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## "Torture the Women": A Gaze at the Misogynistic Machinery of Scary Cinema

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## **Abstract**

A frightening truth remains that within horror-thriller films the experience of women is at the heart of the horrifying. This project analyses the effects of film media on the construction, fetishization, and destruction of female figures and engages with feminist critical concepts, such as Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" and Linda Williams' "body horror," to evaluate Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958) and Satoshi Kon's anime *Perfect Blue* (1997). Importantly, this essay critiques the misogynistic inner-workings of the horror-thriller genre typified in *Vertigo*—that evokes visual pleasure from objectification, victimization, and physical, often sexual, violence—and contrasts it with Kon's anime. This paper finds that *Perfect Blue*, a foil of *Vertigo*, appropriates and intensifies the machinery of the genre to a critical effect, transforming visual gratification into legitimate, objectionable fear. Through close consideration of cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, animation, thematics, and visual tropes, this article exposes the underlying patriarchal structure operating within horror-thriller films and considers the future feminist potential of scary cinema.

## **“Torture the Women”: A Gaze at the Misogynistic Machinery of Scary Cinema**

### **Visual Pleasure & Feminine Fear**

The woman of horror almost certainly falls victim to a cocktail of gruesome acts; she is stalked, intimidated, abused, raped, and killed, all for not only the fulfilment of the injurer within the fiction, but also the fulfilment of the viewer. The spectator, urged by the film’s cinematic composition, becomes complicit in terrorizing filmed females, reinforcing patriarchal structures within both film and the larger society. Alfred Hitchcock, widely regarded as a film auteur and the “Master of Suspense,” was no stranger to the fascination of feminine violence. His film *Vertigo* (1958) places the viewer with detective John “Scottie” Ferguson as he obsesses over the enigmatic Madeleine—a woman named Judy in disguise. The stalkerish coveting of the female body quintessential to the film has garnered pertinent interest within the feminist film community as the culmination of Hitchcock’s mastery of misogyny. The inspiration for the most widely recognized theory within film criticism—the “male gaze”—*Vertigo* acts as a case-study for the horror-thriller’s patriarchal structure, which objectifies, victimizes, sexualizes, and literally violates women.

However, there may be retribution within the “scary movie” genre yet; the 90s animated cult classic film *Perfect Blue* (1997) by Satoshi Kon stands to invert and protest the problematic female treatment within the horror-thriller genre that Hitchcock champions. Kon’s first feature film centers on Mima Kirigoe—a pop idol turned actress—stalked by a fan and her own ghostly doppelgänger. Since its release, the film has amassed critical regard, even gaining attention from prominent American filmmaker Darren Aronofsky, who would later use Kon’s work as

inspiration for his films *Requiem for a Dream* and *Black Swan*. Important to this essay, Kon has often been compared to Hitchcock for their similar tastes in psychological, violent themes and representations. But, though both *Vertigo* and *Perfect Blue* enjoy similar visual styles and thematic elements, there is one factor of paramount importance that fundamentally differentiates them: while Hitchcock's film revels almost unabashedly in the horror of the female, Kon's work is critical and highly self-aware, condemning its filmic subject in real-time. *Vertigo* follows the male protagonist and appeals to a masculinized, patriarchal onlooker; the gaze is hegemonic and encourages the sexual, sumptuous consumption of a suffering female, to which the emotional evocation is pleasure. *Perfect Blue*, on the other hand, follows the terrified female fighting a losing battle against these odds, which purposefully critiques horror-thriller films by appropriating their methods to a different effect entirely. *Perfect Blue* encourages the viewer to watch Mima's horror with repulsion and agony. The viewer is prompted to fear, with intention by Kon, left reeling in their seat, confronted with the horror of the horror-convention. This effect is antithetical to the 'pleasure' of a Hitchcock film, making Kon's film a feminist critique of horror-thriller.

In order to talk about these films with proper respect to the feminine lens, one must first address the problem of genre delineation. Historically, both *Vertigo* and *Perfect Blue* have classically been categorized as "thriller" and "psychological thriller," respectively. However, there arises a point of injustice in this term "thriller," one that validates a certain way of seeing things—namely a masculinized look—and subsequently subordinates the inflected, less socially valuable, less powerful look, typically feminized. It is oft overlooked that a keystone component of the genre determination of "scary movies"—(e.g., thrillers, horrors, slashers, dark comedies)—is audience effect, which is where the name "thriller" finds its origin. Thriller films are all about the evocation of excitement, suspense, and a high level of anticipation ("thriller,

n1”). The American Film Institute’s 2001 list “America’s 100 Greatest Thrillers,” in congruence with this delineation, ranked films on their “heart-pounding” and “adrenaline-inducing impact.” But the attribution of excitement and adrenaline onto the content of this film—women stalked, sexualized, and physically assaulted—fundamentally favors a problematic masculine view that derives visual pleasure from violence towards women. In fact, the attributions of the thriller genre may even imply the derivation of sexual pleasure, the word “excitement” suggesting penile stimulation (i.e. getting “excited”) and “anticipation” suggesting some type of “climax,” not just within the film but also within the male body in the form of ejaculation. The delineation of horror, the “cousin” of the thriller, is often pigeonholed in popular thought by certain trademark accoutrements, such as werewolves, vampires, monsters, and chainsaw-related violence, but when reframed to consider the emotional audience effect, horror is simply about the evocation of fear. Horror hones in on vulnerability, loss of identity, and even sexual anxiety to amass fear. This seems much more the response of those taking the feminine look when faced with the contents of categorically “thriller” films such as *Vertigo*. Demonstrating this ideology, Hitchcock, when asked about his creative philosophy famously parroted playwright Sardou, saying “Torture the women!” (Clover 206), a statement of masculine excitement that simultaneously provokes female fear. In this essay, I ask that the notion of the thriller be perceived as instead “horrific,” and further, that the idea of the horrific—or that which causes *fear*—not stem from the presence of ghouls or werewolves but from that of violence, sexualization, and objectification done onto women.

