Betsy and Christine in *Variety* to invite a critical comparison. Christine, like Betsy, becomes constructed as pornographic fantasy figure. Besides their bouncy blonde and wavy hair and their, classic almost *femme fatale* looks, Cybil Shepherd and Sandy Macleod wear swirls of red and white toward the beginning of each film. McLeod’s costume takes the form of a swimsuit; Shepherd’s a flashy but respectably bourgeois work dress. Here is a play of white, connoting innocence and purity, and red, associated with desire, evil, ‘essence,’ the heart, and blood. The colours of these costumes constitute a play with those polarized significations mythologically associated with ‘woman.’

Christine also is a melding of Betsy with the isolated unemployed marginality of Travis.²⁴ Both Christine and Travis are outsiders in New York: Christine comes from Michigan, Travis has come from Vietnam. They are both writers and live alone. At first unemployed, like Travis, Christine accepts a job with the same utilitarian attitude as Travis. Like Travis, she has obsessive tendencies and starts to enjoy voyeurism. As she gets more obsessed and alone she starts to exercise with weights at home. Both characters frequent the porn theatres. The point of convergence for Christine and Betsy, and also Travis, is when Christine takes the job as

porn ticket seller. This convergence occurs at an early stage in *Variety*'s diegesis, similar to the point at which Travis takes his first shift with the cab in *Taxi Driver*. There is also a ticket seller in *Taxi Driver*: a black woman whom Travis abuses when his date with Betsy turns sour. The polarisation of male and female desire and of angel and whore is cancelled out and complicated in the merging of these positions into the ticket seller.

Variety contains a moment similar to Travis's pornographic dream realisation of obsession in the final massacre. Christine has an epiphany that merges fantasy, pornography and reality (1:21.00–23.09). Christine seems to imagine herself in the porn film that she watches in the *Variety* cinema. Like the change in celluloid when Travis enters the massacre, Christine suddenly appears in a porn film set in a motel room waiting on a bed for Luis. First she is kissing him and then a number of shots of Luis playing with his tie, intercut with Christine looking up at him, suggest a sado-masochistic exchange. The motel room is the site of *Psycho*'s bloody epiphany; it is a space of cinema, already associated with anonymous sex that *Psycho* associates with a slashed single woman. Luis stands over Christine as sadist²⁵ but then the film merges with other pornographic scenes and it is unclear whether Christine imagined herself in this film or actually participated in it. In other words, it is unclear what actually happened here.

This scene raises questions about the nature of desire, of a pleasure in staging one's own domination, that is, a pleasure in masochism. Where angelic Betsy refuses to be in Travis's porn film, here Christine imagines herself, or even plays, in one of her own devising. This scene, and the way in which it offsets Travis's bloody desire, can be illuminated by Gordon's own musings on female fantasies.

Fantasy interested me [. . .] female fantasies, and how they may involve things women don't even talk about among themselves. [. . .] When women fantasise about being held down and made to fuck, it's about not wanting to take responsibility for desire. In a society where sexual desire is so repressed, it makes sense. For men, it's easier to find an outlet for sexual desire—through prostitution, sex or strip clubs. It's more accessible and acceptable. But ultimately, of course, nothing ever satisfies desire. (93)

Christine's fantasy does not translate easily into the diegesis: it is a hypothetical scenario. In this way the film resists a fatalistic and fantastic satisfaction of repressed desire classically

expressed by blood in *Taxi Driver*. Bloody climax is an absurd possibility for Christine, despite her quite similar situation to Travis in terms of loneliness, unemployment, milieu and obsession.

Variety certainly depicts some dysfunctional and desperate men buying tickets to porn films. Christine is physically harassed by men in the porn magazine store (1:30.45–31.08). A man asserts that he saw her in a porn film. This is a possibility because we do not know the status of the excerpt depicting Luis and Christine in the motel together. However, the men in this film are not hot-wired for violence like Travis—or else we do not see this type of violence enacted. The evocation of *Taxi Driver*, the story of a man's repressed sexual desire and loneliness leading to a violent blood bath as erotic climax, serves to emphasise that this analogous woman's story contains no blood whatsoever.

Sanguine Genres and Empty Streets

Christine chooses to sell pornography tickets simply because the job is available and she needs money. But it also enables her to obtain a type of knowledge. This knowledge is not the 'truth' sexual pleasure involuntarily or hysterically registered in women's bodies, as Linda Williams suggests is the founding desire of pornography (*Hard Core* 49–50). Nor is this knowledge the 'truth' of pornography itself. *Variety*'s narrative simply allows Christine to do what she wants, immersed within this porn milieu, without getting hurt.

Christine's knowledge emerges from informal, personal channels, without professional motive. These channels are immersed: she investigates from within, whilst her boyfriend's knowledge is career-based, paid, and officially implicated in public and legal discourses. Christine not only investigates but subjectively engages with pornography in her storytelling to her boyfriend Mark Hardrick (Will Patton). These situations in the cafe, in the car, and at the pinball machine create ironic juxtapositions. They are a joke, because seemingly this couple never has sex (note her boyfriend's porn-star name). Christine's porn stories are a disquieting substitute and these narrations of porn have a kind of sadistic effect on him.

Christine's porn stories offset the story and knowledge gained by investigative journalism. Mark's story comes from a discourse of great American journalistic finds about corrupt businesses. Her story is a pornographic fiction based upon what she has seen at her work in the porn theatre. Yet both relate to the same man who is seemingly at the centre of a drug and porn racket. The fraught relationship between a licit and an illicit story and the slippage between the two is deftly illustrated when Mark talks excitedly of feeding the story to the police as 'a whole other story...' Mark is making a distinction between a story that becomes involved with the law and a journalistic story. Christine muses and meditates upon these words: "Whole other story... *other* story... story... story.. smooth black slip on her skin.." And so a pornographic story involving red snakeskin heels emerges from his idea of telling the story to the police. Christine's boyfriend is disturbed and quite angry and so he leaves. She exclaims: 'I'm telling you about my life.' Mark's story too is really about his life. The fact that Mark's and Christine's stories refer in a way to the same thing—a Mafia racket related to Luis—is an illustration of their quite different desires. Christine's active desire, complicit with the figures and codes of pornography, serves to destroy her own and Mark's mutual implication in the overall narrative.

The gracefulness of this film's strategy of juxtaposition and reversal makes it hard to detect what, upon closer investigation, appear as intertextual reversals of and games with classical voyeuristic scenarios. After a classic sleuth sequence set on a train, Christine observes a business deal from a seat on a merry-go-round (1:14.21–51). Here she is the voyeur from the centre of a spectacle. She has the same position in the ticket box. A curtain sets the stage for Christine's spying from the Flamingo Motel, but she does not look inside, into a private room, but from inside looking outside at Luis doing deals with men in the car park (1:17.03–29). This is a reversal of the voyeurism of such films as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock 1954) and *Psycho*, *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese 1973) and *Taxi Driver* where voyeurism is constructed as a look into a room from outside a window or peephole, from a position of relative invisibility. Taking up this feminine position, as object of the gaze, makes her less conspicuous or suspect as a bearer of a gaze upon Luis.

So Christine's experience of this milieu is as subject and object. Her immersion and detachment is what de Lauretis argues to be a double movement that constitutes the position of women spectators; the position available for pleasure within a masculine construction of narrative.

