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# Woman as Place: The Utilization of the Female Body in Horror Film

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WOMAN AS PLACE: THE UTILIZATION OF THE  
FEMALE BODY IN HORROR FILM

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Madison Alisa Johnson  
May 2016

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Accepted by:  
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## Abstract

By combining the works of theorists like Yi-Fu Tuan, Luce Irigaray, and Carol Clover, with the films *Rosemary's Baby* (Dir. Roman Polanski, 1968) and *It Follows* (Dir. David Robert Mitchell, 2015), I am exploring where the philosophy of space and place collides with horror film and anxiety. Women are told to fit specific roles, to serve specific purposes. Within the scope of the horror genre, the woman under scrutiny is the “final girl,” a girl that Clover says will survive the film to tell her story. We use the body of the final girl as a receptacle for anxiety and fear – fear on the parts of directors, audience members, and fellow characters. In order to be a receptacle, the final girl must be made place; in horror genre, this place-making happens through rape and eventual motherhood (both actual and imagined). It is problematic to think of a woman as place, something that we seek to inhabit, yet we do it and find it comforting. Even more troubling, then, is the thought that media and society are involved in a reciprocal relationship. This thesis seeks to critique the both the utilization and the means by which we use the body of the final girl within the horror film, and the ways in which this utilization of a female body has transgressed the borders of media and infiltrated reality.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated primarily to my parents, Richard and Kelli Johnson, to thank them for their unconditional love and support. I would also like to thank my sisters, Lynsey and Erin Johnson, for their support and ability to make me laugh when I need it most.

## Acknowledgements

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# Woman as Place: The Utilization of the Female Body in Horror Film

“As for woman, she is place.”  
-Luce Irigaray  
*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*

## I. Introduction

When driving through suburban neighborhoods at night, you can get a glimpse of anonymous life illuminated through the windows. You can observe what looks like a locus of safety – a happy, warm family home. This is a calming image, a place where we feel protected. For this reason, slasher films often occur here. They must destroy this idyllic vision and make space for terror to run free. Towns like Woodsboro from *Scream* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1997) and Springwood from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1984) shift from images of perfect suburbia to locations of extreme terror. Within these towns there exists another place that becomes the locus of terror: the body of the “final girl” – the term for the sole survivor coined by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Horror films draw explicit links between the body, most often female, and fear. It is through the female body that our fears are not only realized, but are also, if only temporarily, quelled.

Films like Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and David Robert Mitchell’s *It Follows* (2015), though decades apart from each other, feel very similar in

the way that they configure the female body as a repository. *Rosemary's Baby* is a classic horror movie that is remembered for the connection it established between the female body and horror. Polanski puts the body of a woman at the forefront of the story, making her experiences of bodily harm and internal torture evident in every scene. The film features rape, arguably the ultimate act of consuming and controlling the female body, as a catalyst for the remaining events. In *It Follows*, we become aware of the transformation in audience culture since *Rosemary's Baby*. In the late sixties, utilizing very specific gender roles (i.e. "woman ought to be wife and mother") and having those roles play out as horror was relatable for the American audience who were witnessing changes brought on by the feminist movement. Significantly, in 2015, when we watch Jay in *It Follows*, we witness gender roles that are being enforced in an entirely different way. Jay is not expected to be a mother in the same way that Rosemary was, yet we still force her to become one. We expect Jay to take on that role despite and against all of the cultural advancements in our society's treatment of women. As Jay's body becomes the place where the curse lives, she must assume the role of the mother for her friends, her sister, and herself. Though the two films are separated by nearly fifty years, we still see horror genre compulsively enforcing the gender-normative roles. While society seems to have progressed some, I argue that the horror genre has remained stagnant. The female body has been in use for decades.

Despite the long and ongoing feminist critique of mainstream cinema, most horror films still utilize the female body as a repository for its generic needs. Rosemary, Jay, and all of the final girls between 1968 and 2015, become receptacles for our fears and

anxieties. We take the final girl and we place all of our cultural worries onto her body, making her have to work through them. Since it is her character's function to survive at all odds, we feel comfortable using her in this way. As the final girl is often portrayed as a mother figure, we feel compelled or encouraged to give her our problems and fears, in hopes that she will take care of us. Just as we use her, the characters in the film enforce the notion of place upon her. The generic conventions assure us that she can take it. This assurance makes the process all the more problematic. By necessitating the need for a female body that we can use symbolically for our own benefit, we as viewers agree to ascribe a utilitarian function to that body. This function is all too familiar – the final girl will function as an actual or imagined mother. It is through her role as mother and through the means by which she is made mother that she becomes place. This place becomes the home for the very specific anxieties and cultural tensions that the horror genre reflects on and is shaped by.

By looking at Rosemary and Jay, two filmic examples of the mother figure, we can see how the female body becomes place and is utilized as such. The character of Jay, especially, is constructed to model the utilization of the teenaged female body as a place of sadistic pleasure. The silent agreement between viewers, I argue, must have consequences outside of cinema, in the realm of contemporary culture and our social exchanges.