To adopt a term that acknowledges the gamut of possible audience reactions to these films, the hyphen is necessary. The possibility of evoking either excitement or fear in the face of female emotional and physical pain—taking on a masculine or feminine gaze—allow that

*Vertigo* and *Perfect Blue* be dual genre: the horror-thriller. With this more accurate, further-encompassing mixed-genre term, one may more accurately talk about these films.

### **I Look, Therefore I Am**

Although the consideration of a gendered view within genre distinctions may be fairly novel, it seems to be an eventual corollary to a larger, more prominent critical theory essential to this essay: the “male gaze.” In 1985, feminist critic Laura Mulvey coined the concept of the male gaze in her magnum opus, the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Although the theory was created specifically for film criticism, it has been used more generally in academia and may apply to visual art and even literature that depict women as sexual objects for males to receive pleasure from, be they characters, creators, or viewers. In her essay, Mulvey points to the “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” of women within cinema, the visual placement of the scenes, or *mise-en-scène*, reflecting dominant ideological concepts that are unequivocally masculine (Mulvey 15). Mulvey highlights the “othering” of cinematic women, which promotes the justification of visual display and consumption of the feminine form, explaining, “Women then stand in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of women still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 15). With this, there is close attention paid to the symbolic interactionism that subordinates women within society and its reinforcing duplication within prominent film. But Mulvey’s central problem with popular film remains that this “formal beauty”—or the apparent beauty of that which upholds patriarchal control over the female image—arouses *pleasure* within the viewer. She mentions the pleasure of looking, or scopophilia, which encourages the use of the other as “an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 18). Women of the screen thus become sexual entities to be coveted,

subject to a curious and controlling gaze. According to Mulvey, the male gaze essentially characterizes cinema as an instrument of male spectatorship, producing images of women that reflect male sexual fantasies.

Mulvey's "male gaze" has been the primary subject of feminist film studies for the last forty years, being the first and perhaps only reading in this area of study that non-scholars of feminist film theory ever hear of or chance upon. This is not to say, however, that it goes without contention. It has been critiqued by multiple film theorists, many with differing grievances with the theory, the most recurrent being Mulvey's supposed ignorance of the female spectator or her reliance on psychoanalysis. Because of this, some defense of the theory's use in this paper is necessary. In her follow-up essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)," Mulvey addresses the criticism over ignored female spectatorship. In the essay she clarifies that her theory did not assert that females did not watch films, but rather identified the preferred subject position of the viewers, which were primarily male, but more specifically 'masculinized.' To Mulvey, masculinity is a point of view, reporting, "the image of woman on screen and the 'masculinization' of the spectator position are apparent, regardless of the actual sex of any real live movie-goer" (12). Those who identify with the active male protagonist, making up the perceptive reality of the film, participate in objectifying the passive, inert woman, notwithstanding gender identity.

As for the claims of the dubiousness of psychoanalysis, it has become common practice to dismiss it as simply anti-feminist due to the reputation of theorists like Sigmund Freud, but this seems a misinterpretation of most of psychoanalytic thought. Mulvey, as well as other feminist film critics and those who write on liberation studies, have used a psychoanalytic framework to promote the destruction of unjust power structures since, as psychoanalyst and feminist Juliet Mitchell states, "psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society

but an analysis of one” (Chaudhuri 18). In fact, Mulvey’s use of psychoanalysis is what makes the male gaze theory so profound; others before her had criticized cinema’s repeat offenders—namely Hitchcock and Sternberg—in a nontechnical sense, but Muvley’s argument stood out as being far more significant for her use of psychoanalytic theoretical framework in constructing an effective rhetorical argument. For these reasons, Mulvey’s male gaze remains a viable theory.

When it comes to the male gaze within horror-thriller cinema, Alfred Hitchcock wrote the book, *Vertigo* being arguably the most quintessential example. The film’s frequent use of slow close-ups of women and subjective camerawork, like point of view shots from the eyes of the male hero, places these women in a *to-be-looked-at* position, and importantly, this position elicits visual pleasure from the audience. The early scene in which Scottie first gazes upon Madeleine in the restaurant acts as the thesis of the male gaze within *Vertigo*. The camera first points to Scottie, his head turned, but as the camera shifts in the direction he is looking, the audience’s point of view merges with Scottie’s; the camera movement frames Scottie as the subject, the “seer.” Mulvey asserts that this subjective camerawork creates a natural allegiance with the voyeur, stating, “Hence the spectator, lulled into a sense of security by the apparent legality of the surrogate, sees through his look and finds himself exposed and complicit” (Mulvey 351). Following his (and now our) gaze, we move toward Madeleine’s back, the camera voyeuristically moving through the crowd to look upon her unsuspecting body. She sits simultaneously framed within the doorway of the dining room and the doorway to the bar; she is contained in not one, but two frames, amplifying a sense of capture and conquest. Madeleine falls victim to the male gaze before we even see her face, yet this coveting presents itself in a romantic manner that seems to justify it. She rises, walking toward Scottie, and when she reaches him, she stops mid-field for a moment and we linger on her profile. The background is heavily saturated red to suggest Scottie’s—and thus the viewer’s—desire, and the colors further saturate



