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**Living deaths, wicked witches and ‘hagsploitation’: horror and / of the aging female body.**

**ABSTRACT**

*Horror films about women often focus on gendered issues such as pregnancy, birth and menstruation, yet stories about menopause are conspicuous by their absence. This article suggests that while menopause itself isn't explicitly addressed in horror narratives, narrative modes such as the 'hagsploitation' subgenre serve to situate the aging female body as both deficient and 'too much', and as such can be linked implicitly to broader social and medical discourses that mark the aging female body as abject and grotesque. These discourses are explored and challenged through an interrogation of American television show American Horror Story (2011-), which radically celebrates and playfully explores (although not unproblematically) post-menopausal sex and desire through its repeated headline casting of 65-year old actress Jessica Lange as a range of characters who both dread and celebrate the intersection of age and sexuality.*

**KEYWORDS**

American Horror Story  
Hagsploitation  
Horror film  
Jessica Lange  
Menopause

American horror films exhibit a fascination with women's bodies and (cis-)sexuality, and have notably emphasised topics such as birth, pregnancy, motherhood, first heterosex, and menstruation, but are there horror narratives about menopause? What might they look like, and where might we find them? Here I suggest that explicit narratives about menopause are conspicuous by their absence, but that the negative attitudes towards women's sexuality and aging that are circulated through medical and social discourses are present in cinematic and televisual texts in more subtle and insidious ways.

Central to investigating the presence (or absence) of menopause in horror film is a consideration of patterns of cinematic representation of 'older' women. Here I use the term 'older' in a deliberately loose fashion, as the notion of what counts as 'older' shifts over time

and can be considered less as bounded by a specific age range and more as a subjective category of ‘older-than’ that sits in opposition to youthfulness: older is *not-young*. To put it crassly, female actors in mainstream American film (as well as other cultural forms such as television and theatre) have a much shorter ‘shelf life’ than their male counterparts. It is not unusual for male actors to be romantically paired up with women decades younger, while female actors the same age as them, if not significantly younger, are deemed unsuitable as romantic interests (Child, 2015) and cast as supporting, one-dimensional characters that fulfil unflattering stereotypes (Lauzen and Dozier, 2005; Markson 2003; Markson and Taylor, 2000). This relative invisibility articulates itself through a paucity of roles for older women, but also through formal and artistic choices, such as the ways that older women’s bodies are hidden or erased through editing and costuming (Kaplan 2011; Markson, 2003). Such implicit narrative unworthiness directly corresponds to the woman’s perceived lack of desirability, which is broadly associated within Western culture with idealised traits that include (hetero)sexual availability, the performance of a certain type of youthful femininity, and reproductive potential (Bazzini et al., 1997). Certainly, there is a slow trend upwards in terms of the age at which the female actor crosses this invisible and misogynistic line, especially in light of the emergence of what Merryn Gott terms the myth of the ‘sexy oldie’ (Gott 2005), but this nonetheless remains a consistent and reductive representation: when women and their bodies are no longer deemed fit to be subject(ed) to the male gaze, they both literally and figuratively disappear from the screen.

What sort of older women, then, are featured in horror narratives? The genre demonstrates a particular interest in youthful women and sexual content, be explicit or allegorical, but analyses of older women tend to focus on archetypal figures such as the matron (Green, 2011), the crone-witch (Walter, 2015) and the archaic, parthenogenetic mother who is both origin and end (Creed, 1993: 17). A helpful site of intervention in this area is *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane* (Aldrich, 1962), a film that playfully combines the visual and narrative language of the family melodrama with that of the gothic horror. The film focusses on two aging sisters who have a deep hatred for one another, helpfully portrayed by real-life rivals Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Baby Jane Hudson (Davis) had achieved widespread fame as a cutesy-pie vaudeville child star in the 1930s, while her more moderate sister Blanche (Crawford) found success later in life as a ‘serious’ actor. As the film opens, both are in their 50s; Jane is mentally unstable and Blanche is confined to a

wheelchair, and while the two have a lifelong enmity they are nonetheless violently, destructively bound to one another.

The film notably frames the pair as grotesque through a slippage between acceptability and abjection that Lorena Russell terms a “queer[ing of] normative female sexuality” (Russell 2004: 214). This is most evident in the way that the increasingly unstable Jane continues to slather herself in garish stage make up, to dress in cute, frilly frocks, and, later, to preen coquettishly and flirt ostentatiously with a male visitor, much to his obvious revulsion. This provides a transgressive juxtaposition between Jane’s overt performance of youth, her libidinous yet girlish sexuality, and her haggard appearance, all of which challenge implicit understandings of what sort of behaviour is considered to be ‘age appropriate’. This seriocomic presentation, the film’s macabre humour, and the stars’ hammy acting serve to mark *Baby Jane* as an outstanding example of camp horror. This, in turn, calls back explicitly to the comic, overblown presentation of aging actress Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s subversive comedy-drama *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), which remains the exemplar Hollywood text for stories about women aging. The film frames Norma, played with hyperbolic glee by 50 year old Gloria Swanson, as obsessive, erratic and grotesque, while simultaneously implicating the audience and their acceptance of Hollywood’s impossible standards of worth and beauty in her descent into madness and obsolescence.

