

CONFIGURATIONS OF BODY HORROR IN AMERICAN MARY (2012)

Configurações do Horror Corporal em American Mary (2012)

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ABSTRACT: *American Mary* (2012) is a film directed by the Canadian sisters Jen and Sylvia Soska. It is centered upon the body as a locus where horror dwells. On the one hand, Mary's body itself constitutes a repository for myth: she is a metaphorical vampire and she can also be said to give life to the legend of Bloody Mary. On the other hand, the bodies that Mary radically modifies in the sequence of her surgeries operate within the cinematic narrative as real monstrous creations, in the sense that they inform a kind of corporeality that is deviant with reference to the acceptable social patterns. In this way, Mary can be said to incorporate a female version of Mary Shelley's character, Victor Frankenstein. Therefore, the body is explored in an urban and violent environment, within a hybrid context where several horror subgenres co-exist: slasher, torture porn, surgical, and rape-revenge. All these aspects require a reflection regarding the female protagonist and potentiate a redefinition of the concept of the final girl.

KEYWORDS: Body; Horror; Blood; Monstrosity.

RESUMO: *American Mary* (2012) é um filme realizado pelas irmãs Canadianas Jen e Sylvia Soska, centrado na problemática do corpo enquanto foco de horror. Por um lado, o corpo de Mary constitui ele próprio um repositório mitológico: ela é uma emanção da figura do vampiro, e o seu corpo também dá vida à lenda de *Bloody Mary*. Por outro lado, as criações da jovem, os corpos modificados, funcionam na narrativa cinematográfica como criações monstruosas, aludindo à obra de Mary Shelley, e transformando-a numa versão feminina de Victor Frankenstein. Assim, o corpo é explorado num ambiente urbano e violento, num contexto que reúne convenções de vários subgéneros no âmbito do horror, tais como, o *slasher*, o *torture porn*, o *rape-revenge* e horror cirúrgico, aspetos estes que reclamam uma reflexão sobre a protagonista feminina, e que exigem uma redefinição do conceito de *final girl*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Corpo; Horror; Sangue; Monstruosidade.

Horror, body horror and the wound culture

American Mary (2012) is a horror film that sprang up from the creative minds of the Canadian film directors Jen and Sylvia Soska. Having a female surgeon as its protagonist, Mary Mason, the film can be said to have the body as its main focus. It can also be said to work as the repository of fear, anxiety and horror.

The film tells the story of Mary (Katherine Isabelle), a promising student that attends medical school with the purpose of becoming a doctor, specialized in surgery. She is depicted as a very committed student; she is often shown home alone, practicing her surgical skills upon the body of a turkey.

However, due to financial problems, the young woman is forced to look for a part-time job so that she can pay her college fees and other domestic bills. While searching the Web for this kind of job, she comes across a strip club where girls are well paid without the need of any sexual involvement. Mary decides to go there to attend an interview. While at the club, she is introduced to Billy (Antonio Cupo) who is really impressed by her résumé. He then informs her that he would like her to perform another task for him that evening. Mary is told that she has to take care of a badly injured man, who had been previously subjected to physical torture. As an almost-surgeon, she takes up the gruesome challenge and accomplishes it with success.

One day, she receives an invitation from Dr. Walsh (Clay St. Thomas), one of her university Professors to attend a party. She promptly accepts the invitation, in the hope of hanging out with some colleagues and at the same time looking forward to be fully accepted among her peers. Unfortunately, Mary is drugged and raped at that same party by one of her Professors, Dr. Grant (David Lovgren), one of the supposedly respectable persons in whom she trusted and who she saw as a reference. This tragic event throws Mary to the underground world of surgery and marks the start of her career in the field of body modification. She will then weave a powerful revenge against her rapist that involves a painful process of torture whereby Dr. Grant will become an experimental dummy at the hands of Mary, an objectified body in which she tries out and practices her medical skills.

As this brief summary shows, *American Mary* discloses a kind of horror strongly centred upon the body: Mary's body and her clients' body. The film thus offers the viewer a descent into Mary's personal hell, in a register fret with blood and gore, where bodies undergo extreme procedures.

In this respect, Fred Botting stresses that the main objective of the horror film is to shock the audience by engaging in the display of acts and scenes of extreme violence. The author observes:

Horror films deal primarily in the production of extreme affects, effects evoked by taboos, shocks, suspense, and violence, by the promise of delivery of blood and gore, by repulsive eviscerations, decapitations, and destructions of bodies on screen (...) to assault the eyes and sensibilities of spectators... (BOTTING, 2010, p. 180)

In practical terms, the horror film's purpose is to awaken the spectator's fear and anxiety, to impel him/her to feel the horror experience in physical terms. Indeed, the horror genre encompasses a twofold interest, not only does it wish to violate and transgress the borders of the physical body of the characters, but it also intends to provoke physical reactions upon the viewer, those pleasurable sensations that mix fear and pain. Somehow the characters' corporeality and feelings are ultimately mirrored by the viewers, who seem to experience these strong sensations as if they were second-handed emotions. The horror subgenre called body horror feeds on this closeness. It indulges in bodily displays that evoke fragmentation, decomposition, putrefaction and abjection. All these features point towards a global picture which is anchored on the wish for the deconstruction of the human body. Through body horror, anxieties, fears and mysteries are unveiled and this disclosure talks back to the viewers by spreading a visual abject and violent language that thereby aims at contaminating their bodies.