in her midst. Colors have a powerful influence on human emotion, and color theory asserts that both the color red and higher levels of saturation are linked to ‘excitement’—the same problematic term used to describe the thriller (Bakhshi et al. 3); there again appears an element of sexual intrigue in Madeleine’s coveting and visual presentation. Additionally, her stillness, a break from her natural stride, acts as an intentional opportunity to gaze upon her face and body, which cinematographically maximizes the display potential of the female as an inert object. On this subject, art critic John Burger recognizes that much of the schemata for staging a woman on film can be traced to early Western easel paintings, “which was heavily focused on scenography that presented the beautiful female form frozen in a moment” (Carroll 351). Here, her body, looked upon by the male gaze in this still form wrapped in warm red, imbues her visual conquest with a sense of loveliness and romance too beautiful to be objected.

*Perfect Blue* initially fosters this voyeuristic male gaze through similar cinematography and *mise-en-scène* that emphasizes the masculine desire to obtain the objectified female, but its adoption of the male gaze turns the gaze itself into a despicable bastard. In the opening sequence of the film, shots from Mima’s final concert as a member of the pop group CHAM! are punctuated with shots of Mima doing daily tasks such as taking the train, shopping for groceries, and walking her bike home. The inventive suturing of these dichotomous moments—the public performance and her private life being muddled, mangled together—amplifies and intensifies the act of watching and stalking, the audience no longer a simple viewer “lulled” into the security of the subjective camerawork that constructs *Vertigo*; instead, the viewer finds themselves in a moment of anxiety, aware of impending doom and fearfully anticipant of the stalker for whom the camera moves. A shot with Mima on the train is of particular importance here. Within the train car, her figure is captured from high, imposing angles, as opposed to the eye-level shots in Madeleine’s first presentation. Cinematographically, angles speak stories of power and agency,

important since Mulvey identifies the masculine point of view as powerful and active (Mulvey 17). Low-shot angles in film imbue its subject with active power, like those capturing the titular character in Orson Wells' film *Citizen Kane*. Wells went as far as to cut holes in the floorboards to achieve a maximized low-angle shot, filmically fulfilling Kane's king-like status. The inverse is achieved with high camera angles. In this shot, Mima is lorded over, dominated, the power importantly given to the masculinized look from which she is spied. This automatically invokes an uncomfortable atmosphere, as opposed to the loveliness when witnessing Madeleine.

Furthermore, the train shot, like the restaurant scene in *Vertigo*, is fragmented by multiple metal bars, creating a visual, symbolic prison in which Mima, like Madeleine, is captured. However, unlike the restaurant setting in *Vertigo*, the colors on the train are muted and darkened, devoid of any Hitchcockian romanticism. Mima overtly becomes the object of a sinister male gaze, and this overtness creates an intensity in the moment, a tactic *Perfect Blue* often uses to transform the "oblique rendition of terror" (Clover 205) that Hitchcock relied on—one which promotes a certain amount of subtlety in order to avoid objectionability—into something conspicuous, and therefore, reprehensible.

The male gaze within *Vertigo* continues to be characterized sentimentally, but this sentimentality does not translate into anime. In another pivotal *Vertigo* scene, Scottie follows Madeleine through a dark alleyway into a mysterious building. He opens the door slowly, and the view of the camera moves from black to the intense color and light of the flower shop, almost mimicking the effect of someone slowly opening their eyes. The *mise-en-scène*—characterized by a bright view of life seen through a crack in the door—again palpably suggests that the audience too is the voyeur, the "peeping tom," along with Scottie. A similar technique is used in *Perfect Blue* when we are first introduced to the male antagonist and stalker, Memania. Memania holds out his hand, looking through it so that he may construct his very own optical illusion in

which Mima dances in the palm of his hand. This shot even contains an ocular distortion that obfuscates the borders of the frame, as if creating a “peephole” effect. Both of these instances serve to characterize the female as an object of desire, and the audience, through cinematography, is forced to participate. However, these similarly constructed compositions create different effects when one considers the identifiable male seer. James Stewart, who played Scottie, was a defining actor of his generation, described in *The Guardian*’s tribute to his death as “shamelessly appealing: very nice-looking without having a trace of sexual menace” (Thomson). When the audience gazes at Madeleine in the vibrant beauty of the flower shop through the eyes of an attractive individual, the “halo effect” sets in, the viewer more apt to trust an attractive individual and approve of his visual consumption of the female form. Conversely, when we see the grotesque and monstrous face of Memania we are moved to repulsion, shaken out of the complacency that the beautiful Scottie casts; the visual repulsion of the male seer in *Perfect Blue* makes his spectatorship seem similarly repulsive.

