

# "If we stretch our imaginations": the *Monstrous-Feminine* Mother in Rolf de Heer's *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993) and *Alexandra's Project* (2003)

**D. Bruno Starrs, Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

Critically acclaimed for his complex representations of a wide variety of social issues, from the environmental to the Aboriginal, Australian writer/director Rolf de Heer's oeuvre includes two films featuring uniquely self-centered and negligent mothers. Although *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993) and *Alexandra's Project* (2003) have achieved limited distribution outside the festival circuit, remaining a rare DVD delectation on both sides of the Atlantic, the cinematic cognoscenti have recognized the cult classic status of these two unusual feature films. Both focus attention on and problematize a very specific female subjectivity, which at first consideration might be linked to psychoanalytic notions of feminine monstrosity, but with the novel horror attribute of libidinous female self-interest over-riding normally instinctive maternal care. In *Bad Boy Bubby*, Flo keeps her son, a 35 year old man-child, locked away from the world in a dank, claustrophobic cell where he endures perverse religious indoctrination and his only functions are to apply his mother's makeup and service her sexually. Eventually her abject maternal neglect back-fires and Bubby commits an understandable act of parricide before escaping into the outside world. In *Alexandra's Project*, two apparently happy and well-adjusted kids, Emma and Sam, have their whole world ripped asunder because their mother, Alexandra, feels alienated by her husband. Steve refuses to let Alexandra pay the bills and is insensitive to her needs in bed so she arranges to whisk away her children and all evidence of them as a perverse birthday gift for the doting father. Her social and moral transgression is communicated via a home-recorded videotape in which she reveals her serial infidelity: she is having an affair with the neighbor and works by day as a prostitute. In my reading of these heteroclit films I concentrate on how they use and rework the concept of Barbara Creed's "monstrous-feminine" as an unnatural affront to biological and evolutionary instinct to create a new spin on notions of the suburban monster. But with consideration of the Westermarck Hypothesis, the threat rehearsal function of dreams and the lower survival expectations of fatherless children I conclude there is support for an evolutionary explanation of the function and appeal of such horror films, suggesting the potential for an evolutionary theory of film free from the stretch of the imagination psychoanalytic theory often demands.

## ***Bad Boy Bubby***

*Bad Boy Bubby* presents a disturbing depiction of a modern urban Frankenstein's monster. Its horror involves the graphic depiction of mother/child intercourse, matricide and patricide. The DVD cover of *Bad Boy Bubby* warns via the words of the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper: "Avoid if easily shocked" and the *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper: "A sort of deviant, tasteless

version of *Forrest Gump*" (Umbrella Entertainment, 2005). Of course, such negative admonitions were like flattering exhortations to horror and cult film aficionados and the movie soon developed an appreciative following, winning accolades at several overseas film festivals. [1] The movie's story focuses on Bubby (played by Nicholas Hope), who has been raised for apparently all of his 35 years in complete isolation by his domineering mother, Flo (Claire Benito). Less the suffocating mother-hen than the punishing matriarch, Flo uses Bubby for emotionless sex -- he's only told he's "good boy Bubby" when servicing her -- and she deceives him into believing the air outside is poisonous, wearing a gas-mask whenever she leaves their drab, windowless and cockroach-ridden cement-box apartment. His long-estranged alcoholic priest of a father, Pop (Ralph Cotterill), whom Bubby does not recognize or even remember, arrives unexpectedly, triggering a bizarre act of parricide in which Bubby asphyxiates both of his scabrous parents with cling wrap thus leading to his escape and heuristic journey in the world outside the front door. Any theories of existence or acceptable behaviour Bubby may have held under the tyrannical rule of his late mother are overthrown in a wild revolution that leads him to an eventual understanding of, and place within, the real world. Like Kaspar Hauser (Bruno S.) in Werner Herzog's *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (*Every Man for Himself and God Against All*, 1974), Bubby is a wide-eyed man-child learning how to function as an independent adult in a bewilderingly unknown and foreign world, whose naïve comments are interpreted as meaningful metaphoric commentary by those more complicated mortals he meets. With a great talent for linguistic mimicry Bubby manages to unintentionally charm his way into bed with several well-meaning women, but although his naïveté permits love for the voluptuous Angel (Carmel Johnson), who obviously reminds him of his own mother with her "great big whoppers", Bubby's incestuous and repressive childhood is also responsible for horrific, nihilistic killing. Typical of what Tom O'Regan calls the Australian filmmaker's love to portray ugly, ordinary and 'daggy' Australians (O'Regan, 1996: 245), Bubby, with his balding pate fringed with long, lank hair and ill-fitting pastor's suit (stolen from his dead father) is unstylish but very ordinary and real. This ordinariness makes his horrific upbringing more terrifying: perhaps he is less the societal exception we suppose he is? O'Regan explains that the ordinariness of many Australian film characters makes their strange exploits more truthful, if unpredictable:

Sometimes this ordinariness takes us into decidedly unconventional directions. Bubby's (of *Bad Boy Bubby*) notions of the sexually attractive body are unconventional: the threatening cornucopia of flesh of his aging mum, who keeps him simultaneously as his baby and her sexual partner (in its classic 20 minutes 'theatre of cruelty' opening) enables his positive desire for the younger but equally well-endowed (Ruebens-like) Angel to make sense for him and for the viewer. (1996: 246)

From the opening frame, the germ of a truism is planted: were any of the ordinary people in the audience subjected to the traumatic mother Bubby has endured, then they, too, might have turned out like him. His responses are not inexplicable: they do, indeed, make sense for the viewer and it is no wonder at all that, as his peripatetic Pop surmises, "The kid is a weirdo."

In the late 1980's Irving Schneider recognized a welcome shift in that decade in the way in which Hollywood film treated "weirdos" -- the subjects of psychiatry and mental illness -- with oppressive domineering psychiatrists and their over-medicated, zombified victims being replaced by more human patient/therapist encounters and ambiguous, frequently optimistic, outcomes (1987: 996-1002). Psychiatrist Alan Rosen later commented on *Bad Boy Bubby's* contribution to the Australian and New Zealand film industry as follows:

*Bad Boy Bubby* [...] also extends the 'eccentric cinema's' preoccupation with idiosyncratic characters and offbeat themes. [...] Although there is no psychiatric intervention [...] the relentless playing out of dark psychopathology might nevertheless be included in the 'psychiatric' film category. (Rosen 1997: 640)

Indeed, *Bad Boy Bubby* offers much grist for those wishing to conduct a psychiatric analysis, particularly one based on psychoanalytic theory. In most mainstream horror films the woman is depicted as the victim, frequently punished for her unrestrained libido, because, according to psychoanalytic theory, at the heart of horror lies a patriarchal fear of female sexuality. In accordance with this misogyny, it is generally believed that the horror genre defines female sexuality "as monstrous, disturbing, and in need of repression" (Jancovich 1992: 10). Stretching this definition have been some less common horror films that depict a woman *as* the monster. While still susceptible to the usual patriarchal, phallocentric ideology of the dominant cinema they have tended towards an uncanny representation of women characterized by abjection and transgression. The woman's abjection is manifest through her sexuality, reproductive functions and bodily fluids: her transgressions are played out through disruptions of social, moral, and religious law. Rather than Freud's castrated victim, she represents the castrating monster and this vile image of the mother as threatening has been labeled the "monstrous-feminine" by academic Barbara Creed in her 1993 analysis of gender and horror films of the same name. Flo certainly appears to represent a particularly nasty version of Creed's "monstrous feminine." Employing Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous" (Kristeva, 1982: 4), Creed made the argument that films in the horror genre posit women generally and mothers particularly as posing a potentially fatal threat to men:

... the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous feminine) in order to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. (1993: 14)

But much more than a symbolic rite, Flo's sex act with Bubby is a crime of perversity that destabilizes all the viewer's conceptions of the caring, nurturing motherfamilias. For this reason, the film stands in stark contrast to most horror movies in which the monster is a male who makes victims of women: especially sexually active young women. Gérard Lenne concludes there "are very few monstrous and disfigured women in the fantastic, and so much the better" and that the "great monsters are all male" (Lenne, 1979: 35). Lenne's comments notwithstanding, certain female monsters can occasionally be identified in horror movies, and indeed, Creed goes so far as to say:

The female monster, or monstrous-feminine wears many faces: the amoral primeval mother (*Aliens*, 1986); vampire (*The Hunger*, 1983); witch (*Carrie*, 1976); woman as monstrous womb (*The Brood*, 1979); woman as bleeding wound (*Dressed to Kill*, 1980); woman as possessed body (*The Exorcist*, 1973); the castrating mother (*Psycho*, 1960); woman as beautiful but deadly killer (*Basic Instinct*, 1992); aged psychopath (*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 1962); the monstrous girl-boy (*A Reflection of Fear*, 1973); woman as

non-human animal (*Cat People*, 1942); woman as life-in-death (*Life-force*, 1985); woman as the deadly *femme castratrice* (*I Spit On Your Grave*, 1978). (Creed 1993: 1)

While Creed's list seems comprehensive, to my knowledge the maternal incest attacker is unheard of before *Bad Boy Bubby*: Flo is a distinctly unique and disturbing aberration. Norman Bates' desire for his mother in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) is not necessarily consummated -- not in life, at least. Her mummified corpse is made available, but there is no suggestion Mrs. Bates ever desired, let alone achieved, sexual union with her son. As Carol J. Clover said:

It is one thing for that viewer to hear the psychiatrist intone at the end of *Psycho* that Norman as a boy (in the backstory) was abnormally attached to his mother; it would be quite another to see that attachment dramatized in the present, to experience in nightmare form the elaboration of Norman's (the viewer's own) fears and desires. (Clover in Jancovich 1992: 82)