Because *American Mary* dwells upon the human body, it can be inscribed in the subgenre of the body horror. Kelly Hurley defines body horror as "a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative and cinematic conventions of the science fiction, horror, and suspense film, in order to stage a spectacle of the human body de-familiarized, rendered other" (HURLEY, 1995, p. 203).

Apart from examining bodily representations, *American Mary* aims at discussing the configurations of monstrosity, announcing that horror and evil may lurk inside conventional and normal bodies. Thus, monstrosity in this specific film is not necessarily synonym for disfigurement. In this light, Judith Halberstam argues, "Postmodern horror lies just beneath the surface, it lurks in dark alleys, it hides behind a rational science, it buries itself in respectable bodies..." (HALBERSTAM, 1995, p. 163). In the case of this particular film, this premise holds true because the female protagonist, Mary Mason, is a medical science student, a normal girl who aims at building a career as a surgeon but, due to an ominous occurrence, is forced to thread a different path. This traumatic event

that changes Mary's life will also change her future behaviour. Inside her respectable body, the seed of revenge starts taking form and compels her to engage in violent actions, hence turning her into a monster. The same logic can be applied to Mary's rapist, Dr. Grant, who is socially seen as a respectable Professor and surgeon, but, in reality, impersonates a mischievous man with a deviant personality.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo, in her academic research, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997) underlines that, in postmodern horror there is a thin line that divides the monstrous from the normal, as these boundaries are almost blurred:

The boundaries of any genre are slippery, but those of postmodern horror film are particularly treacherous to negotiate since one of the defining features of postmodernism is the aggressive blurring of boundaries. (PINEDO, p. 10)

American Mary offers the viewer a horror cocktail that mixes surgical horror, and rape-revenge allied to body horror. Surgical horror because some of the graphic scenes are played out upon the gurney as Dr. Mason is an aspiring surgeon; rape-revenge because she truly only becomes violent once she is raped at the surgeons' party, and finally, body horror because it is centered not only upon Mary's body, whose representation raises questions regarding female identity on screen, but also upon Mary's clients' bodies, those urban bodies that seek difference amidst a globalised and standardized world.

All this setting can be said to invoke the ideology that Mark Seltzer coined as 'wound culture,' in his paradigmatic work entitled *Serial killers: death and life in America's wound culture*. The author defines this concept as "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound" (SELTZER, 1998, p. 3). In reality, there seems to be a fascination with the body interior and its fluids that haunts the so-called postmodern horror film. Particularly body horror, and within its context surgical horror explore this thin frontier that separates the interior of the body from its surroundings, and it does so by resorting to a strategy grounded upon extreme visual aesthetics. In this fashion, the horror of postmodern cinematic narratives clings to the promise of violating bodily secrets and taboos, anchoring itself upon images of pain and extreme violence that hide underneath a subversive message. Therefore, it can be said to travel deeper than the surface shows, hence carrying more meaning than the flesh and gore they left exposed. In this respect, Linda Badley, in *Film, horror and the body fantastic*, unremittingly unites flesh and

subversive potential within the horror film, claiming that horror speaks the most physiological languages when compared to other genres. The author contends, "Horror language is somatic, communicating in a preliterate, subconscious level" (BADLEY, 1995 p. 10).

Mary Mason: between the girl next door and the monster

In *American Mary*, the fantastic itself becomes metaphorized through the body, therefore acquiring a cultural, social and symbolic significance. The character of Mary is complex when examined through these lenses, firstly because her name discloses her potential dubious nature, lodging a codified reference. On the one hand, the name Mary hints at purity and innocence. It alludes to the sacred side of the feminine, which holds the Virgin Mary as its icon. On the other hand, the surname Mason has a double connotation. Charles Mason was one of the most famous serial killers of America; he was the leader of a hippie group, called 'the family' that was held responsible for a carnage in California in the late 1960s. Mason is also liable to bear a reference to the pop artist Marilyn Mason, whose songs are highly visceral and critical regarding the American way of life, and whose looks rely on a queer aesthetics, in which prostheses and special effects combine themselves to produce an ever-changing exquisite human body. Following this, it can be said that the name Mary stands for innocence and naiveté, whereas Mason inaugurates a stage characterized by violence.

Another important reference in the film, which is deeply rooted both in the fantastic and in folklore, is the urban legend of "Bloody Mary". Identified in some contexts as a witch, in others as a disturbed ghost, Mary is a woman who can be summoned by looking into the mirror and calling "Bloody Mary" three times. This female figure is believed to be a hostile presence, due to the fact that she might harm the people responsible for invoking her to cross the mirror.