[T]he movement of narrative discourse, [. . .] specifies and even produces the masculine position as that of mythical subject, and the feminine position as mythical obstacle or, simply the space in which that movement occurs. Transferring this notion by analogy to cinema we could say that the female spectator identifies with both the subject and the space of the narrative movement, with the figure of movement and the figure of its closure, the narrative image. Both are figural identifications, and both are possible at once; more, they are concurrently borne and mutually implicated by the process of narrativity. (143)

In articulating a narrative, a desire, an obsession, Christine becomes the image—she dresses and 'plays' as sex object in porn costume she appropriates its *mise-en-scène*, just as she occupies liminal space as mythical obstacle in the ticket box. She also becomes the narrative movement—her investigation moves the camera. *Variety* thus emerges as a parallel of de Lauretis's theory of female spectatorship enacting a female narrative in a film. However, Christine's very positioning allows her unique access to certain knowledges due to her proximity to pornography and the man whom she suspects is the 'boss.' Because of her implication within this scene however, she cannot claim the same kinds of 'truth' value that her boyfriend's more pure act of journalism can officially achieve.²⁶

Gordon's resistance to conventional cinematic codes also thematises an incompatibility in the cinema between woman as eroticised figure of contemplation and detective; between woman as desiring story teller and woman as desired prize of the story. This is the tension and absurdity of the film: a tension conspicuous for its lack of sex or violence as a way of 'making sense.' The ending of *Variety* is identified by de Lauretis to be maintaining a protracted tension between the two positionalities of desire afforded to the woman in the Oedipal situation. *Variety* suggests that 'such duplicity, such contradiction cannot and perhaps even need not be resolved' (153).

What Christine touches upon is underground trade, yet this is not even ‘the answer.’ There is literally something fishy going on, that is, the suspect nature of pornography leads to an underground black market of pornography and drugs located in the meat–packing district. The images of fish and hanging carcasses shown of this district create a literal equivalence, a kind of feminist critique. It finds that pornography is analogous to dead fish and this has something to do with men and Mafia business, through homosocial exchange, with male spectators. The suspect nature of the businessman who watches pornography links the idea of women and sex to the meat sold on the market.

The fish is the quintessential image of the meat market sequences. A number of shots show men hooking fish and packing them in boxes. A fish is hooked through the eye casually, mechanically. These fish eyes are alien, cold, dead. Are these eyes the eyes of those looked at or of those looking? Are the men who watch pornography the hooked and dead fish? Is looking itself a kind of dead activity? As de Lauretis asks, whose death is at work here? Is the fantasy of porn finally a ‘red herring’ for feminism? Although literally there is a link and seemingly there should be an answer, there is nothing more than this. It is a possible relationship, not an obvious or a provable one.

Variety leaves the viewer with a wet New York street: the *mise-en-scène* of romance and desire, of the prostitute and of the dead body. This is the place which Christine makes the meeting place when she blackmails the businessman. Neither party turns up and the credits roll. This final locale could be anywhere, not just iconic Manhattan, it could be Brooklyn or the Bronx. The street corner is deflated of its cinematic glamour and its importance as the final space of the diegesis. There is no woman: the space is empty. The streetlight is not red but standard white. The street is wet because it is raining; the street is not bloody. The narrative denies the Oedipal logic of the hero who penetrates the truth. There is no mystery, we know this story: its heroics can be left to her journalist boyfriend who is also researching this same market. Christine needs not the heroics, nor the heroics of blood, yet her desire is left open.

Judith Shulevitz describes the ending as open and static. This film narrative does not translate into anything familiar regarding the stories we are used to seeing on film. ‘The film’s strength

lies in the tension of its non-ending: the absurdity of the sacrifices required for narrative closure become all too clear. All the film can allow is a symbolic stand-off between female and male characters' (179).

This has a formal importance that speaks to the absurdity of the conventional desire where the truth is revealed or penetrated to, where relationships are sealed. A massacre or a shoot-out is a convenient and bloody way to represent this in a conclusive red colour, a grand painterly gesture. If this is absurd in *Variety*, it is perhaps because, when the narrative is constructed from a different point of view, its formulas do not make sense; nor do they necessarily generate as much pleasure.

But what is constructed in this space? What is said here about feminine desire? Or a desire, regardless of gender, that is left after deconstructing some ideological patterns that construct heterosexual masculinity: sex and violence? The title proposes 'variety.' This film asserts that a reflexive desire to know and appropriate pornographic codes is a valid but inconclusive journey. Christine's story is contextual, complicit and nonetheless pragmatic. This film's construction of a female story in the context of pornography the genre of *noir*, refigures the scarlet woman in the complex figure of Christine who is both promiscuous and invisible. The non-ending is the inscription of an alternative desire within this project of staying afloat. True to any desire—it is never satisfied. In this way situated knowledge speaks to feminist theory.

Variety presents blood in a porn film within a detective-*noir* thriller. This strategy has the effect of illuminating pornography as artifice. However the woman's story is precisely one of representation—that is, it presents a woman's story insofar as it does not represent her in an act of sex or bloody violence. This is a strategy of what the narrative shows or does not show as much as it is a question of a different type of narrative. Blood is, in this sense, incompatible with a female story and implicitly necessary for a mainstream (conventionally masculine) story. Is this an essentialist politics? In leaving blood and sex out of this story, this film writes itself almost as a cinematic failure, revealing how necessary they are to mainstream structures of narrative and entertainment. *Variety* thus employs a strategy of deconstruction: a figuration of blood's absence.

A LITTLE BLOOD, A LITTLE DEATH?: MEDUSA'S PAINTED LIPS IN *MESHERS OF THE AFTERNOON*

Not only do the elements of the dream have a manifold determination in the dream thoughts, but the individual dream thoughts are represented in the dream by many elements. Starting from an element of the dream the path of associations leads to a number of dream thoughts; and from a dream thought to several elements of the dream. (Freud 266)

I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick. (Deren qtd. in Rabinovitz 49)

The premise upon which this film was undertaken were rather broad and general: first, that a "creative" work of art implied the creation of an imaginative experience or reality rather than a preproduction of one already existent; and second, that that experience would be created out of the nature of the art instrument by which it was, in fact, realised. (Deren 'Outline of Projected 16mm Film' 1)

Mesher of the Afternoon (Maya Deren 1943–59) is a 14-minute, black and white psychodrama²⁷. It was produced on a budget of \$260 and first screened in New York City in 1946 at the Provincetown Playhouse (Rabinovitz 72). Initially a silent film, Deren added a soundtrack by Teiji Ito in 1959. The film follows a woman (played by Deren) on a walk along a path and through a house's spaces: first as a visitor and then as a dreamer. The pattern of images set up in the first sequence is repeated, intertwined and complicated in a dream cycle. The result is an extremely sophisticated yet apparently simple short film.

This film is an allegory of human subjective experience of relativistic time and space and thus speaks to a particularly contemporary sensibility. Deren argues that:

The universe was once conceived as the passive stage upon which the dramatic conflict of human wills was enacted and resolved. Today man has discovered that [...] his own inventions have put into motion new forces, toward which he has yet to invent a new relationship. Unlike Ulysses, he can no longer travel over a universe stable in space and time, to find adventures; nor can he solve intimate antagonisms with an adversary sportingly suitable in stature. Rather, each individual is the center [sic] of a personal vortex; and the aggressive variety and enormity of the adventures which swirl about and confront him are unified only by his personal identity. ('Program notes')

These are Deren's program notes published to accompany the first viewings of her films in 1946 with particular reference to *At Land* (Maya Deren 1944). Like Deren's conceptions of *At Land*, *Mesbes* is an 'inverted Odyssey' (Deren qtd in G. 23). The expression of a modern and critical mythology of subjectivity is enabled through a female protagonist.

In particular I want to suggest that the film's magical events resonate from the perspective of a Medusa who is finally slain. The film reveals the paradox of a woman as desiring subject of narrative. The logic of narrative solicits the blood of a female protagonist who, in working with and against narrative, reaches a point where existence is untenable. The threshold of female desire and its masculine appropriation are marked by blood as a state of femininity and *jouissance*.

In *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943–71*, Lauren Rabinovitz uses Deren's comments to elucidate the filmmaker's concern with material, aesthetic and political practices.