Of course, part of the success of *Psycho* lies in the audience's mistaken belief that the mother is the monster of the movie. In *Bad Boy Bubby* there is no doubt as to the identity of the monster -- initially. The film starts out, from the opening frame, with the mother as the evil creature, belittling her son with perverted religion and engaging him in depraved incest. Flo also serves the standard functions of the monstrous feminine with regard to sphincter/toilet training and cleaning. Washing the desultory Bubby, standing naked in a tub, she scrubs him as indelicately as one might scour a pot and when he pisses himself she beats him. So far, so good: as Creed says, "Virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (1993: 13). After about half an hour of watching her do her worst, she (and her partner "Pop") are murdered -- painlessly made to "be still" whilst comatose from drinking -- by the new male monster, Bubby. Shaving him in the film's opening shot, Flo carelessly nicks Bubby with the razor and when he flinches, Flo slaps him across the head, admonishing him to "Be still!" Later, she admonishes him again to "Be still!" when she leaves the apartment. Bubby tells his struggling pet cat to "Be still!" Finally, in his act of matricide he tells his dissolute mother, "You be still, too."

One cinematic monstrous mother that does come close to Flo is Margaret White, mother of Carrie in the Brian de Palma 1976 movie of the same name. Mrs. White regards her daughter as a sexual sinner, her menarche as proof of such, and she attempts to kill Carrie on the night of her apocalyptic Prom. Creed acknowledges this as follows: "The mother-child relationship in *Carrie*, as in *Psycho*, is depicted as abnormal and perverse" (1993: 78), and "Carrie's stabbing suggests a sexual assault by the mother" (1993: 82). But this fertile ground for an analysis of the maternal monster is elided by Creed in deference to her focus on the menstruating Carrie as witch and the role she plays in her feminist discourse. Creed concludes the chapter on Carrie as follows:

I regard the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology [...] Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourses as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film -- a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other. (1993: 83)

Like many horror films the horror depicted in *Bad Boy Bubby* beggars belief. The audience cannot easily grasp the notion of a mother as dissolute as Flo. Jonathan L. Crane explains "Horror is then an interrogative genre that demands of its subjects, on screen and off, a reply. Is this some kind of joke?" (Crane 2004: 142). Crane continues: "What the audience needs is confirmation. Has something wicked this way come or are we, viewers and players alike, being had? This is a question of irony" (2004: 144). Until the doubt has been removed or confirmed, the viewer must patiently attenuate disbelief. Often, the plot of a horror movie revolves around characters failing to believe the horror they have glimpsed, as one by one, the monster picks off the obdurate sceptics, but a well made horror film will nevertheless convince the audience to believe their aporetic eyes. Whilst the beginning of *Bad Boy Bubby* may elicit nervous titters of disbelief, after some twenty minutes most spectators will have arrived at the unwelcome conclusion that Flo is no joke. In forcing herself on Bubby and broaching the usual taboo of mother-son intercourse, Bubby's mother figures herself as the archetypal Freudian "phallic mother", maintaining the standard "dread of mother-incest and horror of the female genitals" (Freud 1974: 24). Flo is devoid of any maternal gentleness and is hideous in her capaciousness and rapaciousness. No foreplay is ever shown: scenes cut to Flo atop the hapless Bubby who caresses her pendulous breasts passively, as if quite unsure of it all. For Bubby, fornicating with his own mother is an act apparently unworthy of comment: a mere quotidian by-product of sharing a bed with the only other human in his universe, akin to the daily chore of applying Flo's eye makeup and lipstick. He feels no embarrassment or shame, for he knows of no other way. His super-ego has not been educated to believe otherwise. Bubby's first experience of people outside the door occurs when he overhears Pop knocking on the door and stating with his thick Irish accent, "I know you're in there, Florence. I'll be back." He then overhears Pop telling his mother she's a "sexy woman, Flo" as he seduces her, in a re-enactment of what Freud calls the "primal scene:" a situation in which anxiety is produced when the child sees or overhears his parents engaged in the sex act (see Freud 1971).

Certainly, *Bad Boy Bubby* is a film saturated with an awareness of Freudian concepts, established from within the narrative context. *Bad Boy Bubby* undermines and confounds the dominant societal discourse regarding male heterosexuality: traditional notions of masculinity are disintegrated. Likewise, the standard Oedipal narrative of Sophocles' play "Oedipus the King" is confounded. The film does this by parody, performance and subversion, particularly Bubby's overt adoption and linguistic mimicry on stage of his father's persona, Pop the part-time priest. Bubby's relationship with his parents is an Oedipal nightmare. If the pre-Oedipal child desires the mother, Bubby is forced to remain at that stage, having been unable to develop desires for another. The filthy den of inequity Flo has built is no home, sweet home: it is Julia Kristeva's "neutralizing cave, a fantasy arising precisely as the negative imprint of the maternal phallus" (Kristeva, 1982: 135), a place where the male audience's deepest fears of feminine sexuality are graphically enacted. With such a traumatic and destabilizing personal history, Bubby's escape, although enabled through that most taboo of primal acts, murder, is less a noxious irruption of monstrous evil than a justifiable and inevitable conclusion. It is viewed -- at least through the eyes of the male spectator -- as right and just.

