

Female narrative in horror animation: a case study on “Blood Tea and Red String” (2006)

A narrativa feminina na animação de horror: um estudo de caso sobre “Chá de sangue e fio vermelho” (2006)

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to analyze the film “Blood Tea and Red String”, from 2006, directed by Christiane Cegavske, and understand how it broke with stereotyped patterns of female characters in animated films. Considering that animated films were, for a long time, written and directed by men, the women’s representation in these narratives was at the mercy of the male perspective, which most often portrayed them as subservient figures waiting for their prince charming. With feminism and the search for new characters gaining space among the public, it is acknowledged that women have been conquering this place and guaranteeing a different and better representation for these characters. Furthermore, the paper also intends to understand how horror is represented in animation and how Christiane Cegavske managed to build a horror story with puppets, taking inspiration from fairy tales to criticize this historically significant place for women.

Keywords: Animation. Horror. Women in Cinema. Blood tea and red string.

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem a intenção de analisar o filme “Chá de sangue e fio vermelho”, de 2006, dirigido por Christiane Cegavske, e entender como ele quebrou com padrões estereotipados das personagens femininas em filmes de animação. Levando em consideração que os filmes animados foram, por muito tempo, escritos e dirigidos por homens, a representação das mulheres nessas narrativas ficou à mercê da ótica masculina, que na maioria das vezes as retratava como figuras subservientes à espera de seu príncipe encantado. Com o feminismo e a busca por novas personagens ganhando espaço entre o público, é de se reconhecer que as mulheres vêm conquistando esse lugar e garantindo uma distinta e melhor representação para essas personagens. Além disso, o trabalho também objetiva entender como o horror é representado na animação e como Christiane Cegavske conseguiu construir uma história de horror com bonecos, inspirando-se nos contos de fadas para criticar esse lugar historicamente destinado às mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Animação. Horror. Mulheres no Cinema. Chá de sangue e fio vermelho.

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen King once wrote that “we make up horrors to help us cope with real ones.” This brings up a discussion about how the horror genre does not exist only with the intention of scaring people and making them sleep with the lights on for a few nights, but also to wonder about the horrors that surrounds us and to explicitly criticize an inhumanity contained in the social context.

The objective of this work was to analyze the scarcity of animation productions made by women and also to understand horror animation and how it is viewed within a film industry that insists on classifying animated films as being exclusively children’s works. Finally, the film “Blood Tea and Red String” from 2004, directed by Christiane Cegavske, was observed as to how it managed to break with female stereotypes in cinema and, especially, in animated cinema.

The research was committed to analyzing how the lack of representation of women behind the camera in cinema and, consequently, in animation, resulted in the propagation of labels associated with women in these works that objectified, sexualized or diminished them, transforming their existence, even as protagonists of the stories, in an eternal wait for a prince charming.

This work was based on interviews with female animators and data from recent years to assess the number of women in animation, especially Henry Giroux’s research on Disney princesses and the prominence that the company had in the field of animation, in addition to the responsibility for having culminated in such stereotypes and how they have been trying to break this stigma.

From this, an overview was drawn about how animation is seen in society and how animations that are not aimed at children end up being targets of a certain amount of fear on the part of the viewer. Finally, violence within animations and horror in specific were approached. Furthermore, there was also an effort to analyze the stereotypes portrayed in horror stories and how the genre was also responsible for propagating ideals contained in a male perspective.

With this basis, the intention was to analyze Cegavske’s film and understand how it managed to break these rules in cinema and become a film that aimed to criticize the position of women not only in society, but also in how they are seen in cinema, always from a patriarchal point of view.

THE SCARCE PRODUCTION OF ANIMATED CONTENT MADE BY WOMEN

Since the beginning of what is today considered the seventh art, women have been left out of a historiography that would value them and praise their work. Thus, even though many of them had led productions, writing, directing or producing, these works ended up being undervalued within a culture grounded in patriarchy and masculine ideals.

