

The Horror of Gender: Revamping Horror Films in US Indie Cinema through The Case of A24 Productions since 2010

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Abstract. Gender in traditional horror films is often portrayed between male and female opposition and inequality, reinforcing the male perspective and marginalizing female audiences. Since the 2010s, A24, an independent film production company, has transformed U.S. indie cinema with its distinctive cultural values and aesthetics. A24's horror films are notable for their innovative approach to gender issues and audio-visual techniques, differentiating them from traditional genres. This article examines A24's contributions to the genre, focusing on films such as *Hereditary*(2018), *Pearl*(2022), and *Men*(2022). A24's work introduces psychological horror tied to anatomical anomalies, challenging conventional horror categories. Additionally, these films address gender binary, expressions, and patriarchy, merging gender and horror in novel ways. The analysis underscores how A24's films reflect contemporary concerns and engage audiences in gender-related discussions. This study highlights A24's role in redefining horror cinema narratives and advancing gender dialogues in the post-2010s era.

Keywords: contemporary horror films, gender deconstruction, A24 production studio, US indie cinema.

1. Introduction

In recent years the horror film genre has entered a cycle of so-called art horror. A24, an independence film studio contributed the largest number of horror film about that. The high-profile horror films released by A24, such as, *Hereditary* (d.Aster, 2018), *Pearl* (d.West, 2022), *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019), *Men* (d.Garland, 2022), *Beau is afraid* (d.Aster, 2023), which popular with films fans. A24 studio achieves an effective balance between art and commerce, and has already become tastemaker in horror film.

Horror film have become very well developed in the American film industry, and are loved by audiences for a long while. The highlight feature in traditional horror film is that the psycho killer or monster who one by one killed a string of victims, which always attracting horror fans, immerse in shocking suddenness and slash actions from main characters. As a film genre, horror film have basic component elements, such as, killer, locale, victims and shock effects. The filmmakers adapt these several elements to create a scary atmosphere and achieve a frightening effect. As a result, making challenge and stimulate audiences' physical and psychological defenses while critiquing mainstream discourses through themes of violence and loss of control. Traditional horror films are often body-oriented, focusing on the physical body and sensory experiences. In many B-grade horror films, erotic elements are prevalent, with the female body being objectified. This exploitation is particularly evident in 1970s slasher films, which were heavily influenced by the Italian "Giallo" genre. These films often depict the murder of beautiful, seductive women, with secondary female characters frequently shown disfigured. Women are portrayed as victims, with a focus on their fear and physical suffering, often imbued with sexual connotations. The screams of female characters in terror have become a significant auditory element in horror cinema. Additionally, these films often depict female victims as bold and fashion-conscious, contrasting with traditional patriarchal ideals of femininity. Contemporary horror films have made strides in addressing gender inequality, reflecting shifts in social attitudes.

Film industry needs to adjust stylistic elements of film genre, in order to respond the changing of audience's preference. Genre films have different creative characteristics in different periods of time, and these new genre films with the same creative tendency will converge in a certain period of time to form the so-called genre cycle. Leger Grindon thought generic cycle as a series of genre films produce during a limited period of time and linked by a dominant trend in their use of the genre's conventions[1]. In fact, the production ideas of indie films and genre films are not completely opposed to each other. Indie film will borrow genre films to attract the attention of specific film fans, while genre films will iterate on a particular genre under the influence of the unique production methods of indie films.

The horror film of the 21st century decade, represented by the A24 horror films, continued to summarize the production experience of their predecessors, and made new aesthetic turns, forming the elevated horror films, which not only led the horror films to enter a new genre cycle, but also enhanced the influence of independent films in the present. The horror film produced by A24 has been creatively upgraded in terms of genre elements, changing the way horror films are made, the way the film presents horror is not a direct representation of the scares as in traditional horror films but focuses on the trauma suffered by the characters, highlighting the distortions and struggles of the character's interior world to create a realist psychological horror.