## II. Conceptualizing the Female Body as Place

To begin to theorize the female body as place, we must turn to Luce Irigaray's 1984 lecture, "An Ethics of Sexual Difference." In it, Irigaray describes the existing model of woman as othered object:

It is understood that she accedes to generality through her husband and her child but only at the price of her singularity. She would have to give up her sensibility, the singularity of her desire, in order to enter into the immediately universal of her family duty. Woman would be wife and mother without desire. (Irigaray, 117)

By becoming a mother and/or a wife, Irigaray suggests that the woman loses her individuality, and that what makes her a singular person is stripped. The title of mother and of wife indicates that another person is dependent upon her or that she is now defined by the existence of another. In her lecture, Irigaray continues by outlining how men have provided a model of our universe in order to "take possession" of it (Irigaray, 121). Men are not defined by titles in the same regard that women are. In his essay, "Giving a Face to Place in the Present," the philosopher of place Ed Casey responds to a number of theorists, including Irigaray. Like Irigaray, Casey posits that there are bodies and places. It is Casey that says, "there are bodies-*as*-places...the mother's body as a place for the prenatal child" (Casey, 323). Both theorists suggest that women are allowed to become places through motherhood, but are denied the choice to become anything but place. In a masculine society, a society defined by and ruled by men, women are restricted to

positions of use. Both Irigaray and Casey point in the direction of important links between the female body, motherhood, and place.

However, in order to understand the concept of the female body as place in the horror genre, we must look to the book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, by Carol Clover. In her seminal study, Clover talks about “the terrible place.” She describes it as such:

The Terrible Place, most often a house or tunnel, in which the victims sooner or later find themselves is a venerable element of horror...what makes these houses terrible is not just their Victorian decrepitude but the terrible families – murderous, incestuous, cannibalistic – that occupy them...the house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in. A phenomenally popular moment in post-1974 slashers is the scene in which the victim locks herself in...and waits with pounding heart as the killer slashes, hacks, or drills his way in. This action is inevitably seen from the victim’s point of view...The penetration scene is commonly the film’s pivotal moment; if the victim has up to now simply fled, she has at this point no choice but to fight back. (Clover)

In the slasher film, the place is just that – a location one can visit and enter. It is a house that seems safe from the outside. Often, within the scope of the horror genre, this house is located in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. The house is familiar. We can picture it and its occupants very easily. Horror, then, turns this image on its head. Instead of finding a familiar face inside the house, our final girl comes face to face with the ultimate evil, the killer attempting to slaughter her. We choose our location, our terrible place, wisely. It must look safe and non-threatening, so starkly different from how it will look when the horror begins.

To define place, one can look to Yi-Fu Tuan's seminal book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Places become "centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied" (Tuan, 4). Places are spaces of need and of use. We visit these places for selfish purposes. When we visit with the final girl, her most important function, though there are several, is to be used. The final girl becomes a receptacle that we can fill with our anxieties, our worries, our troubles, so that we do not have to deal with them. It is her body that will bear the struggle and weight, and ultimately, it is her body that will be tortured for it. In horror genre, we as viewers, writers, directors, and producers agree to choose the final girl as our victim. It is important to keep in mind that most horror film viewers are male, and even if they are not, the cinematic gaze within the genre is coded as male. We choose a girl whose image speaks of safety and societal norm and we agree to witness the physical and mental havoc wreaked onto her. Thus horror is created and experienced. The complicity I point out here is responsible for the troublesome moral and ethical consequences of our collective agreement to call a girl a place.

Mothers become places if we are to follow Tuan's theory. I can think of no other body that meets the many needs for food, for rest, for procreation, for safety, for comfort than the body of a mother. The very function of motherhood seems to suggest the necessity of a consumable body, something that we can use time and again, no matter the circumstance. Motherhood is a function that is typically only available to women. This seems to illuminate the specific gendering of horror films – the victim typically is female,

and it is her body that the viewer, the killer, and the characters within the story will return to for the meeting of needs.

In mainstream cinema viewers, creators, directors become masculinized subjects, and they create the final girl as the object to be observed and scrutinized. Laura Mulvey discusses this process in her famous essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey suggests that film (especially classic Hollywood cinema) is a medium that seems to enforce strict gender roles that seem to be governed by unbreakable rules of cinematic language. Specifically, this gendering enforces a way of looking at an object and making a spectacle of that object. In order to avoid being killed, the final girl must become the object of the scopophilic gaze. Mulvey says of scopophilia:

Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drive quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze...although the instinct [pre-genital auto-eroticism] is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object...producing obsessive voyeurs and peeping toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other. (Mulvey, 806)

Scopophilia becomes the process that the female character must undergo in order to become the final girl. She must be objectified through the killer’s act of choosing her and often stalking her. The killer must identify her as a suitable victim, indicating to the audience it is she that we must watch. She becomes the object to be looked at, the object utilized in its “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 11).

In a chapter from her book, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva mentions “suffering as the place of the subject...the initial fleeting grasp: ‘suffering,’ ‘fear,’ ultimate words sighting the crest where sense topples over into the senses, the ‘intimate’ into ‘nerves’” (Kristeva, 141). Kristeva draws the link between the suffering of the victim and the place in which it must happen. For the final girl, this place is her own body. There is a strict boundary regarding this place of suffering – it is not something we have physical access to. Kristeva feels this separation is significant – that we create and enforce this separation to maintain the boundaries between person and victim. One way we do this is through the ritual of defilement. The ritual itself represents the in-between. When our final girl goes from normative teenaged girl to the site of violence, that space of transition is where she undergoes this ritual. As she becomes the site of violence, her body shows evidence of defilement. Often, our final girl will be covered in blood and wounds, and she will not look untouched as she did in the beginning of the film. She will become a victim, this place we will continue to visit and use.