But most importantly, as opposed to *Vertigo*, *Perfect Blue* punishes men for their gazes, actualizing the destruction of the male gaze. In typical horror films, women—though placed in the role of the “object of desire” via the male gaze—are scapegoated as the guilty party for which violent punishment must be bestowed. As prominent feminist film scholar Linda Williams asserts, “The horror film may be the rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women’s sexual potency [...] but, it does so only to punish her for this” (33). Furthermore, Mulvey argues that punishment of the guilty party, most often the female, is part of the male gaze profile. She believes that voyeurism, a defining characteristic of the gaze, includes sadism, which fundamentally ascertains pleasure from punishing the guilty (Mulvey 349). In *Vertigo*, Judy becomes the scapegoat for Scottie's loss of Madeleine. In the final scene, he berates Judy

verbally, blaming her for the death of “Madeleine”—the fantasy construction, not the woman—and in the end, Judy is the one who pays the ultimate price with her death.

But in *Perfect Blue*, Mima does not ascertain mortal guilt—the men do; all of the men who objectify and control Mima are murdered by who is later revealed to be Mima herself, their eyes importantly gouged out, which seems to be an intentional nod to the destruction of the male gaze. In the pivotal murder of the sleazy photographer, Mima in a slasher-like fashion is poised with the ice pick. Behind her, an image of her face from the projector shares the screen; the dominant look becomes not that of a man, but of a woman seeking vindication, Mima’s own likeness gazing contently on the scene as if approving the punishment. In this counter-conventional horror, the lecher, the sexual-exploiter, the man wielding the male gaze becomes the guilty party who receives mortification and death.

### **Constructing, Performing, and Killing the Female**

Once a female subject falls victim to the objectifying male gaze, what is left of her can be described as a male-created female construction whose identity, more so a “role,” is owned and influenced by the patriarchal system; her life, then, becomes performance. However, unlike other film genres that also utilize the gaze and therefore appreciate female construction, horror-thriller movies uniquely enjoy female destruction as well; there is intense gratification—and, of course, pleasure—found in both constructing the female and violating, even killing her. *Vertigo* completes this archetype, while *Perfect Blue* inverts it.

To understand this male fantasy process within horror-thriller, first we must apprehend the reason to create “Woman”—the feminine construct, being a paragon of impossible femininity. The French psychoanalyst, and Laura Mulvey’s theoretical father, Jacques Lacan asserts that the idea of “Woman” is but a fiction, a fantasy symptomatic of a male’s wish to see

himself as subject: “A woman representing the feminine is the *object* that causes a man to feel like a masculine *subject*. Femininity does not exist except as a cultural construct, nor does masculinity” (Leonard 271). As one may recall, Mulvey adopts this thinking, explaining that “Women then stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman” (Mulvey 15). These theorizations initiate a sort of precariousness to the concepts of both “Man” and “Woman,” but when one takes into account patriarchal control in broader society as well as the hegemony of the male gaze, it seems sensible that the male may only allow the female to be “Woman” so that he can assuredly be “Man.”

With Lacan by his side, film expert and author Garry Leonard believes that this system of gender construction fundamentally disenfranchises the female, making her a male-servicing actress, stating, “Once a man successfully casts a woman in the role of the ‘feminine,’ then a woman becomes what Lacan calls ‘Woman’; she ceases to exist for him as an individual and becomes a performer” (Leonard 274). Essentially, there exists an intense need for a male ego-building apparatus, and the female seems to qualify. In infancy, identity is formed during the *stade du miroir*, or “mirror stage,” where children ascertained their being as a differentiated subject, but now it seems that the “black mirror”—the screen—acts as supplement, the women on display being what both the men in the film and the masculinized viewer use to construct their own ego. This notion is essential since it necessitates the impoverished versions of femininity born from men, which we see in most films, especially the horror-thriller. If it cannot be guessed, it should be stated that these female constructions are reductions and impossibilities used to stifle female agency and promote the objectification and sexualization of women.

It is no coincidence, then, that both Judy’s and Mima’s professions are essentially performance, and it can be understood that they also portray the ultimate role, that of “Woman.”

Mima is a pop idol, which fundamentally involves musical performance, but also a type of performance of Woman. Like the name implies, “idols” are meant to be not just any woman, but the perfect Woman, demure but energetic, shy yet personable, sexy yet innocent. Mima’s particular career as an idol in Japan is notable since, unlike in America where audiences for female artists and bands tend to be comprised of females, Japanese idol groups draw in a massive amount of male fans—or *otaku*—who can be described simply as “passionate obsessives” (Gibbons 11). In the opening scene, Mima-the-pop-idol’s male coveting is disturbingly overt; a group of middle-aged men crowd and shout for her, a man selling fanzines of the group walks through the crowd, Memania lurks near the stage, a male “Greek chorus” of sorts speculates over Mima’s rumored retirement. One of the chorus members displays the troubling mentality of most of these “fanboys,” responding to the rumored news saying, “That’s pretty cold of *our* Mima-rin!” (Kon); essentially, these *otaku* believe that they are entitled to Mima as a concept, that she is “theirs.” This rationalization most likely stems from real-life Japanese idols who sign contracts stipulating that they may not date or have relationships because it may interfere with the lucrative *otaku* fantasy that these idols belong, body and soul, to male fans (Napier 29). Her next profession, TV drama acting, also falls into a performative auspices.