It can be noticed that the horror created in the series of horror films produced by A24 does not originate from monsters or killers that suddenly enter the lives of the characters, but rather from the fear that comes from within the family or from the characters' deepest psychological trauma. On the one hand, A24 as a commercial film company, released a series of horror films using some fascinating film production approaches, which are different from the traditional Hollywood horror film production model, and creating elevated horror film genre cycle. Horror films produced by A24 have a variety of methods to set scary atmosphere and to which varying from Hollywood. Instead of the hysterical roar and jump scare sequences of traditional horror films, A24's horror film matches the spooky atmosphere created by the film in an experimental manner. For instance, an director Air Aster, dedicated to making horror films with a distinctly individualized style: *Midsommar* (2019) uses a fresh, bright color palette throughout the film to tell a series folk horror stories that takes

place in daylight; *Hereditary* focuses on the family horror, setting up elements of horror such as witchcraft, hallucinations, and invocations to show the breakdown of a family. On the other hand, A24, as an indie film company, has become an indispensable front for American independent films. In A24, horror film has employed gender as a means of innovation, offering a fresh perspective amidst creative stagnation. It utilizes body horror, female horror, and family horror to highlight gender issues, while stimulating horror by showing the unequal power relations between men and women in the story, thus triggering the audience to think about gender relations. This paper will focus on A24's *Hereditary* (2018), *Pearl* (2022), and *Men* (2022), examining their audiovisual language and visual symbolism to explore the representation and interaction of gender and horror.

2. Literature review

Gender and horror cinema emerged as a significant area of scholarly inquiry in the 1980s, with gender inequity of character building becoming a focal point in academic discourse. This period marked a critical juncture in examining gender representation in horror films, as scholars like Linda Williams, Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, and Robin Wood explored how horror narratives often reflect and perpetuate societal biases and stereotypes.

Most horror film analyses often depict monsters as male and relegate women to victim roles. Williams contends that the frequent objectification of women in horror films contributes to a gendered dichotomy in viewing behaviors[2]. Creed and Clover introduce concepts as the "Monstrous-Feminine" and the "Final Girl" to highlight gender repression in horror cinema. Clover's analysis of slasher, occult, and rape-revenge films which feature narratives involving female protagonists subjected to violence and offer sadistic pleasure to their viewers reveals the "Final Girl" as a survivor who aligns spectators with the female experience of fear and degradation[3]. Creed posits that the archetypal monster represents the female reproductive system, evoking terror through the threat of emasculation[4]. Wood further connects horror films to broader sexual politics, advocating for an intersectional approach encompassing feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmentalism to achieve genuine liberation[5].

In contemporary horror cinema, audience expectations have become more diverse, reflecting the varied backgrounds and perspectives. Understanding the appeal of horror requires examining the relationship between a film's textual features and audience interpretations within specific social contexts[6]. Horror films' archetypes such as the "Final Girl," have evolved to reflect societal critiques, with these characters not only physically battle the monsters but also psychologically challenge patriarchal authority and societal norms[7]. The growing recognition of female characters' subjectivity in horror films allows for an exploration of human fears, such as identity and family life[8].

A24, an independent film company, has distinguished its horror films in this evolving landscape through its unique aesthetic choices, thematic alignment with societal issues, and sophisticated commercial strategies. Briggs describes A24's "house style" is characterized by its alignment with the cultural zeitgeist of Millennials and Generation Z, who, as digital natives, engage predominantly through online platforms and seek cinematic experiences that mirror their lived experiences, values, and societal identities. A24 caters the audience's own digital vernacular through youth-centric themes, genre innovation, auteur-driven visions, and social relevance[9]. Brannan notes that A24 has played a pivotal role in popularizing "elevated horror," a genre marked by art-house aesthetics and psychological depth. By targeting both niche cinephile communities and broader market segments, A24 has emphasized narrative, stylistic, and generic elements alongside critical reception discourses, contributing to the cycle's cultural impact[1]. A24's distinctive "cool" aesthetic, marked by its retro-

contemporary visuals and authentic themes, along with its innovative marketing strategies and robust digital engagement, especially targeting youth culture, have established the company as a vanguard in indie cinema and positioned A24 as a neoliberal entity within the "Indiewood" landscape[10].

Current research on A24's horror films employs case studies and gender-focused analyses, exploring unique film characteristics. Hellmuth applies queer affect theory to *Hereditary* (2018), revealing fears within societal constructs and critiquing neoliberal horrors faced by queer individuals[11]. The conventions of postmodern horror in *Midsommar* (2019) challenge binary oppositions with fluid gender roles to critique gender inequality and cultural bias[12]. Some studies highlight A24's innovative sub-genre approaches, such as how grief elements drive the plot in horror[13], while the use of collective emotions to articulate a vision of a community defying traditional gender norms[14].