When Maya Deren bragged, "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick," her metaphor was well chosen. She contrasts Hollywood's material construction of women's lips as both icon and sexual fetish with the possibility of her films as a confrontation to an entire system of economic practices. Long before Claire Johnston called for a women's countercinema that would rewrite patriarchal film language, Deren asserted an oppositional voice to Hollywood cinema and confronted Hollywood's formal aesthetics as a set of political practices. (49)

It is only recently that Deren's work has been subject to feminist analysis, having been 'largely received and understood within the concerns of postwar arts discourses' (Rabinovitz 49). *Mesbes* is made in opposition to Hollywood's commerciality and realism, whilst simultaneously mobilising an image of the *femme fatale*. The bleeding mouth at the end articulates a critique of Hollywood's image of woman, of painted lips, at the same time as revealing a violent unsaid in representations of heterosexuality. Blood is an important element of *mise-en-scène*, as are all the details of *mise-en-scène*, indeed, crucial to this film. The bloodied lips are almost produced by to a set of displaced symbols of sex and violence. The blood condenses these dream symbols at the level of waking reality. It marks a critical engagement with Hollywood at the level of *mise-en-scène*, not only as it pertains to aesthetics, but also as it engages narrative. The

ending prompts questions of cost where the material meets the political: At what cost lipstick? At what cost a bleeding mouth? At what cost the desire of a female cinematic subject? What is the cost or requirements of constructing the sexual allure of femininity?

Deren was a founding figure of American avant-garde and independent film practice (Cook 'Deren, Maya' 116). She developed two types of short film—the *psychodrama*, of which *Mesbes of the Afternoon* is an exemplar, and the *cinè-dance film* (Heck-Rabi 115). Deren collaborates with her then husband Alexander (Sasha) Hammid (Alexander Hackenschmied until 1947 [Rabinovitz 55]) in the scripting of *Mesbes*, a film that comes to represent her oeuvre and American independent film.

Mesbes is the film that has been the most frequently shown; it is the single American independent film most likely to be in every school, film club and museum collection. It is, according to film critic J. Hoberman, "probably the most widely seen avant-garde film ever made." Whereas *Ritual* has been called the most artistically accomplished of Deren's films, *Mesbes* may be the most popular because of its intervention and confrontation with the dominant Hollywood cinema, a language widely understood and shared. (Rabinovitz 72)

Mesbes' engagement with Hollywood cinema is the reason why I reiterate an emphasis on this film. There is some debate as to who is most influential in the conception of *Mesbes of the Afternoon*. I am going to read this film as primarily Deren's in line with Rabinovitz, who argues that 'The film is significant, then as a woman's discourse that rewrites Hollywood's objectification of women by addressing a female subject who must contend with her own objectification' (56).

Repeated viewings of *Mesbes* make visible a complex network of associations and signifiatory resonance and at least two endings. What interests me here are the kinds of investment that feminist theory has in these endings and how they relate to the particular narrative, symbolic and formal import of blood. The particular ways in which narrative and closure are inverted in this film, the delicate play with phallic symbols, and its mobilization of figures of mythology, make it almost a blueprint for Teresa de Lauretis's and Laura Mulvey's questions relating to female desire, narrative and violence.

Investigation into Psychological Space: Traces of Blood

A. L. Rees states that the avant-garde post-war films were 'dark and parodic, as in the psychodrama, and expressed elemental fear and anxiety. The avant-garde in part was equivalent of the "film noir" articulation of these themes in narrative fiction' (57). *Mesbes of the Afternoon* symbolised this 'new narrative avant-garde' (Rees 58). Similarly, Rabinovitz suggests that this film is less surrealistic than it is engaged with the Hollywood style of *noir*.

Mesbes of the Afternoon adopts the dominant visual vocabulary associated with the emerging *film noir*—high contrast lighting, extreme camera angles, character point-of-view shots—but displaces it onto a narrative of a woman subject contending with her own fragmentation and disequilibrium. It was not until 1978, however, that film critic J. Hoberman suggested such a cinematic context for the film, "*Mesbes* seems less related to European surrealism than to the Freudian flashbacks and sinister living-rooms that typify Hollywood's wartime '*noir*' films. Located in some hilly L.A. suburb, the house where Deren's erotic, violent fantasy was filmed might be around the corner from Barbara Stanwyck's place in *Double Indemnity*." (56)

As Rabinovitz suggests, the use of *mise-en-scène* is critical to the sense of *noir* evoked by this film. The spectator, like the dreaming woman in her chair, has a viewing relationship to this film like that of a reeling or disoriented detective. An investigative mode of engagement with the space of the house, its objects and a disappearing figure, forms the protagonist's journey into her own psyche, ultimately leading to her death. The trance-like diegesis thus needs some explaining.

A disembodied mannequin arm places a fake flower on a path. The arm disappears. A woman picks up the flower and continues to walk along the path. We only see her feet, her hands and her shadow. She sees a man in a black suit further along the path as he disappears around the corner. She turns to go up some stone steps to a house. At the door she knocks, tries the handle and then pulls out a key from her purse. Thus there is an apparent question as to her relationship to this house. She knocks, but will try to walk in anyway, and yet she has a key. Does this key belong to a friend or a lover who she expects to be there? Has she stolen the key, does she intend to steal things from the house? She drops the key and it tumbles down the steps. She runs down to pick it up and walks back to open the door. A point of view shot

pans around the room. There is a phone off the hook, a knife in some bread, and a half–full cup of tea. The knife slowly falls out of the bread.

We still have not seen this woman's face but nonetheless look from her point of view as she walks up the stairs. She walks into the empty bedroom and turns the spinning record player off. No–one seems to be home, yet all these details are traces of a recent presence. Finally, she sits in the living room on an armchair with the flower sitting in her lap. Briefly caressing herself, she closes her eyes. A point of view shot from the chair emerges almost from the recess of her vision or her mind. The shot is bordered and framed by a metallic–looking tunnel that then recedes.

Her dream begins as a point of view shot through the window. She sees a black-cloaked figure with the flower she had picked up before. This figure is walking up the path in the same way that the man in the suit had done. He or she, a genderless figure,²⁸ pauses and turns to reveal a face of mirror. She dreams that she is running, thwarted in speed, after the cloaked figure. A series of repeat shots, beginning at various stages of her progress up the path, are overlayed to give a sense of futile movement. She cannot catch up to the black figure and so turns to go up some stone steps. At this point the camera's point of view shifts to the level of the woman's dreamed self. The first time we see the woman's face is when she passes the flowers, going up the steps as her dream double. This doppelgänger glances at the flower box, walks through the doorway, into the living room and past the sleeping woman. She sees a knife now sitting on the stair, where the phone was in the first sequence. She runs in slow motion, impeded, up the stairs. She emerges in the bedroom, however, through the window. The phone is on the pillow, off the hook. A knife, the one first in the bread, sits lower near the bed covers.

Shocked at the presence of the knife, she falls and sways about the window and around the stairs. Gravity and space are out of kilter. Down in the living room, by the sleeping woman, the record player is playing. It was previously in the bedroom. A direct and relatively fast tracking point of view shot traces a line from the stair to the record player as if the

doppelgänger were floating. Her hand enters the frame and turns the record player off. The double looks out the window, hands pressed against the glass, her image registered by a partial translucency in the window, a reflection of outside melding with her hair. She sees the black-cloaked figure with the flower followed by yet another image of the woman. As she sees this, a key emerges from her mouth.

The second doppelgänger arrives in the living room to see the cloaked mirror-face walking up the stairs with the flower. She follows the figure up the stairs. The stairs themselves now seem to be swaying. A series of rolled shots combined with Deren's thrown movements create the sense of a boat on a rough sea. 'Mirror-face' puts the flower on the bed, turns the mirror gaze towards the second doppelgänger and then disappears in the manner of 'trick photography.' Her shocked image then appears and disappears in rapid successive jump-cuts. She is spotted all over the stairs in a single reverse reaction shot.²⁹ She sees her reflection in the now slightly bloodied knife on the bed but the bed itself is now down in the living room, beside the sleeping woman. In an 'intricately crafted' matte shot (Rees 59) she walks past the sleeping woman to look through the window. A key emerges from this second doppelgänger's mouth as she sees a third doppelgänger chasing after the cloaked person.