In fact, the urban legend of "Bloody Mary" assumes a significant role in the construction of Mary's identity. Before the rape, Mary^[1] is portrayed as an ordinary student trying to succeed at being a competent surgeon; however, after the rape, she becomes a doctor who indulges in illegal market of surgery, thus becoming known as "Bloody Mary". This nickname is given to the young female when she is requested to perform an unusual surgery that consists of arm swapping between two sisters who wish to be closer to each other. Apart from being the creators of Mary's nickname and

having helped spread her fame through the World Wide Web underworld, these twins are the Soska sisters themselves, the film directors.^[2]

As the mythical “Bloody Mary,” Mary Mason can also be considered a sort of witch: by means of surgery she reshapes people; she lends them a new identity via a modified body. She has been blessed with a gift: her magical hands are really good at nipping and tucking human flesh.

Psychoanalytically, the legend of “Bloody Mary” is said to signal a transition from girlhood to womanhood by virtue of menstruation. The adolescent feminine bodily cleanliness is suddenly disrupted by the surge of blood, an aspect that is intrinsically connected with sexuality.

The crossing of the mirror can figuratively point towards the inception of a new stage in life. The girl breaks the mirror of her childhood to emerge on the other side, in the body of a woman, biologically capable of reproduction. As Alan Dundes remarks in the article “Bloody Mary in the mirror: a ritual reflection of pre-pubescent anxiety”, “The Bloody Mary ritual may not be a scientific accurate picture of menstruation, but it does represent an anticipatory image of a forthcoming major event in the individual female’s life cycle” (DUNDES, 1998, p. 132).

In this script written by the Soska sisters, the “Bloody Mary” imagery becomes attached to a violent event. Mary Mason’s rape by one of the trustworthy doctors becomes the trigger for that transition. Simultaneously, the aspiring surgeon loses her innocence, her trust in her future, her hope of becoming ‘normal.’ She feels betrayed by the promises inherent to the American Dream, by the city itself and by the patriarchs who ‘rule’ it. The medical ‘gods’ that were her precious reference lose their credibility. Thus, the ritual of rape, a violent act of sexual desecration of the female body, operates in the film’s context as the summoning of a surgeon who is willing to go to great lengths in order to provide clients with the bodies they need. Mary abandons her dreams of being a respectable surgeon to become a kind of female Doctor Frankenstein.

In the context of feminine sexuality, blood is intimately connected to menstruation, and signals a ritual of passage from girlhood to womanhood, as it activates the reproductive capacity of the female body. Similarly, in Mary’s case, her subjection to rape can likewise be considered a ritual of passage; it signals her initiation into violence. It is precisely this transgressive male act - the act of rape - that will turn Mary into a kind of respectable monster in the underground world of extreme body modification.

Indeed, there are several scenes in the film in which the viewer perceives Mary looking in the mirror. Perhaps she is searching for her real self or, at least, she is expecting to still see the remaining traces of humanity that still lie within herself. However, the most poignant scene that immediately ties this almost-surgeon to the legendary “Bloody Mary” is a scene where she follows a stripper who works at Billy’s club towards the toilet. The space is permeated by red undertones, an aspect that foregrounds a bloody atmosphere. Once inside, Mary starts putting on the apron and taking out the medical instruments from her leather case, preparing herself to hurt the girl. Nevertheless, when she pushes the scared girl onto the sink, she seems to look at her reflection in the mirror, a fact that suddenly impels her to stop. The viewer is not clearly informed if the reason why Mary stops the aggression has to do with the fact that there is a camera in the toilet or if it is because she glimpses a trait of humanity in her face reflected in the mirror. The truth is that Mary suddenly puts a term to her violent behaviour and lets the girl go. Later on, she justifies herself to this girl, telling her she was just in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Another potent mythical figure that seems to contribute to depict Mary as a bloody monster is the reference to the Countess Erzsebet Bathory (1560-1614). The Countess is said to have been implicated in the murder and torture of more than six hundred girls. She did it not only out of pleasure, but also to enhance her beauty and youth by bathing in their blood. Erzsebet was believed to have been a witchcraft practitioner. Much like Mary, she was a well-educated woman who spoke several languages and, like Mary, she had Hungarian origins. This is a very interesting detail that appears in the film when Mary speaks to her Hungarian grandmother. It is also worth observing that, once Mary is informed that her grandmother is dead, she seems to let go of her attachment to her human side and feels ready to embrace her monstrosity as if she does not have anything else to lose.

There is a remarkable scene in the film in which the owner of the strip club envisions Mary covered in blood, dancing in provocative ways. This vision clearly epitomizes the reference to the so-called “Bloody Countess” of Čachtice.

The Countess, believed to be the one of the sources of inspiration for Bram Stoker’s character, Dracula, was later judged and condemned to be walled up in her castle. The Soska sisters also seem to have appropriated this event, because as the film progresses, the viewer can feel Mary’s gradual estrangement and confinement to her dungeons of torture, where she engages herself in the most extreme body modification

acts. By virtue of her illegal profession, the young woman must remain as discrete as possible and her house is simultaneously rendered a place of solace and a workplace. Mary's flat in the city operates as a vivid allegory for the dungeon or the medieval castle implanted in the urban tissue. This metaphor is vividly evoked when Mary moves to another flat, in uptown Seattle, which has bars on the windows. The feeling of imprisonment and claustrophobia emerges when the camera focuses on Mary's bird that is confined inside its cage. The locked bird reminds the viewer of the young female tragic situation.