Bubby's creative outlet -- and cathartic salvation -- is music, as he finds an audience for his parrot-like renditions of past abuses via his position as the idolized lead-singer of a pub band. Liz Ferrier said "*Bad Boy Bubby*, like *Lillian's Story* (1996) and *Cosi* (1996), depicts a disadvantaged individual overcoming setbacks through the passionate and eccentric expression of his creativity" (Ferrier, 2000:57), noting, as her editor Ian Craven summarized, "the generative axis constructed within the films between elements of the dysfunctional

within the family, and their protagonist's subsequent creativity and acceptance." In further describing *Bad Boy Bubby* as one of the New Gothic Australian horror films of the 1990s, Jonathan Rayner writes:

Just as the heightening of noises on the soundtrack and the occasional distortion of the film's images have served to articulate Bubby's defamiliarising perspective on the world, so the verbal fossils of his foreshortened childhood strike an epigrammatic cord [sic] with his audience: Bubby fronts the band with a rant strung together from fragments of the abuse he's undergone. (Rayner 2000: 141)

Like Dr. Frankenstein's confused and monstrous creation, Bubby is eventually redeemed by music -- he ends up fronting a punk rock band named after his father ("Pop and the Clingwrap Killers") and this "figure of the naïve visionary" (Martin, 2000: 30) is given a voice. As John Conomos put it, "He verbalizes and acts out the social and psychological maladies that characterize our families and society" (Conomos, 1995: 377) and takes to the stage with the confidence and charisma of a prophetic poet of the people, apparently rid of any long-term damage from his poor parenting experience.

*Bad Boy Bubby* is no ordinary film about a deprived childhood. Unlike Werner Herzog's *Kaspar Hauser*, Bubby kills his oppressing jailers. And yet, *Bad Boy Bubby* is no ordinary horror film. Unlike many of its contemporary horror films, the protagonist has been victimised by no less perverse and evil an influence than an incestuous mother. Despite its disgusting and gruesome opening half hour which outraged many viewers to the extent they walked out of the cinemas, this tale of parental corruption, naïve crime and religious negativity illustrates an almost *film noir* disillusionment with our poisonous urban society, but nevertheless has a sweetly humanist core. In the final scenes, Bubby has overcome all hurdles and reached the zenith of familial bliss, that catholic goal of humans: a loving partnership complete with two children playing in his suburban backyard. With this happy ending, Bubby proves his guiltless honesty and motiveless innocence, thus purging the taint of terror created by the opening scenes. Nevertheless, de Heer doesn't let us off that easy: it is, after all, a horror movie. Overlooking the safe, cosseted suburban Adelaide home are the smokestacks of industry, spewing out their gaseous pollution as church organ music plays and we recall the warnings of Flo: "If the poison don't getcha, then God will!" The denouement of de Heer's masterpiece seems to be suggesting that the horror Flo created may well be repeated by all others with warped attitudes to the children of the world.

### ***Alexandra's Project***

Rolf de Heer has made several films that examine nuclear suburban families a little less dysfunctional than Bubby's. His first feature was about a socially inept young boy growing up in a one-parent household who gains confidence by repairing and eventually flying a Tiger Moth bi-plane in *Tail of a Tiger* (1984). *The Quiet Room* (1998) explored a marital breakdown from the perspective of a little girl who chooses muteness as a demonstration against her parents arguing. But the controversial and divisive *Alexandra's Project* is a study in extreme marital discord and bitter retribution. It is an angry, caustic film that leaves few married men unrattled and more than a few scorned women vicariously fulfilled. After a gripping, atmospheric beginning that emulates David Lynch's detached depictions of well-scrubbed, green-lawned suburbs reverberating with shades of *Blue Velvet* (1986) bliss, the film soon demonstrates how unknowingly a husband can slowly chip away at the dignity of

his wife in socially acceptable means, as per our patriarchal world where men are the power brokers, but how the wife retains the awesome power to literally and figuratively reduce a man to nothing within the course of a single evening. De Heer said of the marriage between Steve (Gary Sweet) and Alexandra (Helen Buday): "The way people communicate and don't communicate, to me that's very interesting stuff" (Molitorisz, 2003). *Alexandra's Project* tracks the fragmentation of connubials and the festering reality of the resultant emotional torment to a surprising and depressing conclusion, and as such, de Heer's project bears significant resemblance to Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* (2001). The film was selected for Official Competition at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival even before delivery, and although screened at numerous other festivals it was not as well received as previous festival hit *Bad Boy Bubby*. [2]