Despite a growing body of literature on A24's independent horror films, the majority are confined to case studies, with scant efforts to consolidate the defining 'horror' elements across A24's cinematic landscape and to examine the intersection of horror and gender dynamics. This paper will concentrate on two central research inquiries: How does A24 innovate within the horror genre, and how do elements of horror and gender interact in A24's horror films? These questions will guide an exploration of A24's unique approach to horror, its impact on genre conventions, and the portrayal and challenge of gender in their films.

3. Findings

3.1. *Men*(2022): the horror of anatomical abnormality and patriarchal oppression

Produced by A24 and directed by Alex Garland, the revealing of horror in *Men*(2022) can be divided into two ways, which are anatomical abnormality and patriarchal oppression.

The director effectively employs folk elements to evoke horror, aligning the script with a recurring motif in folk horror cinema: the notion that the countryside, often perceived as a place of refuge, is instead a setting where violence frequently emerges. Specifically, the protagonist Harper seeks solace in the English countryside following her husband's suicide. Upon her arrival at a seemingly idyllic cottage, Harper finds herself being stalked by several different men, all of whom share the same face. This ultimately leads to a climactic confrontation where she must face her fears.

As noted by *The Guardian*, "Part of folk horror's role is to unearth forgotten barbarities and injustices and make us look at ourselves afresh"[15]. The film frequently contrasts colors to juxtapose the seemingly tranquil green landscape with the red-hued flashbacks that signify danger. Furthermore, the narrative incorporates folk symbols that suggest the worship of fertility. One such symbol is a narrow, wet, and shadowy tunnel resembling a womb and the way from birth to death. Harper, initially singing for the simple pleasure of hearing the echo, is suddenly confronted by a naked man who interprets her actions as a mating call, causing her to feel unsafe.

The film also employs mythical symbols such as *The Green Man* and *Sheela na gigs* in the village church, which serve as metaphors for life, rebirth, and reproduction. In this setting, Harper encounters two additional men: a schoolboy who hurls profanities at her and a vicar who conceals his sexual desire, as evidenced by a scene where his fingers reach through the slats of a chair in a gesture laden with sexual innuendo.

These folk elements elicit strong feelings of disgust in the audience. Through the portrayal of bodily exposure and sexual innuendo, the film generates a pervasive sense of panic, encouraging viewers to connect the scenes with their own experiences. This evokes a form of body horror,

characterized by grotesque or psychologically unsettling violations of the human form[16]. The film predominantly explores deviant sexuality and anatomical abnormalities, allowing the audience to empathize with Harper's profound sense of helplessness and revulsion.

Patriarchal oppression is also a central element in the film's portrayal of horror. In *Men*, the lustful Green Man embodies an uncontrollable urge for self-reproduction, initiating a chain of procreation before Harper's eyes. The men she encounters—ranging from the Green Man to the schoolboy, the vicar, and the landlord—culminate in the reappearance of her husband, who symbolizes her inner fear and guilt, despite his accidental death. The horror experienced by the audience stems not only from their empathy with Harper's emotions but also from the unsettling truths they uncover alongside her. Each character around Harper represents different facets of male privilege and toxic masculinity, extending from nature to society, and symbolizing the pains of birth, misogyny, patriarchy, and domestic violence. The fact that all the men share the same face underscores the pervasive and uniform nature of patriarchal oppression and abuse, which is portrayed as equally horrific across different manifestations.

This theme is further emphasized in the film's conclusion. Although Harper successfully overcomes the men who threaten her, when her pregnant best friend finally finds her, Harper smiles wearily, embodying the "final girl" trope—a concept introduced by Carol Clover to describe the sole surviving female protagonist in horror films[17]. As Clover suggests, "These films are designed to align spectators not with the male tormentor, but with the female victim—the 'final girl'—who ultimately defeats her oppressor." In A24 productions like *Men*(2022), *Midsommar*(2019), and *Pearl*(2022), the closing scenes often feature close-ups of the final girls' expressions, revealing smiles that convey not just triumph, but also profound exhaustion. These moments leave the audience pondering the uncertain futures that lie ahead for these characters. The film's true horror lies in the realization that, despite the characters' efforts to escape their circumstances, they are ultimately confronted with the futility of their struggle for a better existence. It is through witnessing the unmasking of danger that the audience is awakened to the reality in which they are entangled. The greatest horror is not merely that individuals are powerless against overwhelming forces or risk being completely crushed, but that they may become the very force they seek to resist.