This reality resulted in a hegemonic cinema, which is characterized by the male perspective as the correct one. Therefore, the majority of cinematographic

productions with an economic appeal or that achieved great positions in the history of cinema are exclusive to men in script and direction.

Variety magazine, one of the greatest in the entertainment industry in the United States, made a survey of the one hundred best films of all time in the history of cinema. Among the one hundred films chosen, only five were directed by women.¹ In Brazil, this reality is no different either. If analyzing, for example, the list of the Brazilian Association of Film Critics in relation to the hundred best Brazilian films, there is only a total of seven films directed by women.²

Neusa Barbosa (2019), in her article entitled "Pioneers in cinematographic production in Brazil" (our translation), makes an observation about the delay of women, according to current historiography, in entering the cinematographic market. According to the author:

The first film made in Brazil (of which, according to reports, nothing remains) was shot on June 19th, 1898, by the Italian Afonso Segreto. (...) The first film signed by a woman was made exactly 22 years after this inaugural milestone. History records the name of Cléo de Verberena (1909-1972) as the first director of Brazilian cinema with the silent film *The Mystery of the Black Domino*, a police intrigue involving the murder of a woman during Carnival, released in 1930 (BARBOSA, 2019, p. 18, our translation).

Animated cinema, as well as cinema in general, was also affected by this reality. In the book "*Animações Brasileiras: 100 filmes essenciais*", organized by Gabriel Carneiro and Paulo Henrique Silva (2018), only nine works are exclusively written by women. Laryssa Prado and Erika Savernini (2018) address this lack of women in the animation field in their research and state that:

It is noteworthy that the absence of women in these commemorative texts does not seem to be just an option of those who produce them, of those who choose to address animations of male predominance, but it is rather a reflection of the state of the art in national production: a majority male environment both due to the predominance of men in management and key creative roles and due to representation (PRADO; SAVERNINI, 2018, p. 12, our translation).

Even though the passage of time and the debate about representation both in front of and behind the camera have contributed to bringing more women to cinema and, consequently, also to animation, the number of women in this area is still worryingly smaller than that of men.

According to a survey carried out by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, with the group Women in Animation in 2019, considering the last 12 years, only 3% of animations had a woman in the director position. Most of the stories,

1 Available from: <https://variety.com/lists/best-movies-of-all-time/all-about-eve-1950/> Cited on Jun. 05, 2023

2 Available from: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_dos_100_melhores_filmes_brasileiros_segundo_a_ABRACCINE Cited on Jun. 05, 2023

as well as the animation itself, end up being scripted, animated, directed and produced by a massive majority of men, which also influences the themes and representations that these works come to have, mostly from the perspective of men. Kitty Turley, executive producer of *Strange Beast*, criticizes in an interview that in an animation studio “women are there to facilitate men’s creative voice and vision”.³

The result of this lack of female protagonism in film production resulted in countless narratives that concurred with stereotypes of female characters being propagated in cinema, especially for children, who are still the target audience for most animated films.

It is impossible to talk about animation without also talking about Disney. Since the best animated film category was created at the Oscars in 2002, the company has taken home a total of 16 statuettes. Furthermore, it is clear that most of the successful animations in the 20th century and that influenced thousands of children were also the company’s products.

Therefore, one must also address the fact that Disney had a huge role in spreading female stereotypes. Most of their stories reinforced an image of women as a fragile princess, whose only goal in life was to wait or fight for a prince charming. These princesses followed a socially well-developed formula of what was considered “being a woman”. Michelle Cechin (2014) questions this idea:

The first Disney princesses were inscribed in an ideal of behavior considered civilized, noble, showing special care to the rules of etiquette, decorum and hygiene. This “social distinction” was expressed by “noble feelings”, and was expressed as being beautiful, docile, polite, passive, industrious and controlled (CECHIN, 2014, p. 135, our translation).