The protagonist is thus trebled and quadrupled on this dream journey. The third doppelgänger arrives at the house and walks to the other two doppelgängers sitting at the table with a knife. A series of matte shots have created the images of three women at the table plus the woman in the armchair sleeping: all her. At this point their culmination becomes more bizarre. The knife, when the third woman places it upon the table, turns into a key. It appears in the third woman's, now blackened, palm. The key repeatedly appears on the table after being picked up by each woman and then finally turns into the knife with the third woman. Rabinovitz suggests this is like a game to decide who kills the sleeping woman (62).

The third doppelgänger picks up the glinting knife and, zombie like, with mirror-surfaced balls protruding from her eye sockets, steps ceremoniously towards the woman asleep. In a famous sequence (Heck-Rabi 115) each step her sandalled foot lands in shots of different terrains: on grass, on sand, on a dirt mound, on a concrete path, and then back on the carpet

of the living room. These inconsistencies of space are sutured by a consistent walking movement. This movement is an inversion of suture achieved through editing which transcends the cuts and the space. Arriving in front of the sleeping woman, the doppelgänger passes the knife by her face. She moves it down in line with her mouth and where it goes is unclear. This shot either registers the knife going down her throat or into the side of her throat. In the next shot the man in the black suit is match-cut with the doppelgänger. He is pulling back from kissing the sleeping woman. The three doppelgängers have gone. The suited man puts the phone back on the hook and looks back at her. The phone is now in its original spot on the stair.

It seems as if the dream has ended: she is woken up by her lover's kiss. However, this is all thrown into doubt when the knife reappears. She follows the man, presumably her lover who lives in the house, up the stairs. As she reclines on the bed, the man caresses her in a way reminiscent of when she caresses herself before the dream. The flower lies decoratively by her ear. Then the flower snaps into the knife. She throws the knife at him but his face turns out to be a mirror image that shatters. Behind the remnants of the shattered image is a beach and the ocean. The shards fall onto a shot of this seashore and are washed about in the foam.

In the final sequence of the film, as if for the first time, the man walks to the door and finds a cut flower lying in the doorway. He picks it up and opens the door. He sees the woman dead on the armchair, looking almost strangled by seaweed, shattered mirror strewn, and with a small amount of blood trickling from her mouth.

Blood is displaced from murder and suicide in this film. It is not absolutely clear from the diegesis whether or how she kills herself; whether the lover or the cloaked figure kills her; whether all these people are effectively the same; or if this death is yet another episode in the dream. In her program notes, however, Deren encourages an interpretation of this ending as real. 'The protagonist does not suffer from some subjective delusion, of which the world outside remains independent, if not oblivious; on the contrary, she is, in *actuality* destroyed by an imaginative action' ('Program Notes'). The blood dripping from the woman's mouth implies that the third doppelgänger actually kills her when she pushes the knife down, or into

the side of, her throat. Yet this doppelgänger with a fatal knife is figured as equivalent to her lover's kiss. Like the prince who wakes the sleeping beauty, the equivalence of juxtaposed shots inscribes this romantic act as penetrative and violent, like a rape, yet her dream self is the one who carries the knife. She herself is a source of and a solution to the violence of this heterosexual structuring of narrative: she wants to kill herself as dreamer. This dream violence is one ending to the film.

Her lover is later made equivalent to the cloaked mirror figure when his face shatters as a mirror image. In killing this mirror image she apparently kills herself. These other figures then, one male, and one androgynous or disguised, are also, in some senses, the protagonist. All people in this film can be read as the woman's imaginative selves or figures of her troubled psyche. The event of the knife thrown at the mirror is a second ending to the film.

In the final shot, a trickle of blood is the mysterious but real trace, the literal condensation, of these tricky and disturbing dream events. This is a reverse to Freud's descriptions of the condensation of dream thoughts within a dream because here the dream images condense into one image in reality. This could be another dream layer also. The first image of blood occurs in the first dream sequence: there are drops of blood on the knife when she finds it in the bed but we see this blood only in a moment. This trace prefigures her death, especially because her face is reflected in this bloodied knife. In the last image it is hard to distinguish blood from seaweed in the shades of grey and black. Initially the seaweed around her neck looks like blood. Indeed, Mayne (190) and Rabinovitz (65) read her neck as having been slit. This slit neck is ghosted earlier when it is not clear whether the knife goes into the side of her throat. So, like a mirror, this death structures recognition and misrecognition. Yet it is a paradox that this realness is precipitated by a dream of multiple selves. The dream seems actually to kill her.

The mirror is perhaps the most compelling clue to this dream mystery. The appearance of 'mirror-face' announces the doubling of her self—a point of alienation and projection. The mirror-face of the cloaked figure and the mirror image on the bloodied knife link the cloaked figure to the murder. The lover is also implicated in the murder when she attempts to stab

him and he turns out to have a mirror-face. Surreptitiously, her lover turns the mirror by the bedside away when they approach the bed. The woman's dream self is also implicated in the murder by her mirror eyeballs and her wielding of the glinting knife. Is the throwing of the knife at the man, the shattering of the mirror, a merging of unconscious and conscious, dream and reality, sea and shore? Are their culmination a pleasurable *jouissance* or a bloody death in this film, or both? Are the cloaked figure and the lover her own desires for self-destruction or loss of coherence?

The knife, the key, the flower and the mirror are intimately linked. The blood trickling from the protagonist's mouth has a symptomatic relationship to the flower and especially the bloodied knife and the key. The bloodied knife, the knife as mirror, the mirror that kills, and the flower all circulate around the bed. Then the bed itself moves. The key emerges from her mouth; the knife is plunged into her mouth or throat. The reciprocity, substitution and interaction of the key, the knife, the the romanticism of the flower, a lover's caress, a lover's kiss, lead to death here. There is the implication of a sexual exchange. The film seems to want to play with the dream symbols of phallus, flower and blood, and to destabilise these symbols on a formal level. Certainly, there is no easy interpretation of these 'obvious' clues. Importantly, the mystery is not so much of woman but of objects, the space and the mirror figure.

The key, the flower, the knife, become floating markers slightly detached from the wake of their connotations. They are points of intersection in this mesh of relative narratives and occurrences one afternoon. Like blood, they are also traces of narrative that, in their alienated placement, question their symbolic basis in a gendered desire.

Medusa, the Mirror and Bloodied Lips

It is the relationship between the motifs, not the inherent meaning of these images as symbols, which creates the dream dynamic of this film and lends it a classical formalism akin to myth. I would like to tease out the relationship of some aspects of the *mise-en-scène* to the Medusa myth. The iconic image of this film, indeed of Deren's career, is a still of her protagonist, hands at the window, gazing wistfully into the distance. Deren used this image in

much of her promotional material. Anaïs Nin's description of this image as having a resemblance to Botticelli's *Primavera* is often quoted (Pramaggiore 238). Maria Pramaggiore suggests that this shot 'more accurately resembled the promotional glamour photography of the Hollywood studio system' (238). Rabinovitz states that 'Deren has always been represented as a strikingly beautiful woman with a strong will and a forceful, self-centred personality' (50).

I want to suggest that this image at the window, with her hair blending with the trees reflected on the window's surface, and more generally—the fact that she has masses of curly hair—make Deren's lead character appear like a Medusa. This is not the monstrous Medusa of ancient art but a more recent and beautiful version. Bergen Evans observes that,

under the influence of more poetic inspiration they [the Gorgons], especially the Medusa, came to be pictured as beautiful, with the snaky locks stylized to little more than a comely wave. Shelley (*On the Medusa*) aptly perceived that "it is less the horror than the grace/which turns the gazers spirit into stone." Milton (*Comus*) felt that it was "rigid looks and chaste austerity" in a virgin that froze (presumptuous males, no doubt) "to congealed stone." (103–104)

Apart from this image at the window in which the woman's hair looks serpentine, there are many other strands of *Mesbes* that configure this myth. The iconography and some narrative fragments of the Medusa myth are loosely woven as one layer. *Mesbes* plays with the myth's imagery and turns the myth around to the woman's point of view to fracture its ideological coherence.