3.2. *Pearl* (2022): the destruction of patriarchal family

The 2022 film *Pearl*, directed by Ti West, uses a female narrative, and sets the story in a novel way by wiping the role of a traditional patriarchal father and giving the patriarchal role to the mother to destroy and reflect on the traditional patriarchal family. The film is set in a small Texan farm in 1918, when the WWI and the Spanish flu was reeking havoc on the world. The protagonist, Pearl, is living in a German family in the rural area with her disabled and aphasic father and her control freak mother. Her mother Ruth represents the role of a patriarchal father in the family, using an imperious status manipulating the way of life of every people in this family, controlling the financial assets of the family. Her father is disabled due to the Spanish flu, unable to function as a traditional leader of the family, which is the role of Ruth.

Being imprisoned in this little Texan farm, Pearl dreams for leaving the farm and become a movie star and a dancer. However, her mother Ruth notices Pearl's propensity of violence, and thus constrain Pearl not to leave the farm and help her with the farm works. She does not allow pearl to have any movie or dancing activities[18]. And this long constrain caused Pearl's psychiatric disorder and eventually cause Pearl to kill her parents and one acquaintance.

There are three scenes where all three member of this family appears, and all of them are dinner time. All the setting is the same with the dim lighting in the room for all three nights, forming

tension in the room. On the dinner table, there are almost no daily conversation, only order from mother to Pearl, creating a sick and intense atmosphere between the family members.

The tension between the family members is building throughout these three scenes. For the first scene, the mother just grimly orders Pearl to feed her father before eating, as Pearl starting to eat before helping her father. For the second scene, mother is punishing Pearl by not letting her to have dinner and sermonize her, because she spent the rest few cents change left from the money used to buy the painkiller for her father. However, on the third dinner, the mother discovered that pearl used the change to watch a movie and want to go to an audition for a role in a dance regiment. The mother and the daughter engaged in a fierce argument, which result in a deadly fight, causing the death of the mother. The mother even used knife to threaten Pearl, to regain control of her life, trying to retrieve the strongest power to control the family. And this starts the ultimate rebellion from Pearl to her family. She killed her father on the next morning, marking her breakage from her original family and starting to peruse her dream of being a star. Tracing down the source, it is the rising pressure from the mother that caused the deadly result and the destruction of this family, marking the monstrosity of the female. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Pearl (left) is threatened by Ruth (right) by a knife

Director Ti west dedicates in the destruction of the sacred community – family. Different from the traditional American’s sense of family in previous horror movies, which is “love is the most effective tool when it comes to fighting against strong power”, the director depicts an extremely distorted sense of family, using exaggerated mise en scene and argument to display the harmful effect of the oppressive force of the traditional patriarchal role. This smashes the audience’s conventional thoughts of horror movie family view and reveal a different way to deconstruct the traditional patriarchal family and create new sense of horror.

3.3. Hereditary (2018): female perspective and sarcasm toward the family community

As the debut of the director Ari Aster, Hereditary tells the story of a family that, following the death of their grandmother, gradually discovers they are controlled by an ancient cult. Annie and her family experience a series of bizarre events, eventually revealing that the cult, which the grandmother was involved in, is trying to summon a demon through her family. The film's climax reveals Peter becoming the cult's sacrificial offering, leading to the family's complete destruction. This movie employs a female protagonist, Annie, which is the mother in the family and fits perfectly

into the category of an independent female. With her perspective of the death of the grandmother Ellen, the daughter Charlie, and her husband Steve, the desperation of not being able to do anything creates horror[19].

From the entire film, we can notice that the member of the cult almost controls every move of the family, including the woman from the grief recovery that tried to “help” Annie but actually sacrificing the family by letting Annie to perform a séance with Steve and Peter. In the end, when Annie discovered the presence of the cult and the cult member around her, it is too late. She tried to stop all of these but end up killing her husband Steve, and letting herself being controlled by Paimon and let her son to become Paimon. From the perspective of Annie, director Ari Aster depicted a story of a woman being completely controlled by her mother, even though Annie had hope and performed some action to fight against this destiny of dying. Horror comes from the fact that every single move of Annie is being predicted by her mother and Ellen’s conspiracy succeeded, just like a puppet being controlled by a puppeteer. This degree of command from Ellen towards the entire family through Annie in this movie also demonstrated the monstrosity of female[20]. Moreover, the fear of unable to change Annie’s own destiny despite the immense effort that she tried to escape this destiny is also a horrifying element when the audience put themselves in the role of Annie, as they can experience the desperation from her trying to save the family but unable to confront the destiny from her mother.