Similarly, Judy is an actress of sorts. She agrees to pose as Elster’s wife, Madeleine, “possessed” by Madeleine’s grandmother, Carlotta Valdez, and importantly, the role she must play is based off of the iconic portrait of Valdez; the version of femininity that Scottie comes to obsess over is by its very origin a representation, something idealized and constructed. However, more than anything, Judy’s role is to be the perfect object of Scottie’s desire (Scottie could be described as an *otaku* for Madeleine). Mima’s professions as idol, actress, and occasional model are similar to Judy’s job as an actress playing the role of “Scottie’s Madeleine”; however, we can

also consider, more broadly, both Mima's and Judy's most paramount performance as that of 'Woman' (Capital "W" again for Lacan's idea of gender construction or even Teresa de Lauretis' notion of Woman as 'a fictional construct' in "Technologies of Gender").

As Lacan and Mulvey suggest, these male-serving female constructions help consolidate the powerful male ego by acting as female-object to the male-subject. This can be most clearly evidenced by Mima's and Judy's/Madeleine's frequent exhibition of doll-like iconography. When Scottie pulls Madeleine out of the San Francisco bay, he carries her limp body like a lifeless dummy. When she wakes up in Scottie's bed, her wet clothes hung out to dry in the bathroom, we understand that she has been undressed and dressed like a Barbie doll. This, their first official interaction, is heavily characterized by her role as the "puppet" to Scottie's "puppet master"—her objectification creating his subjectivity—and their subsequent relationship follows this paradigm. In the dramatic denouement of *Vertigo*, Scottie tells Judy, "He [Elster] made you over just like I made you over, didn't he? He made you over just like I made you over, only better! Not only the clothes and the hair, but the looks and the manner and the words..." (Hitchcock). Scottie is supremely unsatisfied that the real, lacking Judy cannot replicate the perfect Madeleine-doll he obsessed over, especially since his ability to save and capture Madeleine made him feel capable and masculine. In fact, he is so unsatisfied that his response is to grab Judy by her arms, push her up the stairs, strike her against the walls, choke her, berate her, and force a kiss upon her, all before she plunges to her death in the darkness.

Mima also assumes a doll-like figuration in the beginning of *Perfect Blue*. In her first appearance on screen we capture her in desperate parts, never seeing her face, which creates the illusion of a "living doll." Before she runs on stage, the camera captures her from behind, again withholding her head and face from the frame, and instead focuses on her back. As anime scholar Susan Napier explains, "We see Mima from the back at this point, underlying her role essentially

as a puppet without a personality” (29). As we learn of Mima’s dilemma, torn between the idol and actress life, we see her own agency dwindle. Napier asserts the connection between these women, affirming that “Mima’s manipulation by her manager and agent is reminiscent of Madeleine/Judy’s orchestrated transformation into a ‘living doll’ in *Vertigo*” (Napier 33). In other words, her body and visage serve not herself, but her male fans and male management, boosting their egos while stunting her own.

Following the preceding evidence, it should be restated that the women in these films perform the impoverished role of “Woman” to the empowerment of the male within the film and the masculinized viewer. However, as much as the feminine figure—in all her desirability and eroticism—may service the male ego, these films follow the pathway to female destruction pertinent in the horror-thriller. Prominent psychoanalytic theorists who specialize in horror and thriller cinema, such as Laura Mulvey, Carol Clover, and Cynthia Freeland, recognize that the Freudian concept of castration anxiety plays a part in the homology of the horror-thriller, which is preoccupied with the torment and murder of the cinematic Women. As much as the construction and possession of the female aids in male ego formation, her bodily construction simultaneously incites an insecurity in the male subject because her lack of a penis “implies a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (Mulvey 348). So, in order to reconcile his fear of de-masculinization, the male subject “punishes” the guilty female—typically resulting in her demise.

*Vertigo* follows through with this regressive, conventional horror ending in which the insecure male figure punishes the offending woman, leading to her untimely demise. And in true Hitchcockian fashion, this completion of form is heavily romanticized, portrayed mostly as a beautiful, just eventuality, or, in its most forgiving interpretation, a noble tragedy. The final kiss Scottie and Madeleine share, to which Madeleine seems only to relent, accompanied by the



unmistakably romantic theme music entitled *Scene de' Amour*, or “Scene of Love,” characterizes her death not as horrific, but terribly beautiful. Madeleine’s death seems even reminiscent of the fate of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*, a relative to the horror, who, despite her reputation as the destroyer of men, often dies violently at his sanction. This destruction of the female construct acts as violent, highly-signified misogyny.

Conversely, Mima’s fraught survival flouts this destructive structure. In the final struggle with Memania, her violent attack, dark and unromantic, functions antithetically to *Vertigo*’s more subtle struggle up the stairway at the mission. Memania even pierces Mima with the ice pick, converting visual pleasure into the fear of the horrific. There is a viscerality and explicitness to her attack, aided by its “slasher” elements, which fundamentally set *Perfect Blue* apart. And in the end, it is Mima who manages to drive the ice pick through Memania’s heart—she survives.

Carol Clover in her essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” explains that the sole surviving female—or “Final Girl”—acts as covert misogyny, her power seemingly born of her masculinization (usually with tomboyish style or an androgynous name like ‘Sam’). Additionally Clover argues the survival of the “Final Girl” as the only sexually inactive girl upholds the moral judgments of the misogynistic killer. Though I can appreciate these arguments, Mima does not typify the “Final Girl” trope. She is feminine in name and appearance, not tomboyish or androgynous. Moreover, her sensational photographs and TV appearances sully the virgin immaculateness that saves the “Final Girl.” Instead, she becomes the feared female castrator, and as Mima’s English voice actress Ruby Marlow once commented, “I think through her struggle she survived...she eventually won herself back” (Cavallaro 48). She won herself back. Both Mima and Judy are forced into male-serving roles of femininity that necessitate their mortal punishment to satisfy both male ego and masculine anxiety, but where Judy falls victim to

this twisted, misogynistic archetype, Mima lives and offers the narrative possibility of reclamation within the horror-thriller genre.