After being preyed upon by her male future peers, after being "vampirised," Mary will become herself a kind of vampire. In horror, it is common the principle that monsters produce other monsters and Mary will indulge in the physical pleasure of retribution. In her case, violence seems to operate as a surrogate for sexual intercourse and, in this vein, the progressive dismemberment of Professor Grant is liable to evoke the fragmentary image of women conveyed by pornography. The Professor is literally and symbolically reduced to meat, to an object at Mary Mason's disposal. The roles of the male and the female are here reversed. Whereas during the rape scene, Mary was the victim, now she plays the role of an active agent of revenge.

Aspasia Stephanou, in *Reading the vampire gothic through blood*, characterizes the urban milieu as a predatory place and establishes a connection between the city and the vampire metaphor:

Indeed, the ubiquity of the metaphor of vampirism in contemporary fictions and relations suggests a world in which predation has become a compulsion. The antagonistic, competitive, and predatory relationships that neoliberal capitalism encourages, paralyse contemporary subjects who are either compelled to become predators themselves or surrender to the appetites of other predators. (...) In this respect, contemporary manifestations of vampirism may be considered as expressions of a vampiric neo individualism in the light of neoliberalism. (STEPHANOU, 2014, p. 139)

It is precisely in this transposition of the metaphor of the body fantastic onto the physical body of Mary that resides her double essence. She has a human female body; however, the textuality inherent in horror inscribes her body with the signature of the fantastic, a feature that contributes to enhance her feminine monstrosity.

The rape scene is mainly focused on Mary's face, particularly upon her eyes, where the viewer can see the girl's panic mixed with horror and disbelief. Due to fact that she had been previously drugged (to incapacitate her movements), Mary wakes up all sore and tipsy, crying. When she leaves the flat where the party took place and takes

the lift, the city, coded in the film, as male, acquires gray and threatening undertones. She no longer scrutinizes her face in the mirror. This suggests that Mary's identity and confidence have been fatally injured. The scene shows an empty woman glancing at a full, compact, concrete city that somehow seems to exert its pressure upon her, mimicking Dr. Grant's weight over her vulnerable body. Mary is suddenly afflicted by a feeling of disenfranchisement; she feels detached and threatened by the verticality of a city that henceforth will be metaphorically read as phallic.

Gyan Prakash contends that the late portrayals of the city conveyed by cinematic narratives configure the city as a dystopia, a sort of Hobbesian jungle, a dysfunctional, competitive and hostile place that yields to the survival of the fittest. The author notes:

Since the turn of the twentieth century, dystopic images have figured prominently in literary, cinematic, and sociological representations of the modern city. In these portrayals, the city often appears as dark, insurgent..., dysfunctional, (...) engulfed in ecological and social crisis, seduced by capitalism consumption, paralyzed by crimes, wars, class, gender, and racial conflicts, and subjected to excessive technological and technocratic control. (PRAKASH, 2010, p. 1)

Michelle Smith shares this gloomy vision of the city that pervades the geography of the horror film, and characterizes it a place where evil lurks. The author claims:

The city breeds evil. It is a symbol of decline and decay. It is the most inhumane place for humanity. The rule of the city is that everyone owes everyone inattention, whether they want it or not. (...) The city is the ultimate horror setting (...) It is horrific to what it does to us, and what we do to each other. (...) The city is the setting for more psychological stories than supernatural texts. (SMITH, p. 75-76)

After the ordeal, when Mary arrives home, the viewer understands that something has changed. Mary's dreams of becoming a respectable surgeon and work at a hospital have been shattered. This fact is highlighted by the terrifying sounds, typical of the horror film, that accompany her entrance in the house and that will contribute to intensify gloomy atmosphere. Stricken by rage, Mary removes all the books from the table and pushes them away. Academic knowledge contained in books and the city full of promises are both equated in a metaphorical dimension with masculine power and logos, hence it is because of this connotation that Mary rejects them. Therefore, instead of being successful among her peers in the urban landscape, she will henceforth parade her talent underground, rejecting the company of the patriarchs in detriment of the company of the 'freaks.'

One night, when she arrives at the club, she sees Dr. Grant, her rapist, stuck to a gurney, and she ironically informs him that she has quit medical school. In a twist of fate, Dr. Grant becomes Mary's experiment, her new project, the vulnerable and naked turkey where she will train her skills as a surgeon.

Mary's workshop of filthy creation

As Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Mary also keeps her laboratory, where she indulges in her surgical unauthorized activity. Increasingly, Mary gets involved in more complicated procedures. She becomes the female goddess that rules the industry of body modification. In one of the film scenes, we see Mary talking to a boy and showing him her "Mod menu". When the boy argues that he is actually thinking about doing some piercings, Mary looks at him astounded and angrily dismisses the boy by telling him that her specialty does not contemplate those minor practices. In reality, this filmic passage shows Mary has finally embraced those procedures that initially gave her the creeps; she is now fully engaged with a type of body modification that can be deemed radical. She starts to enjoy the myriad of creative possibilities inherent in surgical procedures such as amputation. This change throws Mary Mason closer to the figure of a monster. She is now coined as "Bloody Mary," acclaimed to be able to turn every client's whim into reality.