The provocative terrain de Heer bases this psychosexual thriller in is the happily married family home consisting of husband, wife and two children, Emma and Sam (Samantha Knigge and Jack Christie). As the audience follows Steve through the course of his birthday, de Heer builds up a sense of dread by isolating certain incidents (such as Steve knocking his family photos over at his work desk) and subtly pointing out the cracks in the successful businessman's smugly controlled veneer. An early conversation between Steve and his daughter Emma about a condemned man's last request being a cigarette (he is a secret smoker) portends the imprisonment to come. Expecting a surprise party, Steve returns to his suburban domicile after a productive day at work to find it empty, dark and deathly quiet. Lights fail to work, doors lock as he passes through them and the phone is disconnected. Then he finds a tape labeled "Play Me," and what follows is the unspooling of a homemade videotape: an electronic "Dear John" letter. The video shows Alexandra performing an awkward striptease and trying some spur-of-the-moment nipple piercing. She delivers a meandering monologue on her unhappiness, her barren love-life, a possible mastectomy and their mutual unfaithfulness. He lacks uxorial compassion. She points a gun at her head. Alexandra's embittered performance can be interpreted as a feminist empowerment ritual, a reactionary diatribe on sexual politics, but one that succeeds mostly in venting her own passive aggression. But the lecture has teeth: it savagely attacks her unfortunate mate. In a panic, Steve tries to leave the suburban battlefield only to find that his door keys no longer fit the locks and the security shutters placed over the windows are held fast. Remembering his mobile phone, Steve is appalled to find the battery has been replaced by a bullet. Frightened and alone, Steve is imprisoned in his own house and he has no choice but to resume watching the rest of the video tape, which is a litany of the accumulated humiliations Alexandra has endured at his insensitive hands. But this is only the start of the mental torture she is to inflict on her hapless husband, a man she now quite obviously reviles. She takes careful pleasure in exposing her husband's shortcomings and exploiting his sense of marital presumption by offering the sordid spectacle of voyeuristic infidelity: the video reveals another man, the "hairy garden gnome" of a neighbor (Bogdan Koca), engaging her in sex from behind. The film's unusually sour edge further unsettles as events unfold until Steve has everything stripped away, including, most notably, his children, as he learns Alexandra has removed all evidence -- their photos, clothes etc. -- from his life.

One of the major themes of *Alexandra's Project* is the subtle depiction of the suburban home as a soul-sapping prison, with dead locks and elaborate security measures providing a metaphor for the lies and hurtful slights a married couple can use to inflict punishment upon each other. But whose incarceration is the cruelest? Alexandra's prison is the marriage in which she has been silenced and patronized. Cathartically, the video makes Alexandra heard and Steve has to listen. Jake Wilson notes: "In nearly all his films, de Heer seems to approach

the same central question: can the Other speak?" (Wilson 2003). As he did with Bubby, the little girl in *The Quiet Room* and the disabled girl Julia (Heather Rose) in *Dance Me To My Song*, de Heer has provided a voice for a "figure of the naïve visionary" (Martin, 2000: 30), someone who has been isolated from the world of mainstream communication. The isolated and alienated Alexandra uses the video recorder to be heard, finally managing to speak without being silenced, and she makes full use of the opportunity to make sure Steve never forgets the lesson she teaches. But is not her "project" overly vindictive considering the nature of the crimes it aims to punish? Surely Steve is guilty of little more than taking her for granted? Herein lies de Heer's guileful subtext: if male viewers consider the punishment meted out to exceed the misdeed, it's perhaps because they could well be in exactly the same position as Steve. For Alexandra, her husband's greatest sin in silencing and demeaning her is thinking he's done no wrong. He blithely sees no harm in denying her ability to even pay bills. He buys her a vibrator for her birthday and fails to see the insult. She is an object for his sexual gratification and she complains: "You didn't marry me [...] you married my body." Mindless of her sensitivities, Steve exercises naked in front of her. Of sex she complains: "you stick that thing of yours in and move it around a bit." In interview, de Heer says:

By being as destructive as she is, by burning those bridges so completely, it is the only way she will ever have to get out from under the problem that she has. Because if she just said 'Look Steve, this is not working, I want to move out' and they argued about custody and access he will continue to dominate. He'll still call the shots and she won't be able to find herself. (Hopgood, 2003: 34)

Considering how the film has polarized critics with regard to which character they sympathise with, de Heer said, "I like them both, and I feel sorry for them both" (Debelle 2003), and he took care not to overly push one party's agenda over the other. In his grim examination of the marital condition, de Heer has explored Steve and Alexandra's extreme dysfunction with uncompromising candor yet it remains all too easy for the audience to take sides. Like a contemporary Medea, her actions in taking away his children for ever -- more effectively than in any family court decision -- are severe and unusual and Alexandra's retribution for crimes only glimpsed fails to garner the male viewer's understanding as much as, for example, the female victim does in Meir Zarchi's *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978). But while Steve has not raped her, he has just as effectively belittled her with his condescension and some female viewers may feel Alexandra's actions are justified. His penis remains attached, they dolefully note. But they fail to acknowledge the severity of his sentence: the finality of the endlessly repeating, endlessly mocking looped video recording of his children: "Cheers, Dad," slams home the full reality of Alexandra's hate. Steve will never see or hear his children again.