The horror of the disintegration of the family is also a part of the horror of this film. The family in this film is not united but instead shattered. The trust between the mother and the father, and the trust between the children and the mother is all very fragile. The children are afraid of their mother because she once almost burnt them to death. The father who is a psychiatrist believe Annie is psychological disordered as she performs séance with him and Peter. This may be the hereditament of this family and causes this family to be fragile and hard to unite, leading to a tension between all the family members, lack of tolerance and understanding, and omission of love. Director Ari Aster also depicts such a distorted family relationship, and let a cult to destroy the family from the inside using the hand of distrust and contradiction, mocking the community of a family. He also uses extreme representation to portray the conflict within this family, to create a sense of horror of exaggeration (Figure 2)



Figure 2: After the death of Charlie, Annie and Peter had an extreme argument on the dinner table. This is a close up of Annie’s extreme facial expression

4. Conclusion

A24, an independent film production company, stands out for its low-budget but highly creative approach to horror films. Unlike traditional horror that often relies on tangible threats, A24's films, such as *Midsommar* (2019), *Pearl* (2022), and *Hereditary* (2018), employ psychological and conceptual horror. These films subvert patriarchal power structures, portraying matriarchies or strong female figures instead. This shift from the expected patriarchal norm to female-dominated narratives creates a dissonance between reality and on-screen representation, leading to a profound psychological horror. For example, in *Midsommar* (2019), the village celebrates sisterhood and female sexuality, while in *Pearl* (2022) and *Hereditary* (2018), the male characters are depicted as weak and ultimately sacrificed, highlighting the abnormality of these power dynamics.

A24's alternative approach to horror also allows for innovation in visual storytelling. Films like *Midsommar* (2019) deviate from the typical dark and eerie aesthetics of horror. Instead, the film is set in a picturesque Swedish village bathed in daylight, with the contrast between the serene environment and the underlying horror enhancing the unsettling atmosphere.

Gender narratives play a significant role in A24's horror films. Many of these films feature strong female protagonists who defy traditional "damsel in distress" tropes. For instance, in *Men* (2022), Harper, initially fitting this trope, ultimately stands up to her fears without relying on a male savior. The persistence of sisterhood, as seen in Harper's reunion with her female friend, symbolizes the resilience against patriarchal oppression.

A24's horror films intertwine gender and horror in unique ways. Traditional horror often depicts women as victims of monstrous forces, but A24 flips this narrative, portraying women as the sources of horror themselves. This exploration of female monstrosity challenges conventional gender roles. Additionally, A24 addresses the horrors of patriarchal oppression, as seen in *Men* (2022), where hyper-sexualization and violence against women are central themes. In *Pearl* (2022), the protagonist's marginalization and her mother's oppressive behavior reflect the collapse of sisterhood and the isolating effects of patriarchal structures, amplifying the horror.

In summary, A24's success in horror cinema is rooted in its alternative representations of horror, innovative gender narratives, and the complex interplay between horror and gender. By subverting traditional tropes and exploring the psychological depths of fear, A24 has redefined the horror genre, offering audiences a fresh and unsettling experience.

A24's success in horror cinema is rooted not only in its innovative approach to gender narratives and psychological horror but also in its unique position as an independent U.S. film production company. Operating outside the constraints of major studios, A24 has the creative freedom to take risks, subvert traditional horror tropes, and produce films with distinct artistic visions. This independence allows A24 to explore unconventional narratives, such as matriarchal power structures, female monstrosity, and the collapse of patriarchal norms, which might be considered too niche or controversial for mainstream production houses. The company's emphasis on lower-budget films pushes directors to rely on ingenuity rather than high-cost effects, resulting in a more atmospheric, concept-driven horror that resonates deeply with audiences.

Acknowledgement

Yifei Zhang, Boyu Fan, Yuchen Bai, Kexin Sun and Zifeng She contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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