The fact that she now has bodies under her control endows her with a certain kind of power and, given the circumstances, it appears that Mary's extreme surgeries operate as a surrogate means for her sexuality. Hence, her creative fleshy oeuvres can be considered her "hideous progeny", paralleling her position as a female Victor Frankenstein.

Surgical horror in *American Mary* highly engages in maneuvering human skin with the aim of producing an aesthetic that tends towards the obscene, as the bodies 'upgraded' by Mary defy normalcy. In a metaphorical dimension, they can be seen as 'monsters' because their aesthetic verges on what is considered by mainstream society body disfigurement.

In a postmodern society the human being tries to define itself and it carves its own identity in unusual and unexpected ways. Thus, this auto-definition progresses towards increasingly fragmentary configurations, as the meat that holds to its body can be truncated, assembled, reconfigured. Identity, in the urban postmodern landscape, is

constituted by these corporeal manifestations. The body gradually becomes an open text where the individual inscribes its identity. More than ever, the body wishes to become a mirror for the soul. Mike Featherstone, in *Body modification* (2000) classifies the procedures of radical body modification as a type of counterculture:

One of the most objectionable aspects of body modification, for the wider public, is not just the project of a different aesthetic which goes counter to the notion of natural and consumer culture bodies, but in the pain and violation of the body associated with cutting. (FEATHERSTONE, 2000, p. 7)

Following this reasoning, Thomas C. Morgen contends that the concept of monstrosity can be legitimately applied in the context of body modification, since the human being, in an extreme effort to change its original body, ends up by swerving away from the socially acceptable norms. Indeed, in certain cases, the sole purpose of the bodily modification is to somehow contrive human nature in an attempt to challenge its limits. The author remarks:

The concept of 'monstrosity' is particularly salient when considering body practices that, because of their overt unconventionality, lie far outside what mainstream society deems acceptable for male and female bodies as far as gender, sexuality, and appearance norms. (MORGEN, 2016, p. 2)

The case of the German twins who seek Mary's services to perform arm swapping is highly illustrative. Both sisters want to change arms and apart from that, they want to become devilish figures by the insertion of silicon horns above their eyebrows. They really want to establish their identities through a different kind of corporeality.

The film also implicitly criticises cosmetic surgery as it represents an image of the body as a Western commodity. In fact, cosmetic surgery has contributed to convey a unified model and standards of beauty, particularly when it comes to women. By promoting a standard of beauty, a surgery with cosmetic purposes is contributing to not only making women uncomfortable about their bodies, but it is also selling a unique recipe for beauty that sanctions any different options. Debra Gimlin observes that,

Cosmetic surgery stands, for many theorists and social critics, as the ultimate invasion of the human body for the sake of physical beauty. It epitomizes the astounding lengths to which contemporary women will go to obtain bodies that meet current ideals of attractiveness. (GIMLIN, 2002, p. 74)

Counteracting this contemporary tendency, Jen and Sylvia Soska show that Mary's clients do not wish to follow conventional standards of beauty. They want a divergent aesthetic, they claim for a body that makes them different and by means of which they can express themselves. Regarding these matters, Bernardette Wegenstein puts forward an important concept coined the 'cosmetic gaze', observing that it "refers to how humans experience their own and other's bodies as incomplete projects that await the intervention of technologies of enhancement, which will help them better approximate their true self or natural potential" (WEGENSTEIN, 2012, p. 109). In truth, sometimes the changes some individuals undergo are so radical that they are accused of committing a crime against themselves, which is the case of Beatress (Tristan Risk) and Ruby Realgirl (Paula Lindberg).

Beatress wants to emulate her feminine idol, Betty Boop. Therefore she has been subjected to a lot of clandestine surgical procedures in order to radically change the configuration of her face and body. When she asks Mary what she thinks of her appearance, the latter answers that her doll-like looks are uncanny. Ruby Realgirl is a designer who seeks Mary's help to transform her into a doll, literally. At first sight, Ruby looks as the kind of woman who appears to have been colonized by the body model advertised by cosmetic surgery: she has a carved waist, two large breasts and many plastic surgeries done to her face, mainly to the nose, cheekbones and lips. Unexpectedly, Ruby's request goes in the opposite direction. She wants Mary to desexualize her, by removing her nipples and by closing her vulva. Obviously, Mary is reluctant when she is asked to perform such radical a surgery, but in the end she complies with the awkward request.^[3]

As previously stated, Mary's reaction towards Ruby's desexualisation is violent, to the extent that as soon as she arrives home, she throws up. Deep inside, Mary seems unable to discern the reasons that might lead a woman to make such request. After all, Ruby had been submitted to plastic surgery before and has had her face, her breasts and waist revamped in order to obtain a voluptuous body.

Mary will only come to terms with Ruby's decision after having gone her private ordeal at the surgeons' party. Having been used as a mere sexual object will make Mary aware of the perils that stem from looking at women as if they were objects.