*Baby Jane* is a helpful place to begin looking at older women in horror because it sparked what has been variously termed the ‘hagsploitation’, ‘Grande Dame Guignol’, or ‘psycho-biddy’ subgenre (Shelley, 2009: 1). The subgenre spans from 1962 to roughly the mid-1970s, and includes titles such as *Hush... Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* (Aldrich, 1964), *Die! Die! My Darling* (Narizzano, 1965), *Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice* (Katzin, 1969), and *Frightmare* (Walker, 1974). These films features older female actors playing mentally unstable or psychotic villains, vulnerable ‘women in peril’, and – in some cases – a slippery combination of the two (Shelley 2009: 8-9). They tend to highlight festering domestic relationships while combining the formal and narrative elements (and excesses) of the gothic melodrama with the raucous and visceral pleasures of cheap, sensational exploitation films.

The fact that the actors involved in hagsploitation films had been A-list celebrities or highly regarded actors in their own right, like Davis and Crawford, means that such titles can be considered as exploitation flicks twice over. As lurid, often low-budget films that exploit niche interests – and perhaps, economically, the audience (Watson, 1997: 76) – they fit the generic sense of the term, but they are also films that exploit the actors themselves. The

women often play snarling parodies of their former iconic selves (Russell, 2004: 219), and the films implicitly ask the viewer to compare one with the other: the glamorous past and the skewed, horrific present. There is some suggestion that that these films denigrate and ritually humiliate their leading ladies in a form of backlash against second wave feminism (Fisiak, 2014: 42-4), but this is, perhaps, a little reductive. Given the capacity for exploitation films and counter-cinema to be sites of contestation and resistance (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008: 8-10; Watson, 1997: 66-67), I suspect that within these films the rage against gendered double standards of worth and attractiveness is both contained and expressed. While certainly sensational, these films offer actors a carnivalesque opportunity to act 'inappropriately' that involves a violent renunciation of the societal imperative that frames the ideal woman as youthful, fecund, beautiful and docile.

While the hagspoitation subgenre was shortlived, its mode of representation remains prominent. The horror genre excels at challenging boundaries, be they the boundaries of bodies, aesthetics, taste, or narrative acceptability, yet parts for older women within the genre remain remarkably constrained. They centre on figures such as witch-like crones (*Drag Me To Hell* (Raimi, 2009)), monstrous mothers (*Mother's Day* (Kaufman 1980), *Braindead* (Jackson, 1992)), deranged spinsters looking for fulfilment (*Misery* (Reiner, 1990)), women who are unable to accept that the shape of their social and sexual roles have changed (*Grace* (Solet, 2009)), and women whose monstrosity emerges alongside disease (*The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Robitel, 2014)). These stories are coloured by loss and longing, and they highlight the latter two figures of the pervasive maiden-mother-crone triad that conceptualises the female lifecycle (Green 2011: 24). They present alternatives to normative, idealised, youthful femininity as horrific, and as such act as both threat and cautionary tale.

It is notable that the most interesting and nuanced representations of older women in horror come not from film but from television. *American Horror Story* (2011-present, hereafter *AHS*), is an anthology series that offers a different story every season, each set at a different time and in a different archetypal site of horror: a haunted house in present day Los Angeles, an asylum in 1960s Massachusetts, a coven in present day New Orleans, and a travelling freak show in 1950s Florida. The first season, in particular, is fixated upon issues of gender, sexuality, reproduction, abortion, infidelity and the relationship between mothers and children, and these deeply gendered concerns carry through the series in various forms.

Like other shows by series creators Brad Falchuck and Ryan Murphy, such as *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) and *Glee* (2009-2015), *AHS* demonstrates an explicitly camp and

queer sensibility, particularly in the manner that it explores issues of sex, gender, taste, identity and the capacities of ‘transgressive’ bodies. The show also has an effusive attitude towards horror tropes that can be loosely described as ‘throw it all at the wall and see what sticks’; the second season (*AHS: Asylum*) alone includes (but is not limited to) serial killers, alien abductions, a psychosis-included musical dream sequence, wicked nuns, demonic possessions, mutants, a Nazi doctor, racial hate crimes and the forced institutionalisation of a lesbian journalist. This madcap semiotic tsunami faces supernatural horrors off against entirely human ones, alternating between outright nastiness and a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour.

As with film, older women have been consistently underrepresented in American primetime television (Signorelli 2004). Contrary to this, *AHS* offers varied, nuanced and often scenery-chewing roles for a variety of women and female-identifying actors, including critically-acclaimed performers in their 50s and 60s such as Kathy Bates, Frances Conroy and Angela Bassett. Of particular note is the show’s repeat headline casting of Jessica Lange. The show celebrates Lange, who is in her mid-60s, as equal parts queer icon, sex symbol, and celebrated *grande dame* of prestige television. Even within the context of the emergence of more positive media images and accounts of sexuality and aging (Gott, 2005), Lange’s roles are remarkable in their sensual frankness and her portrayals have garnered extensive critical acclaim.