And herein lies the first monstrosity of Alexandra. Whatever the crime Steve has committed against her, there is no question of his parenting skills. He is an exemplary father and to remove the children is not just punishing him but the kids as well. When Sam bumps his head, the father is there to comfort him and Alexandra, although eager to also comfort, is told she is not needed. Emma has already adopted a conspiratorial stance apart from the mother regarding her father's secret smoking. Her kids are growing up and as Creed says, "In the child's attempt to break away, the mother becomes an object" (Creed in Jancovich 1992: 72). Only the most heartless of mothers would wreak such emotional damage upon her own children. Unfortunately, de Heer shows us nothing of the torment the children must endure, preferring to let the viewer wallow in the castration anxiety such an act produces for the



loving father. For, surely this is more likely a blow than involuntary penis-ectomy? Regrettably, neither Creed nor Kristeva reflect at length upon this form of symbolic castration anxiety: perhaps the notion of a man whose masculinity is tied up with his paternity deviates too far from the feminist project. Creed does explain the clinging mother, the monstrous feminine who refuses to let her children go:

The ideological project of horror films such as *Psycho*, *Carrie*, *The Brood*, and *The Hunger*, all of which feature the monster as female, appears to be precisely this -- constructing monstrosity's source as the failure of paternal order to ensure the break, the separation of mother and child. This failure, which can also be viewed as a *refusal* of the mother and child to recognize the paternal order, is what produces the monstrous. (Creed 1993: 38)

The second aspect of the monstrous personified by Alexandra is her refusal to acknowledge the paternal order: she works as a prostitute while her husband goes to work blithely unaware of her secret occupation. In the videotape she announces that she has financed her split from Steve by selling her body on the side, although the sex act in which she engages with the neighbour in front of the camera is free: "for services rendered" in assisting with the transformation of the suburban home into a deadlocked and security shuttered prison. In the film's ending, a client arrives at the front door asking for "Mistress Alexandra:" she presumably practiced her castrating fantasies as a professional dominatrix. While *Alexandra's Project* does not represent the abject as boldly as *Bad Boy Bubby*, Alexandra is undoubtedly abject due to her refusal of the symbolic or paternal order's moral and societal boundaries. Creed does not address the monstrosity of the child-stealing mother or the mother as whore but notes that "Fear of castration can be understood in two different ways. Castration can refer to symbolic castration (loss of the mother's body, breast, *loss of identity*) which is experienced by both female and male, or it can refer to genital castration" (1993: 197; emphasis mine). Alexandra is a symbolically castrating monster: Steve's sense of identity as "SuperDad" is taken from him. Alexandra, the *femme castratrice*, has emasculated her husband in the cruellest way she can. Unfortunately, Creed devotes little time to explaining the general appeal to an audience of watching such cinematic horror as de Heer's monstrous feminines -- her interest is typically in the spectator who colludes with the on-screen male oppressor of female victims -- but one can imagine she might refer to a repressed sexual desire for the mother conflicting with the fear of the castrating mother resulting in the ambivalent pleasure of the voyeuristic (male) spectator. Explaining the role of the male spectator in terms of identification is problematic when Flo is having sex with Bubby, but the male spectator may be understood as identifying with Bubby when he murders her, punishing her for her unrestrained sexuality. In *Alexandra's Project* such punishment is absent. Neither of these films offer easy explanations as to the pleasure to be had in viewing the horror depicted in them.

### **An Alternative to Psychoanalytic Explanations of the Maternal Monster**

Although there is little else available in the literature to explain the monstrous mothers of Flo and Alexandra, one must, however, remain cognizant of the fact that the psychoanalytic approach has almost nothing in common with modern, scientific psychology. Instead, psychoanalytic film theory is an imaginative attempt to rationalize human thought processes and behavior that cannot be objectively replicated, nor used to predict any testable insights, nor proven false, or for that matter, true. Psychoanalytic film theory does not adhere to scientific method and as Creed suggests, her hypotheses are more easily accepted "If we

stretch our imaginations" (1993: 111). This is not to say a psychoanalytic study of film is worthless, but as Clive Leatherdale concedes, having conducted such a study of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) a work of fiction that has produced much psychoanalytic theorizing: "psychoanalysis has been to some extent dismissed as a literary fad whose time has come and gone" (2001: 190). Although it offers up fascinating explanations, psychoanalytic theory may itself be as myth-based as vampirology and it remains a worldview that appears inevitably esoteric to the Cartesian public.

