

## Short-Form Women-Made Horror: Origins and Observations

Erica Tortoloni

Volume 5, numéro 2, december 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1096040ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096040ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Tortoloni, E. (2022). Short-Form Women-Made Horror: Origins and Observations. *Monstrum*, 5(2), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096040ar>

© Erica Tortoloni, 2022



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

## Short-Form Women-Made Horror:

### Origins and Observations<sup>1</sup>

Erica Tortoloni

An animated, disembodied hand, its veins and ligaments provocatively exposed, juts out into the frame. Small trinkets, figurines, maps, clocks, scientific diagrams, historical illustrations, all frantically pulsating, appear in succession, enclosed in a circular iris. Staticky music, juxtaposed with natural sounds from a park (or perhaps a playground), fill the soundtrack and are quickly interrupted by the shrill screams of young children. A female doll, our protagonist, watches as limbs, blood, and teeth swirl around her.

Such describes, in part, visual artist Janie Geiser's 2009 short, *Ghost Algebra*. Geiser herself suggests that the animation fulfills, in part, the true meaning of *algebra*—that is, “the science of restoring what is missing, the reunion of broken parts” (Geiser n.d.). Indeed, *Ghost Algebra* reassembles “a landscape of constructed nature and broken bones [...] the fragility of [the human body] exposed for what it is: ephemeral, liquid, a battlefield of nervous dreams” (Geiser n.d.). Beyond such ruminations on death, violence, and the corporeal,<sup>2</sup> *Ghost Algebra* and other Geiser films—like *Immer Zu* (1997), *The Fourth Watch* (2000), and *Arbor* (2012)—become even more significant for their significant role in short-form, women-made horror. We can observe, within the past several decades at least, a massive output of short-form horror helmed by women both in film festival circuits, including the Renegade Film Festival<sup>3</sup> and

---

<sup>1</sup> The following essay has been adapted from the author's doctoral dissertation, *Bitten By the Demon of Cinema: An Examination of Women-Made Horror* (2021).

<sup>2</sup> David Finkelstein of *filmtbreat.com* provides a similar assessment, noting that “The film's title might suggest a method for trying to rationalize one's fear of death, but it might also suggest that the calculations themselves are elusive, ghostly.” In “Ghost Algebra” (2011), <https://filmtbreat.com/uncategorized/ghost-algebra/>.

<sup>3</sup> Formerly known as the Women in Horror Film Festival.

Etheria Film Festival, and online via video sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, women creators' tendency to gravitate towards the horror short is nothing new. As I explore in this essay, at the most basic level, shortform horror filmmaking reinvented women, otherwise on the outskirts of mainstream Hollywood, back into creative roles behind the camera, despite the fiscal and technological challenges that came with it. Women were ultimately afforded more creative leeway, encouraging different genres, topics, and aesthetic styles to be incorporated in their films (Davis 2012, 11-12).<sup>5</sup> Artists-creators who I have affectionately deemed horror's "founding mothers"<sup>6</sup>—interrogating horrific imagery and themes at the cross-sections of film, animation, performance, and other media—transformed horror through the short in numerous ways: by reworking generic tropes, at times through intertextual exchanges; by building worlds through alternative, immersive sensorial experiences; and, as a result, by encouraging active spectatorship, to name a few. As I discuss, short-form horror's founding mothers, especially in non-mainstream experimental circles, were both horror creators and communicators, who had an indelible role in the ways in which horror was understood and normalized in society at large. The works created by these foundational figures have in common the unique ability to take otherwise commonplace images and subject matter (in and outside of horror proper) and

---

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Cooper, for instance, compiles numerous horror shorts—some helmed by female directors like Geiser and Leila Jarman—that are free to access on these video sharing platforms (see <https://denniscooperblog.com/19-experimental-horror-films/>). Similarly, Ellen Avigliano for *divinationhollow.com* offers a list of women-made short-form horror films, most of which can be streamed on Vimeo in particular, in conjunction with the Final Girls Film Fest (see <https://divinationhollow.com/reviews-and-articles/short-horror-films-by-women-to-stream-now>).