Films such as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” (1937), “Cinderella” (1950), and “Beauty and the Beast” (1991) were directly responsible for Disney’s commercial success. They all start from the principle that the salvation of the princess only occurs through the arrival of a man and the love expressed by him. This ends up resulting in a concrete influence on girls’ vision of themselves and their intended future, which is limited to the idea that “happily ever after” can only come through a romantic relationship or marriage. Henry Giroux (1995) debates the influence of Disney on children and adds:

Given the influence of Disney ideology on children, it is imperative that fathers, mothers, teachers, and other adults understand how these films attract the attention and shape the values of the children who watch and purchase them [...] As one of the main institutions charged with building childhood in the United States, it should deserve healthy suspicion and critical debate. This debate should not be limited to the home but should be a central element of school and any other important public place of learning (GIROUX, 1995, p. 58, our translation).

³ Available from: <https://garotasdomotion.com/por-que-existem-poucas-mulheres-na-animacao-e-o-que-nos-podemos-fazer> Cited on Jun. 03, 2023.

It is also important to recognize that this scenario has been changing over the last few years. With the production of content on the internet and feminism taking up more space, there was a reality check with the search for animated content, whether children's or not, that in its construction did not portray women in a passive place in the plot, in addition to asking for princesses who would not meet with a romantic partner as the end of the story.

At Disney itself it was possible to observe these changes. Female characters began to gain a new role within animations, now also as heroines. "*Brave*" (2012) is a great example of this new scenario. Jéssica Dombrowski Netto (2013), in an analysis of the role of women in Disney films, states that "what Merida shows is that it is not necessary to dress like a man, hide from your parents or even want to be someone you are not in order to have your happily ever after. And that happily ever after is not linked to marriage" (our translation).

HORROR ANIMATION: DOES IT EXIST?

At the 2023 Oscars, Guillermo del Toro⁴, winner of the best animation category with "*Pinocchio*", addressed in his speech that "Animation is cinema. Animation is not a genre for kids, it's a medium for art."

The discussion that animation is not a genre for children has been expanding in recent years. It is widely believed that animated films, or even those that mix animation, are exclusively for children. This mistaken idea ends up devaluing animation as cinema itself, as it tries to place it on a "not so serious" level and also results in reaching a completely different audience than what is intended when animation tries to break out of this stereotype.

An example of this is the famous "*Sausage Party*" (2016), an animation dedicated to an adult audience that was involved in a controversy in Brazilian territory, when a candidate for councilor recorded a video repudiating the film and saying that "if it isn't intended for children, why is it a children's animation?".⁵

Even though it is a caricatured and extreme example, it is common for the viewer to associate animations with an audience made up entirely of parents and children. Therefore, when an animated film sets out to break out of this niche, it ends up facing a main challenge: winning over viewers who don't normally consume it.

Horror animation has already conquered a considerable space when it comes to fans of the genre. Even though they are specific works named after famous directors that have gained a greater space in the industry, it is clear that these films had enormous public appeal.

4 Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TASL0ZwXw80&ab_channel=NBC Cited on Jun. 05, 2023.

5 Available at: <https://pipocamoderna.com.br/2017/08/esuíta-de-festa-da-salsicha-na-hbo-vira-causa-de-gente-desinformada/> Cited on Jun. 05, 2023.

When considering, for example, the numbers collected in movie theaters, “The Nightmare Before Christmas” (1993) and “The Corpse Bride” (2005), both with Tim Burton at the helm of their productions, had, respectively, 18 and 40 million dollars in budget and earned an amount of 91 and 118 million dollars at the box office, a profit three times greater than the amount spent.

To get started discussing horror animation, it is also important to consider how the themes covered in the genre are represented in animation. Sébastien Denis (2010) explains the concept of *hurt gags*, saying that most animated films, even the ones made especially for kids, contained violence in their narrative.