In *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey echoes Kristeva’s sentiments, when she suggests that there is a certain sense of suffering that is specific to place. For Massey, this suffering relates heavily to the feeling of being objectified by the male gaze. She begins by describing an experience in which she watched as people looked at a portrait of a naked woman and her response was to feel objectified. She says:

This was a ‘space’ that clearly let me know something, and something ignominious, about what culture thought my place was in society...the only point I want to make is that space and place, spaces and places, and our sense of them...are gendered through and through. Moreover they are gendered in a

myriad of different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live. (Massey).

The female body in horror film becomes indeed a terrain steeped in suffering, a battlefield. It is the remembrance of the female body in horror films that bridges the gap between cinema, television, and reality. It is the recognition of the female body as an inhabitable and usable place that continues to necessitate the need and the consumption of this filmic phenomenon.

Horror films have been utilizing bodies since their origins. Specifically, they have been utilizing them, “gendering” space and place, to echo Massey, with regard to the female body since Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*. In fact, as we watch horror films, we approach them with certain expectations, especially when considering what kind of horror film it is. If it is a film that relies on a stalker, like Freddy or Jason or Michael, we are going to expect to see a final girl and we will expect to see her fight and get hurt and ultimately win, though struggling to do so. We will expect the killer to be male and will expect him to sexualize (through torture) the final girl in order to begin the truly horrific segments of the film. These expectations are ethically problematic, yet because the horror genre has been so gendered in an almost institutional sense, they are not surprising.

In order to have a survivor, to have a final girl, we must have the thing she survives from. Tuan says this of space and place:

“Space” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value....the ideas “space” and “place” require

each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. (Tuan, 6)

When we call the final girl place, we are then also defining the space around her. The final girl is the film's heroine – she is up against another force. This force is our killer (a curse, a madman, a cult). The horror genre defines so easily what a final girl should look, act, and think like. Time and again, we see the genre configuring the final girl as a normative teenaged woman. Yet, the genre is less willing to define what or who the killer is. The killer becomes our abstract space, and just as the final girl can only be called so because of the killer, the killer can only come into existence through the final girl.

The final girl navigates the range of agency between a person able to be attacked and a person able to fight. While the final girl transitions from helpless victim into powerful fighter, we as viewers, creators, and directors of the film become implicated in a problematic phenomenon – we use the body of the final girl as a receptacle for our fears or our anxieties. We put these fears onto her, making her bear the weight and responsibility of quelling them. We know that she will survive, as it is her function within the film to do so; therefore, we attempt to play out our anxieties on a body that will live.

### III. The Beginning: Rosemary as the Original Place

Roman Polanski's 1968 horror staple, *Rosemary's Baby*, becomes our canonical mother text. It becomes one of the first films in which we see a very vivid link, both metaphorically and literally, between the female body and horror. Rosemary (Mia Farrow) becomes the genre's original place, her transformation initiated by a horrific rape, thus catalyzing the streak of deception, paranoia, and ultimately the destruction of Rosemary's body that follows. Though in different ways, many final girls fit the mold that *Rosemary's Baby* created. *Rosemary's Baby* seems to capitalize on the participation of the audience through their viewership. With much of the film taking place inside Rosemary's home, Polanski builds a powerful sense of claustrophobia, making viewers feel just as stuck as the titular character. When Rosemary first enters the apartment that will become her home, she sees a slip of paper with the statement, "I can no longer associate myself," written on it.<sup>1</sup> The film plays on this mysterious statement, as what follows is a series of events in which Rosemary becomes disassociated from herself, becoming a place available for our use and consumption.

The title of Polanski's film speaks of the specific definition of place assigned to Rosemary. When we think of motherhood, we often associate it with the image of pregnancy. We think about the mother's body being used as shelter and sustenance for her growing child. Tuan suggests, " 'body' immediately calls to mind an object rather than an animated and animating being. The body is an 'it,' and it is in space or takes up

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<sup>1</sup> (0:04:19)

space.” (Tuan, 34) By associating the title of the film with the body of the titular character, we subconsciously begin objectifying Rosemary, marking her as a place to be used rather than as a human being.

If the body takes up space, then the body must be a place. Place becomes something that defines space. Tuan touches on the desirability of place – that we endow place with value and feel secure and stable with place (Tuan, 60). This is part of the reason Rosemary works so well as a place. She is kind and sweet, making it easy to sympathize with her. We feel comfortable with her. As Rosemary becomes more maternal, she becomes a stand-in for our own mothers. We feel comfortable unloading our troubles or anxieties onto Rosemary, and will continue to do so for the remainder of the film. Rosemary is a place that exists inside of another place. Though her apartment is a space defined by Rosemary, the apartment is also a place within the apartment building. These encasings, like the set of Chinese boxes, these distances from the outside world, pull us closer into Rosemary.