Lange’s characters are complex, strong-willed, and tragic figures who are willing to do terrible things to advance their own interests. Constance Langdon (*AHS: Murder House*) is a vindictive and status-hungry woman with a tragic family history who helps to facilitate a demonic pregnancy in a storyline that pays homage to *Rosemary’s Baby* (Polanski, 1968). Sister Jude (*AHS: Asylum*), named for the patron saint of lost causes, is exceptionally cruel to the patients at the asylum that she oversees. Her hard line against sinfulness is problematised by her secret history as a promiscuous chanteuse, her ongoing conflict about her own passions, and her anger at the misogyny of the world and the church. Season three (*AHS: Coven*) engages explicitly with issues of aging: Fiona Goode, the Supreme Witch of her coven, is obsessed with maintaining her good looks and power. The inevitable emergence of a new, younger Supreme literally robs her of her vitality and her formidable supernatural abilities, but Fiona resorts to extreme measures, including murdering young contenders, in an attempt to retain her status – a status that conflates raw power with beauty and desirability. Season four (*AHS: Freakshow*) casts Lange as aging German singer Elsa Mars, a one-time

rival of Marlene Dietrich who now runs a failing travelling freak show, although her own pathological obsession with fame and glamour comes at the expense of the freaks she has promised to care for.

Importantly, each of Lange's storylines draw from the themes and narratives of hagsploitation: they emphasise loss, relationships between women and the cruelty that each of the characters have experienced as they have aged, both in terms of their personal lives and more broadly within a society that marks them as increasingly irrelevant because of their age. These themes act as blood and marrow to each season, and are never sidelined as less worthy than the concerns and affairs of younger characters. This is not just horror and the aging body, but the horror *of* the aging body: an exploration of the effects of a misogynistic representation of women that elevates youthfulness, fecundity and sexual availability, suggesting that only by fulfilling these criteria might individual worth be found or mined.

It is here that *AHS* offers a helpful site of inquiry regarding the presence (or absence) of horror films that deal with menopause. The show's repeat casting of Lange, and the concerns addressed within her storylines and by her characters, is an explicit intervention with deeply problematic value judgements that surround older women's bodies, identities and sexualities. Within both Western medical discourse and the mass media menopause is constructed not as a natural process, a change in experience, and a collection of vasomotor symptoms, but as a disease, specifically a *deficiency* in oestrogen (Gannon and Stevens, 2008). The assumption is that menopause is experienced uniformly as inherently negative and that it requires potentially aggressive pharmaceutical intervention, an attitude that is exacerbated by the discourses circulated by those same medical companies that benefit from such demand (Fugh-Berman, 2015). Like other pharmaceutical engagements with sex, the (hetero)sexually available and willing body is posited as the ideal (Vares et al., 2007). This adds to the litany of ways that women's bodies are treated as abject and divergent, both deficient and 'too much', rather than as a body-in-process. As Jane M. Ussher contends, these discursive 'truths' suggest that the "inevitable end of fecundity" is "disease, decay, atrophy and senility" (Ussher, 2006: 127). Menopause, then, sits in opposition to normative femininity, and is specifically indicative of its *loss*. Within this context, *AHS*'s emphasis upon stories about older women, especially those that emphasise sexuality and desire, can be read as deeply transgressive.

This discursive construction of the aging female body is complicated within *AHS*. In *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* and other hagsploitation films, we are asked implicitly to

marvel and perhaps cringe at the shift – that is, the *decline* – from the actor’s youthful elegance and curated beauty to the presentation of the actor as a ghastly, camp, witch-like figure. This trajectory crystallises women’s cinematic (and societal) value as objects to-be-looked-upon, rather than as agents. Within *AHS*, while we certainly bear witness to the deterioration of Lange’s various characters – in some cases to shocking effect – we are also asked to compare Lange’s own glamorous past with her equally glamorous present, be it on-screen, through the show’s promotional material, or in her appearances at awards shows and fan conventions. Lange is consistently, explicitly presented to the viewer as unapologetically erotic and sexually active. She is framed as the deserving object of the audience’s gaze, yet gazes back confrontationally – as queer icon, as sex symbol. Nonetheless, this challenge to normative standards of youthful beauty still sits within broader constraints. Lange is white, elegant and conventionally attractive. She brings to her current roles, including her presentation in the media, a reminder of her bombshell past that serves to maintain the smooth mask of femininity.

While *AHS* offers a transgressive and, perhaps, progressive alternative representation of older women onscreen, this representation remains planted within extremely narrow aesthetic parameters, and lodged within the concerns and suppositions that have traditionally driven older women’s storylines. Importantly, this challenge occurs within an already ambivalent, niche space, for the horror genre and the show’s camp mode of representation both trade upon and encourage a playful blurring of boundaries. Might this sexualisation have occurred within a more ‘mainstream’ text, or with one of the female actors who conforms less to normative beauty standards? At this point in time, it seems that such eroticism and objectification remain wedged firmly within reductive and highly gendered discourses surrounding aging, beauty and worth.

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