Gillmor claims that in the cinematic diegesis the character of Ruby operates as a kind of double for Mary, "Ruby's quest for inviolability can be viewed as her own unusual form of sexual agency, and it becomes a poignant counterpoint to Mary's darker

story of rape and revenge" (GILLMOR, 2015, p. 22). In this sense, we can consider Ruby as a kind of double for Mary on the grounds that she embodies a body that is closed and inaccessible to men, thus meaning that she cannot be sexually penetrated or raped.

Jon Towlson, in his research entitled *Subversive horror cinema: countercultural messages from Frankenstein to the present*, observes that, "The objectification of women within a patriarchal society is all-pervasive, such that it proves impossible for Beatress and Ruby to define their sexual identity away from the male gaze" (TOWLSON, 2014, p. 132). This observation implies that no matter how women decide to transform or define themselves, they are always acting or reacting having the panoptical male gaze as reference.

If one considers the monstrous figures Mary is invited to create as freaks, then it can be also concluded that Mary herself feels really close to this difference, to this freakiness. Although her outward appearance does not reveal it, after the rape, Mary becomes a wounded body. In a symbolic manner, Mary's body can be read as being disabled. This feeling of being inadequate associates Mary with the figure of the freak. More precisely, she can be considered Mary, the mother of freaks. The Soska sisters convey the message that the external appearance is elusive and deceptive. The tragic night at the party pushes Mary unrelentlessly to the underground, putting an end to her dream of becoming an acknowledged surgeon among her peers.

What contributes to enhance Mary's construction as a monster is also the fact that she ends up murdering a man, and almost kills a woman. Sadistically, Mary also keeps Professor Grant as a sort of "pet" by holding him in a secret facility where he is subjected to painful torture. "I'm changing specialties Dr. Grant. Have you have heard of body modification?" - This statement sentences Mary's Professor to a cruel session of body torture which includes tongue splitting, skin implants, genital modification and amputation.

One of the nights, Mary is followed by a police officer who comes across the horrors that lurk within Mary's dungeon. The aspirant surgeon is then forced to kill the police officer in order to keep her secret safe. However, the way Mary kills this man is tainted with sadism, as she bludgeons him to death and seems unable to stop. Technically speaking, Mary has just become a murderer and, apparently, she enjoyed the process. That excessive amount of violence towards this man can be explained as an escape for Mary's vengeful impulses towards male figures. Like Professor Grant, the

police officer also represents authority, a beacon of patriarchal control. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that he suffers such violent a death.

Allison Gillmor in *Feminist horror: plotting against patriarchy* argues that, “For many women, the horror genre is profoundly cathartic: It constructs imaginary spaces where they can work through true-life trauma” (GILLMOR, 2015, p. 21). Within this framework, it can be concluded that violence is enacted by Mary as an effort to overcome her trauma, therefore operating as a vehicle for catharsis.

American Mary brings into discussion the concept of the freak and the monster, by showing that monstrosity is not something exclusively physical; there are monsters, like Dr. Grant that hide their monstrosity behind a normal and respectable appearance. Given the circumstances, Mary Mason can also be deemed a monster because she almost kills two people, a fact that aligns her with the serial killer. However, her outwardly image never discloses her inner turmoil.

Mary Mason as an unconventional ‘final girl’

The Soska sisters cleverly undermine the character of the so-called “final girl”, a subject thoroughly examined by Carol J. Clover in her reference study *Men, women and chainsaws: gender in modern horror film*.

According to Clover, the “final girl” in horror films is normally the girl who succeeds in defeating and killing the monster. Hurt and exhausted, she usually survives the ordeal that has termed her friends’ lives (CLOVER, 1993, p. 35). It is legitimate to transpose this category to the context of *American Mary*, because the aspiring surgeon will try to exert revenge upon those who have harmed her and will strive for her life until her demise. As a matter of fact, in an interview, Jen Soska confirmed that they wanted Mary to stand for a fresh embodiment of the final girl, one “where the final girl and the villain are one and the same”^[4].

Given the particular circumstances, it can be said that Jen and Sylvia Soska give a new contour to the “final girl” and subvert some of Clover’s assumptions. First, the premise according to which the final girl bears masculine traits is subverted to a certain degree. Although Jen and Sylvia Soska recognize they wanted a final girl inspired by the brave Ripley, they simultaneously acknowledged that they wanted a different feminine configuration. Consequently, they chose to hyper-feminise Mary.

By constantly showing her walking around in her underwear, they invest the young woman with a double power: she is able to be a temptress and a sexual object, luring the male gaze to be fixed upon the screen. Nevertheless, at the same time she is liable to pose as a threat to their maleness, embodying the figure of the female castrator.^[5] Her skill handling surgical instruments attests to this male fear, strategically interfering with the sexual desire that her image on screen perspires. As a result, the male chain of desire is interrupted, thus becoming blurred and fragmentary throughout the process of gazing. The Soska sisters imply that the centre of attention of their film resides precisely on the body, and Mary's voluptuous body stands as a preponderant signifier for that intention. Mary is also referenced in the film as a figure that produces fear. Beatress (Tristan Risk), a girl she meets at the strip club, tells her that Bill seems to be fearful of her. He is probably amazed at the lightheartedness with which she deals with her clients' most distasteful requests, by her coolness and detached professionalism. Likewise, her male Frankenstein monster, Dr. Grant, once reduced to a subhuman piece of meat owing to the torture he has been subjected to, logically displays a horrific reaction each time he sets eyes upon the female surgeon. In this sense, Mary also operates as a destabilizing figure; each time she engages herself in a masculine endeavour, in Clover's terms, she is paradoxically feminised by the film directors.