Throughout the film, Rosemary’s apartment is the space in which a large majority of the narrative takes place. Because the apartment is space, Rosemary and Guy (John Cassavetes) are places within that space. Guy (Rosemary’s husband) is at work or out of the apartment for the majority of the film. We see Rosemary defining the space as she begins to design and remodel the apartment based on her own standards and tastes. In the beginning of the film every time Rosemary is on screen, she is brightly dressed, often the brightest presence in focus. She starkly stands out from the dark apartment she moves in to. Yet, when she starts making changes, the apartment becomes brighter and Rosemary

herself, especially following her rape and her pregnancy, becomes darker. Here, visually, the film illustrates how she is lending herself to define space, to be swallowed whole by her space, allowing herself to fully become place.

When the film shows Rosemary redecorating, she is often the tiniest object in view, as the camera allows the apartment to take up most of the shot. The walls are painted white, and the carpet and furniture are brightly colored. Rosemary is lending the characteristics that up until then have defined her presence on screen to her home. This makes the viewer a little more comfortable, as Rosemary is seen as a calming character, one that we feel comfortable around. Yet, after Rosemary is raped, we see a stark change in her characterization. Rosemary is visited by her friend Hutch (Maurice Evans), and upon seeing her, Hutch seems horrified by her appearance.<sup>2</sup> Rosemary attempts to explain his response as a reaction to her new haircut, yet Hutch clarifies. The camera focuses on their faces, and we see Hutch looking horrified and concerned, looking over Rosemary. Hutch continues to explain that he is concerned about her appearance. The camera focuses on Rosemary and for the first time, we can see that she looks sick. Her cheekbones are sticking out and her skin looks sallow. She looks dangerously thin. She is dressed in dark clothing, and as we see her against the bright white walls, she is highly visible. Rosemary has given all of herself to her apartment, her very essence smattered on the walls, leaving nothing left for herself. In Irigaray's lecture, she discusses the idea that women must be emptied out, removed of their individuality and the things that make

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<sup>2</sup> (1:01:42)

them a separate person, to become a mother and wife. With Rosemary and her apartment, we are seeing this transaction take place on screen.

If we are to follow Tuan's definition of place, as a location in which needs are met, then the night Rosemary is raped (fulfilling the biological need for sex) defines her as place. After being drugged by the Casteverts (Ruth Gordon, Sidney Blackmer), Rosemary starts to hallucinate. However, what we see is a combination of the events taking place in the apartment and some snippets of Rosemary's dream.<sup>3</sup> When Rosemary walks into the room where she will later be raped, we are seeing things as she sees them. We are sutured into the scene. Her eyes are ours. Yet, when she steps into the room, our point of view is suddenly repositioned to that of a cult member. We partake in making Rosemary and her body a spectacle, fulfilling the needs for procreation for the cult members, Satan, and indirectly for the viewer.

Using a close shot, the camera focuses in on Rosemary's face, awake but unaware, then pans along her body as a cult member paints symbols on her skin. The camera continues to employ the close-up shot, keeping our focus on Rosemary and her body. When the Devil begins to rape Rosemary, we then see the use of the follow shot, as the camera tracks the movement of the demon's hands as they move across Rosemary. We again assume the point of view of Rosemary as she looks into the Devil's eyes. Only then does she realize that what happened to her was no dream, as she exclaims, "this is no dream! This is really happening." Someone covers her face with a pillow, seemingly sending Rosemary back into her hallucinations. The entire scene is dark, only barely lit;

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<sup>3</sup> (0:42:01 – 0:48:20)

this limits what is available to be seen by the viewer. This makes the scene feel very confusing and disorienting, once again suturing the viewer (coded as masculine) into Rosemary's position, allowing him to inhabit her.

Rosemary and her body fulfill the need for procreation for a multitude of people. Literally, the Devil uses her in this regard, making her body a home for his child. Rosemary also fulfills the need for procreation for the cult, as her body is the only way that their ritual can be complete. Because of her rape, Rosemary physically holds the fears of the cult, Guy, and those who are watching the film. The cult community was in dire need of a female body to use, as one can assume that Terry (the woman living with the Castevelts at the beginning of the film) committed suicide in order to escape their practices. By using Rosemary's body, they are completing their ritual and adhering to their principles. Guy spends much of his time throughout the film critiquing his own acting skills, barely getting parts. Continually looked over in auditions, Guy seems pressed to have his big break within the acting world. By giving his wife's body to the cult, Guy is promised career success (the viewer sees evidence of this before Rosemary's rape even takes place). The use of Rosemary's body through rape becomes the only way Guy can get what he wants. Therefore, by agreeing to work with the Castevelts, he hands these fears to Rosemary to hold on to, as they are no longer his problem. Viewers partake in the use of her body as well. America, a largely Christian society, operates on the fears of the non-normative, especially in regards to religion. Polanski is using aspects of satanic rituals in the depiction of Rosemary's rape, making her body a symbol of the non-normative. Viewers can watch as the effects of this rape continually defile Rosemary's

body. By watching this happen to her, they can experience the repercussions from a safe distance, where they will remain unharmed.