### **Horror-porn: Sex in Scary Cinema**

The combination of the male gaze and objectifying concepts of Woman in horror-thriller films result in horrific representations of sex and sexual dynamics. On this subject, feminist film scholar Linda Williams writes in her essay “Filmed Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” about the closeness between pornography, horror, and melodrama—the first two genres being of importance to this paper—and the misogynistic implications of this proximity.

It should be noted that Williams’ delineation of the term “horror” includes both masculinized pleasure and the feminized fear, which fits my term “horror-thriller” by definition. In order to maintain cohesion, the hyphenated term will continue to be used and identified.

There is a concerning correlation between representations of women in pornography and women in horror-thrillers that sexually charges the violation of women. In her essay, Williams begins this discussion by adopting Carol Clover’s concept of “body genres,” such as horror and pornography, which privilege the representation and the evocation of sensation, especially “ecstasy,” or sexual rapture:

In each of these genres [horror-thriller and pornography] the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain. In other words, even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators, as in the case in most traditional heterosexual pornography, it is the female body in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight. [...] It is thus through what Foucault has called the sexual saturation of the female body that audiences of all sorts have received some of their most powerful sensations. (Williams 4)

Essentially, Williams considers the sensations felt by masculine spectators (mainly sexual arousal) while consuming both porn and horror-thriller comparable, these genres promoting

ecstatic women derived from “pleasure, fear, and pain.” Although feminists are split between the empowering and disempowering elements of adult film acting as a profession, one cannot escape the disempowering fantasy scenes that porn films champion. With male-on-female rape-fantasy scenarios and “torture porn,” pornography often encourages arousal as response to sexual assault and aggression. Williams asserts that the sexualization of female violence sets a dangerous precedent that may even extend past fiction, stating, “The image of the sexually ecstatic woman so important to the genre is a celebration of female victimization and a prelude to female victimization in real life” (Williams 5). In most succinct words, American poet Robin Morgan once wrote, “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” (Morgan 139). Horror-thriller, then, co-opts the signification pornography has given female violation and violence: that it is something pleasurable and gratifying, something that makes the hair on the back of the nape stand erect while encouraging the phallus to do the same.

Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* graciously embraces these misogynistic pornographic elements as romantic accoutrements, coding control over Judy’s body as sexually gratifying. The “reveal scene” in *Vertigo*, in which Judy once again “becomes Madeleine,” acts as the culmination of Scottie’s objectification and fetishization of Judy, serving as the film’s most perfect example of the horror-thriller’s male gaze transubstantiated into erotica. In the scene, Scottie reconstructs Judy as Madeleine, the lost object of his desire. After forcing Judy to wear Madeleine’s grey suit and die her brown hair back to Madeleine’s blonde, Scottie sits in anticipation as Judy places her hair in a bun. When Judy signals, Scottie turns to face her; his jaw drops as Judy/Madeleine stands before him, and he rushes to kiss her passionately. Although this scene may appear fairly tame, in an interview with French film director François Truffaut, Hitchcock professed that he intended for this moment to be a symbolic sex scene:

What I like best is when the girl came back after having had her hair dyed blond.

James Stewart is disappointed because she hasn't put her hair up in a bun. What this really means is that the girl has almost stripped, but she still won't take her knickers off. When he insists, she says "All right," and goes into the bathroom while he waits outside. What Stewart is really waiting for is the woman to emerge totally naked this time, and ready for love..." (Truffaut 186)

Judy's emergence as Scottie's Madeleine acts as his sexual conquest, won not with enthusiastic consent, but with coercion, badgering, and the violation of will. It is not "symbolic sex," but rather symbolic rape. Michael Walker, author of the book *Hitchcock's Motifs*, also makes special note of Madeleine's up-do as a sexual image, saying that "Tightly bound hair connote[s] non-availability—it's vaginal" (Walker 82). The cinematography capturing Madeline's hair earlier in the film emphasizes this eroticization. In the museum, the camera zooms in and lingers over her curl, the slow track forcing the audience to gaze at her as if in a fantasy. In the "reveal scene" her bound-up hair implies the sexualization of vaginal non-availability; Scottie's forceful control over her hair is his forceful control over her body, her vagina. Likewise, authors Paul Condon and Jim Sangster of *The Complete Hitchcock*, even call this moment "emotional rape" since she must submit to Scottie's deviant sexual fetishism. Again, we see the implication of rape romanticized and fetishized akin to pornographic representations. When Madeleine emerges from the bathroom with the up-do, she is not a person but rather a phantom of femininity, a woman from a dream moving through the misty green fog to the romantic sound of *Scene de' Amour*, her movements slow and her figure captured in erotic contemplation. Hitchcock thus creates a signified rape with intense sentimentality, a covert pornography that fetishizes female violation.