As the myth goes, Medusa was a daughter of the sea deities Phorcys and Ceto. The only mortal daughter, she was the youngest of the three and was known as 'the cunning one' (Evans 103) or the 'queen' (Evans 103, Grant and Hazel 188). Traditionally, she was hideous to the eye and her gaze turned onlookers to stone. In some versions she was beautiful until Athena who turned her hair into snakes because of her sexual liaison with Poseidon the sea god (Grimal 165; Kravitz 149). Polydectes ordered Perseus to behead Medusa. Hermes provided Perseus with a sickle and the Nymphs gave him Hades' helmet of invisibility, a pair of winged sandals and a special leather bag in which to put Medusa's head. Athene aided

Perseus by giving him a polished shield that functioned as a mirror and enabled him to avoid looking directly at Medusa. He beheaded her with the sickle and then concealed the head in the special leather bag. The winged horse Pegasus and the warrior Chrysaor sprang fully grown either from her mutilated neck (Grimal 343), from her body (Dixon-Kennedy 140) or from her blood (Grant and Hazel 188; Evans 103; Kravitz 149,107). These children were the result of her lying with Poseidon the sea god. Medusa's two sisters, Stheno and Euryale, also Gorgons, pursued Perseus but to no avail because of his helmet of invisibility. Perseus subsequently used the Gorgon's head as a weapon, for even though Medusa was dead, her gaze was still literally petrifying. Eventually Medusa's head was given to Athene who placed its image in the centre of her shield (Grimal 343).

Meshes of the Afternoon can be read as a reworking of this myth from the point of view of the Medusa: Medusa is the dreaming protagonist. A number of aspects of this film lend themselves to such a reading. Perseus approaches Medusa while she is sleeping. The first time we see the woman's face and gaze in *Meshes* is when we see her double. The spectator is not allowed to look at the woman directly, in the same way that one cannot look at the Medusa directly. There is a sense of paranoia, suspense and disorientation created by the in-betweenness of the house: things are half-finished or still in operation. This disquiet creates a sense of being pursued. In one version of the story, Athene orders Perseus to kill the beautiful Medusa for sleeping with Poseidon in her sacred temple. The in-betweenness of the house space suggests someone has just been there and thus it seems that she occupies the house illicitly. Is this her house? Is it her lover's house or even someone else's? Has she come to meet him in an affair? This house could be Athena's house where Medusa had an affair with Poseidon. The eroticised placing of the objects the knife in the bed, the key emerging from her mouth, the interchanging of these objects create a sexualised dynamic overlaid with the threat of violence. The ocean is behind the shattering mirror and the woman's death—or is this a remnant of Poseidon's world behind the violent encounter between Medusa and Perseus?

The lover in the suit and the caped androgynous figure with the mirror-face evoke the figure of Perseus. They evoke him in their ominous and reflected presence to the woman because

their images are tied up with mirrors. These two figures are also linked together in movement. Mirror-face, retraces, in the dream, the steps of the man in the suit in reality. Importantly, these characters do not directly pursue the woman: she pursues them. More precisely her doubles pursue the more blatant resemblance of Perseus, the cloaked mirror-face. These doubles, like the sisters of Medusa, pursue this threatening figure to no avail. The cloak, as well as the face as mirror, is a figuring of invisibility in the same way that Perseus' helmet enables invisibility. However, the clearest instance of an attack upon the sleeping woman, as sleeping Medusa, comes from one of her dreamed versions of herself. At this point she is her own Perseus: she is killed by her own mirror image. This is a neat way to read the dreamed woman's baffling mirror eyeballs: a literally mirrored gaze. Like Perseus, the third double magically traverses through different terrains on a sandalled foot. This culmination of figures of Perseus and Medusa, of lover, mirror-face and dream double forms the first violent act of the film. This is a condensation also of objects and events that can be seen as one 'cause' of the final violent ending. The ending of death too is a condensation of all events, objects and figures of the dream into reality. This is registered by a single trickle of blood from the mouth. Yet it momentarily looks like her neck is slit, the draping seaweed a necklace of blood—again a momentary ghosting of the Medusa, head severed.

Medusa's blood has particular significance in some versions of the myth. David Kravitz notes that in some versions of the story her blood had a threatening vitality: 'Her blood fell on the sand of the Libyan desert and turned into snakes, one of which killed Mopsus' (149). The mythologist Apollodorus' version adds that Asclepius obtained Medusa's blood to use on his patients: 'One vein produced blood which had the power to revive dead bodies, but the blood coming from the other was lethal' (Grant and Hazel 188). Perseus is said to have gathered up the blood because of these magical properties (Grimal 164). The uncertainty as to whether the Medusa-like protagonist is actually dead at the end of *Meshe*s is precisely an ambivalence about what the trickle of blood on the lips represents. This situation, encapsulated in the image of blood, is reflected in the dual qualities of Medusa's blood in Apollodorus' version of the myth.

In this film the Medusa ‘strikes back’—through the pursuit of a man, an invisible ‘other’ mirror-face and finally through her dreamed self. Blood is the merging of these three perspectives and is crucial to the film’s ‘point’ about female subjectivity in terms of desire and narrative. This dream is a figuring of a woman’s desire turned upon itself. According to Deren, ‘Part of the achievement of this film consists in which cinematic techniques are employed to give a malevolent vitality to inanimate objects’ (‘Film Summary’ 1). The dream, and its imagined objects are a ‘psychological’ causes that lead to bleeding. Her desire is thus figured as almost untenable or only made real through death. That the dream events—particularly the knife in the throat and the smashing of the man as mirror—are the source of a ‘real’ death means that these endings and versions need to be read together.

Meshes of the Afternoon is a much more pessimistic view of a woman’s desire, Freud’s ‘dark continent,’ than Cixous’s utopian vision of the Medusa. In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ Cixous wants to dispel the horror of this myth of feminine monstrosity. She deems Freud’s mystification of female sexuality in the dark continent as a convenient fear of woman as castrated. The Medusa, who is not deadly, but rather laughing and beautiful, is a figure who symbolises the utopian process by which women become aware of their hitherto repressed sexuality, their creativity and power. For Cixous this occurs through a writing of the body. Deren’s Medusa is not written, nor is she laughing, but she nonetheless illuminates that ‘dark continent.’ *Meshes* explores a woman’s alienation from her own sexuality: her own body as doubled and mirrored by herself and her lover. Her active threatening sexuality is represented by the woman with the mirror eyeballs. The motivation of this self is to kill the self that is asleep but, in doing so, both selves are killed. An active female self can only cause destruction to the real or normal cinematic self—here figured as a ‘duped’ dreamer. This ‘real’ woman is passive and her active desires come back to kill her. This predicament is illustrated when she smashes the mirror image of her lover. If the woman pursues her dream desires, and her lover, they are revealed to be threatening illusions that make her own existence untenable. Desire leads to annihilation. This may be pleasurable in terms of masochism and *jouissance*. A little blood suggests a little death: this is perhaps both orgasm and death. This is a dystopian critique of a woman’s sexual predicament and desire. It deconstructs romance—the sleeping

princess—to reveal its unconscious dream of active sexuality and looks and the deadly Medusa.

Deren is asking exactly the same questions about the position of woman in Western narrative as Teresa de Lauretis in her important essay 'Desire in Narrative' written more than 40 years later. I would like to position *Meshes of the Afternoon* this essay as very much parallel texts:

My question [. . .] what did Medusa feel seeing herself reflected in Perseus' shield just before being slain, was intended very much in the context of a politics of the unconscious. [...] It is a rhetorical question in the sense that, I believe, some of us do know how Medusa felt, because we have seen it at the movies, from *Psycho* to *Blow Out*, be the film a *Love Story* or *Not a Love Story*.