Harkening back to an earlier description of Rosemary as maternal, one of the final shots of the film implies that not only is Rosemary an actual mother now, but she is the only possible mother. After Rosemary discovers that she has given birth to Satan's child, she becomes visibly upset and finds a chair to sit in. Roman, the leader of this cult and the one who told Rosemary who the real father of her child is, comes over to her. He talks to her as if he is attempting to comfort her, yet he actually is attempting to get her to be involved with the baby's life. The camera focuses in on Rosemary and Mr. Castevet, filling the screen with their faces, giving the viewer no room for distractions. The angle of the camera makes it appear as if Roman is towering over Rosemary, implying that he is in the position of power. Rosemary remains quiet as Roman says to her:

ROMAN: Why don't you help us out, Rosemary? Be a real mother to Adrian. You don't have to join if you don't want to, just be a mother to your baby. Minnie and Laura Louise are too old – it's not right. Think about it, Rosemary.<sup>4</sup>

Roman seems to be calling Rosemary to action, telling her that she is the only person who can actually care for Adrian, that she is the only rightful mother. Following this, Roman stands up and walks away, leaving distressed Rosemary calling out to God through her tears. One woman tells her to shut up, but is hushed by another woman who says, "You shut up! Rosemary's his mother. You show some respect!"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> (2:11:35 – 2:11:57)

<sup>5</sup> (2:12:16)

Though these characters were more than willing to utilize Rosemary's body as the physical home for Satan's child, they now seem to respect her. It is her body that provides the nourishment for the child (the cult had been getting breast milk from her to give to the child), and they seem to respect and admire her abilities as a mother. Again, we see Rosemary become a place that has fulfilled the need for procreation, thus securing her position as mother -- a place that has provided shelter and nourishment for her child. The cult becomes a sort of bastardized child in this regard. Rosemary's ability to care for the thing they care about makes her important to them, and the fact that she can provide that service for them puts them at ease. In a sense, she gives them rest, for if she cares for the child, they no longer have to worry.

Rosemary seems to be respected then, as her position of place earns her adoration from the majority of the cult. Just as she began the film as a comforting character, she ends the film much the same. Rosemary makes the choice to care for Adrian, comforting her child. Yet, her choice to be an involved mother comforts the audience, too. It serves as visual proof that Rosemary is okay, and that any fear we have ascribed to her didn't hurt her. Rosemary's function as mother provided sustenance for her child, thus fulfilling the cult's desire for a mother and their collective need for procreation. In a myriad of ways, Rosemary acts as a stand-in for the final girl in the horror genre. She provides a mold that many will follow, and her story defines how horror genre will continue to use the female body as place. *Rosemary's Baby* seems to take Tuan's definition, that place is a location in which the needs for sustenance, rest, and shelter are met, and apply it to

Rosemary Woodhouse in every possible way. While she is reflective of place in many regards, the final girls that follow her seem to only utilize specific parts of the definition.

## IV. Bridging the Gap

Horror films between 1968 and 2014 are not as explicit in their use of the female body. The final girls in between *Rosemary* and *Jay* are presented as less physical and more symbolic. Ten years after *Rosemary's Baby*, we are introduced to one of the most well known final girls – Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), the heroine of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). For the first time, teenage girls can see themselves on the screen, making the average night spent babysitting a potentially horrific experience. Additionally, women who are older can remember these moments from their own history, and parents of teenaged daughters now have another thing to worry about. Wes Craven's 1984 masterpiece, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, again gives us a look into the life of an average teenaged girl, Nancy (Heather Langenkamp), before subverting it and turning her peaceful world into a hellish nightmare. Again, this makes terror available to a wider audience, the parents of teenaged girls, the siblings of teenaged girls, and teenaged girls themselves. However, with Nancy, that audience gets even wider, as anyone who has had a nightmare or worries about what happens when you fall asleep can relate to the film. Wes Craven's heroines often have more agency than other final girls. This is especially true with Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) from *Scream* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1996). *Scream* capitalizes on its meta nature, referring back to horror conventions by introducing Randy's (Jamie Kennedy) rules about surviving a horror film. One of these rules happens to be avoiding sex, and this is introduced along side shots of Sidney breaking that very

rule. Sidney differentiates herself from those that came before her by breaking the rules and fighting back, surviving the film. Instead of being killed for her cinematic sin, Sidney turns the knife around on the killers and ends up killing them both.

These characters, among others, bridge the gap between Polanski's and Mitchell's films. I find it very interesting that these films, while still highlighting the female body through torture and torment, don't ground the story within it. This implies that the female body is utilized in many ways, some more physical than others. While Nancy and Laurie seem to move away from the physical use, Sidney's character signals the return to it, almost in preparation for a character like Jay. Sidney is a very modern and relatable character, even twenty years after she is first introduced to cinematic audiences, and it seems as if her character lends some of her agency to Jay in *It Follows*. It is Sidney and Jay's portrayal of highly relatable college-aged women that makes the border between film and reality thin. With these identifiable characters the horror genre both models and reflects on the acts of violence directed against women in our society.