However, this violence was usually caricatured and exaggerated, and never had any real consequences for the person who suffered it. Victoria Farina Meyer (2019) exemplifies this concept with the famous cartoon “Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner”:

Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner (1949) is probably one of the most recognized works for using this type of physical comedy. The plot always revolves around Coyote chasing the Road Runner to devour him. He creates the most outrageous plans, but he never succeeds and always ends up in trouble. Despite this, Coyote never gives up and, with just one editing cut, he is already “as good as new” (MEYER, 2019, p. 26, our translation).

Another animation that became popular in Brazil and also used hurt gags was “Tom and Jerry” (1940). The endless cat and mouse chase always ended in something bad happening to Tom, but the cat recovered in moments and soon after was ready to go after the mouse again.

To talk about horror itself, we first need to characterize what horror would actually be. Horror and terror, etymologically, are distinct concepts. Carlos Primati (2010) defines terror as the sensation of something that comes from what terrifies us, from suspense, from tension, while horror comes from the grotesque, from contact with something that causes us a certain repulsion.

It is unanimous that there is no ideal formula for defining a horror story. Writers such as Noël Carroll, Stephen King, and Ann Radcliffe tried to understand what horror actually consisted of, however, even though there is a consensus that there are certain themes that are commonly associated with horror, such as ghosts, monsters, killers, and violence in general, this, in itself, is not limited to a film of the genre.

H. P. Lovecraft (2020), writer of horror and science fiction in the 20th century and currently called the father of cosmic horror, defines the fear of something unknown as being the narrative driving force for many of these stories:

Man’s strongest and oldest emotion is fear, and the strongest and oldest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. Few psychologists will dispute these facts, and their admitted truth should forever establish the authenticity and dignity of fantastic horror narratives as a literary form (LOVECRAFT, 2020, p. 1, our translation).

Therefore, a horror film does not necessarily need to have extreme violence, to be full of jumpscare⁶ or to have an extremely characterized monster, but rather have in its essence embedded fear, even if not directly causing this fear to the viewer.

Horror in animated cinema can transition into horror subgenres as much as possible. If in "Paranorman" (2012) there is a not-so-explicit aesthetic about a boy who talks to the dead, in "Mad God" (2021) the audience is presented with a gore⁷ delirium about the end of the world.

STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN IN HORROR

In addition to the classic standards to which Disney fitted its female characters and which became embedded in the social imagination and had a huge influence on children, especially girls, the horror genre was also responsible for propagating ideas that defiled the image of women and naturalized certain behaviors associated with female characters.

One of these ideas was born in literature, with writers like Edgar Allan Poe, who often wrote about female characters who were dead or who died during the story. Grace Bellin (2010) analyzes some of Poe's characters, comparing how women were portrayed in his work and those of Ann Radcliffe, observing the differences between the two:

Poe's female figures are also different from Radcliffe's. There is no interest in portraying such characters as noble and virtuous beings, but rather as fragile beings, who get sick and go crazy in different ways. The representation of the feminine in Poe's stories always brings an aspect of horror associated with beauty and youth, so that Poe himself believed that the death of his beloved woman was the most poetic subject in the world (BELLIN, 2010, p. 54, our translation).

Now regarding cinema, one of the most famous stereotypes spread in horror stories was that of the final girls. Carol J. Clover (2015) coined the term in her most famous work "Men, Women, and Chainsaws" and defined final girls as those characters who survive at the end of horror films.

However, these characters have a very well-constructed personality, in contrast to the others who die during the narrative. While the women who do not survive are always shown with a boyfriend, having an active sex life, doing drugs or going to parties, the final girls are those who don't go out, don't drink, are always at home or working and are constantly worried about their friends' lives.

