

Carrie at 40: why the horror genre remains important for women

Brian De Palma's adaptation of Stephen King's tale of a bullied girl taking revenge was both empowering and troubling, with nearly all female main characters



Sissy Spacek as Carrie. Photograph: The Ronald Grant Archive

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Practically the first scene of *Carrie*, released 40 years ago today, shows a girl's high school locker room, complete with not very blurred full frontal nudity. The scene, famously, concludes with Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) experiencing her first period in the shower. Carrie has been kept in ignorance by her repressive, mentally unstable mother Margaret White (Piper Laurie), and the sudden rush of blood reduces her to a quivering, terrified wreck as the other girls mock her.

The onset of adolescence also unleashes Carrie's telekinetic power, and a conflict with her mother and peers which leads her to turn prom night into an orgy of fire and death. Carrie's gym teacher, Miss Collins (Betty Buckley), tries to protect her from the other girls' teasing, and her classmate Sue (Amy Irving), even sets her up with a lovely prom date, but these acts of kindness all turn to ash, as Carrie fulfills her bloody destiny. "Like all the women in the film, she brings on her own destruction; she is punished for being a woman," writes Serafina Kent Bathrick. Critic

Barbara Creed concludes that *Carrie* is “a particularly interesting representation of woman as witch and menstrual monster”.

Creed and Bathrick are hardly the only critics to accuse horror films of misogyny. Janet Maslin, in a 1982 New York Times article titled “Bloodbaths Debase Movies and Audiences” compared slasher films to “hardcore sexual pornography” and added: “It goes without saying that these films exploit and brutalize women.” Roger Ebert characterized the rape-revenge horror *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) as “A vile bag of garbage ... There is no reason to see this movie except to be entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering.”

Anna Biller, the director of new horror/thriller comedy *The Love Witch* expressed similar sentiments. In many horror films, she says, “I would argue that the misogyny is not only obvious, but that it’s the main appeal of these films to fans ... When I watch a film like that, all I can think is, ‘there are hundreds and thousands of people out there that think I’m evil and wish I would die. They would laugh and cheer if I died, and they would dance on my grave.’”

Yet, despite the misogyny many see in the genre, horror films themselves have always had a substantial female fanbase. Shelley Stamp, a film professor at University of California, Santa Cruz, says that horror films were marketed to women as early as the 1930s and 1940s. “I started going to horror films when I was a teenager in the 1970s,” she added, “and I was certainly never the only young woman in the audience.” Today, women continue to be a major part of, and often the majority in, horror movie audiences. In 2013, the hit *The Conjuring* had an audience composed of 53% women; *The Purge* had an audience of 56% women. *Mama* was 61% women. Even the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake showed to an audience that was less than half men.

If horror films are so misogynist, why do they seem to have such an appeal for women? For one thing, as Roxanne Benjamin, co-director of indie horror film *Southbound*, explains, not all horror films are the same. “It depends on the film and the film-maker and point of view,” she says. Any kind of film can be misogynist, she added. Thus, Biller, who dislikes the misogyny of slashers, is an enthusiastic fan of *Carrie*, which, she says, “is a movie that is intensely psychological and is full of truths about human nature and feminine power”. For some critics, *Carrie* may be monstrous, but that monstrosity can also be seen as a feminine agency rare in films.

Stamp suggests that the same qualities which lead some to label horror as misogynist may be the things which explain its appeal to women. “Horror, more than any other film genre, deals openly

with questions of gender, sexuality and the body,” she said. “Yes, femininity, female sexuality, and the female body are often presented as ‘monstrous’. But that doesn’t mean that women aren’t interested in watching and thinking about these issues. In many ways horror films bring to the fore issues that are otherwise unspoken in patriarchal culture – which itself constructs female sexuality as monstrous.”

Journalist Brianna Wu shared: “Horror is one of the only genre films where women get to be the star, and have rich emotional lives.” This is certainly true of *Carrie*, in which not only Carrie herself, but virtually all the main characters are women. Margaret White and Miss Collins fight for Carrie’s soul; there’s no male savior in sight. Even Carrie’s Prince Charming, sports star Tommy Ross (William Katt), isn’t really her Prince Charming. He dates her as a favor to his girlfriend, Sue, who hopes to draw Carrie out of her shell.

Similarly, Chris (Nancy Allen) manipulates her boyfriend (literally and figuratively), to convince him to help her torment Carrie. In the vast majority of Hollywood detritus, women are just pretty prizes through which men work out their various friendships and animosities. Think of any James Bond film, with the hero and villain fighting over some semi-anonymous Bond girl. In *Carrie*, by contrast, it’s women who get to act, plot, rescue and, ultimately, kill.

“Horror movies are a world where money can’t save you, privilege can’t save you, strength can’t save you,” Wu says. “In some ways, it’s a world with real equality.” During the film’s denouement, Carrie kills men and women, adults and kids, guilty and innocent alike with equal and indiscriminate ruthlessness. Callow guys, vindictive girls, failed would-be friends and clueless administrators, all are struck down. Notably, just before she starts her murder spree, Carrie flashes back to the principal calling her “Cassie”. His bland patriarchal refusal to recognize her individuality is the final spark that ignites her vengeance. When Carrie was repressed, bullied and humiliated, people suffered. It’s a message that resonated with horror audiences of every gender, and still does, 40 years later.