## V. A Return to The Female Body in Focus through *It Follows*

*It Follows*, a 2015 film by David Robert Mitchell, echoes Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* in a myriad of ways. Jay's body, much like the body of Rosemary Woodhouse, will fulfill the necessary criteria Tuan sets forth in his theory of place. *It Follows* revisits some of the classic horror genre tropes introduced in *Rosemary's Baby*. The setting of the film is disorienting – the viewer is never certain about season or location, though we know Jay (Maika Monroe) lives near Detroit. Much like Polanski who sutured the viewer into Rosemary's place through the claustrophobic mise-en-scène, Mitchell exploits the elusiveness surrounding his plot details to equalize, in some regards, Jay and the viewer. As Jay begins to interact with the curse, she is confused and does not know how to react. The viewer only knows what she knows. Therefore, Mitchell's choice to combine ambiguous setting with a plot that does not give much away leaves the viewer just as confused as the final girl. Like Rosemary, Jay is a comforting presence. She is normative and does not seem dangerous. We feel comfortable with her, with sympathizing with her, with interacting with her. Like Rosemary, Jay becomes a stand-in mother figure for the characters in the film and the viewer. Her story, much like Rosemary's, begins with rape, emptying out of her body so that she may become place. Unlike Rosemary, Jay's body will show no signs of this emptying out, no physical or visible indicators that she is a place. Tuan seems to account for this instance. He suggests, "many places, profoundly significant to particular individuals and groups, have little visual prominence. They are known viscerally, as it were, and not through the discerning eye or mind" (Tuan, 162).

While Jay is not a traditional mother, her role as maternal place is just as significant as Rosemary's.

Unbeknownst to both the viewer and Jay, Hugh (Jake Weary) is the current target for It and must have sex to pass it on. Jay believes this sex to be without consequences. She makes herself place by fulfilling her and Hugh's need for sex. However, though their sex is consensual, the repercussions and consequences are not, as the effects of this sexual encounter will continue to manifest. Hugh explains to Jay how the curse works:

HUGH: This thing...It's gonna follow you. Somebody gave it to me. I passed it to you...back in the car. It can look like people you know...or it can be a stranger in a crowd...whatever helps it get close to you. Sometimes I think it looks like people you love just to hurt you...scare you...make fun of you. You can get rid of it. Sleep with someone else as soon as you can. Just pass it on. If it gets you, it'll come after me...you understand? <sup>6</sup>

Unlike Rosemary, Jay must continue to make herself place if she wants to survive. She must fulfill the need for sex in order to pass on the curse, diverting It's attention from her. Jay has provided for Hugh a place in which he can transfer his fears and his problems – this place just happens to be her body. In a subverted way, Hugh has impregnated Jay, making her the mother in *It Follows*. In order to protect her friends, Jay must hold on to the curse, fighting it off when necessary, but doing everything in her power to avoid passing it on. As Irigaray suggests, Jay has given up the “singularity of her desire,” (wanting to keep herself safe), and has made the choice to protect everyone else. She is in

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<sup>6</sup> (0:19:00-0:21:00)

immediate danger, alone in this endeavor, because she refuses to cause harm to another character. She becomes the proper mother in the film, as her own mother is largely absent from the narrative.

However, as the film continues and It gets harder and harder to evade, Jay must make herself place again. As she continues to fight off It, she enlists the help of her neighbor, Greg (Daniel Zovatto). As they develop feelings for each other, and his desire to help her grows, he agrees to have sex with her so that she is no longer the target. Interestingly enough, here we see Jay becoming place for herself. She is fulfilling the need for sex to both distance the curse and protect herself. After getting into an accident in an attempt to get away from It, Jay wakes up in the hospital.<sup>7</sup> She seems confused and disoriented. She looks around at her friends. The camera zooms in and focuses on Greg sleeping in a corner. The camera continues to zoom in toward him as his eyes open. He looks into the camera, making eye contact with Jay, and the screen cuts to a view of the hospital from outside. The camera focuses in on the windows of the hospital, giving the viewer snapshots of different moments taking place. This is interesting, as it seems to imply that everything taking place is normal, that there is nothing supernatural at play. The camera gets to Jay's window as we see Greg climbing into bed with her, removing his clothes in the process. The screen then cuts to a close up of Jay and Greg's faces. Jay looks almost relieved for a moment, but as she looks away from the camera and then around the room, it is obvious she is uncomfortable. She looks back in the direction of the camera, becoming more and more disinterested with what is happening.

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<sup>7</sup> (1:03:00 – 1:06:30)

At first, Jay seems to agree, thinking that sharing the curse with someone would help her better manage It. In the first part of the scene, her face as she engages Greg is obscured, and it looks as if they both seem to be enjoying sex. However, as the camera enters the room and we can see Jay's face in greater detail, it becomes obvious that this was a desperate attempt at self-protection. Jay has fulfilled the need for sex and rest using her own body. Unlike final girls that come before her, Jay is the first to use her own body knowingly and willingly. Jay's self interest is intriguing. It is difficult to discern whether her seeming disinterest is because she feels bad for involving Greg or if she is actually disinterested and is in fact using Greg in order to feel better. Regardless, Jay's choice to protect herself by potentially hurting another is new for final girls. Often final girl characters protect themselves, but rarely at the expense of another.

This is not the only time that Jay will try to protect herself in such a manner. Toward the end of the film, Jay and her friend Paul (Keir Gilchrist) have sex. Paul revealed to Jay that he has feelings for her and that he wants to help her fight It. The camera looks up at Jay from Paul's point of view, as she is straddling him on the couch. It then pans away, and we see Paul shake his head, indicating that he understands what will happen to him but that Jay should continue. The basement is dark, and the lighting illuminates the two of them, making the viewer remained focused as the gravity of Paul's choice sets in. The camera stays with them for a few moments, then moves away and focuses on the window above their heads. The camera seems to be asking for us to wait, to see if It will show up for Paul so soon. After some time, we return to Paul and Jay after the act. They have a short conversation:

PAUL: Do you feel any different?