[. . .] Some, for example, would remind us that when we see Medusa being slain (daily) on the screen, as film and television spectators, we have a "purely aesthetic" identification. Others – and probably you, too, reader – would object that my question about Medusa is tendentious, for I pretend to ignore that in the story Medusa was asleep when Perseus entered her "cave"; she did not see, *she did not look*. Precisely. Doesn't an "aesthetic" identification mean that, though we "look at her looking" throughout the movie, we too, women spectators, are asleep when she is being slain? And only wake up, like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, if the film ends with the kiss? Or you may remark that I am indeed naïve in equating Perseus' shield with a movie screen. Yet, not only does that shield protect Perseus from Medusa's evil look, but later on, after her death (in his further adventures), her head is pinned to petrify his enemies. It is thus, pinned up on the shield of Athena, that the slain Medusa continues to perform her deadly task within the institutions of law and war . . . and cinema (I would add), for which Cocteau (not I) devised the well-known definition, "death at work." (de Lauretis 134–35)

Deren's film engages precisely in a politics of the unconscious through presenting the Medusa slain from the Medusa's point of view. What could be regarded as a purely aesthetic display of blood from the mouth, decorative seaweed and mirror strewn about the woman's body should be read as aspects of *mise-en-scène* that define a political and ideological predicament. Here the inversion of a patriarchal myth has limited gains. This woman, like de Lauretis's spectator, wakes up only when she is kissed. Her dream is of active desire to find her lover beyond mirrors and camouflage, to kill herself as sleeping spectator, ignorant and yet participating in a fairytale underwritten by violence. *Meshes* illustrates how the Medusa felt—the thwarted desire of a reflexive position, the desire to self-destruct within these terms, as looked at, as woman who look can only figure threat and sexual allure. The dreamed woman, as Perseus, who appropriates the masculine terms of narrative action and movement

through space, must kill her masochistic dreaming princess self in order to exist at all. Their mutual implication and complicity mean self-destruction. There are elements here of de Lauretis's Sphinx (110)—who killed herself in disgust—along with the sleeping Medusa.

Blood marks the failure of a female desire outside of the terms of masculine desire; it signifies female masochism but also perhaps a more subversive *jouissance*. The mythological male subject returns to find the woman sleeping now dead. Blood occurs here as a figuration of the 'truth' of the male story. The woman with the mirror eyeballs is a violent and reflexive deconstruction of masculine and feminine poles enacted by an active female desire that operates within and then finally transcends the dream. Man is prince, sleeping woman is princess, the dreamed cloaked figure is Perseus, the dreamed woman is Medusa and finally Perseus—they all merge in a trickle of blood.

Paradoxically the 'real' woman dreaming can also be read as cinematic woman. Rabinovitz illuminates how she is shot in a more fractured way, we rarely see her body as whole, and she is without agency (61–62). She also sleeps and her final image is defined by a male gaze. Her dreaming self is more active and indeed actually kills her. Herein lies a question and a critique of the predicament of woman in cinema. Rabinovitz articulates the many questions posed by this film thus:

His [the man's] final close-up images, then, of her dead eyes and bloody mouth are a conclusion whose significance is dependent on how one contextualises the woman's "death." Is it, as Doane would observe about women characters who appropriate the gaze in woman's films, that her desire is so excessive the only closure possible is her death? Or is it the result of her revolt against the cinematic structures of containment? Or is her death dramatically signifying her end as a construction of Woman within *his* dream world? *Her* dream world? (65)

This merging of possibilities is registered by only a trickle of blood. The head is not really cut off—there is only blood from the mouth. This Medusa is not beheaded or castrated.

Pramaggiore argues that this film resists the terms of coupling and traces a bisexual desire. The reality of the blood at the end is questioned by the circular and layered structures of the dream and is finally 'beyond representation' (247). There is no cause and effect logic that would 'resolve this woman's victimisation at the hands of dangerous doubles or a dubious

lover by establishing a choice between self (libratory solitude) or other (the lover, a double)' (247). The blood and the merging of dream and reality can be read as a resistance to a coupling and to defining an identity in relation to an 'other'.

Meshes shows that the male mythological subject attempts to reclaim all movements—of the sleeping princess, of the look of the Medusa, of the female mythological actor, and the threatening *femme fatale* the *femme castratrice*. The male mythological subject arrives in the end to see a bleeding woman. He doesn't look shocked. The red lips of Snow White are revealed to be the trickles of the blood of a possible suicide; a condensation of a mythological death; and a capitulation to the violence of the double self. But it is she who ultimately bridges all movements in transcending or pre-empting the ending. She traverses the space before him—he does not need to kiss or kill her. As Pramaggiore argues, 'At the very least, she is inaccessible to the reality represented by the lover's final (and perhaps only) entrance' (247). Something else has changed in this final shot, there is *less* blood here when a woman's desire and activity is figured—even though it may have appeared in the previous shot that her neck was slit. The blood looks as painless and as decorative as lipstick.

Conclusion

This thesis has challenged the notion that analysis is incompatible with images of blood suggested by the absence of extended discussion about blood in film criticism. At the same time, I have worked towards a demystification of its use as a culturally loaded image that figures desire, death, spirituality and the markings of gender. I have examined blood in a range of scenes in films unified by the ambience of the thriller and of *noir*. In particular I have concentrated upon three films directed by women.

My focus on *mise-en-scène* and blood shaping this project emerged from an interest in the materiality of the filmmaking process. I was interested in the aesthetic qualities and pleasures of blood. It is often visceral and disturbing and yet it is simply a scarlet fluid artfully arranged on set. In many ways, it would seem that blood has an obvious significance: it depicts cinema's realism or its failure. 'It is what it is'—the 'red stuff' inside the body—if it is a successful depiction. In Lacanian terms it can be seen to represent the unspeakable Real. But is it unspeakable? My contention is that, on the contrary it is a substance of cinema's artifice, and a locus that frequently reveals cinema's cultural work in terms of marking bodies and narrative.

Some images that have returned to me during the work on these films are the bodies after car crashes, doused in blood, in the French–Italian film *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard 1967). I raise this film now because it is outside the bounds of American cinema and speaks to the project. There is no attempt to make 'real' the blood in these scenes. It literally looks like tinned red paint has been poured over the bodies. This seems to be a calculated jibe at American cinema: in the sixties blood was absent and then present. In *Weekend* blood evokes an inevitable impasse in aspirations towards realism—the body injured can only be indicated by paint. This film suggests that blood is a part of a film's sculptural status. Moreover, it seems that *Weekend* is pointing to a realist cinema ideology indicated when the presentation of blood attempts to hide its constructedness. To see blood as a type of paint is a way to avoid the assumption that film is a mirror to life. I have emphasised the painterly aspects of violent scenes in *Taxi Driver*

(Martin Scorsese 1976) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) as part of a consideration of these scenes as types of cultural signification.

As indicated by the making of *Taxi Driver*, the simple fact of colour has a relationship to the obscenity of blood: a lesser scarlet red allowed for an 'R' rating. This issue of colour raises other questions, outside the bounds of this project, such as the depiction of race in the cinema. How does the colour of blood mark black or white skin? In the black and white film, *Psycho*, the white of the bathroom connects with the whiteness of Marion's skin when both are marked with blood. What I have touched upon in this thesis is the way that censorship, blood presentation, colour and film stock are in dialogue.

My thoughts have coalesced around a question of the politics in the presentation of blood and how it marks certain bodies. How political are aspects of aesthetics, cinematography and special effects as they pertain to *mise-en-scène*? My concern has been with how the visual pleasures or shocks of blood might construct certain images of gender. A feminist impulse to find the female director and to affirm her work, lead me to films directed by women—films categorised for this reason, as 'women's films.'

The directors I have looked at, insofar as they are women directors, are very much part of mainstream film criticism. Their films are widely distributed and watched. A relative absence of blood in two out of three of these films directed by women, *Variety* (Bette Gordon 1984) and *Meshes* (Maya Deren 1943), is a slightly dangerous equation for feminist politics. I do not want to suggest that this is because of women's inherent distaste for violence; neither do I want to suggest that a lack of blood is due to its status as a signifier of popular culture and 'low' genres such as horror and that somehow these female directors are 'above' this. Kathryn Bigelow's films and films by other directors such as Stephanie Rothman³⁰ (*Blood Bath* 1966, *The Velvet Vampire* 1971, *Terminal Island* 1973) and Mary Harron (*American Psycho* 2000) indicate that clearly the presentation of blood in film, and more broadly the genre of a film, is not determined by the gender of the film's director.