In other words, the idea built in these narratives ends up propagating an ideal of a woman who "deserves" to survive an attack or persecution, while placing the responsibility for the others' deaths on their "inappropriate" behavior for a woman, as if they deserved the end they had. André Campos Silva (2014) questions this thought:

6 Jumpscare, is a technique used in horror films and games that consists of an abrupt change in image or sound, with the aim of surprising and frightening the viewer.

7 Gore is considered one of the cinematographic subgenres of horror, which consists of films that contain extremely violent and graphic scenes, with a lot of use of blood and body remains.

They (the final girls) are built to create an identification with the public, inviting them right at the beginning of the story to look at the world through their eyes. This may help to explain why they do not have sexual relations during the film, do not use drugs or have attitudes that a large portion of the population morally condemns. It seems that the public has very conservative conceptions about sex, as well as the way a woman behaves (SILVA, 2014, p. 94, our translation).

Furthermore, another idea that also spread throughout horror films was that of monstrous women. Unlike the other concept that literally kills characters who do not behave in a certain passive and subservient way, here the narratives transform them into monsters or the villain of the story.

Bárbara Creed (1993) questions the idea of monstrous women and states that much research is done on characters in the role of victims, but little is said about them in the role of monster. But even so, these women have similar characteristics that make them fall into one category or the other.

Furthermore, the author also mentions that many fairy tales also use the figure of the monstrous woman, who always contrasts with the princess. In "Snow White", for example, there is the stepmother, considered a villain for her vanity and incessant search for beauty, differentiating herself from the princess, who doesn't seem to care about her appearance.

The representation of the witch is very common in several tales. During the Middle Ages, the Church associated witchcraft directly with the female gender, calling for the idea that it was easier for women to be led by this sin and provoke what came from it. Creed (1993) addresses this idea of witches also represented in the stories:

The witch, of course, is a familiar female monster; she is invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts. During the European witch trials of recent history she was accused of the most hideous crimes: cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims, and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague (CREED, 1993, p. 2).

Another stereotype appropriated by horror, although not limited to it, was that of motherhood. There is a lot of talk about women in the narrative who die or survive in the face of certain behaviors, but those who are written to have solely the role of mother within the narrative are also noteworthy and, often, they become the ones to be sacrificed. Their lives completely revolve around their children, and this sacrifice can come in different forms, whether it be giving up their personality or literally giving their life.

Placing the woman as a support for the protagonist, whether as a romantic partner or as a mother, is an old role in the history of cinema. However, some horror films also ended up constructing this in an even more explicit way, showing women who have completely lost themselves in search of a child or their salvation.

Sarah Arnold (2016) discusses motherhood in horror films, stating that these mothers end up having only two roles in these stories: that of a good mother or that

of a bad mother. These roles are also normally defined depending on the size of the sacrifice made for the child, with those women who reject motherhood in some way or who are not seen as exemplary mothers being bad.

"BLOOD TEA AND RED STRING": AN ANIMATED REVIEW

It is in this context that Christiane Cegavske's feature film, entitled "Tea of Blood and Red String", from 2006, appears, which seeks to approach a kind of fairy tale for adults, mixing children's narratives with horror cinema to tell a story of a female character who is fought over by rival tribes and who breaks with the standards constructed by men in most animated films, in their aesthetics and in their narrative.

Based on the methodology of film analysis replicated by Francis Vanoye and Anne Goliot-Lété (1994), the film is observed from an active perspective, no longer aiming only at the entertainment of the story, but with the aim of seeking and repairing the issues that are intended to be analyzed.

Analytical reading of the film presupposes some questions of method. Analyzing a film is not watching it, but reviewing it and, even more, examining it technically by taking another attitude toward it, dismantling it, extending its perceptual register and making it "move", stir in its meanings, its impact (VANOYE; GOLIOT-LÉTÉ, 1994, p. 12).

The synopsis of the film, according to Prime Video streaming, is that it "tells the story of the struggle between aristocratic white mice and the rustic creatures who live under the oak tree as they fight to possess the doll of their heart's desire". In other words, the narrative will show a doll as the center of attention of two groups made up of men and how they will go to extreme lengths for their woman who is considered "perfect".