The camera moves from Paul's face and focuses on Jay.

Jay shakes her head no.

JAY: Do you?

The camera focuses again on Paul.

PAUL: No.<sup>8</sup>

It is then that we understand what Paul has sacrificed for Jay. Jay wonders if Paul feels any different because this was his first time having sex, and with doing so he has accepted a deadly curse. Again, it feels as if Jay has done this to protect herself, while also allowing Paul to care for her the way he desired to. She has fulfilled both her and Paul's need for sex again, while also allowing both herself and Paul to rest in some regard, another staple of place for Tuan.

In one of the most horrifying and unsettling scenes from the film, Jay must fight It as it materializes as her father. We learn through very subtle clues that he is deceased. Jay, her sister, and their friends decide that they must kill It. In order to do so, they plan to lure It into a pool and throw electronics into it, hoping to electrocute It. The camera cuts between shots of Jay in the pool, her friends sitting around it, and views of the building and hallways leading toward the pool. As the shots get more monotonous, and the tension seems to stabilize, we almost beg It to appear. We want to see what will happen with Jay when she purposefully interacts with the curse. As they all are standing around the pool, placing electronic devices (televisions, irons, toasters) around the edge,

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<sup>8</sup> (1:32:38 – 1:33: 07)

Jay sees It. At first, It is unseen to the viewer. Jay gasps and points in the direction of It. Her sister asks her what she sees, and Jay says, “I don’t want to tell you.”<sup>9</sup> The camera shows us It, but never close enough to see who It really is. It starts throwing electronics into the pool, hoping electrocute Jay (her intended plan for It). Only then, after the tension has started growing again, do we see It’s face. We recognize that It is Jay’s father. The camera focuses on his face as he continues to stare at her. By choosing not to reveal who It was, Jay is protecting the image of her father that her sister holds. By not naming it, by refusing to say that It is her father, Jay seems to be protecting her own and her sister’s memories of her father. Here, we are revisiting Jay as a mother figure. Tuan says of babies, “movement beyond the immediate vicinity of the mother or outside of the crib entails risks [within space] with which the baby is not prepared to cope” (Tuan, 23). When Jay refuses to ruin their memories of their father, Jay is refusing to relinquish her place as mother. She is refusing to cause pain to other characters (helping her sister avoid associating her father with evil), nurturing them throughout her own experience of horror. She is refusing to interact with space, staying firmly as place. Tuan says that children understand place as “a focus of value, of nurture and support...the mother is the child’s primary place” (Tuan, 29). More than Rosemary, Jay operates as this place of nurture and support, as her role throughout the entire film is to nurture and protect those around her and herself.

*It Follows* takes what films like *Rosemary’s Baby* do and both builds on them and rejects them. Rosemary is a literal mother, in that she spends the entire film pregnant,

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<sup>9</sup> (1:26:35)

caring for a demonic fetus who after its birth will require her body to remain alive. Jay takes motherhood and experiences it metaphorically. Throughout the entire film, we see both men and women turn to Jay in this regard. Hugh, Greg, and Paul turn to Jay for sex. In all three cases, Jay has provided for them relief of some kind. She takes from Hugh the pressure of the curse, making herself the target unknowingly. She becomes pregnant with this curse, a successful attempt at sex. For Greg and Paul, the desire to help Jay seems to outweigh the potential consequences of any sexual interaction. She provides for them temporary relief, as both misguidedly believe they can help and protect her. In both circumstances, Jay gives birth to new mutations of the curse. As a subversive mother, Jay is taking care of them, nurturing them and supporting them. In some way, we see her be more of a proper mother than Rosemary, as we see Jay physically interact with her “children” outside of the womb. Interestingly enough, though maybe in a problematic way or through problematic means, Jay becomes her own mother and becomes the sole person responsible for her safety and wellbeing. Jay decides to have sex with Greg and Paul to protect herself. Jay refuses to name It as her father later in the film, refusing to darken the memories she has of her deceased father. In this way, Jay’s protection of herself is empowering. She does not rely only on the help of others, but rather depends on her own thinking in order to save herself.

Also, Jay operates as a place for the audience throughout much of the film. It is the curse, the disease, within her that seems to drive our use of her body. If we view the It curse as a sickness (maybe as a sexually transmitted disease) then we are going to view Jay as sick, and therefore feel threatened by her sickness. In the beginning of the film,

Mitchell works hard to suture the viewer into Jay's position, letting us be privy to her most private moments. Because from the start she operates as a stand-in mother, we feel comfortable with her. We put this fear of disease onto and into Jay's body and watch as it takes its toll. Interestingly enough, it is this disease (our fear) that makes Jay a mother. We rely heavily on mother figures at specific points in our lives, the viewing of horror films and their mothering final girls being one of those points, so to make Jay a mother through fear is innovative in a sense. Fear is typically something we want to avoid, something we run from. When we are children, we are typically running from fear to our mothers because she provides safety. To make Jay our imagined mother through fear makes our willingness to depend on her all the more intriguing. We are both running from and running to what scares us. Throughout the film, our bodies remain intact and whole, untouched by the curse, yet our metaphorical body (Jay's body) is tortured and bothered, and we let it happen. Because Jay is the final girl, we know that anything we do to her, anything we let happen to her, any pain we cause her, cannot kill her – she, and us, will survive this.