<sup>5</sup> To be sure, most production companies had a creative stronghold over their directors, even those working with a lower budget. Nevertheless, a "new way of making films outside of the major Hollywood studios"—both in terms of production practices, and aesthetic choices—came to fruition in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>6</sup> I've coined the term "founding mothers" – tongue firmly in cheek – as a way to best describe those female progenitors of visual, narrative, and thematic elements of the horror genre, in disciplines like cinema, proto-cinema, and the visual/performing arts. Borrowing from Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection, Barbara Creed further observes that the "mother" or maternal in horror "does not respect borders, positions, rules, that which disturbs identity, system, order" (Creed 1986, 38). Horror's founding mothers, therefore, while not as negatively coded as maternal abjection, still arguably disrupt the same types of boundaries in their interpretation of the genre.

give them new feminist meaning. Such radical tendencies extend into the modern day, where contemporary women horror creators share in common the same movement towards subversion in their short-form horror creations.

Beginning with a more general overview of the role of women in short-form horror media, this essay focuses on those artist-filmmakers experimenting with horrific imagery in modern art circles in the twentieth century, namely Maya Deren, Mary Ellen Bute, and Claire Parker. I then draw parallels between these founding mothers and contemporary online horror which, in many instances reconceptualize existing women-made horror. Such remediations are similarly redefining the boundaries of the horror genre, all while breaking new ground in how horror is created, communicated, and now shared across media platforms.

### **Towards the Short Form: New Perspectives**

It is first important to consider *why* the short is so popular amongst women behind the camera. Talking more broadly about her experiences making and studying film shorts, scholar Charlotte Crofts observes that

The lack of narrative space in short film also contributes to its open-endedness as a medium, demanding a similarly active spectatorship [...] Thus the short form could be said to be potentially radical in its tendency to encourage the imaginative activity of the spectator. As [Malcolm] Le Grice suggests one way to resist “dominant cinema” is by ‘demanding or encouraging a more “conscious” or self-aware spectator. (Crofts 2007, 19-20)

The short, by this logic, breaks new ground stylistically, and spectatorially, allowing women creators to radically challenge mainstream filmmaking *writ large*. Short-form filmmaking becomes even more relevant, arguably, when considering the horror genre. Speaking with Brian Hauser, multi-hyphenate horror creator Jennifer Trudrung states rather baldly that the short’s appeal lies in the fact that she’s “just a true horror geek. I absolutely love horror [...] My imagination is also ripe with scary ideas. I tend to try not to think too hard on what lurks in the corner, but I’m also riddled with fears. So making short horror films came quite naturally” (Hauser 2022, 182). Actor-director Tristan Risk, comparing short-form horror to “tango-dances—they are a brief love affair,” offers additional rationale for their attraction to the horror-short,

noting that “short films can elicit a strong reaction [...] I think it’s a neat trick if you can take someone on an emotional journey in a short period of time, allowing for a richer depth of experience” (Christopher 2019, n.p.). Meredith Alloway of *Ride* and *Deep Tissue* [2019] fame observes the formal, stylistic, and thematic potential of horror shorts:

I have been making horror movies since I was about 10 — they’re sitting in my closet on VHS. They’re ridiculous. I think genre is such a great way to explore darker themes in life. I don’t think I set out to make horror films, but let the story dictate the tone and the tone dictate the genre — and also really love playing with typical ‘genre’ boundaries. My first short *Interior Teresa* wasn’t horror, but played with spiritual elements that did let it live slightly in that world. I also think thrillers, body horror, psychological descent films and slashers (all the above!) can be really fun.” (Bohannon 2021)

From these observations, it is clear that short-form horror allows creators to embrace the genre in an experimental, almost playful way, in effect feeding “an impulse and a passion and a daily trek,” in Alloway’s words (Bohannon 2021). Beyond taking enjoyment in short-film horror, we can additionally extrapolate other advantages to the horror short: it is an overall practical, not to mention cost-effective, entry point into a restrictive (financially and otherwise) film industry. Besides, short-form women-made horror encapsulates women’s unique experiences, showcasing in part “other worldviews, opening the variety of ‘real’ and showing new ways of seeing things with other stories that can give a counterpoint to those ideas that the main cultural industries offer” (Caradeux and Salom 2013, 128). Women-made short-form horror, in other words, opens up the space for new, alternative experiences not only along gender lines but also intersectionally, accounting for deeper explorations of race, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic class otherwise not afforded in the industry at large, born out of systematic inequalities that are still present today.

