

PANIZZA ALLMARK

**masculinity  
in crisis**  
the uncanny male monster

BARBARA CREED

*Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal  
Uncanny*

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The nature of masculinity and the suppression and re-emergence of the feminine are brilliantly explored in Barbara Creed's *Phallic Panic: Film Horror and the Primal Uncanny*. Creed delves deep into the horror genre and what emerges is a succinct and engaging analysis of the connection between the primal uncanny and the classic male monster of horror. The social, historical and psychoanalytical aspects of the horror genre are integrated into the analysis. The book provides a noble contribution to feminist insights and cultural criticism by providing a counter-reading to the hyper-masculinity that has often been aligned with the male-driven genre. The book is culturally subversive in demonstrating the contradictions and inconsistencies in the symbolic order. Creed argues that in cinematic representation and other cultural forms the male monster is associated with the 'primal uncanny', which is woman, the animal and death. The three categories are not mutually exclusive and the book highlights their prevalence in aspects of popular culture.

In Creed's rich theoretical discussion, she examines popular film and myth, which feature male monsters, such as Dracula, Frankenstein, werewolves, mad scientists, slashers and ghosts. Creed discusses what they have in common and significantly she, in turn, uses the uncanny as a motif for revealing or bringing to light what, according to phallogocentric society 'ought to have remained secret and hidden'.<sup>1</sup> (3) The book is compelling in its appeal and approach to the shadow side of popular culture. Creed draws to light the impossibility of ever achieving a 'proper' masculine ideal. As such, the

male protagonist, wearing the mask of the monster, highlights the contradictions that exist in patriarchy in which elements of the primal uncanny emerge.

The uncanny male monster arouses dread and horror and unsettles the symbolic order. Thus he disturbs identity, disintegrates meaning and is a point of resistance and rebellion. This is what Creed terms as a 'phallic panic'. It is generated from an uncanny form of anxiety about the disruption of the phallogocentric symbolic order in which the monster is constructed by and within. Rationality and control are weakened in the male monster. Hence, significantly, Creed highlights that the male monster sometimes registers a cry not of the victim but of the monster himself. It is a cry that alludes to the fragile concept of masculinity. Significantly, it is a cry that resonates a phallic panic.

The book draws upon Freud's 1919 famous essay on 'The Uncanny' and the critical responses to it as a theoretical framework for analysing the phallic panic. In the eight chapters of the book, Creed examines the myths and creation of the central male monsters of the twentieth century in terms of their relationship to the primal uncanny. In the first few chapters she eloquently sets the groundwork for the detailed analysis of the uncanny, drawing upon a range of writing commencing with Freud's seminal work and extending to writers such as Hélène Cixous, Phillip McCaffrey and Nicholas Royle on the uncanny. Creed argues that the primal uncanny offers a way of understanding the proximity between the familiar and the unfamiliar and discusses how the uncanny tropes are constructed from the 'otherness'

of male symbolic order. An essay by Linda Williams can be evoked here, in which Williams argues that women can be positioned as a symbiotic double for the monster, as an Other.<sup>2</sup> Creed reverses this uncanny framing by suggesting that the monster evokes the attributes of woman: 'birth, nature, the animal and death'. (15) These qualities that are repressed in western patriarchal culture become monstrous when the male monster evokes them.

Creed draws upon cinematic conventions in relation to the uncanny by exploring Freud's statement that 'fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are possible in real life' (36)—thus acknowledging that film, in its unique ability to represent an image of reality, offers another way of seeing the world. The cinema in itself is an uncanny space, a dream factory that can also evoke the horror and anxieties of our inner imaginings. Perhaps, though, rather than a dream, the nightmare movies project a sense of anxiety and tension which, Creed purports, unsettles Laura Mulvey's much discussed male-driven pleasure of authority and control in viewing. As such, there is unease, a phallic panic, because the monster projects an otherness, associated with the feminine.

The book highlights that in cinema, the male monster is transformed through the power of the uncanny gaze, and in the act of concealment and revelation a ghostly feeling may be created. Film conventions are also uncanny in that film animates inanimate objects to create an illusion of movement and reality. The cinematic devices in which movements are seen in fast-forward or in slow motion render the gaze

uncanny. Similarly, the uncanny is also, significantly, evoked with the male monster moving between feminine and bestial qualities.

The male monster endangers the foundation of society through his many guises and in the practices of the uncanny. But one of the uncanniest of all things according to Freud is the womb, especially the displaced womb. In this horror theme the very foundation of society, the biologically feminine process of birth, is threatened. Creed describes in great detail and with great aptitude the horror theme in which man creates life without the agency of woman. She suggests 'that the rational force of science and civilisation is not necessarily a sane one' and may therefore generate a phallic panic. (67) A range of films and cultural myths are discussed, most notably, *Frankenstein* (1931), *Alien Resurrection* (1997) and *Dead Ringers* (1988). The texts discussed all feature male couples and/or groups who attempt to create life, but the life that is produced is monstrous. It is abject.