In Kon's *Perfect Blue*, the "rape scene" acts as the perfect foil to Hitchcock's "reveal scene," presenting pornographic symbolic rape as utterly horrific. In the scene, Mima, wishing to prove herself a serious actress, agrees to act in a scene in which her character—a stripper—gets

raped during a strip show. Mima's character is pinned down on stage, and before the actor-assailant continues, the director yells "Cut!" and they hold places for the camera to move. This break of the mimesis signals filmically that what we see is fictional. However, as the scene continues, the fictitious simulation transforms into something else, something real. Lines are blurred—the camera angles become chaotic, the director interferes no more, the diegetic sound distorts and morphs with the haunting music of "Mima's Theme"—and the viewer can no longer be confident that the actor-assailant is simply simulating rape. The viewer becomes inclined to believe that the assault is emotionally, even physically legitimate. As the viewer watches Mima under the man as if being penetrated, the camera closes in on her eyes glazed-over as if petrified in pure shock, or dead. The eye-focus then becomes cross-cut with the pornographic images Mima took with the now murdered photographer. But, instead of being illuminated in an innocent white light as they were when taken, they are tinged in dark-yellow, and we actually see the cameraman lording over Mima's naked body splayed on the bed, as if mimicking the demon atop the maiden in Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare*; her violation becomes a nightmare legitimated, and what was seen as a "beautiful symbol" in *Vertigo* transforms into horrific truth. Thus the components of horror-thriller and violent pornography are deeply criticized.

Director Satoshi Kon intended for his film to turn heads, but not to thrill and entice like Hitchcock's, but to shock and horrify, critiquing film's fascination with feminine violence. In Truffaut's interview, Hitchcock asserts that women make the "best victims" and that "They're like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints" (Truffaut 182). This rhetoric, with the valuation of feminine victimhood and the romantic description of women as "virgin" snow—(the double-meaning of this word not lost)—only good to be sullied, suggests enjoyment manifested from sadistic acts done onto women, sexual and otherwise. But an interview with Kon reveals a very different attitude to his inclusion of dizzying violence done onto women. "I'm not

particularly interested in violent scenes,” says Kon, “However, if the story or the character or the expression of a mental state requires a violent expression, then I won’t hesitate to use it. If the violence Mima goes through was toned down, then perhaps audiences could not have shared her experience, how *fearful* it was for her” (Osmond 39; emphasis mine). Kon’s inclusion of violent expression done onto the female figure acknowledges the fear-inducing horror of scary cinema in a way the does not elicit visual pleasure but instead criticizes it.

One can even point to the anime medium itself as another indication of critique when approaching its animated quality with the formalist concept of defamiliarization. Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky describes defamiliarization in his book *Art as Technique* as the act of “estranging” by medium, which as a result, “renew[s] the readers’ lost capacity for fresh sensation” (Shklovsky 5). Although Shklovsky’s theories focus on literature, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht applied defamiliarization to epic theater, calling it the “alienation effect.” So, it seems that defamiliarization within visual art may viably render tried structures alien, and thus open to reconsideration. Anime scholar and author of *Anime Intersections* Dani Covallaro explains the importance that this alienation has on the audience’s perceptions: “*Perfect Blue* also shatters the audience’s dependence on the screen itself as a supposedly safe space, compelling us to look on it more warily and aware that its coordinates may be arbitrarily violated at any moment” (Covallaro 45). That which appears on the screen, like in a Hitchcock film or video pornography, often incites complacency and comfort via its familiar forms, but when the characters are rendered in animation, the familiar forms, along with the safety they imply, disappear, allowing for a new awareness of things. The fact that *Perfect Blue* is conceived in the animescape fundamentally lends itself to the deconstruction of its genre; it signals criticism, the pornographic horror-thriller genre ‘made strange’—and made objectionable—by its animated construction.

## **Creating (Anti-)Horror Paradigms**

Although the violence I've analyzed thus far appears on screen, media studies suggest that depictions of violence, especially sexual, against women impacts the way we perceive real-world women. In her essay "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm," Carroll Noel explains that the problematic images of women in pop-culture are added into the cultural repertoire of emotion and response. She begins with a fairly commonsensical notion: "Recurring images of women in popular media may have some influence on how people think of women in real life" (Noel 355). However, she also integrates this idea of "image" with philosopher Ronald de Sousa's theory of paradigm scenarios. Essentially, paradigm scenarios attach emotions and responses to new experiences that may be called upon in similar scenarios, but, as de Sousa explains, these paradigms often shift from biological to cultural. According to Noel, this means elements of culture influence our emotional responses, especially in regards to gender: "Male emotional responses to women, for example, will be shaped by the paradigm scenarios that they bring to those relations. Such paradigm scenarios may be derived from films, or, more likely, films may reflect, refine, and reinforce paradigm scenarios already abroad in the culture" (Noel 357). If one witnesses novel interactions, even in fiction, that disempower, violate, sexualize, victimize, and kill women with a romantic tint meant to incite pleasure, this may trigger a pleasant emotional response when these situations reappear, even terrestrially.

Multiple quantitative media studies also uphold the idea that visual representations of violence done onto female affect real-world attitudes toward the like. In a study at the University of Montreal, researchers showed men and women films with varying degrees of female-directed aggression followed by a documented rape trial. The following 252-item questionnaire revealed that the men who watched the most violent films were more attracted to sexual aggression and

more accepting of rape myths, which excuse sexual aggression and create hostility toward victims (Weisz and Earls 71). A similar study conducted at The University of California, Los Angeles found that media plays a central role in the development of thought-patterns that support female-directed aggression (Malumuth and Briere 75). Looking at female responses, a study conducted at the University of Cape Town found that women exposed to mediated-aggression toward women had heightened feelings of disempowerment (Reid and Finchilescu 397). On this subject, studies seem as plentiful as the representation of male-on-female violence that necessitate them, which adds an increased sense of urgency for feminists who seek change in genres such as horror-thriller, a genre that fundamentally bases its success on the horror of the feminine experience. Perhaps philosopher and film critic Slavoj Žižek said it best, asserting “This would then be the lesson of the film [*Vertigo*]: fantasy rules reality” (Zizek 54).