Above all, short form horror implies something *outside of* Hollywood. In the contemporary context, Hauser asserts: “Horror films have long been a genre that blurs the lines between studio and independent fare, allowing some filmmakers to achieve big-budget commercial success without necessarily requiring front-end studio involvement. Horror films, and specifically horror short films, may offer a singular opportunity on the border between these categories” (2022, 195). This positioning of horror between the mainstream and

the margins can be traced back even further to Hollywood's studio era. "When Lois Weber warned would-be female directors in 1927 that they would 'never get away with it'," writes Karen Ward Mahar, "the age of the female filmmaker appeared to be over" (Mahar 2008, 204). To be sure, as the Hollywood film industry expanded economically (with the rise of the studio system in the late-1920s) and technologically (with developments such as synchronized sound and the transition to color film), the number of opportunities for women behind the camera decreased significantly. Additionally, as studios became "larger, centralized, and dependent on outside capital," different roles within the film industry became largely gendered, with women being pushed out by their male counterparts and placed instead in roles with less creative control (Mahar, 204).<sup>8</sup> Women, once "touted as artists" and argued as bringing "special talents to the screen," were now viewed as being intrinsically different from their male counterparts, their abilities constrained to so-called feminine dramas, like social-problem films, serials and, above all, melodramas (Mahar, 190). Horror filmmaking<sup>9</sup>, therefore, was a male enterprise, at least within the context of the studio system; women, already on the outskirts of this industry, were defined "as suitable filmmakers *only* when the subject of was germane to women."<sup>10</sup>

### Horror's Founding Mothers: Bute, Parker, and Deren

Given the gendered discrimination of the Hollywood studio system, it would appear as if women's role as horror directors, during and after this industrial shift, is relatively scant. On the contrary, a number of women creators outside the studio system—namely, within avant-garde film circles—experimented

---

<sup>7</sup> "It," in this regard, pertaining to "filmmaking careers. Mahar, 2.

<sup>8</sup> According to Mark Garrett Cooper, factors like vertical integration, the rigidity of production roles (ultimately eliminating the pipeline that actors and screenwriters would travel to become directors), and the overall opinion that directing "would be men's work" (Cooper 2010, xvii), each helped to eliminate women from major directorial opportunities. Even studios like Universal Pictures, who were unique in their employment and promotion of a large number of women behind the camera, abandoned these progressive practices in favor of such industrial developments. In Mark Cooper, *Universal Women: Filmmaking and Institutional Change in Early Hollywood* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, in directorial roles; women instead have figured prominently in screenwriting and editing, for instance.

<sup>10</sup> Author's emphasis; Mahar, 192.

heavily with horrific elements, their contributions arguably vital to the expansion of short-form horror as a whole. One such example is Mary Ellen Bute, whose work combines traditional animation, lighting techniques, music, and other visual effects<sup>11</sup> to reproduce a unique audiovisual language, and, in Bute's words, to create "a world of color, form, movement and sound in which the elements are in a state of controllable flux," with film thus becoming "a stimulant by its own inherent powers of sensation [...] on the effect it produces" (Bute 1956). Bute's films, along these lines, immerse the viewer fully within a sensory experience that heightens their affective response to a film. This is most evident in her 1939 short animation, *Spook Sport*,<sup>12</sup> a "new type of film ballet" that combines traditional, popular horror visuals (like ghosts and so-called "spooks") with "Danse macabre," a classical song and poem chronicling the activities of the undead on Halloween (Bute 1939). Bute, while not explicitly staking a claim in the horror genre, animates her abstract, neon-colored illustrations in such a way to as to both physically visualize sound (Naumann, n.d.)—in this case, the frightening tune of the *Danse macabre*—and lend a further sense of eerie uncanniness to otherwise inanimate objects. As indicated in its opening intertitle, the film depicts "the bewitching hour of midnight, [when] spooks and ghosts arise from their graves to cavort about and make merry" (Bute 1939). Certainty, throughout the film, Bute expertly fulfills this description, layering darting, dancing, and morphing creatures on top of a foggy, mysterious midnight sky. The menacing and altogether unpredictable movements of the ghosts, spooks, and other creatures, which interact within a traditionally scary environment, therefore add a more horrific tone to the film. Bute then calls upon her audience to experience the film in a fully sensory way, encouraging their frightened, or at least uneasy, response to the content of her film. *Spook Sport*, beyond merely featuring horrific elements, amplifies its status as a horror film through its affective experimentations, a key example of the transgressive potential of short-form, women-made horror.