I have described how blood or its absence can work as a feminist detail. The use of blood in these films acknowledges and indicates blood's status as an overdetermined signifier of

gender; that is, it indicates blood is a 'problem' for feminism. It has a close association with sexual difference; traditionally marking a woman in relation to castration and the state of the body opened or penetrated, thus defining states of femininity. The cathexis of semen and blood as an extension of the gun as penis, and a disavowal of homoeroticism, shift blood to an association with masculinity but then code (heterosexual) masculine sexuality as inherently violent. The displacement of this signifier from its gendered determinants, to question blood or to make it signify outside these terms of mainstream realist cinema, are strategies that I have argued to operate in these films. These approaches do not have to be part of a woman's discourse, or from a woman's film. A male director can employ blood as a feminist detail.

Different scenes of blood in these films appeal to different points at which feminism may engage with blood. *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow 1990) unsettles a relationship between the gun-phallus and blood. *Variety* questions the appearance of blood in pornography. *Meshe* usurps the status of a representation of bloodied lips. The use of blood in *Blue Steel* and *Variety* is an indicator, in some sense, of the films's varied approaches to mainstream genres with a female protagonist: an action-thriller in *Blue Steel*; pornography and detective *noir* in *Variety*. In the first case it is perhaps not surprising that blood is consistent with the genre but it also signals parody and that in the second case blood is largely absent. *Blue Steel* affirms that a woman can and must engage with gun violence. Blood is frequently a realistic, rather than eroticised, aspect of violent scenes. *Variety*'s evocation of the *femme fatale* and pornography as possible sites of dead flesh, resists a narrative pull towards blood. This is because in pornography and *noir*, blood and woman are tied up in a symbolic and narrative structure of evidence and guilt: markings of castration, markings of penetration and markings of (male) desire.

Eroticism and blood are issues for both of these films and a certain decoding of a bloody *mise-en-scène* occurs. *Variety* presents a send-up of a bloody porn film and there is also a conspicuous absence of blood as a narrative conclusion. There is a satirical tinge to *Blue Steel*'s bloody eroticised scenes that associate them with an excessive psychotic blood obsessed male sexuality. These decodings, however, are not as simple as they may appear—they are uneasy and never quite final. Blood does not lose its ability to disturb, and 'the problem' of blood and

gender is not fixed— a sense of uncertainty and uncomfortableness that is echoed in the ambivalent endings in these films.

Decoding of blood presentation in a scene is perhaps less important than the marking of a female story in these films. Constance Penley suggests that narrative is more important to feminism than decoding:

Stephen Heath has argued that “deconstruction is clearly the impasse of the formal device” and that a socio-historically more urgent practice would be a work not on “codes’ but on the operations of narrativisation, that is, “the constructions and relations of meaning and subject in a specific signifying practice.” (27)

The deconstructive strategy in *Variety* is precisely one of leaving out blood and sex as culminating narrative events. This makes us more aware of Christine’s story. In blood’s absence, the complexities, the uncertainties of her obsession and investigation become very apparent.

Penley argues that some avant-garde films by women engage a politically motivated film practice engaged with questions of narrative.³¹ I would suggest that the strategies she identifies also operate to some extent in *Blue Steel*, which is a mainstream film. *Blue Steel* mobilises blood as a marker of increasing intensity, insofar as it exaggerates phallocentric fantasy structures and makes them untenable from within a tradition of film realism. The interpreted failure of this film (Maltin 129) is due to its engagement with multiple genres and the unbelievable enacted by horror codes. This film ‘fails’ because it plays with the construction of narrative. The ‘stretching out’ and slowing down of violent scenes exaggerates motifs of action and merges them with the perpetual deferment of horror endings. This offsets narrative as a fiction and a trajectory of desire. As a marker of mainstream cinema, blood, is a hinge that serves to question the gun-as-male-phallus and to indulge the fictional process.

Meshes also speaks to Penley’s assertion but comes from a very different location. *Meshes* would seem to be the very type of modernist avant-garde film that would present a formal and deconstructive impasse in its ‘work on “codes” and “perceptual processes” ’ (27). I have illustrated how this film’s engagement with the myth of Medusa moves through the very

narrative process needed to question the position of woman in cinematic structures. This film is concerned with creating a different type of narrative, and female subject position. The ending of this narrative is an ending with blood that ghosts the blood of castration, the blood of a slit neck. In ‘actuality’ there is only blood trickling from the mouth.

Through the merging of dream and reality with the image of a blood trickle this film expresses some female subject positions running through the project: the contradiction of woman as viewer and viewed as subject and object, as point of identification and as masochistic object, and also as *femme castratrice*. The blood on the lips speaks other questions I have asked in this project, and questions that can be asked of blood in film—does blood represent castration? Does it represent simple reality or realism, a liquid colour, pleasing abstract shape or movement? Does it figure a type of desire? Whose desire does the blood indicate and what is the status of this representation?

My preliminary case studies into symbolic and narrative meanings that can emerge from the depiction of blood in *mise-en-scène* have mapped some departure points and examples of close reading. I have participated in discussions that are operating between the films themselves: I have been pleased to read the details enunciated by this confronting red substance.

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¹ Essays such as Susan Bassnett's 'Blood and Mirrors: Imagery of Violence in the Writings of Alejandra Pizarnik,' Michel-François Demet's 'George Trakl: Blood, the Mirror, the Sister,' Marie Mulvey-Roberts' 'Dracula and the Doctors: Bad Blood, Menstrual Taboo and the New Woman,' Anna Powell's 'Blood is the Drug: Narcophiliac Vampires in Recent Women's Fiction' and Susan Tiefenbrun's 'Blood and Water in *Horace*: A Feminist Reading,' explore the specific and wider cultural significance of blood in connection to their respective texts.

² Prince notes that D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) depicted 'decapitation and other gruesome sights and climaxes' and these aspects, combined with nudity, signify its status as a pre-code film (2). This information suggests that blood was a part of the cinema before the code as well as after.

³ This canon changes according to what characteristics define the violence. For instance Jason Jacobs establishes a canon of violent films that display a modern stylistic tendency in gunfire sequences beginning with *The Wild Bunch* and also displayed in 'Bonnie and Clyde, *The Godfather*, *The Getaway*, *Dillinger*, *Magnum Force*, *Taxi Driver*, *Assault on Precinct 13*, *The Long Riders*, *Blade Runner*, *Scarface*, *The Terminator*, *The Year of the Dragon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, *State of Grace*, *Nikita*, and *Reservoir Dogs*' (38)

⁴ According to Elizabeth Grosz in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, the child's experience of the mirror stage revolves around a pleasure and fascination with one's mirror image. 'It becomes the organizing site of perspective, and, at the same time, an object available to others from their perspectives—in other words, both a subject and an object.' (38) This stage coincides with the child's recognition of lack, and is structured around recognition and misrecognition. In this new subjective orientation, the child experiences the self as a separate totalized self-image—a *gestalt* (38–39). However,

the visual *gestalt* is in conflict with the child's fragmentary disorganized felt reality; the discordance of the visual *gestalt* with the subject's perceived reality means that the specular image remains both a literal image of itself and an idealized representation, more complete than it feels. The mirror-image thus provides the ground for the *ego ideal*, the image of the ego, derived from others, which the ego strives to achieve or live up to; the mirror stage initiates the child into the two-person structure of imaginary identifications, orienting it forever towards identification with and dependence on (human) images and representations for its own forms or outline; the ego can be seen as the sedimentation of images of others which are libidinally invested, through narcissism, by being internalised [. . .]. (48)

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Some of the most violent and terrifying moments of the horror film genre occur in moments when the female victim meets the psycho-killer monster unexpectedly, before she is ready.[...] This surprise encounter, too early, often takes place at a moment of sexual anticipation when the female victim thinks she is about to meet her boyfriend or lover. The monster's violent attack on the female victims vividly enacts a symbolic castration which often functions as a kind of punishment for an ill-timed exhibition of sexual desire. (Williams 'Film Bodies' 279)

⁶ See William Rothman *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* for a shot-by-shot analysis of the shower scene that considers the significance of blood in this scene.