The abject may also be aligned with Creed's discussion of 'Man as Menstrual Monster'. She asserts: 'his mythic and symbolic associations with woman's menstrual cycle, virginal blood and foetal blood make him the supreme blood monster of the cinema. (94) Creed provides a number of interesting insights in her analysis. An example of this is her discussion of Franco Moretti's collection of essays *Signs Taken for Wonders* in which the monster is viewed as an ambivalent sexualised figure. Creed expands this view by suggesting a more perverse notion than the taboo ideas of oral sadism that Moretti highlights. She suggests that 'Dracula's fanged

mouth represents both a mouth with teeth and a vagina with teeth'. (86) Creed refers to the *vagina dentata* and suggests that as it is depicted in the region of the mouth it is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is uncanny. It also 'warns man about the dangers of female sexuality that is not brought under strict control and regulation'. (87). Significantly, though, in the mouth of a male, Dracula's sexuality is feminised and animalised, and thus it heightens the male anxiety of female sexuality, as that which cannot be suppressed.

The male monsters that the book discusses evoke a deviant form of female sexuality, which alludes to a form of control, yet presents it as primal. The monster signifies sexual excess in that 'it both repels and attracts; hence the protagonist (the desire of the text) also desires what he/she fears'. (85) Furthermore, the sexuality conveyed is also connected to cycles in nature and to women's reproductive organs. For example, in the detailed discussion of Dracula and the vampire myth, Creed insightfully draws a connection between the categories of the primal uncanny and the motif of the womb, which in Dracula mythology is a vault or crypt buried deep in the ground. It is described as a secure space from which he emerges and to which he recedes. She asserts that 'the womb is the source of new life, yet here it harbours the undead; the marked reversal of its natural function renders its uncanny in the extreme. (81) Moreover, the fact that Dracula emerges and 'is active on the full moon, which appears every twenty-eight days, the average length of the menstrual cycle' aligns the character with the primal uncanny. (82) This is an example of

the fertile basis for the seditious themes raised in the book.

The motif of the womb is also further explored in another chapter with the discussion of the monstrous ghost of Elm Street, Freddy Krueger. Creed describes Freddy's behaviour as 'perversely maternal: his most uncanny characteristic is that he keeps the souls of his victims trapped inside his body like a collection of unborn babies'. (162) Thus, this confinement alludes to what may be considered as a monstrous maternal which underlies much of the discussion on adverse procreation.

Creed, furthermore, proceeds to discuss the primal uncanny in the Elm Street films superbly weaving in earlier discussions on Freud's (1919) commentary on E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' to illustrate the effects of the uncanny. Freud is also drawn upon in the discussion of the mythology and cinematic representation of the wolf. In the chapter titled 'Freud's Wolfman', Creed discusses in great detail the primal uncanny which was overlooked or omitted in his 1918 case study. This section is very lengthy in its analysis and critical responses to the various accounts and re-readings of the case study. Nevertheless, it provides the groundwork for the following chapter on the werewolf in cinematic representations. The films *Wolf Man* (1941), *An American Werewolf in London* (1991), *The Howling* (1981) and *Wolf* (1994) are examined. Creed succinctly argues that in 'werewolf films the male body is rendered feminine and uncanny—animal hair sprouts, flesh changes shape ...'. (151–2) Interesting to note here is Estés' (1992) seminal work on the wild woman archetype in which she makes

comparisons between women and wolves, arguing that they also share certain psychic characteristics and similarly have been hounded and harassed.<sup>3</sup> Creed presents an alternative view. It is, rather, not about women who run with the wolves but wolves that run by way of woman. The character points to the primal uncanny and, moreover, to the fragility of nature and civilisation. The narratives are also uncanny in their relation to death in which werewolfism provides 'a rehearsal of the death of the proper subjects and an intimation of the end of the civilised self'. (152) This theme is also evoked in the tales of Jack the Ripper.

In the final chapter Creed argues that Jack the Ripper represents non-being and death. She asserts that he 'was a cruel observer of modern life, a *flâneur* of death'. (181) He is a killer of women. He appears, moreover, to be super-human, possessing uncanny powers to enable him to avoid detection. Creed highlights that though there have been over twenty film versions of Jack the Ripper as well as his being a popular subject of television dramas, novel and plays, there is a lack of detailed academic analysis. The work therefore provides valuable insights to discussions on horror, woman and the modern city. Creed argues that the Ripper in recent decades can be seen in figures such as the slasher and the stalker, as well as the psychopaths from films such as the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* series. Whatever his guise the monster does not present a rational self. He presents dark misogynistic desires that point to the fear and threat of women and the feminine.

The book highlights what Jack the Ripper shares with other classic male monsters. It is,

'that through his monstrous desires and deeds he too uncovers gaps and contradictions at the heart of the symbolic order'. (201) Creed, as well, also expresses these desires but significantly with an insightful feminist engagement of popular culture. The phallic panic moves beyond fantasy by generating a disquiet—fear and unease in the 'proper' masculine order. The book is sensationally subversive, though it not just a panic, but a captivating cultural commentary on the male monsters in horror and their association with what cannot be repressed.

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1. Schelling, cited in Creed.
  2. Linda Williams 'When a Woman Looks' in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (eds), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, Frederick, MD, American Film Institute, 1984, pp. 83–99.
  3. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman*, Ballantine, London, 1992.