For other artists, the combination of the avant-garde and horror genre harkened back to the foundational works of Alice Guy-Blaché and Germaine Dulac, borrowing from multiple genres and narrative techniques, as well as

---

<sup>11</sup> These include such experiments with light and movement, which reproduced "constant flowing forms" like "swirling liquids, clouds or circles" (which were created by common household items like mirrors, cellophane, kitchen tools, and jewelry). See William Moritz. 1996. "Mary Ellen Bute: Seeing Sound," *Animation World* 1, no. 2: 29-32.

<sup>12</sup> *Spook Sport* is oftentimes credited to animator Norman McLaren, who collaborated on some of the visuals for the film.

displaying, in tandem, physical and psychological horrors. Animator Claire Parker, together with husband and collaborator Alexandre Alexeieff,<sup>13</sup> paid similar attention to the horror genre, using the novel *pinscreen*, or pinboard, animation method in each of their films. In brief, this animation medium, invented specifically by Parker and Alexeieff, consists of thousands of small metal pins held upright and moved around by a roller system; when lit in different positions, shadows emitted from the pins created moving images that could be photographed (Furniss 2014, 54).<sup>14</sup> The result of the pinscreen is rather distinct. In Maureen Furniss's assessment, not only does it afford a "wide variety of image types [...] from abstract to representational, from realistic to stylized and from firmly modeled to softly amorphous" due to the positioning of the pins relative to the lighting apparatus, but these images also have an almost nightmare-like quality, becoming more "loosely constructed, blending into the [background] rather than being self-contained forms" (54). This then leads to a number of creative possibilities. In *Le nez* (1963), Parker and Alexeieff use these fluid movements to capture a variety of emotions on their characters' faces, seamlessly weaving between thriller, drama, and dark comedy in the process. In their earliest and most famous work, 1933's *Night on Bald Mountain*, the pinscreen effectively enters the realm of horror. Described by Arthur G. Robson as "a nightmare, a *Walpurgisnacht*" (Robson, n.d.), the film takes inspiration from Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, and features a dizzying, chaotic montage of witches congregating on top of the titular mount. Like Bute, Parker and her collaborator combine the rhythm of a thrilling, sometimes chilling classical score with the fluid movements of horror characters; in *Bald Mountain*'s case, these include floating witches, grotesque animal hybrids, and shadowy, demonic creatures. Moreover, like Blaché's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *Bald Mountain* combines physical horrors (human and animal faces mutating into one another, bodies floating in mid-air, and so forth), with the psychological, focusing on tormented emotional states just as much as visual grotesqueries. Viewers are often shown innocent victims—or what appear to be innocent victims—grimacing and contorting in horror at the very sight of the witches' activities. Enveloped in "shadows and shine, positive and negative space,

---

<sup>13</sup> Like Bute, Parker's films are often solely attributed to a male collaborator; in this case, Alexeieff is listed above Parker in their films' credits.

<sup>14</sup> In 1973, Norman McLaren released a documentary in which Parker and Alexeieff demonstrate the technology and creative capacity of pinscreen animation amongst fellow animators. For more information, see *Pinscreen*, streamed in full by the National Film Board of Canada.



surface and depth, and above all else, the virtual and actual” (Thain n.d., 168), the spectator is witnessing the victim’s reactions but, because of the frequent lighting and movement techniques, the spectator is also left in a state of utter chaos. The film as a result, leaves the viewer in a perpetual state of horror, immersed in a “tragicomic story of life and death” (Robson n.d.) where confusion and mental anguish are at the forefront. *Night on Bald Mountain*, in its surreal imagery, aptly encapsulates the sheer terror of the source material—the Witch’s Sabbath—and the eventual societal and physical persecution that accused “witches” would face as a result. *Bald Mountain*, as a result, has important implications for how trauma, and specifically women’s trauma, can be represented on screen. A striking entry into women-made horror, Parker’s animation combines horror and the surreal to chronicle the terrors of the everyday.

