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Film Studies 380

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Reading Response 5: *Evil Dead* (1981)

Immediately out of film school the young Sam Raimi fearlessly and audaciously went out and singlehandedly created a little independent movie titled *Evil Dead*, which became one of the most popular cult movies of modern horror. Interestingly enough Raimi remarkably achieved all of this simply by using the primitive cinematic tools of low-budget movie making, along with the help and financial support from a cast of inexperienced college dropouts. After watching *The Evil Dead* again I discovered that there is still much to appreciate and admire. There was of course the excessive use of the gore and the eye popping practical effects, which was obviously inspired by Romero's earlier cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). But what I admired the most about the picture was the pure craftsmanship and innovative style of the long tracking shots and zany POV angles, which was at the time a remarkable technical achievement.

In the article "Film Bodies: Gender" by Linda Williams, she explores three specific texts of the cinema (with her seven-year old son?!) which is melodrama, pornography and violence in the movies. Williams also brackets these texts together, explaining the various reasons on why the majority of people look down on them as either bad taste or bad art. "Alone or in combination, heavy dose of sex, violence and emotion are dismissed by one fraction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite" (Williams 3). Melodrama or 'Kitsch' as some theorists label it as is usually looked upon by critics as fraudulent or overly sentimental emotions, mainly devised to cheaply manipulate its audience.

Pornography in cinema is looked at as gratuitous or unnecessary, as most of the explicit sex and nudity is presented cruelly to simply exploit the female gender; presumably because most pornographic movies are geared towards men and Mulvey's iconic 'male gaze'.

And finally there is the violence which seems to easily cross over into pornography and melodrama, offering a misogynistic perversion to voyeurism, fetishism and sadism, mostly upon defenseless female characters. Williams states that all three texts over-stimulate our sensations and emotions and we can feel manipulated by them, not just mentally but physically, mostly through bodily excesses. "Is it simply the unseemly gratuitous presence of the sexually ecstatic woman, the tortured woman, the weeping woman...and the accompanying presence of the sexual fluids, the blood and the tears that flow from her body and which are presumably mimicked by spectators...that mark the excess of each type of film" (Williams 6)?

I immediately saw elements of William's melodrama, pornography and violence interwoven together in *Evil Dead*, most obviously with the iconic 'tree rape' sequence. Is it surprising that this specific scene is the most discussed and remembered among male horror fans? The tree crashes into a woman's bedroom and the large branches snatch her dragging her outside. The branches slowly begin to rape her by spreading her legs and penetrating her repeatedly. I laughed during this scene, not because I thought it was funny but because I knew Raimi's sleazy intentions. The film for the most part was directed and created by males and so it is obvious perverted men would construct such an explicit and misogynistic scenario (which also includes gratuitous nudity of the actress) that is slightly demeaning and exploitative to women.

In the early 80's the slasher or gore films (Roger Ebert tended to call them 'Dead Teenager Movies') became a financially successful and hugely popular subgenre, especially after

the success of John Carpenter's classic *Halloween* in 1978. Many of these gore films along with the first *Evil Dead*, like *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Friday the 13th*, *Sleepaway Camp* and *My Bloody Valentine* were just a few of an endless amount of Dead Teenager Films which were released all throughout the 1980's. Many of these films exploited the plight of young woman in danger, most of the time the women are weak, helpless, alone, defenseless or pathetically cowering in a corner, right before getting brutally stabbed, raped and murdered.

The problem I have with many slasher films is that the filmmaker wants the spectator to identify with the killer and not with the victim. For some sick, disturbing reason the director seems to favor the killer and we have to suffer watching his heinous murdering acts through their eyes. I know the director isn't really murdering these women, but it sure feels like he is enjoying the fact that he can fanaticize and recreate such nauseating, grotesque scenarios. Several critics suggested that the sudden popularity for these types of movies was all because of the growth of the female movement in the 80's. Many of the women that are killed in 80's horror films are usually independent, spunky, confident and sexually liberated. These horror films could be a subconsciously primal instinct for many of these sexually-frustrated male filmmakers; and they want to punish these new aggressive women of the 80's by putting them in their place.

I love a good scary movie and I do not believe in censorship. I believe artistry can redeem any subject; it is merely how the artist approaches such controversial and taboo subject matter, either in the context of the genre or as a statement or commentary of our society. Unfortunately there will always be people (most of them sleazy film merchants) using art as a way to make easy money, cheaply exploit, simply shock or create a scandal. We shouldn't censor these kinds of movies being made but we can choose to ignore them. I choose to ignore them.