## VI. Rape In Television

In horror genre, rape is often used as a catalyzing agent, the event through which final girls are chosen as victims and designated as places. In horror films, though there are exceptions, rape is not shown as graphically or as explicitly as it is often shown in contemporary television. As viewers, we have watched the topic and image of rape shift from an obscured experience in horror film (often only implied by characters or dialogue) to a very vivid spectacle on the small screen. This shift can be seen through television's use of realistic representations of female characters. The most popular example of a television show that uses rape as a plot device is *Game of Thrones*. In episode six of season 5, "Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken," we watch as Sansa (Sophie Turner) is raped by her husband on their wedding night as a friend is forced to stand in the room and watch. The camera employs many close-up shots, particularly of Sansa, in order to convey her fear and pain, focusing only on her face and not her body. *Game of Thrones* is a primitive show set in the Middle Ages and focused on war and destruction. Because of this, one could argue that *Game of Thrones* is geared toward a largely male audience.

Interestingly enough, when rape is geared toward unisex audiences (or audiences that are largely female), rape operates as a warning signal and not as a plot device. Unlike in *Game of Thrones*, rape becomes a very graphic, charged, and uncomfortable experience. It is not hidden from viewers, making the rape more of a spectacle and more accessible. In Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series, Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), a character that many women and men admire for her strength and

resiliency, becomes a victim of attempted sexual assault. In the episode titled “Seeing Red,” the viewer watches through a shaky camera lens as Spike (James Marsters) attempts to rape her, only stopping once Buffy fights back hard enough. Instead of being obscured visually like in *Game of Thrones*, Buffy’s rape is graphic and visible. We see Spike attempting to control Buffy, talking to her about feeling his love again, hoping to convince her to love him again. Similarly, when Tyra (Adrienne Palicki) becomes a victim of attempted rape in “Mud Bowl,” an episode from *Friday Night Lights*, the camera is shaky as it graphically depicts the events. Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Friday Night Lights* are shows that are geared towards mature unisex audiences, and neither glosses over rape the way that *Game of Thrones* does. Both shows also employ intensely unsettling camera technique that makes the viewer follow the rape as it unfolds, in its painful and shocking immediacy. This helps build the anxiety of the situation and makes the viewer realize that rape is real and should not be spectacularized.

The instances of rape, where we are visualizing rape from a scopophilic point of view, seem to suggest that we as a culture have embraced, in some regard, sexual violence as a site of spectacle. Though we may be seeing some societal advancement or progressions (for example the critical discourse about the campus “rape culture”), our mainstream and popular media suggest that those advancements or progressions are not significant enough. The media unveils a proliferation of sexual assault spectacle, in which every rape scene accentuates the female character as a repository.

In the instances of rape in television, especially when the rape victim is a teenage girl, we can see the application of Tuan’s definition of place. Buffy spends much of the

series as an imagined mother for her friends and for her sister (especially following the death of her own mother). When she becomes a victim of attempted rape, Buffy then must deal with the rape on her own (harkening back to Irigaray's suggestion that mother's internalize their own desires and fears) all while protecting her friends and family from the show's latest villain. We as viewers depend on Buffy to fight the villain and win, much like her friends depend on her to keep them alive. We become willing to overlook Buffy's own pain in order to relieve our own.

Characters like Buffy or Tyra (or the multitude of other teenaged female characters) are often the characters young viewers look up to. They see themselves in those characters. By that logic, it is safe to assume, then, that others see young girls in those characters as well. They see how quickly rape is experienced and swept under the rug. It is this desensitization that suggests to potential aggressors that rape is a minor crime, an experience easily dealt with.

## VII. Conclusion

Representations of rape proliferate in media, showing it as a minor crime, as something with little significance other than a plot device. Simultaneously, there is a stream of daily news reporting on the growing rates of campus rape. It is this horrifying prevalence that initially pulled me into this project. As a young woman on a college campus, I am all too aware of the way that rape is a silent, malicious presence lurking on campuses across the country. It is in the administrators' emails sent to students following sexual assaults, in the rape-awareness campaign stickers on female bathroom walls and mirrors, and in the lack of accountability on the part of the university officials that we see rape become "culture." A culture is a body of people who act, believe, think, and value similar things. It just so happens that the beliefs indicating and guiding culture shame victims of rape for being exactly that – victims.

Like Rosemary and Jay, women on college campuses are in danger of fulfilling unwillingly the need for sex, becoming victims of sexual assault. Unlike in horror films and television, this place-making isn't fictional. Rather, we see the explicit and real utilization of female bodies happening. Tuan continually touches on the desirability of place, that we crave place because it is definite and nurturing and comforting. In many ways, the rapes of Rosemary and Jay, in their ability to make place, are comforting for us. They make those characters mothers and receptacles, bodies available for our consumption. By that logic, then, do the rapes of actual women make them places? If they are indeed places, then are not their rapes place-making, and comfort inducing for

some? The danger of rape culture lies not only in the physical and mental effects of rape, but also in the desirability that coincides with the use of the female body, and the ways in which we force women to become place.

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