Still, for others, using horrific elements in film followed in the longer tradition of visual modernisms outside of film, like in dada and surrealism.<sup>15</sup> Maya Deren, one of the foremost figures in US avant-garde film circles during the 1940s and 1950s, is an interesting example of this, given her own tangential affiliation with surrealist filmmaking and her subsequent work in collaboration with fellow artists like Marcel Duchamp (Keller 2015, 67).<sup>16</sup> Deren’s work across her career can be characterized by the themes of autobiography, modern subjectivity, and subconscious exploration, as well as her frequent experiments with movement and mobility (juxtaposing physical movements like dance with experimental, visual techniques) and, in her later works, explorations of Afro-Caribbean culture.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, a common thread through all of Deren’s works is a fascination with dreams—not just the nonsensical, abstract imagery that is commonplace to dreamlike states, but also, in the words of Sarah Keller, the temporal “logic of dreamscapes” that takes shape in nonlinear narrative

---

<sup>15</sup> For a lengthier discussion on this topic, see the author’s dissertation, *Bitten by the Demon of Cinema* (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Deren “did not consider herself a Surrealist, she felt her art form [sic] was more controlled than allowed by the movement’s original objectives using ‘stream of consciousness’.” (Philpot 2001, n.p.). However, the case has been made by both contemporaneous and current critics for surrealism, noting her tendency towards conveying “the Imaginary, to map the very psychic structures that predate and predetermine both the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’ [...]” (Harper 2016, 290).

<sup>17</sup> See P. Adams Sitney (1974); Catrina Neiman, “An Introduction to the Notebook of Maya Deren” (1980, 4); Maria Pramaggiore, “Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren” (1997, 25); Graeme Harper, “Maya Deren in Person in Expressionism” (2016, 291).

structures and the “emotional experience” that one may have with their dreams (Keller 2015, 32). What has often been neglected from these discussions of Deren’s use of dreams, however, is how it implicitly grafts onto the horror genre. In her most famous work, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943),<sup>18</sup> Deren constructs a dreamlike world—characterized by “collapsing and expanding of time and space, meticulous structure, mysterious symbology and imagery, and recursive, poetic logic”—which, as its narrative unfolds, quickly shifts into a nightmare-scape marked by violence, death, and an overall sense of disarray (42).

This experimentation with psychological horror is expanded in Deren’s incomplete short, *Witch’s Cradle* (1944),<sup>19</sup> which combines dreamlike qualities (like the movement of inanimate objects, and repetition of actions and events) with actual horrific elements, like an ominously beating heart, ritual magic, witches, and occult symbols (prominently, the pentagram painted on the forehead of actress Anne Matta Clark).<sup>20</sup> The result of Deren’s combination of such horror tropes with the display of jarring psychological states is two-fold. On one hand, the film immerses its viewers in a seemingly never-ending labyrinthine journey that constantly threatens the protagonist with literal and figurative stasis; vine-like strings frequently constrain the protagonist and her non-linear, non-resolute movements in time. On the other hand, in her exploration of magic and the occult related to the female body, Deren makes implicit statements about gender. As Keller offers, “the ‘witch’ invoked in the film’s title both [wields] an excess of power and yet [is] always in danger of punishment for her brazen independence” (66). In other words, the use of horrific elements in *Witch’s Cradle*, through the trope of the witch, communicates the fraught status of women as both “wielding an excess of power” and being “in danger of punishment for her brazen independence” (66). Indeed, Matta Clark’s witch character oscillates between being powerful and powerless,

---

<sup>18</sup> Like Parker’s films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is attributed to two directors; in this case, the film is directed by both Deren, and her then-husband, Alexander Hammid.

<sup>19</sup> Several parts of *The Witch’s Cradle* are lost, but in general, the film was not completed. This, according to some, is because Deren herself “must have surmised that [the film] did not or would not be successful at some point in the production” (Keller 2015, 61).

<sup>20</sup> There are confusing inconsistencies as to the correct name of the actress playing Deren’s witch. Sources like IMDb, for instance, list the actress as “Pajorita Matta;” other, particularly in reference to her artist son, Gordon Clark, use “Anne Clark Matta,” “Anna Matta,” and “Anne Alpert” in their records. For the purposes of consistency, I’ll be using “Anne Matta Clark” (referenced in Sarah Keller’s text) in my analysis.