⁷ There is much morbid humour in this film about dryness, dampness and corpses especially when Norman talks to Arbogast. Norman as taxidermist dries out flesh. In a conversation to Arbogast about changing sheets, Norman says he can't stand the smell of dampness. Earlier he had said to Marion that he could not leave his mother because the fire would go

out and it would get damp. These comments are puns on the fact that Norman's mother is stuffed and dry like his birds. Arbogast says to Norman: "If you can get anything out of your mother tell me," a bad joke perhaps about how nothing else can be taken out of his mother, her guts and the bodies fluids of water and blood are gone.

⁸ I was alerted to the quality of this image of blood in *Psycho* by a film called *Suture* (McGehee and Siegel, 1993). This film thematises amnesia and colour in a conversation with *Psycho*. A black man, Clayton, takes the identity of a white man after he loses his memory after a bloody car crash and he has a facial reconstruction based upon the white man's driver's licence. A psychoanalyst tries to help him regain his memory. Being a black and white film, the Rorschach image in the psychoanalyst's office looks like a blood splatter. Repression, the unconscious and the idea of a mind wipe or *tabula rasa* as well as issues of blackness and whiteness are crystallised in this splattered image. A question of difference, erasure and story, that in *Psycho* revolves around woman and man, is transposed into a question of black man/white man. Both sets of questions are united by their use of black and white film and the idea of a bloody splatter or 'black blood' as a kind of psychological symbolism. Notably, *Suture* reaches a climax at the point at which the black man shoots the white man from a white shower in a house in Phoenix—the city that Marion departs from.

⁹ Presumably, special effects designer Clarence Champagne 'painted' the blood in this scene.

¹⁰ The end credits of the film thank John Woo for the use of his kitchen knife in *Psycho* (1998). Woo began as a Hong Kong action film director and after the success of *The Killer* (1989) he signed a Hollywood contract. The fact that Woo's films are known for their explosive blood and bullet spectacles, and that Van Sant uses Woo's kitchen knife, adds a contemporary layer to the reflexivity of blood in *Psycho*'s shower scene.

¹¹ In *Savage Cinema* Stephen Prince says that these shots look like a 'Jackson Pollock collage' (237).

¹² Alfred Hitchcock describes the process of attaching a tube to Arbogast's head to enable a blood spurt: 'We put a plastic tube on his face with hemoglobin [sic], and as the knife came up to it, we pulled a string releasing the blood on his face down the line we had traced in advance' (Truffaut 276).

¹³ Leslie Stern has also made this point: 'as his obsession becomes more psychotic he transforms his own semen into others' blood' (48)

¹⁴ Stern writes a particularly illuminating essay about the connections between blood, semen, and Travis's pornographic gaze in her essay 'A Glitter of Putrescence' (see esp. 55, 61–67).

¹⁵ As described by Needeya Islam: 'The camera looks down the barrel and maintains its gaze as bullets are loaded – the gun is hyperbolised and fetishised and the fascination with guns within the genre and its audiences is laid bare' (112).

¹⁶ Eugene is also an eighties avatar of the physically immaculate but characterless Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000) the serial killer who enjoys sex crime as the Wall Street stockbroker.

¹⁷ Rikke Schubart writes of the honourable wound sustained by the action hero. 'The action hero is clearly a martyr, and the martyr shares traits with the masochist. They both accept a tragic guilt, they do penance, they are tortured – and they demonstrate their wounds in public' (196),

This is the man on the cross, and the pleasure is in subjecting to and subverting the threat of castration. Identification is with the hero as victim, not victor. In spite of the apparently feminine position there is nothing effeminate or womanish whatsoever about the passions of the action hero. Instead of weakening the hero, the pain induces new strength. (196-197).

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- ¹⁸ Jean Cocteau's first film was *The Blood of a Poet* (1932). He had links to surrealism and his films mirrored narratives of classical myth.
- ¹⁹ Much of feminist film criticism and the concerns of women's movement in the seventies and eighties engaged with pornography at a controversial level. The question of a woman's pleasure in viewing pornography has received some attention from feminist film criticism. Classics of this shift in emphasis are Angela Carter's *The Sadean Woman* (1979), which explores the relevance of Marquis de Sade's pornography to feminist critique and Linda Williams's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989) which concerns itself with cinema.
- ²⁰ Teresa de Lauretis writes that "death at work" is a 'well known definition' devised by Jean Cocteau (135).
- ²¹ This is one of a number of porn 'excerpts' displayed in this film. These excerpts may or may not be from pre-existing porn films—they could have been made in conjunction with the film proper.
- ²² That this is a game between the 'Yankees' and the 'Redsox' may be a comment upon the game between American Businessman and 'scarlet woman,' between Luis and Christine. The sign of the 'redsox' baseball team on the billboard (39.15) is an amusing detail in this film about pornography, business and work.
- ²³ Leslie Stern describes the view of Betsy 'drifting, disembodied, blonde hair floating like a halo' as 'a lethally pornographic image, epitomising the violence of projection and deadly affectivity of fantasy' (66).
- ²⁴ In 'A Glitter of Putrescence' Leslie Stern also argues that Gordon is drawing parallels between Travis and Christine in terms of their interests in pornography and voyeurism (63, 64, 66).
- ²⁵ This scenario echoes the Charlie's dream in *Mean Streets* (see Chapter 2).
- ²⁶ As theorized by Teresa de Lauretis:
- if the spectator can identify "with himself as look, as pure act of perception," it is because such identification is supported by a prior, narrative identification with the figure of narrative movement. When the latter is weak, or undercut by a concomitant and stronger identification with the narrative image—as is the case with female spectators more often than not—the spectator will find it difficult to maintain the distance from the image implicit in the notion of a "pure act of perception." (144)
- ²⁷ According to A.L. Rees in *A History of Experimental Film and Video* the 'psychodrama' is a re-invention of the European narrative film—poem by U.S filmmakers:
- The 'psychodrama' (or 'trance film') was modelled on dream, lyric verse and contemporary dance. Typically, it enacts the personal conflicts of central subject or protagonist. A scenario of desire and loss, seen from the point of view of a single guiding consciousness, ends either in redemption or death. Against the grain of realism, montage editing creates swift transitions in space and time. The subjective, fluid camera is more often a participant in the action than its neutral recording agent.(58)
- In *Women Film-makers* Louise Heck-Rabi credits Deren with inventing the psycho-drama (115), the first being *Meshe of the Afternoon* Rees suggests that 'Cocteau laid down the paradigm for psychodrama in *The Blood of a Poet*' and that 'Psychodrama often offers a sexual as well as mythic quest' (59). Rees cites Sidney Peterson, Stan Brakhage Deren, Gregory Markopoulos and Kenneth Anger as 'refashioning' this form in terms of style and the use of classical figures (60).

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- ²⁸ Maya Deren says the figure is a woman ('Meshes of the Afternoon'). Judith Mayne says the figure is androgynous (188).
- ²⁹ Teiji Ito's soundtrack, added in 1959, links this reaction shot to the previous image of the key falling down the steps. We hear exactly the same accelerated drumming in both instances. In this way, the woman is equivalent to the key: she is a product of a chaotic chain of events pulling her in a haphazard direction.
- ³⁰ A number of writers describe Stephanie Rothman as a feminist director (Cook 'Rothman, Stephanie' 347–8; T. Williams; Peary.) Due to time constraints and difficulty gaining access to Rothman's films I have not been able to view her work.
- ³¹ Constance Penley cites Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Yvonne Rainer, Babette Mangolte, and Jackie Raynal as feminist filmmakers whose strategies 'point to a manner of re-working subjectivity within an analysis of social/sexual relations that avoids the kinds of transgressions of the symbolic paternal function that risk ending in an identification with patriarchy' (28).