So, can feminist scary cinema persist? The females of horror-thrillers, though often surprisingly bold and intelligent, suffer violence and fetishization at the hands of cinematic techniques, the male heroes of the films, and even the viewers themselves. For this, one could argue convincingly that part of Hitchcock’s signature of horror is the crystallization of the ideal female figure—sensual, beautiful, desirable, destructible, and under the watchful eyes of men. However, there may be retribution in the horror-thriller genre as films like *Perfect Blue* appropriate misogynistic tropes to a critical, subversive effect. Perhaps one may simply look to the final scene in *Perfect Blue* to receive Kon’s message. In the scene, Mima leaves the hospital, alive and with newfound confidence having overcome her ordeal. She passes some nurses whispering to each other, wondering if this really is *the* Mima Kirigoe. She gets into her car and the camera pans into the perfectly blue sky above. Susan Napier comments on this moment as one of feminine reclamation: “No longer the object of a male gaze, she is, in fact, the subject of female speculation as a group of nurses wonder if she is the ‘real’ Mima. Their uncertainty



suggests that Mima is finally in charge of her own image. Perhaps to underline this change, Mima is shown wearing glasses that reflect—nothing” (Napier 34). Mima escapes and destroys the male gaze, winning back herself. In the midst of what Kon clearly displays as terrible female horror, he concludes with an optimistic alternative that champions feminist sensibilities; horror’s redemption may be grasped. In shortest words, against a long history of misogynistic tropes, some horror-thriller cinema, such as *Perfect Blue*, act as much-needed feminist critique. However, it remains important that scary cinema be criticized under a feminist lens so that the unjust torture of both filmic and embodied women falls not under our gaze.

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## **Reflection Essay**

My research journey for this project began on the Copley Library online catalogue. I previously knew of a few prominent essays related to my topic, like Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Linda Williams' "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," so I let these kick-start my research. I searched in the catalogue for the books where these essays reside, requested them, and began to peruse the books located on the "virtual shelf" nearby, since books of similar topics are usually organized together. I previously made it a point to scour the Copley stacks for my research, but the closure of the physical library made this work a bit more challenging. Thankfully, I was able to use the books' call numbers to find the adjacent books in the catalogue. This gave me a nice starting-off list of resources, and extraordinary reliable resources at that. Since the articles and essays that appear in published literature have been produced by experts and thoroughly scrutinized, they are the most robust research resources and the most stable foundation for my own essay.

From the previews of the book contents available on the catalogue, I next made a list of search terms, such as "women and horror," "the male gaze," "Hitchcock's women," and "body horror," and looked for relevant contents in the resulting books. I made sure to also check the circuit since there are more books available at other affiliated libraries not to be forgotten. Once I requested and received my books, I read the essays that seemed paramount, marking ideas and terms of importance with sticky notes. I also made sure to look at the bibliographies and works cited pages of these essays for other resources that I could potentially use. From there, I was able to find more resources and finally transition into the invaluable online databases available to me through USD's subscriptions.

The main online databases and search engines I used were JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. It was important to me to rely on peer-reviewed scholarly journals since these essays

are subject to inspection and review from expert academics in the field. These are wildly more reliable than the results of a simple Google search, which may turn up information of a dubious nature. Even the dictionary definitions that I used came from the Oxford English Dictionary, which is the most comprehensive, dependable dictionary available. That is right: even definitions can be low-quality when the product of a quick Internet search! I found it helpful to use the “advanced search” optimization on JSTOR when looking for more specific things and Google Scholar—which actually acts as a collection of research pulled from multiple scholarly databases—when my ideas or wording was more free-flowing. I always made sure to double-check the reputability of the journal to assure quality.

However, there were a few instances in my paper where non-scholarly sources were cited. For example, in one instance I referenced the American Film Institute’s list of “Top 100 Greatest Thrillers”; in another instance, I quoted a tribute to the actor James Stewart from *The Guardian*. I believe that there are allowances to be made for these since I used these resources to illustrate the state of public opinion and compliment more thorough research, usually acting as something for more informed perspectives to foil. I believe that non-scholarly resources, like popular press, can have a place in research projects—(and may even make the essay more varied)—but must be used with discretion and not given an undue amount of credence.

Nevertheless, books and scholarly resources remained king to my project.

The most exciting and beautiful part of my research process was discovering how many different types of evidence that I could find through diligent research, allowing me to create a sort of “tapestry of information” to bolster my argument. I began my research journey with more topical, pointed subjects like criticisms of my two primary texts, cinematographic tactics, horror tropes, feminist theories such as the “male gaze,” but it developed into more complex searches concerning ideas such as defamiliarization, psychoanalysis, horror-porn, art schemata, and

others; my research even helped me wade into interdisciplinary waters, leading me to philosophical theories about paradigms of the mind and quantitative media studies, which proved valuable to my argument.

Ultimately, I found this project to be an indispensable opportunity to practice good research efficacy and make room for my own argument while standing on the shoulders of giants.