eventually ensnared by a series of web-like ropes that appear in the empty gallery space. However, by the film's end, the witch reclaims agency through her magical powers: through the simple act of looking, she is able to set herself free from the ropes, a literal and figurative symbol of restrictive power in society, and redirect them towards the figural, oftentimes grotesque artworks that fill the halls of the gallery (perhaps a representation of the restrictive, "boy's club" in the modern art world). *Witch's Cradle* ultimately ends on a cliffhanger, with Matta Clark's witch once again cowering in fear over the ropes that twist across the gallery. Yet, this uncertain ending works to turn the witch trope on its head; rather than merely representing the woman-as-witch as a figure in constant persecution by her male counterparts, as was more or less common in the horror trope, Deren presents a witch that is multi-dimensional, one that works to regain her agency and actively work against the inevitable persecution that she faces within society. At its core, horror is impactful because it encapsulates the power dynamics of the chaotic back-and-forth between dominance and submission that results, in mainstream iterations, in the latter. Deren, through her aesthetic reconceptualization of the witch trope, reconceptualizes horror as a genre, constructing a world in which the monster character is indeed complex, and the power struggle is one where there is no clear-cut resolution. Coupled with the distinct mythos surrounding Deren's own persona as an artist,<sup>21</sup> the visual and thematic experiments in *The Witch's Cradle* propel it into a distinct realm of horror, one that is extended in more contemporary iterations of the genre that reclaim the witch.

As I have discussed thus far, the works of directors like Bute, Parker, and Deren were located outside of the studio system, during a time that generally eschewed the creative input of women behind the camera. Nevertheless, the works of non-mainstream directors like Bute, Parker, and Deren were valuable for their expansion of horrific elements developed by other seminal female creators as well as their new interpretations of such content aesthetically and thematically. Of course, the trajectory of the cinematic medium—and all of the multi-media experiments surrounding it—is enriched by the contributions of women, who laid the groundwork for how we understand horror as a unique and popular genre. The creative contributions of these women—some prominent, some obscure, and some that were altogether anonymous—are indeed novel for their experiments with horror *as a genre*. They

---

<sup>21</sup> Rumors of Deren as a witch place her in a unique position with the horror genre, reinforcing "the image of Maya as an occult priestess, the exotic 'angle' of her story which most journalists still find irresistible" (Neiman 1980, 15).

were preoccupied with how the genre (and, all of its earliest iterations) looked and felt, and how audiences could and should understand the content they were consuming.

### Short-Form Horror's New Internet Frontiers

As we see in the contemporary context, experiments with short-form horror now also consider affective response, namely, how the spectator should react to and interact with on-screen horrific content. Additionally, contemporary women-made horror is all the more radical in its reinterpretation of the genre, situating horror as a larger statement on topics like gender, sexuality, and race relations. Shorts like *Suicide By Sunlight* (Nikyatu Jusu, 2019), *For A Good Time Call...* (Izzy Lee, 2019), *Do You Want Me to Kiss You This Time?* (*Quieres Que Hoy Te Bese?*; Miriam Ortega Dominguez, 2019) and many others have taken both film festivals and Internet platforms by storm, “filled with meaty, macabre substance and no filler” (Guest Editor 2020). Outside of the festival circuit, even more interesting experiments in horror shorts have been taking place: namely, on popular social media sites. According to Megan McCluskey, Tik Tok in particular has been fertile ground for short-form horror creation. “From comedies to musicals, these videos run the genre gamut,” McCluskey observes,

There’s even a thriving corner of the TikTok community that has taken to creating short-form horror flicks — including ones that are themed for this unique moment in time. And while it may seem strange for horror fans to want to experience the thrill of a good scare in the midst of a crisis that could be considered a real-life nightmare, with millions of viewers tuning in, it’s clear some of these spooky shorts are resonating with people. (2020)

Typically, however, Tik Tok’s women-made horror takes on myriad forms and styles, beyond traditional horror narratives. Shelby Nicole of @nightpoolproductions, for instance, alternates between “story-time”-style testimonials, directly addressing the viewer with personal anecdotes; engaging summaries of real-life true crime headlines; and ranking and reviewing her favorite horror content, including those Tik Tok-specific shorts cropping up since 2020. Similarly, @briheartshorror and @horror\_chronicles share their favorite horror content, giving first-hand accounts and reviews of mainstream, indie, and even experimental horror content. Still others are largely self-

reflexive, following the tradition of many other Tik Tok creators, in that they remix and rework pre-existing horror content in new, bite-sized formats. This is most evident in the recent resurgence of soundbites from Cecelia Condit's influential horror short, *Possibly in Michigan* (1983), on the platform, where users like @stargirlaur (a popular cosplayer on the site) lip sync and even reenact snippets from the infamous horror short.<sup>22</sup> All in all, what's noticeable about the new batch of short-form, women-made horror is, like the foundational figures in experimental film and video before them, its transgressive nature, on multiple levels. New horror shorts, akin to those works by horror's founding mothers, evidently play with form, offering alternatives to traditional horror content in the process. They break the fourth wall, actively incorporating multiple storytelling forms and engaging the spectator, this time with an arguably broader (viral) reach. And, through this social mediated environment, new horror shorts in effect maintain "relationships with audiences that many institutions find difficult to engage, developing alternative narratives and reclaimed histories."<sup>23</sup>