The film begins with the construction of a doll by a tribe of creatures. The doll, which was initially supposed to be given to another group, the rats, ends up becoming an object of obsession for the creatures, who fall in love with it and decide to take it for themselves. However, the rats, not satisfied with this attitude, kidnap the doll, which leads the creatures on a journey to try to recover it.

As already mentioned, in most children's stories, the desired female figure is actually perfect in the eyes of society: beautiful, feminine, kind. Here, the doll makes an analogy to what is seen as perfect to men: an apathetic, lifeless figure, only aesthetically beautiful. There is no real reason for the passion of the creatures and mice other than the representation of the doll, which appears to be beautiful in their eyes.

Cegavske seeks, during the narrative, to build numerous parallels about women within society, who are not only seen as an object of possession, but also created to serve male desires and an already established destiny, which is motherhood. Even though the doll shows no trace of life or humanity, they transform her, at the end of the film, into a mother.

The director also seeks to incorporate many elements from horror films to create a work that is not limited to showing only the delicacy of fairy tales. It uses not-so-common places portrayed in the animation to create a horror story. For example, the creatures falling into a trap that leaves them completely drugged and encountering a figure of a spider on the way who is also interested in the doll but has his own personal motives, which are distinct from those of the two tribes.

Although some viewers consider it essential, as already mentioned, jumpscars are not mandatory to categorize a film in the horror genre. Therefore, the film ends up being a unique representation of the genre within animation.

Tzvetan Todorov says that the feeling of fear or the fright caused by a work does not define horror and adds: "looking for the feeling of fear in the characters does not allow us to define the genre either: firstly, fairy tales can be horror stories" (TODOROV, 2010, p. 21). In other words, "Blood Tea and Red String" may be considered an example of a fairy tale that is also a horror story.

Furthermore, the film is constructed in a way that fear and horror are placed from a feminist perspective within the animation. Cegavske uses references to aristocracy, childbirth, gore, playfulness, expressing the oppression suffered by women using rag dolls and creativity. The director seeks to connect all these elements to bring to life a dark and sensitive tale, which breaks directly with the pattern of animation themes and establishes itself by showing the reality of a fairy tale.

CONCLUSION

Horror is a fluid genre that can change and is not limited to one subject or format. Although blood, monsters and death are often present, it is mainly defined by representing the fears of a person or character, which may or may not reflect on the viewer. Therefore, a day at home can become a horror film, just as a fairy tale can too.

This work did not intend to state the characteristics of a horror film, but to present new perspectives that can be engendered in it. Furthermore, this article also sought to provide an overview of the conditions of women on and off camera and how, in recent years, based on feminist studies and women gaining a greater space in these places, narratives about women have been changing their desires and their destinies, no longer limited to a man and a marriage, but also and, mainly, to self-knowledge and their own discoveries.

It was also necessary to understand the audience for animated stories and how horror can be fitted into these films, explaining that animations of this genre end up having a popular appeal, whether by horror fans, or by people looking for stories in animation that are not so aimed at children.

Therefore, Christiane Cegavske's film becomes a rarity in an environment that obstructs female entry in every way, since, in this specific niche, women were even more invisible, since horror had, for a long time, a perspective

and a majority male spectator, while animation also excluded women from its productions.

It is important to understand the film as a criticism of society and the role of women within it. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe the aesthetic used by the director and how it differs in every way from those often used in animation as well as from what the public would consider an exclusively feminine aesthetic.

Furthermore, the research was intended to promote studies on horror animations directed by women and bring to light films like Cegavske's, which did not reach a wide audience, and which deserve more visibility. Only in this way can these stories and these directors guarantee the opportunity to continue producing films that are not limited to hegemonic animated cinema, bedtime stories, and a completely masculine vision of the figure of women.

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