Most of the times during her surgeries Mary appears wearing her underwear or dressed in a sexy outfit, an aspect that renders her as a highly sexualized female. This means the Soska sisters wanted their protagonist to flaunt her sexuality on screen, in a defiant way. This visual strategy defies Carol J. Clover theory according to which the final girl points towards a male in disguise, a feature that enables a more plausible identification from the perspective of the male audience. She is a woman who simultaneously has the power to seduce, but also to kill. Although the use of surgical pointy, sharp tools can contribute to phallicise her, Mary remains essentially a castrating figure. This way, Mary can be aligned with the figure of the monstrous woman rather than with a masculine representation. At one point in the film she even asks Beatress whether she is a monster, perhaps because deep inside she fears she might fit in with the monster's profile. Tomasz Sikora, in his article about Canadian gothic anxieties, argues that in some cases, the so-called "final girl" will die in the end, becoming a kind of sacrificial figure. The author comments, "Some artists choose to retrieve the monster from the dungeon, revive it and give it a voice, even if, in the end, it must be killed..." (SIKORA, p. 216).

Although the Soska sisters emphasize that Mary cannot be considered a pseudo-male, they converge towards Clover's precepts when they decide to portray Mary as a kind of virginal woman. Symbolically, her name provides some clues concerning this matter. In fact, the viewer is informed that Mary has no boyfriend because she is really busy with her medical studies. Mary is a very committed girl, intelligent and hard-working as one can see at the beginning of the film. As soon as she arrives home, she puts her efforts into cutting and sewing the body of a turkey in order to perfect her surgical techniques. Interestingly she engages in this domestic work wearing black lingerie and a white apron. While the black lingerie signals Mary's seductiveness, the white apron conversely invests her with a symbolic purity. By resorting to these double standards, the film directors wish to demonstrate that female sexuality does not imply an active involvement in sexual intercourse. Mary is capable of cultivating her sexuality in private even if she is not currently involved in sexual affairs. This image contributes to detach her from the image of the promiscuous woman, and reinforces her representation as someone independent. Mary is definitely aware of her sexuality, but she decides to keep it to herself. Throughout the film, Mary does not engage in sexual activity with any men, except in the rape scene.

Interestingly, the males all display a kind of protective attitude towards her, an aspect that shows Mary as a kind of damsel in distress taken from the pages of a Gothic novel. Billy, the owner of the strip club, invites her to a new beginning in California, telling her they can start a new life in a different place. The young detective Dolor (John Emmet Tracy), who is in charge of investigating Dr. Grant's disappearance, is constantly offering Mary help, assuming that she was one of the doctor's victims and is too ashamed to reveal it. Lance (Twan Holliday), a sort of bodyguard of Billy's, also seems to take Mary under his guard. On the day she kills the police officer, Lance takes the young woman to the strip club and offers her a milkshake and some food. Overall, all male figures represent a kind of maternal figure that is missing from the film. However, Mary refuses to be given any help.

Curiously, Mary operates Ruby dressed in white, a fact that conveys an image of purity, almost as if she was engaging upon a sacred act. Conversely, when she operates the German twin sisters, Mary is dressed in red, complying with the nickname given to her in the World Wide Web, a place where her true identity comes up disguised: "Bloody Mary". When she deals with Dr. Grant's body, she usually dresses in black underwear

signaling the upcoming torture process. Sadomasochistic sex is here parodied, because Mary's torture is quite radical and deflects any possibility of carnal pleasure.

Mary Mason's demise

The end the directors craft for Mary intimately resonates Linda Williams' prophecy concerning women's fate in horror films. The author claims that if a woman represents a threat to the masculine, if she fiercely gazes back, then she must die.

The Soska sisters, contrary to what the viewer was probably expecting, end up subscribing to the traditional Female Gothic canons as they appropriate the repetitive pattern of the bold woman being punished in the end. At first, the choice of killing Mary appears to bear no feminist connotation whatsoever; nevertheless, the message of a woman destitute of power in a patriarchal-dominated society reifies the premise that men fear powerful women. Therefore, she cannot endure in a society based on such premise. The message of the punished woman translates the patterns used by the Female Gothic writers into a powerful cinematic message. Transgressive females must pay for their braveness. The world is not prepared to embrace Mary Mason's art or emancipation. Probably these anxieties echo the Soska sisters' struggle to thrive in a cinematic industry circumvented by male power. Hopefully, their horror will be able to transpose the barrier of the patriarchal armour and bring back onto the screen more creative pieces such as *American Mary*. Linda Badley stresses the conservative position assumed by contemporary horror, reminding us that, "Horror is reactionary. Its job has long been to punish transgressions of conventional gender roles and reinforce stereotypes" (BADLEY, 1995, p. 102).