Quoting a Tik Tok user who popularized the #filmtok hashtag on the site, Maybelle Morgan notes:

What we watch has always had a direct impact on culture and society, and as long as conversations in film are singular so will be viewpoints by the masses that consume them [...] There's a ton to discuss in terms of race, gender, and sexuality in film, and the darker potential that it can have as a tool of propaganda or in terms of producing and reinforcing negative stereotypes that genuinely affect people's lives. The stories we tell as a culture, and the funding that goes behind that, has a very tangible impact on all of us. (Morgan 2021).

---

<sup>22</sup> Many articles exist dissecting the popularity of Condit's horror short; see, for example, Tatum Dooley's 2019 piece for *Vice*: [https://garage.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wjv8z/cecilia-condit-video-art-tiktok](https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/wjv8z/cecilia-condit-video-art-tiktok).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Chitty develops this argument in reference to digital film archival work, namely, co-curation "between collections-based institutions and members of the public" (2011, 413). In my view, Chitty's observations are salient to new short-form women-made horror: social media sites like Tik Tok arguably house media texts in a way similar to these digital archives; they reinterpret relationships between film industry-as-institution and consumer; and, importantly, create a space for such "alternative narratives and reclaimed experiences" from women in front of and behind the camera. See Chitty. 2011. "London Re-cut: Reclaiming History through the Co-curated Remixing of Film," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 54, no. 4: 413-418.

Indeed, the significance of women creators, even beyond the horror genre, is one that is mold-breaking and discourse-disrupting. Importantly, such new tendencies can be traced back to those early creators who, firstly, offer new insights into the power and potential of horror and, secondly, exploring the nuances, and oftentimes shortcomings, of the existing genre, laying bare the scaffolding of otherwise commonplace genre conventions, and the potential (and, sometimes harmful) shortcomings thereof. Returning to the work of Janie Geiser, the short arguably has the unique potential to “activate our primal fears, emotions, childish fascination, nostalgia, fear of ghosts, remembrances; resonating in the spiritual part of the self and how is it related to this emotional hauntology we know very little of but is present as deeply as something we might’ve felt minutes ago” (Sarmiento Hinojosa 2020). Undeniably, the women at the heart of my discussion have cultivated an index of images and techniques challenging those things that society deems horrific, breaking down such rigid assumptions and, sometimes simultaneously, loudly and proudly expressing aspects of identity that are limited or censored in mainstream society. Women clearly have always made horror, and the short, once on the genre’s periphery, is now an essential mode of discourse that amplifies these voices at their loudest.

---

**Erica Tortolani** recently completed a Ph.D. in Communication with a concentration in Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Together with Martin F. Norden, she has published the edited volume *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Leni* (Edinburgh University Press), which debuted in March 2021. Her work has also appeared in *Interdisciplinary Humanities* journal, the *Journal of Historical Fictions*, *In Media Res: A Media Commons Project*, and the edited volume *Bloody Women!*.