Built upon the convincing successes of science since the 17<sup>th</sup> century up to and including the present time, naturalism is the conviction that scientific inquiry can be applied to any aspect of humanity, including the mind and human culture and it suggests a foil to the anti-empiricism that has ruled the schools of literary theory for most of this writer's academic life. Notions of the *tabula rasa*, the Standard Social Sciences Model, environmental determinism or what some call Social Constructivism -- label them what you will -- while forming one part of the nature/nurture discourse, are not the only explanation. Biology is an indisputable factor in human behaviour. Indeed, a biological approach one might call "evolutionary film theory" satisfactorily explains the repulsion felt by audiences at the bad mothering of Flo and Alexandra, and does so far more succinctly than psychoanalytic film theory. And without interpreting every object of length as phallic, every enclosed space as a womb, every winding road as an umbilical cord and every doorway as vaginal. The abject is horrifying not because it is shameful or feminine, nor because it represents a blurring of the boundaries between that which is human and that which is not, nor because it serves as a modern defilement rite, but simply because it is potentially unhealthy: bodily fluids are a toxic source of infection (see Rozin and Fallon, 1987) and evolution has selected for humans who are instinctively repulsed by such bio-hazardous material. Similarly, incest is repulsive because it begets deformed offspring. The Westermarck Hypothesis holds that an information processing mechanism has evolved that makes incest seem disgusting because inbreeding frequently results in genetic birth defects (see Lieberman, Tooby and Cosmides, 2000). The closer the relation between parents, the greater the risk of deformed progeny due to the pairing of recessive genes. Also the closer the similarity in genotype between parent and child the greater the likelihood of pathogens finding an identical micro-environment on or in the offspring and achieving cross-infection. Therefore natural selection has evolved a species-wide repulsion of incest, such as that which Flo so horrifically performs with Bubby. Such a mechanism is likely to involve an instinctive mechanism of facial recognition and the Major Histocompatibility Complex derived ancillary odours for kinship identification (see Penn and Potts, 1999). Progeny also have less chance of survival without the father present (see Hill and Hurtado, 1996; Geary, 1998), so evolutionary forces conspire against the voluntarily single parent family, such as that which Alexandra so horrifically inflicts upon her children.

The horror that Flo and Alexandra have in common is, of course, their unrestrained sexuality. This aspect of the monstrous-feminine is not uncommon in the horror genre, as pointed out by Creed. But rather than serving to mollify male spectatorship's fear of the libidinous woman by punishing them, the film that highlights rampant female sexuality as horrific can be explained succinctly by recognition of the evolutionary disadvantages to such aberrant behaviours. The monogamy of mothers is an advantageous behavioural attribute because of the extended childhood dependency on parenting our species, with our huge neo-cortex, demands. If new males are taken into the family before sexual maturity is reached by the children, their survival will be severely compromised by the new dominant male, anxious to perpetuate his own genes. Emma and Sam are running a greater risk without their father to protect them from the competitive males Alexandra shares her bed with and Flo runs the risk

of bearing deformed children by engaging in incest. In both cases, the mother's unrestrained libido is not conducive to the survival of hers and the father's genes: such behaviour is selected against by evolution.

Flo and Alexandra are monsters previously undepicted on film and de Heer has created two new nightmares to plague the restless sleep of contemporary suburban males. Of course, maternal monsters are not representative of the horror film: great diversity exists in the genre. Indeed, many would argue against inclusion of these two monstrous mothers in the same category as, for example, the supernatural vampire of *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), the bloody slasher of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) or the extra-terrestrial of *Alien* (James Cameron, 1979). Nevertheless, an evolutionary film theory approach can help explain the general appeal of much of the horror genre. Rather than generating spectatorial male pleasure by repressing the feminine on screen, an explanation that has never satisfactorily accounted for female spectatorship, horror serves to satisfy the meaning-seeking creature that evolution has selected humans to become. The viewer of horror undergoes a journey of discovery regarding the existence of the monster. Jonathan L. Crane explains "Horror is then an interrogative genre that demands of its subjects, on screen and off, a reply. Is this some kind of joke?" (Crane 2004: 142). Noel Carroll clarifies this as follows: "So as a first approximation of resolving the paradox of horror, we may conjecture that we are attracted to the majority of horror fictions because of the way that the plots of discovery and the drama of proof pique our curiosity, and abet our interest, ideally satisfying them in a way that is pleasurable" (Carroll in Jancovich 1992: 37). Eventually the viewer is convinced of the existence of the monster and the quest for meaning becomes one for methods to destroy the monster. The cognitive process of discovering and proving the impossible -- the film's monster -- and then addressing the narrative question of whether that impossible monster can be conquered, provides the pleasure of viewing horror. Such a learning experience is something we can easily imagine evolution selecting for, especially in an animal such as man that has excelled through its problem-solving and meaning-seeking skills. Carroll continues:

In this interpretation of horror narratives, the majority of which would appear to exploit the cognitive attractions of the drama of disclosure, experiencing the emotion of art-horror is not our absolutely primary aim in consuming horror fictions, even though it is a determining feature for identifying membership in the genre. Rather, art-horror is the price we are willing to pay for the revelation of that which is impossible and unknown, of that which violates our conceptual schema. (1992: 37)

The monster represents a new, (un)natural selection: a violation of our conceptual schema which must be defied if the pressures of evolution are not to extinguish our own particular genotype. Carroll's second resolve to the paradox of horror states:

the monster -- as a categorical violation -- fascinates for the self-same reason it disgusts and, since we know the monster is but a fictional confection, our curiosity is affordable[...] Moreover, this fascination can be savoured, because the distress in question is not behaviourally pressing. (1992: 40)

More generally, we can assume that our survival in future environments may proceed in part through our exposure to -- and inherent practice within -- alternative narratives that are regularly created for our consumption, whether around the camp-fires of stone-age man or produced by Hollywood for the screens of the suburban megaplex. Like the threat rehearsal

mechanism of dreams (see Revonsuo, 2000), we have evolved an ability to rehearse in our imagination survival strategies for various scenarios, and movies provide detailed and unexpected scenarios. Our genetically determined meaning-seeking behaviour is allied to a quest for solutions to problems and our alternative fictitious narratives, be they ghost story, adventure thriller set on a distant planet, or a domestic murder mystery, better equip us to survive any similar environments we may encounter in real life. "What did the hero do in that horror, sci-fi or thriller movie?," we may one day ask ourselves, and the satisfaction in learning that behaviour at the cinema, especially if the movie had a happy ending, is considerable.

Horror as a genre has stimulated many literary theorists to rationalise its meanings and affects in terms of psychoanalysis, and such explanations frequently involve complicated readings of the film as texts in which women are repressed, either as victims -- typically -- or as monsters -- less typically. While this writer does not flinch from the spectre of mainstream cinema as an ideological tool of the white, heterosexual male-oriented hegemony, the denial of a biological basis for the function and appeal of the horror film, as many social constructivists insist upon, seems short-sighted. Flo's incest and Alexandra's denial of the biological father are evolutionarily dangerous. Viewing horror is generally advantageous to *Homo sapiens* due to the evolutionary benefits of threat rehearsal. When psychoanalytic film theorists base their analyses on such far-fetched interpretations as a winding road equating to an umbilical cord and other psychoanalytic film theorists express their allegiance to their Grand Theory by promulgating the baroque conceptual edifice and the obfuscating vocabulary in which it is framed, one is tempted to throw all such literary theory out. With the 1988 publication of *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Film Studies*, a monograph which relentlessly critiqued and ultimately dismissed the ruling paradigm of film theory, that being a mish-mash of Neo-Freudian Lacanism and neo-Marxist Althusserism, Noël Carroll's conclusion was uncompromising. Grand Theory, he wrote, had "impeded research and reduced film analysis to the repetition of fashionable slogans and unexamined assumptions" (Carroll, 1988: 234), and should be unapologetically discarded. However, given the widespread support for psychoanalytic theory one cannot safely claim that it explains nothing, and Carroll himself believed psychoanalytic film theory had much to offer with regard to the horror genre, "if only because various psychoanalytic myths, images and self-understandings have been continually and increasingly appropriated by the genre throughout the twentieth century" (Carroll, 2000: 168). Instead of a refusal of all things psychoanalytic, I would suggest that rather than relegating such work as an irrelevant and misguided historical non sequitur, both evolutionary film theorists and psychoanalytic film theorists should realize that the nature/nurture dichotomy is not characterised by a massive ontological chasm: a less imaginative form of social constructivism may well be compatible with the emergent biological explanations of human behaviour, resulting in a unified understanding of such strange manifestations of the creative human mind as the monstrous feminine mother in the horror film.

## Notes

[1] Venice awarded *Bad Boy Bubby* the 1993 Grand Special Jury Prize while it also won the Italian Cinemagoers Award (CIAK) for Best Film and Best Actor, the OCIC (Ecumenical Award) Bronze Plaque and it shared the FIPRESCI (International Critics) Award with Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*. The next year it won the Seattle Film Festival's award for Best Achievement in Direction and Runner up Best Film; the Australian Film Institute Awards for Best Original Screenplay, Best Achievement in Direction, Best Performance by an Actor in a

Leading Role and Best Achievement in Editing; and the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Best Screenplay. With 32 different cinematographers, it is perhaps not surprising that there were no awards for photography, despite the movie's seamless look.

[2] *Alexandra's Project* won the Golden Zenith award for Best Film from Oceania at the Montreal World Film Festival, 2003, the Best Screenplay in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards of 2003, and the Best Actress award (Helen Buday) at the 48th Valladolid International Film Festival in 2003.

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