Mary had everything to make her a successful young woman. She was pursuing a solid career; later on, maybe she would meet someone, fall in love and have children. However, the fact that Mary chose a different path has taken her towards a different fate. By detouring the expected feminine role-model embedded in the contemporary capitalist and heteronormative society, she falls into a trap.

In symbolic terms, Mary's homicide at the hands of Ruby's husband strongly emphasizes the patterns of the Female Gothic rules. Mary is murdered by a man who cannot survive in a world made of desexualized women. From a masculine perspective, sexual attributes must form part of the female body for the world to have a meaning. In turn, it all boils down to a question of survival; the human species cannot thrive without

sexual intercourse, although technology and medical science have made some significant progresses in the field of artificial reproduction. In this vein, when she defiles Ruby's body, she is unconsciously committing one of the biggest atrocities against patriarchy, and this sinful transgression must be punished with death.

As previously mentioned, Mary unwisely refuses the help of the young detective who senses the girl's life is at stake. His efforts alongside Mary's non-cooperative attitude will result in his failure to save her life. Within this framework, she can be compared to the damsel in distress of the classical Gothic novel who, in this case, refuses the help of the chivalric detective. The young female doctor denies masculine protection and trusts her powers to be enough to protect her from the threats she might find by delving into this underworld of body modification surgery.

Paradoxically, even in this underworld, there is a prince charming that wishes to start a new life and invites Mary to go along with him. As expected, the young woman refuses to escape with the owner of the night club. It appears undeniable that, after having undergone the ordeal of rape, men have been crossed out from Mary's narrative.

If one reads Mary as the embodiment of a female vampire whose origins can be traced to medieval times, it is legitimate to conclude that she does not fit the contemporary urban landscape. She becomes a displaced medieval body which cannot grow roots in an urban world made of concrete that offers no reward for her way of life. The Bloody Countess was walled up inside her castle, forever condemned to eternal darkness; Mary will endure a similar destiny.^[6]

Mary's rejection of both the urban landscape and the patriarchal system surface when she rejects the concept of Lacanian extimacy with the world. Mladen Dolar, in her academic paper "I Shall Be with You on Your wedding-Night: Lacan and the Uncanny," defines the concept as follows:

All the great philosophical conceptual pairs - essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc. - can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority. Now the dimension of *extimité* blurs this line. It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. (DOLAR, 1991, p. 6)

After being stabbed by Ruby's husband, Mary goes to great lengths to suture her wound, because she is horrified that her blood and bodily fluids might mix with the floor. It is as if the world is infected and she does not want to catch that disease.

Obviously, Mary will not be able to succeed, and her dead body will eventually spread its fluids onto the ground, thus consummating an ultimate act of intimacy that Mary wished to avoid.

Even in her final moments, Mary refuses to mingle with the urban tissue. She desperately tries to keep her bodily fluids inside. Remarkably, she grabs the instruments and tries to sew her own wound, trying to avoid the blood spillage that threatens to evade her body. This is a highly metaphorical scene, as the wound in her stomach becomes metonymy for the representation of the female as wounded. Unfortunately, Mary is unable to suture the wound and she dies, in a blood bath that parallels Erzsebet Bathory, also known as “the bloody lady of Čachtice” and with the legendary figure “Bloody Mary”.

Therefore, by incorporating traditional feminine modes of representation anchored upon the traditional Female Gothic roles ascribed to women, the Soska sisters write a cinematic narrative fraught with repetition and cliché that, nonetheless, manages to bear some powers of subversion provided that the audience is able to read the message hidden between the lines. This message lies at the heart of Mary’s body. In the end, Mary becomes the textual bloody corpse where patriarchal power is violently inscribed.

Footnotes

[1] Mary is a very common name in America. By having selected such common a name, the Soska sisters wanted to show that what happened to Mary may happen to another girl. She was just a simple girl, seeking the fulfillment inherent in the American dream; just another “American Mary”.

[2] The fact that the Soska sisters/German twins make up the nickname for Mary as “Bloody Mary,” reinforces the idea that they are indeed the authors of this film, which is strongly focused upon Mary’s character.

[3] In Katherine Dunn’s novel, *Geek Love* (1989), Mary Lick resorts to medical science in order to de-sexualise women; she wants to empower the female body by eradicating all traces of femininity from it. Her name is also Mary. The Soska sisters might have been inspired by that character regarding the creation of Mary Mason.

[4] This was said in an interview by Sarah Dobbs, in which the Soska sisters admitted to have been influenced by the depiction of Ripley in the science fiction film *Alien*.

[5] Mary Mason is a mixture of the female comic book character Vampirella with the pin-up Bettie Page, since she appears on the screen wearing sexy underwear and has black straight hair with bangs.

[6] Another aspect that brings Mary closer to the vampire, in this case, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), is the fact that just like in the case of Lucy Westenra, there are three men who are willing to help her.

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