## References

- Bohannon, Anna. 2021. "Women in Horror: An Interview with Meredith Alloway." *Killer Shorts* (blog). March 11.  
<https://killersshortscontest.com/interviews/women-in-horror-an-interview-with-meredith-alloway/>.
- Bute, Mary Ellen. 1956. "Light Form Movement Sound." *Design* (The Center for Visual Music Literacy).
- Bute, Mary Ellen, dir. 1939. *Spook Sport*. Youtube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnLJqJBVCT4>.
- Caradeux, Dinka Acevedo and Luz Gil Salom. 2013. "Social Representation of Gender in Award-Winner Short Films in Spain." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 95 : 126-135.
- Chitty, Andrew. 2011. "London Re-cut: Reclaiming History through the Co-curated Remixing of Film." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 54, no. 4 : 413-418.
- Christopher, Bryan. 2019. "Sinister Seven, Women in (Short) Horror Day 9: Tristan Risk." *Rue Morgue* (blog). February 28.  
<https://rue-morgue.com/sinister-seven-women-in-short-horror-day-9-tristan-risk/>.
- Cooper, Dennis. 2019. "19 experimental horror films." *Dennis Cooper* (blog). October 28.  
<https://denniscooperblog.com/19-experimental-horror-films/>.
- Cooper, Mark Garrett. 2010. *Universal Women: Filmmaking and Institutional Change in Early Hollywood*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Creed, Barbara. 2015 (1986). "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection". In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 37-67. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Crofts, Charlotte. 2007. "Bluebell, short film and feminist film practice as research: Strategies for dissemination and peer review." *Journal of Media Practice* 8, no. 1: 7-24.
- Davis, Blair. 2012. *Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Deren, Maya, dir. *Witch's Cradle*. 1944. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkMfRVaA6fs>.
- Dooley, Tatum. 2019. "Cecelia Condit's Video Art is Going Viral on TikTok." *Vice*. July 22.  
[https://garage.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wjvv8z/cecilia-condit-video-art-tiktok](https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/wjvv8z/cecilia-condit-video-art-tiktok)
- Furniss, Maureen. 2014. "Alternatives in Animation Production." *Art in Motion, Revised Edition*, 29-59. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Geiser, Janie, dir. *Ghost Algebra*. Filmed 2009. Janiegeiser.com, 7:30.  
<https://www.janiegeiser.com/ghost-algebra>
- Guest Editor. 2002. "Top Ten Female Directed Horror Shorts." *Morbidly Beautiful* (blog). February 11.  
<https://morbidlybeautiful.com/ten-female-directed-horror-shorts/>
- Harper, Graeme. 2016. "Maya Deren In Person In Expressionism." In *Expressionism in the Cinema*, edited by Olaf Brill and Gary D. Rhodes, 287-302. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hauser, Brian. 2022. "Short Sharp Shocks: An Interview with Women Who Make Horror Shorts." In *Bloody Women: Women Directors of Horror*, edited by Victoria McCollum and Aislinn Clarke, 181-196. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press.
- Keller, Sarah. 2015. "Done and Undone: Meshes of the Afternoon and Witch's Cradle." In *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*, 30-79. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mahar, Karen Ward. 2008. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McCluskey, Megan. 2020. "Meet the Tik Tok Creators Taking the Mini-Horror Movie to New Levels." *Time Magazine*. May 1.  
<https://time.com/5825674/horror-tiktok-videos/>.
- Morgan, Maybelle. 2021. "The Women of Film TikTok Are Here to Reclaim Your Favorite Movies." *Refinery29* (blog). August 5.  
<https://www.refinery29.com/en-au/rise-film-tiktok-female-creators>.
- Moritz, William. 1996. "Mary Ellen Bute: Seeing Sound." *Animation World* 1, no. 2 : 29-32.



- Naumann, Sandra. "Bute and Nemeth."  
<https://maryellenbute.ima.or.at/cat3.html>.
- Neiman, Catrina. 1980. "An Introduction to the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947." *October* 14: 3-15.
- Parker, Claire and Alexandre Alexeieff, dirs. 1933. *Night on Bald Mountain*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqRzuYKKgm4>.
- Philpot, Eloise. 2001. "Maya Deren and the Surrealist Movement." South Eastern College Art Conference (SECAC), Session, Influence of Art Movements on Filmmakers and Their Films, Oct. 24 - 27.  
<https://www.radford.edu/~ephilpot/abDeren.html>.
- Pramaggiore, Maria. 1997. "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren." *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2: 17-40.
- Robson, Arthur G. 2020. "Une Nuit Sur Le Mont Chauve - Film (Movie) Plot and Review." *Film Reference*. Accessed April 20.  
<http://www.filmreference.com/Films-No-Or/Une-Nuit-sur-le-Mont-Chauve.html>.
- Sarmiento Hinojosa, José. 2020. "Snippets of a Conversation with Janie Geiser About 'Reverse Shadow' (2019)." *Desist Film*. February 19.  
<https://desistfilm.com/snippets-of-a-conversation-with-janie-geiser-about-reverse-shadow/>.
- Sitney, P. Adams. 1974. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thain, Alanna. "In the Blink of an Eye: Norman McLaren Between Dance and Animation." In *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, edited by Douglas Rosenberg, 167-186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

- 2022 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.  
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).